

*“If I’ve Got God on My Side, I Can Do It”*: A Phenomenological Investigation of the Lived  
Experiences of Spirituality for LDS NCAA DI Student-Athletes

A Dissertation Presented for the  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Degree  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

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August 2020

### **Dedication**

This project is dedicated to my wife and eternal companion, Arminda Marie Moore, as well as our beautiful daughter, Maya Hunter Moore. In addition, I would like to also dedicate this work to my loving Heavenly Father, to His son Jesus Christ, and to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

## Acknowledgements

Over four years ago I had the crazy idea to pursue a PhD. The only way that this idea has come to fruition is because of the amazing support staff that has been right by my side. First and foremost, I would not be here today if it were not for my Heavenly Father and my Savior Jesus Christ. Through the many tears shed and the hours spent on my knees in prayer, I have grown closer to my Heavenly Father in so many ways and I have truly utilized the power of the Atonement of His son and my Redeemer, Jesus Christ. Both God and Jesus have shown me what I am capable of with their help and through my faith—which was tested and tried over these years—I have come to know with surety that they both live and love each and every one of us.

Secondly, I want to sincerely thank my beautiful, funny, amazing, altruistic, intelligent, and faithful wife, my Min. I will not be able to adequately express my love and gratitude to you in this single paragraph, but I hope you know how grateful I am for you in my life. Mindy, without your unwavering faith in me over these years of being a doctoral student, I know that I would not have been able to do it. Your faith in me and most importantly in our Heavenly Father has provided me with peace at much needed times. Knowing that our daughter is safely in your hands on a daily basis provides me with a sense of security and calm. Maya and I are beyond lucky to have you as our mommy and wife. You have demonstrated to me what a true and loving partner should be, so thank you from the bottom of my heart, I love you. And Maya boo, thank you for the recharge and the whirlwind that you are. Being with you every day is a new adventure and I cannot express in words what you mean to me; you are not only daddy's little girl—you are daddy's world. I am forever grateful that I get to be called “dada”, thank you and I love you unconditionally.

In addition, I would also like to thank my parents, Ron and Annette Moore. Dad, you have always shown me how important it is to follow my dreams and to not let anyone or anything stand in my way, especially as that relates to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Ma, thank you for always lending your presence. You may not have realized it, but you have been my go-to at times of stress and angst over these past years; I look(ed) forward every Friday to our weekly phone calls.

Getting a PhD and going through the many ups and downs that exist as a doctoral student requires a patient, knowledgeable, and loving mentor; Dr. Leslee A. Fisher, thank you for providing me with this mentorship and the “kick-in-the-butt” that I have needed at times. I obviously would not be here today if it were not for you, your guidance, and your willingness to take a chance on me as your doctoral student, so thank you. Alongside Dr. Fisher, I would also like to thank some colleagues who have helped me in so many ways: Dr. Matthew Jones—thank you for being the other “Matt” and who always set a great example of what I should be doing; Dr. Morgan Eckenrod—thank you for being “my person” and for always listening and ready to help with *anything*; and Lindsey Miossi—thank you for showing me what calm and peace looks like in the storms that reside in doctorate programs at times. I truly love you all.

In addition, I would like to genuinely thank the rest of my committee: Dr. Steven Waller—you have been an inspiration from the very beginning. Your expertise as it relates to religion, spirituality, and sport was key in this project, thank you. Dr. Lars Dzikus—you allowed me to learn more about my own church! Your sociocultural role during this project was paramount so that not only I but most importantly, the readers can better understand the foundation that is this project: the LDS Church, “ich bin dir dankbar.” Dr. Sandra Thomas—you have pushed me greatly in getting out of my comfort zone in terms of research. As a result, this

process has allowed me to truly see the efficacy in choosing the right methodology for such a beautiful investigation, so thank you. And one additional and extremely influential mentor, Dr. Jacob Jensen—I cannot begin to thank you enough for your advice, your insight, your guidance, and your support. Your expertise came at a much-needed time throughout this project, and I will always be grateful for you and our friendship, thank you.

Lastly, I would just like to say, WOW! What an amazing journey this has been. What an amazing opportunity I have had as a doctoral student to learn, to develop relationships with others, and to grow as husband, father, academic, consultant, and as a son of God. My time as a doctoral student will always stand out as a time of hardship, growth, and adventure. This project has truly shaped me into who I am today. Additionally, I am forever grateful to the participants who decided to share their stories and testimonies that stand as the bedrock for this current project. THANK YOU support team; I love you all and God bless!

To that end, I share a quote from Elder Jeffrey R. Holland (2004)—an apostle and leader from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—who said that:

God expects you to have enough faith and determination and enough trust in Him to keep moving, keep living, keep rejoicing. In fact, He expects you not simply to face the future (that sounds pretty grim and stoic); He expects you to embrace and shape the future—to love it and rejoice in it and delight in your opportunities. God is anxiously waiting for the chance to answer your prayers and fulfill your dreams, just as He always has. But He can't if you don't pray, and He can't if you don't dream. In short, He can't if you don't believe. (p. 1)

## Abstract

The aim of this study was to explore the lived experiences of spirituality for National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I (DI) student-athletes who also identified as members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS). Using an existential phenomenological approach (Thomas & Pollio, 2002), nine interviews were conducted with four self-identified female and five self-identified male members of the LDS Church who were current NCAA DI athletes at the time of the study; they participated in four different DI sports (cross-country/track and field, football, soccer, and volleyball) and attended five different DI institutions. Their mean age was 22 years. Interviews were audiotaped, transcribed verbatim, and lasted an average of 43 minutes. Thematic analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Sohn, Thomas, Greenberg, & Pollio, 2017) constructed from the nine interviews consisted of four major themes—and subthemes—related to participants’ experiences of spirituality as LDS NCAA DI student-athletes. All themes represent the student-athletes’ embodied LDS NCAA DI identity and included: *LDS Identity*; *Balance Between LDS Identity and Athletic Identity*; *LDS Identity During Times of Crises*; and *LDS Identity in Relationships*. The most significant aspects of these LDS NCAA DI student-athletes’ lived experiences of spirituality were: (a) the use of LDS embodied spirituality when times get tough, (b) LDS embodied spirituality was greatly influenced by relationships, (c) LDS embodied spirituality was not always enough in terms of support throughout student-athletes’ collegiate careers, (d) a holistic care team could be useful in terms of support for LDS student-athletes’ mental training and mental health, and (e) LDS NCAA DI student-athletes who are also returned missionaries of the LDS Church utilized their 18-month to 2-year mission experience within their collegiate experience as student-athletes. Practical recommendations have also been constructed related to the role that support staff (e.g., sport psychology consultants, LDS

bishops/leaders, psychologists, coaches, parents, etc.) can play in helping LDS student-athletes include spiritual elements throughout their collegiate careers.

*Keywords:* sport psychology, LDS, religion, spirituality

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## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction

It is by being what I am at present, without any restrictions and without holding anything back, that I have a chance at progressing; it is by living my time that I can understand other times; it is by plunging into the present and into the world, by resolutely taking up what I am by chance, by willing what I will, and by doing what I do, that I can go farther. (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012, pp. 482-483)

National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I (DI) student-athletes who also identify as members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) go through what many other student-athletes experience over the course of their college careers. This includes pressure to perform consistently at a high level within all DI athletic departments. However, LDS student-athletes are unique—alongside the daily, weekly, and yearly grinding schedule that exists within DI college athletics (e.g., attending classes, meetings, team workouts, games, practices, study-halls, travel time, etc.), LDS student-athletes are also encouraged to abide by and adhere to the rules and regulations of the LDS Church. Therefore, the purpose of the current study was to explore the lived experience of LDS NCAA DI student-athletes. In this chapter, I first outline some important points regarding the main research question and the reasoning behind the intention to take on such a project. Then, I briefly review some important academic concepts that inform the study such as the interplay between religion and spirituality, what The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) puts forth as their doctrine, and how these relate to sport.

The term “your body is a temple” as contained in *The Holy Bible* (1 Corinthians 6:19, English Standard Version, 2015b) is an important passage and commandment to those who

practice the LDS faith. One belief of the LDS Church doctrine is a health code known as the “The Word of Wisdom” which encourages practicing members of the Church to abstain from alcohol, green tea, any illegal drugs (opioids or marijuana), vaping, cigarettes, e-cigarettes, and coffee. According to LDS doctrine, this commandment was revealed to the prophet President Joseph Smith in 1833 (*Doctrine and Covenants* 27:2, English Standard Version, 2015a) with the belief that the current President of the LDS Church, President Russell M. Nelson, continues to receive modern-day revelation to lead the Church (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2019a). The Word of Wisdom is meant to promote good health for the physical, psychological, and spiritual benefit of an individual, no matter if they compete in DI athletics or not. In addition, LDS members are also encouraged to live certain commandments such as the law of chastity which includes abstaining from pre-marital sex.

In addition to some of the aforementioned bodily rules and regulations of the LDS Church, some LDS student-athletes are also returned missionaries. Missionaries of the LDS Church are required to dedicate their full-time attention to the work of spreading the Gospel (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2018a, p. 1). Those student-athletes who choose to serve a mission are also choosing to step away from their individual sports for 18 to 24 months. As a result, upon return from a mission, many individuals experience atrophy of their muscles and loss of strength and athleticism. In addition, these student-athletes/returned missionaries must cultivate a competitive mindset that had been absent for up to two years in order to compete at a DI level (Moore, Fisher, Miossi, Smith, & Jensen, manuscript in preparation).

Religiosity and/or spirituality in this group could, however, be positively related to a smoother transition back into/to the competitive DI environment. This is because religion and spirituality have both been shown to provide individuals with greater psychological resilience

(Mosley, Frierson, Cheng, & Aoyagi, 2015) and religion can serve as a protective factor against stressors and negative life events (Peres, Moreira-Almedia, Nasello & Koenig, 2007). Yet, the spirituality of LDS student-athletes has only been explored in one study to date (Moore et al., 2018). As a result, the lived experience of spirituality for LDS NCAA DI student-athletes was the driving impetus for the current investigation.

### **Brief Literature Review**

A greater understanding of the spiritual and religious dimensions of student-athlete identity has provided insight into important factors such as where student-athletes derive meaning, their core values and belief systems, as well as mechanisms and behaviors for coping with adversity (Egli et al., 2014; Nesti, 2011). In addition, the practice of turning towards God and Jesus Christ to feel comfort, peace, and hope in moments of difficulty has been linked to better psychological adjustment (Exline, 2013). In contrast, experiencing negative emotions towards God (e.g., anger at God, feeling abandoned) and/or religious struggles can cause detriments to performance (Exline, 2013). Religious student-athletes who feel comforted by God during their disappointment may not only be able to bounce back and learn from failed experiences but also experience spiritual and religious growth (Park, Edmondson, & Blank, 2009). Houlberg, Wang, & Schnitker (2017) found that “religiousness can promote a sense of self-worth that protects elite athletes from experiencing high levels of post-performance shame and help athletes appraise competition as a challenge as opposed to as a threat” (p. 39). In this brief literature review, I first talk about the paramount constructs of religion, spirituality, sport, and the LDS faith; these constructs add further understanding to the contextual background of NCAA DI sport.

## The Intersection of Religion, Spirituality, and Sport

Within the fields of religious and spiritual studies as well as sport studies, there are ample amounts of work that has been conducted indicating their profound relatedness to one another (Ballard & Wilson, 2017; Czech & Bullet, 2007; Davies, 1965; Gabana, D'Addario, Luzzi, Soendergaard, & Wong, 2019; Hoffman, 1992, 2010; Hoven, 2014; Mosley et al., 2015; Nesti, 2004, 2011; Parry et al., 2011). For example, research has shown the efficacy of studying both religion and spirituality within the context of sport (Czech et al., 2004; Evans & Petersen, 2015; McKnight & Livingston, 2018) and how attending to the *whole person* (i.e., mind, body, *and* spirit) can add value to understanding sport participants (Gabana et al., 2019; Jirásek, 2015; McKnight & Livingston, 2018; Nesti, 2004, 2011; Sullivan, 2010). However, even with the plethora of work to choose from, there still seems to exist large amounts of ambiguity for scholars who attempt to come to a consensus definition of both religion *and* spirituality in these fields.

**Religion.** As of 2018, there were roughly 4,200 different religions worldwide (Banks, 2018). Of those 4,200, the five most “adhered to” religions (more commonly known as “The Big Five”) are: Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Hinduism. Each religion has different denominations and sub-denominations within them. For example, Judaism has roughly three different denominations or movements, those being: Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform (Abel & Kruger, 2012); Buddhism has three major denominations or branches which are: Mahayana, Theravada, and Vajrayana (Baumann, Deeg, & Thompson, 2012). In the Islamic religion there are two main branches, which include Sunni Islam and Shia Islam with numerous sub-denominations (Morgan, 2010); Hinduism contains four major traditions or denominations which include: Vaishnavism, Shaivism, Shaktism, and Smartism with more sub-denominations (Lipner,

2009). And Christianity mainly consists of: Catholic, Protestantism, Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodoxy, Non-trinitarian Restorationism, and Independent Catholicism as the main denominations with a plethora of sub-denominations (Melton & Baumann, 2010). For the purpose of the current project, however, the focus will be on the traditions, beliefs, and customs from one specific Christian faith/denomination - The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS).

When thinking about both religion and spirituality, one might believe they are intimately related to one another. However, they are defined and operationalize differently by scholars. They define spirituality as concerned more with the search for meaning or purpose in one's life (e.g., a relationship or belief with something/someone bigger outside one's self), while religion focuses on standardized practice of beliefs (Neck & Millman, 1994; Waller et al., 2016). Scholarly work has historically produced many different examples of how religion is defined. As Hill, Pargament, Hood, McCullough, Swyers, Larson, and Zinnbauer (2000) described it, that given "our limited understanding of contemporary religion and spirituality, it is perhaps premature to insist on a single comprehensive definition of either term" (p. 52). However, James (1902/1985) described religion as the realization that one has of their own unique relationship with some form of deity, which is independent of what is considered a deity.

Similar to James (1902/1985), Edwards, Lapp-Rincker, Magyar-Moe, Rehfeldt, Ryder, Brown, and Lopez (2002) state that religion is "the belief in a higher power that provides meaning and purpose in life, and which is demonstrated through behavior, such as prayer and attending services" (p. 148). A "higher power" for some could be God, Mother Nature, Buddha, the Energy of the earth, or many others. A belief in some form of deity and/or higher power alongside the practice/behavior of that belief are emerging themes in relation to what religion

entails; these facets are otherwise known as adhering to a system of beliefs. To make things slightly clearer, Higgs and Braswell (2004) have stipulated that there are in fact three facets that make up religion:

(1) forms of art or icons symbolic of gods and/or governing power in a particular religion, (2) patterns of behavior or conduct expected of adherents, and (3) rituals for encountering the transcendent world either on a recurring basis or permanently after death. (p. 239)

These three aforementioned facets and definitions can allow for some sort of structural framework to emerge moving forward in terms of better understanding how to define religion and what it entails.

To further delineate the already stated examples and definitions of religion, according to Argyle and Beit-Hallahmi (1975), religion is, “a system of beliefs in divine or superhuman power, and practices or worship or other rituals directed toward such a power” (p. 1). In other words, religion is in the practice of one’s beliefs about something and/or someone greater and grander than themselves. That practice can come in many forms, some of which include: church attendance, temple attendance, number times of prayer per day, reading of sacred texts, and much more that make up a “system of beliefs” (p. 1). Similar to the aforementioned definition, Koenig (2008) states that religion is a “system of beliefs and practices observed by a community, supported by rituals that acknowledge, worship, communicate with, or approach the Sacred, the Divine, God in Western cultures, or Ultimate Truth, Reality, or nirvana in Eastern cultures” (p. 11).

Hook and Davis (2014) defined religion as the “adherence to a belief system and practices associated with a tradition in which there is agreement about what is believed and

practiced” (p. 4). Once again, we see the importance of the words *belief* and *practice* and the interrelatedness that they have in relation to religion. Adding to Hook and Davis’ (2014) definition of religion, Hill et al. (2000) described the root of the word “religion,” which comes from the Latin root “*religio* which signifies a bond between humanity and some greater-than-human power” (p. 56). This “bond,” is indicative of the belief in and practice of one’s religious system.

Religion has the potential to affect how people see the world that they live in and the perception of their own lived experiences. Coakley (2009) stated that:

Religion is powerful because it forms a foundation for general systems of meaning related to ultimate issues and questions. These systems of meaning affect the way people think about the world, about social life and social relationships, and even about sports.

(p. 11)

Religion has the potential to affect who one chooses to marry or not marry, what one does for a living, what one eats or does not eat, extracurricular activities (e.g., play or sport), educational pursuits, and/or familial relationships. The foundational aspect of religion is important to understand, not only to further separate it from spirituality, but also within the context of what it means to be a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (i.e., the chosen population for the current study). Belonging to the LDS religion is not merely attending church on a weekly basis; it is more about who they are and who they will become because of the Church and ultimately, because of Jesus Christ. As Brigham Young—an earlier prophet of the LDS Church and the successor to President Joseph Smith Jr.—once said, “Our work, our every-day labor, our whole lives are within the scope of our religion” (Moore, 1990, p. 91).

**Spirituality.** Similar to religion, the word *spirituality* has had many different interpretations that have added to both the clarity and ambiguity aspects within the literature. Ronkainen et al. (2015) stipulated that spirituality “is centrally about awareness and reflection of one’s existence” (p. 2). To further Ronkainen et al.’s (2015) point, Frankl (1969) and Kierkegaard (1846/1992) described that human beings are the synthesis of mind, body, *and* spirit. As a result, they believed that spirituality exists in all persons (Elkins, Hedstrom, Hughes, Leaf, & Saunders, 1988). Thus, not only can one be spiritual and/or practice their spirituality, but like the body and the mind, the spirit is a part of everyone - it is what makes up the “whole” person (mind, body, and spirit).

Spirituality is the awakening or reawakening of one dimension of our humanness or existence as human beings - it is recognizing the wholeness that exists within each of us, and reflecting, as Ronkainen et al. (2015) suggests, on one’s existence within the world. In addition to the idea of spirituality being concerned with one’s spirit/dimension of self, Hook and Davis (2014) described spirituality “as a more general feeling of closeness and connectedness with the sacred” (p. 4). Many people are able to “feel” spiritual within the adherence and practice of religious pursuit; however, others are also able to experience spirituality with the connections that they develop with other human beings or with nature. The “sacred” piece that Hook and Davis (2014) refer to depends on the person and what they actually perceive or believe to be sacred (e.g., God, nature, relationships, etc.).

In contrast, Waller et al. (2016) described spirituality and religion as being intimately interconnected while at the same time containing different constructs. Waller et al. (2016) state that in spirituality the “primary questions revolve around: Where do I personally find meaning, connection, and value? In religion the primary questions revolve around: What is true and right?”

(p. 229). As touched on previously, spirituality scholars in this sense concern themselves more with existential questioning (i.e., human existence and experience) while religion tends to be more associated with the practice of those questions and regulations, rules, commandments, and ultimate adherence.

The connection of the two—religion and spirituality—can be observed at the same time. For example, when one attends a church meeting and feels a connection to their god, not only are they practicing religion (i.e., attending church), but they are also practicing spirituality (i.e., praying to their god and feeling its presence). Waller et al. (2016) goes on to say that “spirituality is about seeking a meaningful connection with something bigger than one’s self, which can result in positive emotions, such as peace, awe, contentment, gratitude, and acceptance” (p. 229).

Although completely distinct, both spirituality and religion can play important roles of supplementation and application towards whole person (i.e., mind, body, and spirit) development.

### **The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints**

Known by outsiders as the “Mormon” church or perhaps the “LDS” church, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the proper and official name of the faith) was reorganized by Joseph Smith Jr. (who members believe to be a prophet of God) in the year 1830 in upstate New York (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2018b). “LDS” connotes “Latter-day Saint(s);” however, the term “Latter-day” simply is indicating that members of the LDS Church believe that we, as human beings, are in the last days, aka “Latter-days,” before Jesus Christ returns once again to the earth (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2018b). The term “saint” in the New Testament (English Standard Version, 2015b) are all those who by baptism have entered into a Christian covenant (see Acts 9:13, 32, 41; Romans 1:7; 1

Corinthians 1:2; Philippians 1:1; 1 Peter 1:14:15), thus emphasizing the importance of baptism within the Church. Even within the Church, for many years Church members were often referred to as Mormons; but, in recent years, the full name (as described previously) of the Church has been highlighted to help emphasize that the Church is a Christian religion.

Although it is not an “American” church per se, much of its history, language, leadership, ideologies, missionary work, and behaviors are that of American/Salt Lake City, Utah culture. Therefore, the LDS church could be called an “American Worldwide Religion” (Decoo, 2013). Members of the LDS Church continue to inhabit a large part of the population within the state of Utah to this day (Canham, 2014). Since the year of 1830, membership of the LDS faith has grown from about 30 individuals to roughly 16.4 million members worldwide. Most of that membership resides in countries outside the United States of America (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2019b).

The LDS Church is a Christian denomination. However, there are some differences in LDS Church doctrine compared to other Christian denominations. For example, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints believe in God the eternal father, in His son Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Ghost, taken together commonly referred to as “The Godhead” (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2018b, p. 1). God the father and Jesus Christ have separate bodies of flesh and bone, while the Holy Ghost is a spirit or personage. This is in contrast to other Christian doctrines (i.e., Protestantism or Catholicism) which espouse there is one God, who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Banks, 2018). These beliefs by the LDS Church are supported by some of the following passages found in *The Holy Bible*, English Standard Version, 2015b, in 1 Genesis 1:26; John 3:16; John 14:26; Matthew 3:17; and Numbers 16:22; *The Book of Mormon*, English Standard Version, 1981, in Alma 11:44; Moroni 10:5; 1 Nephi

10:17; and *The Doctrine and Covenants*, English Standard Version, 2015a, in passages found in D&C 8:2-3; D&C 20: 26-27; D& C 130:22. Jesus Christ is central to the overall message and worship for LDS Church membership.

The LDS Church makes up roughly 1.6% of the U.S. population, with just over six and half million members (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2019b). Mexico contains roughly 1.5 million members of the LDS faith, along with roughly three million more throughout North and Central America. In addition, the LDS Church membership in South America numbers just over four million, with Brazil containing the most membership (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2019b). The Pacific Islands' membership numbers just over 562,000 in countries such as American Samoa, Australia, Fiji, New Zealand, Samoa, Tonga, and Vanuatu, just to name a few (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2019b). Europe has just under 500,000 members, Asia has over 1.2 million members, and Africa has over 620,000 members (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2019b).

### **The Book of Mormon**

Student-athletes who belong to the LDS Church, in addition to every other member, are invited to learn and live the principles that are taught within *The Book of Mormon* (English Standard Version, 1981), alongside *The Holy Bible* (English Standard Version, 2015b). Some of the more, but definitely not limited to, salient principles within *The Book of Mormon* are: Morality and chastity, Sabbath day observance, abstinence from idolatry, service to others and to God, love and charity, self-mastery and healthy living, prayer, and repentance.

*The Book of Mormon*, alongside other holy sets of scripture both ancient and modern (i.e., *The Holy Bible*, *The Doctrine and Covenants*, and *The Pearl of Great Price*), provide a set of guidelines for those—including student-athletes—who practice the LDS faith. Therefore,

exploring how collegiate DI student-athletes use religiosity and spirituality as tools and practices to build, develop, and combat the inevitable vicissitudes of college athletics and life is an important area of research that deserves attention. It is hoped that the current study benefits sport psychology professionals (SPPs) and other student-athlete support staff (i.e., administrators, coaches, etc.) so that they can better understand the experiences of student-athletes from this population and who are competing at this level of college athletics.

### **Rationale for the Current Study**

The relationship between spirituality and athletic experience is one that has been explored by several researchers in the field of sport psychology over the last 25 years (e.g., Houlberg et al., 2017; Hoven, 2014; Nesti, 2004, 2011; Novak, 1976; Ronkainen, Tikkanen, Littlewood, & Nesti, 2015; Vernacchia, McGuire, Reardon, & Templin, 2000, Watson & Nesti, 2005). This is an important relationship to explore for researchers as well as practitioners, as knowing how a student-athlete's spirituality affects their performance can be considered a cultural competency issue for developing competent certified mental performance consultants (CMPCs; Egli & Fisher, 2017; Egli, Fisher, & Gentner, 2014). The experience of Christian athletes, in particular, has been a focus in this research (Czech & Bullet 2007; Czech, Wrisberg, Fisher, Thompson, & Hayes, 2004; Egli et al., 2017). However, the lived experiences of spirituality for Christian athletes who belong to the LDS Church has yet to be examined.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Research has illustrated the impactful nature of utilizing spiritual avenues and skills for many student-athletes (Ballard & Wilson, 2017; Czech & Bullet, 2007; Czech et al., 2004; Evans & Petersen, 2015; Houlberg et al., 2017; Jirásek, 2015; McKnight & Livingston, 2018; Parry et al., 2011; Parry et al., 2007; Sullivan, 2010). In addition, research has also demonstrated the

benefit of implementing a holistic care system for student-athletes and the effective role that spirituality can play within that system (Egli et al., 2014; Roe & Parker, 2016; Waller, Huffman, & Hardin, 2016; Watson, & Parker, 2013). However, there was a need for an examination into the collegiate experiences of LDS student-athletes; more specifically, I (the first author/main researcher) was interested in how spirituality as part of LDS student-athlete identity—and the way it gets practiced—informs the *lived* experience of LDS student-athletes.

### **Purpose of the Study and Guiding Research Question**

The purpose of this study was to explore how spirituality—as part of LDS student-athlete identity—gets practiced and informs the *lived* experience of LDS student-athletes. The overarching research question was the following: What is the lived experience of spirituality for LDS NCAA DI student-athletes?

### **Limitations**

There were several limitations from the current study, of which included:

1. Only audio phone calls were used to conduct the interviews.
2. Of the nine participants, eight self-identified as European American and one self-identified as Pacific Islander.
3. Only selecting current members of the LDS Church who are also NCAA DI student-athletes excludes the comparison of other student-athletes from differing religions, spiritualities, and/or other collegiate athletic levels.

### **Delimitations**

1. Student-athletes were carefully selected to include only those from a DI institution and who were current members of the LDS faith.

2. Participants were recruited from five different NCAA DI institutions where LDS student-athletes resided and participated in sport.

### **Most Relevant Definitions**

**Apostle:** The LDS Church has a system of leadership similar to the original church that Jesus Christ organized while he was on the earth and after his death. The LDS Church believes that “apostles are servants of the Lord. They travel to visit members of the Church around the world...When Jesus was on the earth, He called 12 men to be His special helpers. They were called Apostles” (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2016a, p. 1).

**Atonement:** The word Atonement, as used in the scriptures and in the LDS Church, indicates “to atone is to suffer the penalty for sins, thereby removing the effects of sin from the repentant sinner and allowing him or her to be reconciled to God. Jesus Christ was the only one capable of carrying out the Atonement for all mankind...Jesus’ atoning sacrifice took place in the Garden of Gethsemane and on the cross at Calvary” (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2018d, p. 1).

**Brigham Young University (BYU):** The Church owned university in Provo, Utah. BYU’s other campuses are in Salt Lake City, Utah; Rexburg, Idaho; Laie, Hawaii; and Jerusalem, Israel (BYU, 2019).

**Commandment(s):** As described in *The Holy Bible* in the book of Exodus 20: 2-17 and as well in *The Book of Mormon* in the book of Mosiah chapters 12 and 13. Commandments consist of rules, regulations, and guidelines sent from God to His children via ancient and modern-day prophets. Members of the LDS Church believe in the 10 commandments as well as other commandments revealed to church members through modern day prophets and apostles (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2018b).

**Covenant(s):** A covenant is a promise (spiritual and/or physical) that one makes with God. In the LDS Church, covenants are mostly conducted in holy Temples and chapels such as baptism and sealing (marriage) (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2018b).

**Culture:** “The collective programming of the mind that distinguishes one group or category of people from another” (Hofstede & McCrae, 2004, p. 58).

**Godhead:** According to LDS doctrine, the godhead consists of three eternal, omnipotent, and omniscient Gods/beings. Those being: God the father (made up of perfect flesh and bone), Jesus Christ the son (made up of perfect flesh and bone), and the Holy Ghost (a spirit that is able to dwell within someone) (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2018b).

**Gospel:** According to the LDS Church, and as contained in the holy scriptures, “the gospel of Jesus Christ is our Heavenly Father’s plan for the happiness and salvation of His children. It is called the gospel of Jesus Christ because the Atonement of Jesus Christ is central to this plan” (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2018d, p. 1).

**Investigator:** This term is used by LDS members and missionaries to refer to someone who is *investigating* the Church. In general, it is referring to someone who is not a member but is learning and taking lessons from the missionaries (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2018d).

**Mormon:** Older term used to describe a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Derived from *The Book of Mormon*. Mormon was an ancient prophet who compiled and wrote parts of *The Book of Mormon*. The preferred term is by the official name: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Or, when referring to a member of the LDS Church, it would be appropriate to call them “a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” and/or “a member of the LDS Church” (*The Book of Mormon*, English Standard Version, 1981).

**Priesthood:** There are two priesthoods in the LDS Church; one being the Aaronic (which is the lesser priesthood) and the other being the Melchizedek (which is the greater priesthood). The Aaronic priesthood can be received by a young man at the age of 12, and the Melchizedek priesthood can be received by a young man at the age of 18 (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2018b).

**Prophet:** A prophet, as described by the LDS Church, "...is the authorized representative of the Lord. While the world may not recognize him, the important requirement is that God speaks through him. A prophet is a teacher. He receives revelations from the Lord. These may be new truths or explanations of truths already received" (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1973, p. 1). The prophet for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints today (2020) is President Russell M. Nelson.

**Race:** To provide context within the current study, the utilization of the word *race* is defined as "a concept that signifies and symbolizes sociopolitical conflicts and interests in reference to different types of human bodies" (Winant, 2000, p. 172).

**Relief Society:** An organization in the LDS Church specifically designed for women. This organization helps prepare women for the blessings of eternal life as they serve individuals and families of those that are in need, both inside the Church and outside the Church. It is one of the largest and longest-standing women's organizations in the world (1842-present day), with over seven million female members worldwide (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2018b).

**Returned LDS missionary:** One who has served the full length of an LDS mission (18-months to 2-years generally) and has returned back to his or her original culture. An LDS missionary can

be called to serve to almost any part of the world (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2018b).

**Stake (LDS):** A group of wards (usually 3-6), presided over by a Stake President/Presidency (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2018b).

**Ward (LDS):** A local congregation within a community (usually consisting of 70-200 individuals), presided over by a Bishop/Bishopric (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2018b).

## CHAPTER 2

### Literature Review

Nelson Mandela (2000) once said that “sport has the power to change the world” (p. 1). Mr. Mandela knew the impact that sport has not only on culture and politics, but also on spirituality and religion. Sullivan (2010) stated that “many in modern society have turned to sport, especially the commercialized and professional form, as a religious practice that can fill the void once filled by traditional religion” (p. 10). The question that surfaces then is: Have people substituted sport for religion? Sullivan (2010)—who outlined historical and recent challenges to religious and spiritual knowledge and experience within sport literature—reflects on the fact that “one need only look at the filled football stadiums and high television ratings across the country on Sunday afternoons as proof of this religious substitution” (p. 10).

Similar to religion and forms of spirituality, sport possesses some of the same attributes. Sport, like religion, “become(s) sacred because of the strength and beauty in their form and function, godly features since ancient days, and because of the service to the state as magnificent symbols of success in all aspects of culture” (Sullivan, 2010, p. 3). Many athletes and coaches describe a playing field or court of play as “sacred,” connoting some form of religious component to it, or cheering for a particular athlete as if they were a god of some sorts. However, Hoven (2014) suggests that sport should have its limits: “It is not and cannot be the *be-all* and *end-all* of living spirituality. It does, however, offer moments where spiritual dimension comes to life, where Christians have the possibility to re-center themselves in Christian living” (p. 73). In addition to Hoven (2014) and Sullivan (2010), Kelly (2015) believed that, “sports can offer one of our best vehicles for moral education in the light of the clash of moral cultures that the present world throws up” (p. 75). When coaches and leaders of sport are able to provide effective

examples of character, their athletes are able to learn these lessons of “moral education” via their sporting experience (Kelly, 2015).

Before diving into this chapter, I first ask the reader to go back and take a look at the definitions I gave for religion and spirituality in Chapter 1. With these definitions as a base, I take a dive into a brief history of the LDS Church as it relates to sport, spirituality, and identity. Next, I describe intersections between literature in the areas of sport psychology, religion, spirituality, and prayer with the inclusion of an LDS student-athlete wellness model as an illustration. Finally, I highlight some important sport psychology scholarly work that has utilized existential phenomenology and why this methodology is the appropriate one for the current investigation.

### **Sport and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: A Brief History**

Play, sport, and/or recreation since the restoration of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in 1830 have played significant roles in the lives of members of the church. Members of the Church from an early age are encouraged to play, to move, and to socialize to maximize mind, body, and spirit. President Joseph Smith stated that “the spirit and the body are the soul of man” (Kimball, 2009, p. 22), thus connoting the significance of the body within the Church. Joseph was known for his strength and playful manner, often not fitting into the stereotypical strict or solemn religious leader type-of-role. As Kimball (2009) described:

President Smith set out to nourish both halves of his eternal soul. So much for the Western religious supposition pitting spirit against body; in fact, in Smith’s formulation, to find redemption for the soul, the spirit and body have to work together. It follows that what is good for the body is good for the soul. (p. 22)

In relation to President Joseph Smith, Kimball (2009) continued by saying that “Intellectual, spiritual, and physical exercise filled the prophet’s day and comprised the major elements of Mormon cultural and spiritual life” (p. 23). From Joseph Smith’s journal, Kimball (2009) described that “there were no clear-cut boundaries separating spiritual, mental, and physical health. Mormonism combined all of the elements of life—just as the soul combined the spirit and the body” (p. 23). Whether it was/is enjoying nature and going hiking, participating in some sort of recreational activity, or being involved in actual sporting leagues and events (e.g., basketball or baseball), members of the LDS faith have been examples—since the early days of their prophet, Joseph Smith—of how to maintain a healthy mind, body, and spirit.

Sport first flourished as a communal activity—mostly among young men and women within the LDS Church and more specifically within the state of Utah—after the Mormon pioneers had arrived. The sport most popular among the LDS population was basketball, not football or baseball (Baker, 2007). Basketball leagues had started to form in Salt Lake City as early as 1908 and basketball in the 1920s replaced not only cultural programs such as music or theater but also other recreational activities among Utah’s and the Church’s youth (Baker, 2007). In fact, As Baker (2007) noted, “Despite the onset of economic woes in the Depression, an all-church basketball tournament in 1931 drew some 8,000 spectators from all over the state to Salt Lake City” (p. 174). Sport was used as an avenue to form camaraderie, as a source of entertainment, and, of course, as a tool to increase not only physical but also mental and spiritual health.

Early members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints also endorsed wholesome recreation, sport, and play as a means of teaching moral values that still continues to this day. These values reflect what is taught inside the Church’s doctrine; thus, recreation, sport,

and play—in addition to Sunday church attendance, monthly Temple attendance, reading of sacred scriptures, and listening to prophets and apostles sermons and talks—were/are avenues that members took/take to develop sound and pure minds, bodies, and spirits. Similar to muscular Christianity—a movement that started in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century in England for young prep boys characterized by obedience, discipline, manliness, and moral physicality via athleticism (Ladd & Mathisen, 1999)—muscular Mormonism was designed to “instill masculinity and the religious tenets of Mormonism”; this was “at the heart of Mormon recreation in the early twentieth century” (Kimball, 2009, p. 4). As Baker (2007) noted, both President Joseph Smith and his successor, Brigham Young:

Took a page from muscular Christianity in blending masculinity and religious principles. Muscular Mormonism served pioneers well as they trekked from upper New York state to Illinois and Missouri on their way to Utah. It served them all the more as they sought to create a Zion in the Rocky Mountains. (p. 172)

Women’s sport in The LDS Church is similar to the sports world for women in the larger American picture in that at first, athletics was mainly for males (Embry, 2008). Although young women in the Church participated in and played sport/recreation, muscular Mormonism’s focus was directed towards the young men of the Church; the role of women in the Church was primarily directed toward household and eventual child-rearing duties.

**Young men and young women programs.** However, The LDS Church implemented what they call/called Young Men and Young Women recreational programs in the early days of the Church. Participation in these programs was to provide young individuals, especially young men in the LDS faith:

A sense of order, team sports gave young men the skills to cope with the temptations of urban life. Furthermore, church leaders noted that athletics provided a ready-made tool for proselyting missionaries throughout the world. More than anything else, however, church leaders hoped that athletic participation in a wholesome atmosphere would shepherd the adolescent male along the path toward moral maturity. (Kimball, 2009, p. 97)

As previously stated, the role of the women in the early days of the Church was primarily focused in and around the home (i.e., child-rearing, cooking, cleaning, homemaking, etc.). However, many women and young women still participated in sport since the early days of the Church (Embry, 2008; Kimball, 2009). In fact, Brigham Young actually had a gymnasium in his Utah home and encouraged *all* of his children—sons and daughters—to exercise and play (Embry, 2008). Brigham Young believed that “play should be where members could enjoy the spirit of the Lord” (Embry, 2008, p. 63). However, very little was written about LDS women’s exercises and athletic activities within the Church for over half a century (Embry, 2008). In 1952, the *Church News* “announced a new women’s sports program because ‘girls must be kept busy in this day when boys are being called in the service in large numbers’ during the Korean war” (Embry, 2008, p. 65).

The Young Women and Young Men programs still continue today with activities ranging from sport, dancing, gardening, learning to care for a pet, learning to build homes, learning different survival techniques, camping, social outings, writing seminars, and much more (Kimball, 2009). As Melvin J. Ballard—a past apostle and leader of the LDS Church—said in relation to these programs:

The ultimate purpose of our being interested in this recreational work is to keep our young people safe, pure, and under the influence of the Church, and keep them in such environment that they ultimately will find their way into some or one of the Church organizations, Priesthood quorums, Sunday schools and other organizations—the end being to establish in their hearts faith in God, love for his work, desire to serve and keep themselves during their leisure period free from the vices and sins and contaminating influences of the world. (Kimball, 2009, p. 46)

Indeed, the focus on recreation for males was on the spiritual aspect of the Church, not on “social indoctrination” (Kimball, 2009, p. 46). However, the physical aspect played/plays a major role in the training and maturation of young LDS men.

In addition, praise for the LDS Church about their recreational programs came from one renowned sociologist (and member of the summer faculty at UAC—Utah Agricultural College—in 1912). Edward A. Ross said:

I don't know any other place where the young people are so well provided for as here in [Utah]. I don't understand how the 'Mormon' Church got the idea of providing so well for the recreational and social needs of people so much earlier than we sociologists got the idea. The Church was way ahead of us in making this discovery. (Kimball, 2009, p. 45)

These programs have served many purposes within the Church. In addition to spiritual training, another more implicit purpose of the Young Men and Young Women programs was to prepare strong spirits, minds, and bodies that would be ready for full-time service as missionaries. These missionaries learned lessons from sport and recreation programs in that they reflected the life of a missionary. For example, being a missionary requires teamwork (a missionary is required to

work and be with another missionary at all times, a term coined “companion,” together making a companionship), persistence, patience, perseverance, and resilience; these are all qualities that sport and recreation can teach a young LDS Church member. .

In summary, since the early days of the restoration of the LDS Church in 1830, participation and involvement in play, recreation, and sport has been valued. LDS members used/use sport to enhance not only body and mind, but spirit as well (Kimball, 2009). If played and taught correctly, LDS members believe that sport, recreation, and play can serve as wonderful spiritually-enhancing avenues. Similarly, Hoven (2014) described using sport as a way to increase one’s spirituality because “by engaging the sporting realm as an important element of culture, Christians open themselves to the possibility of personal growth and deeper reflection in their lives of faith” (p. 54).

**Identity.** Further relating sport participation to identity, one’s relationship to themselves can be potentially enhanced and/or developed via the sporting experience. In fact, Hoven (2014) claimed that “in this spiritual context, sporting experiences can act as a rehearsal of how people understand their identity and their mental image of themselves” (p. 68). Competing against others directly in certain sports (e.g., baseball, basketball, soccer, football, etc.) and indirectly in other sports (i.e., golf, track and field, swimming, etc.) allows for athletes to see where strengths and weaknesses exist within themselves. Sport can also provide opportunities for people to develop relationships with others. Hoven (2014) stated that:

Reflecting upon experiences of community within sport asks participants to think about how they act toward others (i.e., opponents, spectators, parents, teammates, officials, and caretakers), to reflect upon whether they avoid unnecessary harm of others, and to contemplate how much they desire to bring out the best in others. (p. 70)

This means that for LDS—and other Christian athletes—the concept of love (the “great commandment” about how to act towards self, God, and for *others*) can come to fruition via the sporting experience. Thus, the experience of spiritual identity in the context of sport could be related to the overall well-being and development of an individual.

A greater understanding of the spiritual and religious dimensions of an athlete’s identity may provide insight into important factors such as where the athlete derives meaning, core values and belief systems, and mechanisms for coping with adversity (Egli et al., 2014; Nesti, 2011). Student-athletes who are members of the LDS Church and who adhere to the LDS doctrine and standards have the potential to use their religious and spiritual knowledge and experience, for the betterment of their performance as an athlete. Greater levels of spirituality have been associated with less depressive symptoms and more spiritual sport experiences among suffers (Amrhein et al., 2016; Taylor, 2007). Since religion and spirituality have both shown to provide individuals with greater psychological resilience and serve as a protective factor against stressors and negative life events (Peres et al., 2007), religiosity and/or spirituality could potentially be positively related to resilience among athletes; furthermore, this association might be mediated by higher levels of gratitude (Mosley et al., 2015). Expressing gratitude for life, for family and friends, for health, for school, and/or for athletic abilities could be used as another spiritual tool for LDS student-athletes and other athletes alike. Gabana et al. (2019) has expressed that, “an athlete who identifies as religious may have participated in a faith tradition which placed an emphasis on being thankful for one’s blessings, and in turn may view his or her sport experience as a gift; thereby promoting humility and minimizing a sense of entitlement” (p. 10). To further this point, spirituality has also been shown or associated with higher quality of life overall, as well as lower levels of anxiety (Kandasamy, Chaturvedi, & Desai, 2011).

In addition, spiritual interventions and therapies in a clinical setting have also demonstrated the benefits of improving quality of life and spiritual well-being, being able to cope better with physical ailments and/or illnesses, and combatting and even treating anxiety, depression, and anger management difficulties (Richards & Bergin, 2005; Richards & Worthington, 2010; Zamaiyan, Bolhari, Naziri, Akrami, & Hosseini, 2016). These results could very well affect student-athletes in relation to their perceived level of spirituality; and more specifically for LDS student-athletes. As such, an athlete's religious and/or spiritual practices and beliefs could very well serve as effective coping tools and strategies during difficult times and implemented as a vital part of the standard training curriculum over the course of an athletic collegiate career.

Being an active member of the LDS Church requires dedication and faith. Obeying and adhering to the standards, commandments, and regulations of the LDS faith is not an easy feat, especially for young college student-athletes. However, and as a potential result of being obedient to standards and regulations, a student-athlete's connection to God and His son Jesus Christ may create feelings of worthiness and empowerment in times of difficulty (Houlberg et al., 2017). This concept would be particularly pertinent for DI college student-athletes where pressure to perform is at a very high level. College DI athletics, similar to being an active member of the LDS Church, requires dedication, faith, and persistence, even in the face of adversity and setbacks. Finding out how LDS NCAA DI student-athletes use spirituality as a tool to build, develop, and combat the inevitable vicissitudes of college athletics and life would be worthy of pursuit.

## **Collegiate Athletics and The LDS Church**

Since the 1800s, sport has played an enormous role in the development and growth of American culture and the nation (Madymuk, 2012). When people think of the United States of America, some of the first things that could come to mind include sports such as baseball, football, or basketball. Even more unique to the American culture is the popularity and the view many Americans have on college athletics. The rise of collegiate sports in America continues to grow as college athletes are seen as just as popular and perhaps even important as some professional athletes.

College athletics and their impact on modern American culture cannot be overstated. College campuses throughout the country attract millions of visitors each and every year for whatever sport it may be. However, college football by far gets the most attention and also garners the most revenue (Gaines & Nudelman, 2017). In fact, in the southern parts of the United States, college football “assumes the characteristics of a civil religion ...a social cement, a means of organizing the state” (Morgan & Klimasewski, 2015, p. 214). In addition, religion and spirituality seem to ride right alongside college sport in America, as some of the most well-known universities and colleges belong to a faith-based organization. As Baker (2007) noted, “The athletic histories of places like Methodist Duke, Baptist Baylor, Catholic Notre Dame, Mormon Brigham Young University, Jewish Brandeis, and fundamentalist Liberty University thus figure heavily in the American accommodation of religion and sport” (p. 4). Alongside other religious institutions, Brigham Young University (BYU) has influenced how the LDS Church is perceived and portrayed to the rest of the world.

The flagship university of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is BYU, located in Provo, Utah. Although the LDS Church owns and operates other schools in places

such as Hawaii, Salt Lake City, Idaho, and even Jerusalem, the face of college athletics for the Church lays in the hands of the athletes and coaches at BYU Provo. Historically, BYU athletics has garnered much success in sports such as rugby, baseball, softball, tennis, soccer, basketball, track and field, and, of course the most popular sport, football. The football team at BYU secured the NCAA College Football National Championship in 1984 when they defeated Michigan 24-17 in the Holiday Bowl (Robinson, 1984).

Athletics at BYU have demonstrated to millions of sports fans alike that the “Mormons” are not just religious, un-athletic, peculiar individuals. Rather, members of the LDS faith and athletes and coaches at BYU display how sport, play, and recreation are an important way of life and an avenue that one can use to build and develop the *whole* person. The LDS sport culture at BYU has run alongside the American sport culture since the beginning days of the restoration of the LDS Church and continues today (Kimball, 2009).

Some famous LDS athletes—some of whom attended BYU—include Rulon Gardner, Steve Young, Jeremy Guthrie, Erin Thorn, Billy Casper, Jabari Parker, Bryce Harper, Torah Bright, Haloti Ngata, Danny Ainge, Cael Sanderson, Ty Detmer, Mark Madsen, BJ Flores, Dale Murphy, Dennis Eckersley, Ashley Hatch, Taysom Hill, Nicole Pikus-Pace, Jonah Lomu, and Eric Weddle. As Elder Gary E. Stevenson (a current apostle and leader in the LDS Church) has recently stated in a worldwide General Conference presentation:

While they are extremely successful in their sports, these athletes would be the first to admit they are not perfect athletes or perfect human beings. They work hard to be the best in their sport—and to live the gospel. They get up if they stumble, and they strive to endure to the end. (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2019d, p. 1)

These LDS athletes demonstrate the impact that the gospel teachings can have on an individual. The gospel of Jesus Christ teaches LDS members to “endure to the end” (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2018d, p. 1). In the athletic culture, “endure to the end” might be more commonly known as *grit*, or even *resiliency* in sport psychology literature. Grit as defined by Duckworth (2016) is “sustained passion and perseverance for especially long-term goals” (p. 7) while resiliency “...the ability to use personal qualities to withstand pressure” (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2016, p. 136). According to researchers, both grit and resiliency have been shown to produce success in the athletic realm (Duckworth, 2016; Fletcher & Sarkar, 2016).

In sum, both the American athletic culture and the LDS culture have impacted one another. Indeed, since sport has been historically used to “communicate morals, attitudes, and expectations” (Kimball, 2009, p. 13) in the LDS culture, LDS athletes appear to have been impacted by this relationship. In addition, participating in sport has been linked to increase church attendance; in other words, morally clean young men and women were adhering to the gospel teachings (Decoo, 2013) in all facets of their lives. As a result, LDS athletes were demonstrating what it was like to *live* the gospel of Jesus Christ while simultaneously performing well as an athlete.

BYU is not the only NCAA institution that has LDS student-athletes. Within the mostly LDS-populated state of Utah alone, there are two other Division I (DI) institutions that have student-athletes that belong to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The University of Utah (Salt Lake City, UT) and Utah State University (Logan, UT) are the other two large DI institutions with a large number of LDS athletes; their athletic prowess is also well known. In fact, in 2017, there were over 150 returned LDS missionaries playing college football nationwide

(Toone, 2017); however, this statistic only accounts for returned LDS missionaries who were football players.

To be sure, LDS DI student-athletes form a unique group of individuals. They abstain from alcohol, drugs, and pre-marital sex and try to live the standards and commandments within the Church; this is not an easy task for a young person in college. These student-athletes appear to realize the potential for positive spiritual, mental, and physical growth and development that can take place when they adhere to the commandments and standards of the Church. Alongside the two-a-day practices, attending classes, doing homework, going to meetings, dating, and playing in games/events, these student-athletes also attend church, attend the temple when able, read the scriptures, pray (both personally and communally), listen to sermons and talks from Church leaders, and utilize other avenues that not only build their minds and bodies but their *spiritual* selves as well.

### **Ties Between Religion and Spirituality in Sport Psychology Literature**

Maranise (2013) has suggested that within the field of sport psychology, “Little academic attention has been given to this rapidly-increasing popular culture phenomenon [sport and spirituality]” (p. 83). However, several researchers have explored the intersection of religion and spirituality in the practice of sport psychology. For example, Sarkar, Hill, and Parker (2014) conducted a study where they utilized the RRICC (Respect, Responsibility, Integrity, Competence, and Concern) Model (Plante, 2007) as a framework for sport psychology professionals to use to address ethical issues when working with clients. They found that as SPPs become more open to discuss and implement some of the RRICC principles with the religious and spiritual athletes that they work with, it can allow for a more successful relationship to materialize between the SPP and the athlete. Egli and Fisher (2017) interviewed 10 sport

psychology professionals regarding how spirituality showed up in their consulting practice; they made a case to other sport psychology professionals that spirituality should be a part of cultural competency when working with athletes and coaches.

McKnight and Livingston (2018)—who utilized online surveys to determine college student-athletes’ perceptions of spiritual care and found that when an athletic support staff (i.e., sport psychology consultant) member is able to address “the spiritual concerns of an athlete that could result in a more positive outcome” (p. 4). In other words, when sport psychology professionals can understand the “whole” athlete person, they can potentially find new ways, methods, and approaches to help athletes integrate spirituality and religion within their sport experience.

In addition, several researchers have explored the connection between Christian spirituality and athletic experience (Amrhein et al., 2016; Czech et al., 2004; Egli et al., 2014; Gabana et al., 2019; Houlberg et al., 2017; Mosley et al., 2015; Nesti, 2004, 2011; Ronkainen & Nesti, 2018; Ronkainen et al., 2015; Sarkar et al., 2014; Vernacchia et al., 2000). Much of this research has been focused on the use of prayer in sport. For example, Ballard and Wilson (2017) interviewed elite Christian athletes about their subjective experience of spirituality; as they reported, “the belief in God, the act of prayer, and the use of scripture, have been found to shape and nurture the mindset needed to develop skills that are believed to assist in achieving excellence and peak performance” (p. 14).

Czech and Bullet (2007) conducted semi-structured interviews to study the perceptions of Christian athletes’ use of prayer in sport and found that “the use of religious prayer to alleviate anxiety and stress in uncertain situations is highly prevalent among today’s athletes” (p. 50). Czech and Bullet (2007) went on to say that, “coaches need to understand that during times of

high anxiety, prayer for the religious athlete may be the best coping mechanism” (p. 52). Prayer was used in a variety of different ways within the sport experience. Using prayer occurred when trying to calm one’s mind and body from stress and anxiety, asking for good health, asking for the ability to perform well, and giving thanks to their God before, during, and after competition (Ballard & Wilson, 2017).

Similar results were also present in other studies as well (e.g., Bade & Cook, 2008; Czech et al., 2004; Hochstetler, 2009) as athletes utilized the simple act of prayer to help alleviate and combat the physical and mental difficulties that sport and competition present. Egli et al. (2014) conducted qualitative interviews utilizing the existential-phenomenology methodology to discover the information-rich and detailed description of coaches’ experiences of prayer in sport; they found that prayer was the most prolific response that coaches reported Christian athletes used to cope with difficulties in sport.

In addition to prayer helping athletes alleviate and combat stress and anxiety in athletics, Coakley (2009) suggested that athletes and coaches use prayer in coping with uncertainty, to stay out of trouble, to give meaning to sport participation, to put sport into a “balanced perspective,” to establish team solidarity and unity, to reaffirm rules, expectations, and social control on teams to assert autonomy in the face of power, and to achieve personal and athletic success; in other words, prayer has the potential to serve many purposes outside of simply combatting anxiety and stress. Czech et al. (2004) found similar results as they interviewed athletes on their perception of prayer; they found that athletes utilized prayer to reduce anxiety and increase their perception of control on the athletic field.

However, even though many previous sport psychology studies have produced meaningful insight regarding the use of Christian practices in sport, Gabana et al. (2019) have

stated that “more research is needed to understand how this aspect [Christian identity] of an athlete’s identity impacts their experience in sport, as well as other variables which may be linked to mental health, well-being, and performance” (p. 5). In addition, most of the research has not been conducted within an LDS population.

### **Existential Phenomenology and Its Appropriateness for this Study**

Moran (2000) described that phenomenology was announced “as a bold, radically new way of doing philosophy, an attempt to bring philosophy back from abstract metaphysical speculation wrapped up in pseudo-problems, in order to come into contact with the matters themselves, with concrete living experience” (p. 1, preface). The lived experience component of existential phenomenology is what I focused on in the current study; I wanted to find, discover, and learn about the lived experience(s) of spirituality of members from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) who are also National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I (DI) student-athletes.

This is a population that is unique and understudied. The aim was to “produce faithful descriptions of human experience, unfettered by theoretical formulations and presuppositions” (Thomas & Pollio, 2002, p. 283). The existential phenomenology methodology for the current study was most appropriate for many reasons. For example, this method is primarily designed to get at how a particular phenomenon is experienced by individuals; as a result, it is uniquely appropriate for understanding how NCAA DI LDS student-athletes have experienced spirituality without imposing any kind of rigid framework that could potentially restrict participants from sharing rich and organic descriptions.

Aside from the saliency and foundational concepts taken from Merleau-Ponty’s (1945/2012) work, there have also been numerous sport psychology, nursing, and educational

studies influencing my decision to utilize this particular methodology of existential phenomenology (Cotterill, Sanders, & Collins, 2010; Dale, 1996, 2000; Fahlberg, Fahlberg, & Gates, 1992; Greenberg, Sohn, Greenberg, Pollio, Thomas, & Smith, 2019; Grindstaff, Wrisberg, & Ross, 2010; Hector et al., 2018; Jensen & Wrisberg, 2014; Johnson, 1998; Nicholls, Holt, & Polman, 2005; Parker, 1994; Ploszay, 2003; Pollio, Henley, & Thompson, 1997; Post & Wrisberg, 2012; Simpson & Wrisberg, 2013; Smith, 2017; Sohn, Thomas, Greenberg, & Pollio, 2017; Thomas, 2000, 2005; Valle & King, 1978; Valle, King, & Halling, 1989). For example, Fahlberg et al. (1992) were some of the first researchers to utilize existential phenomenology as a methodological approach to try to better understand the behavior of those who exercise. Fahlberg et al. (1992) explained why using such an approach was effective for their work: “Without attention to human consciousness there can be no understanding of meaning. Without knowing what the experience of the habitual exerciser is, we cannot know the meaning of that exercise” (p. 177). Fahlberg et al. (1992) found that when they attended to the actual experience of the exerciser, the meaning of that particular event/lived experience could be analyzed. This approach allowed Fahlberg et al. (1992) to understand exercise from a different lens and thus promote the holistic side of exercise compared to other methods.

Similar to Fahlberg et al. (1992), Dale (1996) stated that the existential phenomenology approach is an effective tool because it offers “an alternative way of examining the experiential aspects of performance or sport participation” (p. 319). Dale (1996) explored the advantages of using an existential phenomenology approach when working with athletes as a Sport Psychology Professional (SPP). With its open-ended format, existential phenomenology can offer valuable information for the SPP that might perhaps go unnoticed if a differing approach/method is

utilized (Dale, 1996). He demonstrated the efficacy of bringing the lived experience of the athlete into the consulting relationship.

In addition, other sport psychology researchers (e.g., Czech, 2001; Grindstaff, Wrisberg, & Ross, 2010); Hector et al., 2018; Jensen & Wrisberg, 2014; Johnson, 1998; Nesti, 2004; Parker, 1994; Ploszay, 2003; Post & Wrisberg, 2012; and Simpson & Wrisberg, 2013) have made significant contributions using the existential phenomenological methodology. For example, Cotterill, Sanders, and Collins (2010) examined the experience of pre-performance routines used in the sport of golf. They found that some golfers utilized imagery to enhance their performance both on and off the course. Nicholls, Holt, and Polman, (2005) investigated the different coping skills and strategies also used by golfers. They found that golfers utilized a variety of coping skills and strategies (i.e., positive self-talk, routines, breathing exercises, social support) to combat the stress and pressure that comes with high-performance golf.

Jensen and Wrisberg (2014) examined the lived experience of hand-to-hand combat for soldiers. After interviewing 17 soldiers with experience in hand-to-hand combat during military warfare, the most important finding in the study was that these individuals experienced the identification of context-specific sources of stress (e.g., endangering their fellow soldiers, or being captured). Essentially, their results indicated that the acute stress that was experienced by these soldiers in hand-to-hand combat is much more complex and nuanced than previous literature has indicated (Jensen & Wrisberg, 2014). Post and Wrisberg (2012) interviewed 10 female NCAA DI gymnasts (ranging in ages from 19-25) to explore their use of the mental skill of imagery. They found a much more complex understanding of the use of imagery by gymnasts than previously understood.

Nesti (2004) has done extensive work surrounding the utilization of the existential phenomenology approach, particularly as it relates to sport psychology consulting and research. In fact, he wrote a book on the subject *Existential psychology and sport: theory and application*. Nesti posited that an existential perspective, “with its focus on larger questions of meaning, choice and responsibility, can be used to help athletes towards career-long personal and performance development” (Nesti, 2014, p.1). Nesti (2014) also described the benefits for sport psychology practitioners and educators for using this approach because it “involves going beyond skills training to engage more fully with athletes as individuals, directly supporting them in their search for success and fulfillment through competitive sport” (p. 1).

Hector et al. (2018) also explored the role that existential phenomenology can have within sport psychology consulting. When utilizing phenomenological consulting—or what Hector et al. (2018) called “PC”—one “must, above all, respect *the athlete’s* experience and seek to understand it” (p. 2). PC allows the sport psychology consultant to view the athlete and/or performer that they are working with as a co-consultant, similar to how researchers view participants in existential phenomenology as co-participants. Hector et al. (2018) stated that this approach “is designed to promote a collaborative relationship between SPCs and athletes that encourages the latter to assume a more active role in monitoring their own thoughts, feelings, and behaviors” (p. 8). The PC approach can be a great method because it can help SPCs resist the temptation to adopt or implement the “one-size-fits-all” approach for every athlete and/or coach that they may work with (Hector et al., 2018).

In this vein, Sohn et al. (2017) described the existential phenomenology interview and methodological approach as:

A radical empiricism, a flexible structure, and a dialogical community of support. We do not impose *a priori* theoretical explanations—we seek an intimate connection with our research participants and refrain from theorizing about them before we come to know them. (p. 124)

Sohn et al. (2017) went on to describe that the true value of existential phenomenological research is to bring peoples' voices alive; this was also the goal in the current study.

### **Summary**

Using Merleau-Ponty's (1945/2012) existential phenomenology in the current study allowed me to be in the perspective of the participants in order to better understand their experience and feelings surrounding the phenomenon of being an LDS NCAA DI student-athlete. This perspective focuses on the idea that mind, body, and consciousness are interconnected and influential (Allen-Collinson, 2009). As described by Thomas (2005), "the specific aim of his (Merleau-Ponty) phenomenology was to give a direct description, not a causal explanation, of experience...he exhorted us to examine the immediacy of experience before it is objectified by science" (p. 65).

Many salient concepts related to the current study—including: Sport and The LDS Church: A Brief History, Collegiate Athletics and The LDS Church, Ties Between Religion and Spirituality in Sport Psychology Literature, The Lived Experience of Spirituality for LDS Student-Athletes and Existential Phenomenology and Its Appropriateness for this Study—have been presented to aid in further understanding regarding why the current study is important. In the next chapter, I dive further into the methodology used in the current study. Because I come from an LDS upbringing and still adhere and practice the teachings of the LDS Church to this day, it is also fitting to bring light to my own positionality as a straight, European American male

from an upper-middle-class upbringing. My own presuppositions also had an effect on the phenomenon that I investigated. Continuing to be self-reflective about my own presuppositions and biases is a lifelong pursuit, but a pursuit that can help me further respect those I work with and remain open to.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **Methodology**

What is new in phenomenology is not that it denies the unity of experience, but that it establishes it differently than classical rationalism. (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012, p. 307)

In this chapter, the methodology for the current study is discussed. First, I discuss my own positionality as it relates to this investigation and the impact of my own experience(s). Secondly, the overarching and paramount influence of Merleau-Ponty's (1945/2012) work is described along with the rationale for using existential phenomenology through said lens and its guiding structure for the current study. Lastly, the description of the methods that were utilized for the current study are also discussed.

### **Positionality**

Positionality, as it relates to qualitative research, refers to the elucidation or examination of the background upon which researchers stand (Madison, 2005). Positionality compels a researcher—like myself—to engage with their own power, privilege, and life histories and the biases and insights that stem from them (Madison, 2005). As such, I now position myself—as the main researcher—for this current investigation. I am a thirty-two-year-old male Caucasian American doctoral student. I was raised in a middle-class Caucasian family and I am one of four siblings. I have a twin brother—who I am older than by approximately two minutes—and two older sisters. My siblings and myself were privileged to be able to receive financial and emotional support for both academics and athletics growing up. All of my siblings are married, with kids, and all reside in middle-to-upper-class family structures. I had the opportunity to play football, baseball, golf, and basketball while growing up and while attending high school. I have

also been an NCAA DI strength and conditioning coach. I am a heterosexual; I have been married for over seven years. My wife and I have one daughter.

My entire family, along with my wife's entire family, are members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) religion. Both my family and my wife's family have ancestors that date back to the beginning days of the LDS Church (i.e., 1830). In fact, my wife's great-grandfather was president of the LDS Church from 1994-1995. I was baptized a member of the LDS Church at the age of 8 in 1995 and served an LDS two-year mission to Monterrey, Mexico in 2006-2008. My assumptions surrounding this investigation are described below in the bracketing interview section.

Essentially, as Denzin and Lincoln (2005) explained, ontology addresses the question of "What is the nature of reality?" (p. 19). The word ontology, as defined by Bhattacharya (2017), "refers to your nature of being...when you think about it, there are some things you know resonate well with your nature of being and others not" (p. 11). This resonance that Bhattacharya (2017) is referring to, for me is the adherence to a Christian ontology. Hence, my reality or realism relates to Christian/LDS values, especially my view that there is a Heavenly Father—or God—His son Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. Those who subscribe to realism believe that reality is subjective and differs from one person to another (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). How I know that what I know is real refers to my epistemological views (Bhattacharya, 2017).

Epistemologically, I prescribe to constructivism. Those who follow constructivism believe that people construct their own meanings based on their interactions with the world around them (Bhattacharya, 2017). Hence, I believe that learning is done by constructing or deriving knowledge and meaning out of one's experiences. Some of these meaningful and knowledge-based constructive meaning avenues for me have been attending an LDS Church on

Sundays, reading the holy scriptures, praying to my Heavenly Father, serving an LDS mission in Mexico, worshiping and making covenants in an LDS Temple with my family, and receiving guidance from the Holy Ghost.

My aim in describing my own positionality was to aid in the further understanding of contextual intelligence as it relates to the current investigation. Contextual intelligence is much more than understanding factual knowledge or information; related to the current dissertation project, it is an “understanding of the historical and philosophical evolution of sport, as well as the formal and informal political structure—the decision-making processes and customs in *this* particular governing organization, school, or team” (p. 54). In striving towards and gaining more contextual intelligence as a sport psychology scholar, I try to have “an understanding of values and attitudes of the people at all levels of the organization, from head of the organization all the way to the equipment manager” (p. 54). Closely related to contextual intelligence is this idea of becoming a culturally competent sport psychology professional.

### **Self-As-Culturally-Competent Scholar and Practitioner**

As a young SPP, my philosophical approaches are cognitive-behavioral therapy (Beck, 1975; Ellis & Harper, 1961), the person centered/humanistic approach (Rogers, 1961), phenomenological consulting (Hector, Raabe, & Wrisberg, 2018), the solution-focused approach (de Shazer, 1985), a strength-based approach (Clifton & Nelson, 1992), mindfulness, acceptance, and commitment approach (MAC; Gardner & Moore, 2007), and positive psychology tenets (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Seligman & Csikszentimihalyi, 2000). Because I utilize more than one theory and/or approach when working with and thinking about student-athletes (both as a practitioner and as a scholar), I adhere to what Poczwardowski, Sherman, and Ravizza (2004) call the eclecticism (Køppe, 2012) paradigm.

However, it is imperative to talk about how my philosophical approach is related to cultural sport psychology (CSP; Stambulova & Ryba, 2013). Cultural sport psychology scholars have defined CSP as increasing “cross-cultural understandings and deliver[ing] culturally sensitized sport services” (Sshinke, McGannon, Parham, & Lane, 2012, p. 34). This cultural awareness increase for SPPs allows for a more well-rounded and diversified field. The ultimate goal of CSP practice is “to blend theory, lived culture, and social action with a ‘self-reflective sensibility’ to raise awareness as to how one’s values, biases, social position, and self-identity categories impact participants within research and/or consulting realms” (Schinke et al., 2012, p. 35). As SPPs aim to include a more culturally sensitive praxis, this could potentially allow for a more inclusive field in general.

Many athletes with marginalized identities (i.e., in terms of race, sexual orientation, gender, socioeconomical status, etc.) have been historically marginalized and continue to suffer from repercussions of the past still to this day. Bringing these issues to the forefront can allow for a more socio-cultural sensitive future within sport psychology. In addition, many athletes rely on different facets of their lives to help them during times of difficulty. For example, Agergaard and Ryba (2014) and Campbell and Sonn (2009) demonstrated the importance of family relationships during a playing career in both female and male professional transnational athletics. These aforementioned researchers utilized qualitative methods (i.e., open-ended interviews) with both professional Australian rules football players and professional soccer players. Results from both studies demonstrated how support from family members can be salient in helping athletes remain in their individual sports—especially if they are not playing/living within their original culture—and also helped sustain their overall well-being. Middleton, Schinke, Oghene, McGannon, Petersen, and Kao (2020) have also demonstrated the paramount role of family

members—including siblings—for athletes as they play throughout their careers. Acknowledging the importance of relationships to athletes is just one way to contribute to a more culturally sensitive sport psychology research and practice. Knowing cultural dos and don'ts can also aid in more overall meaningful sport psychology research.

Schinke et al. (2012) describe that one way that the field of sport psychology can actually see change in terms of culture sensitization is for SPPs to be more self-reflective of their own identities, biases, and presuppositions. To add to the point of using the efficaciousness of self-reflectivity as a tool towards culture sensitization, Saukko (2002) wrote that, “reflexivity is a tool to enhance awareness of our situatedness and, subsequently, to be more receptive to perspectives that approach the world from a different position” (p. 88). In addition, Pagis (2009) defines self-reflexivity as “the conscious turning of the individual toward himself, simultaneously being the observing subject and the observed object, a process that includes both self-knowledge and self-monitoring” (p. 266). This definition was important for me as the main researcher because of my abovementioned positionality as it related to the current investigation. I found myself continually “monitoring” myself—my thoughts, my speech, my impressions, my body language, my physical state, my emotions, etc. I utilized journaling, meditation, and prayer as my three avenues of self-reflexivity. This process was implemented from the very start of the current study—from the proposal, to the interviews with the student-athletes, to the data analysis, to the writing, and will be until the very end when the study will be closed out with IRB.

In summary, CSP scholars demonstrate the need for sport psychology professionals to gain a deeper and richer relationship with those that they are working with (Butryn, 2002; McGannon & Smith, 2015; Sarkar et al., 2014; Si, Duan, Ki, Zhang, & Su, 2015). For example, as an SPP, when I am able to get past the superficial level of understanding when working with

or interviewing an athlete, the dialogue between the two of us begins to broaden. Once the athlete understands that I care for them as a human being, not just as an athlete, the comfort of that athlete seems to be released and ultimate progress towards a more successful performance and/or interview can begin to take place. Regardless of one's race, gender, socioeconomic status, religion, age, and/or sexual orientation, I strongly believe that it is my responsibility to establish trust and rapport so that the student-athlete feels welcomed and comfortable as we work together. I need to show the utmost respect and openheartedness no matter the circumstances, towards the student-athletes I work with, in whatever capacity.

However, the most personal aspect that I have taken away from the CSP movement/research is the implementation of a more holistic perspective on athletes' careers and lives. Stambulova and Ryba (2013) described the importance of implementing a more holistic approach within sport psychology praxis; praxis as articulated by Hodgkinson (2000) "suggests the conscious reflective intentional action of man, as opposed to mere reflex; is purposeful human conduct, or behavior informed and guided by purpose, intentions, morals, emotions and values as well as the facts or 'science' of the case" (pp. 42-43) and the benefits that can be derived as a result. I believe that CSP integrates very well into my own aforementioned philosophy/approach for sport psychology practice and research. As previously discussed, I adhere to philosophical frameworks that describe how every human being/athlete has a mind, body, and spirit. I believe that all three dimensions are highly affected and influenced based off of one's own culture. To be able to help and develop the "whole" person as an SPP, therefore, I need to be not only mindful of student-athletes' cultures, but also how that culture is and/or could potentially be affecting their performance. By taking into account the mind, body, and spirit—as well as student-athletes' cultures—I can create a much more holistic approach to my

research and practice. Both contextual intelligence and CSP demonstrate the need for SPPs to go deeper...deeper into the environment/culture in which one is working or doing research. Doing so can result in earned “legitimacy, trust, and respect” (Brown et al., 2005, p. 54) from the individual(s) that one is working with.

Now that readers understand where I personally come from ontologically, epistemologically, and theoretically, I will now describe how these important tenets relate philosophically to the methodology for the current investigation. Existential phenomenology is intimately related to my aforementioned described approaches/theoretical frameworks; thus, this is one of the many reasons why I felt inclined and inspired to utilize such a methodology for the current investigation.

### **Existential Phenomenology**

The study of human existence has long been a favorite for many philosophers, educators, and researchers alike for centuries. Existentialists such as Dostoyevsky (1869/2003), Kierkegaard (1846/1992), Nietzsche (1886/1907), Husserl (1954/1970), Heidegger (1927/1996), Buber (1923/1937), Gadamer (1960/2004), and Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012) have not only wrestled with the ambiguity of human existence, but also human experience. Both phenomenology and existentialism—two distinct but interrelated philosophical branches—can direct us towards questions and answers within the broad scope of human existence and experience. Existential phenomenology is the combining or blending of two interrelated philosophical perspectives: existentialism, proposed mainly by the Danish philosopher Kierkegaard (1846/1992), and phenomenology, which was mainly developed early on by German philosopher Husserl (1954/1970). Phenomenology as a methodology is the study of how different phenomena affect individuals from their own perspective, while those who utilize

existentialism are more concerned with the study of the meaning of life and human existence. Both philosophies share the common grounds of studying and describing everyday experience, as it is perceived by the consciousness of human beings (Heidegger, 1927/1996). Heidegger, a German philosopher (1889-1976), was one of the first to combine both branches—existentialism and phenomenology—of philosophies into one phenomenological ontology (Heidegger, 1927/1996).

Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961), a French philosopher and academic who was heavily influenced by Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, had his own interpretation of the two aforementioned philosophies. According to Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012), those who utilized phenomenology emphasize returning to the world as one experiences it and the interrelationship of the person and the world. In addition, Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012) believed that phenomenology was the study of essences.

An essence, or essences, could be understood as a concept of essential meaning(s) that directly inform a phenomenon of interest. The essence(s) illuminate the essential characteristics of the phenomenon. Thus, Merleau-Ponty's (1945/2012) aim was to examine the things themselves as they relate to the individual and their world. Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenological viewpoint is the foundation upon which the current study is based. In particular, the phenomenon of spirituality in the lives of National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I (DI) student-athletes who belong to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) was examined.

Essential to existential phenomenology as described by Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012) are the concepts of *perception*, *figure and ground*, and *intentionality*. In addition to these concepts are the *four existential backgrounds* or “grounds” which are: corporeality (“body”), relationality

(“other”), spatiality (“world”), and temporality (“time”)(Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012; Sohn, Thomas, Greenberg, & Pollio, 2017; Thomas & Pollio, 2002). These concepts are further explained and delineated next.

First, it is important to point out that Husserl (1954/1970) described the nature of existential phenomenology as a return “to the things themselves” (p. 252). Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012) pointed out that it is in the *experience* that we come to *know*—not necessarily via our own intellect—the “things” that Husserl is referring to. These “things” refer to the actual lived experiences of individuals.

**Perception.** The focus of Merleau-Ponty’s research and practice consisted mostly in and around the concept of *perception*. Perception is a salient cornerstone and relates to all major and non-major tenets alike within existential phenomenology. Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012) felt that some philosophical scholars had misunderstood perception and the role that it plays within phenomenology. As a result, he felt the need to bring to light the impactful nature that perception has on human experience as a whole.

According to Merleau-Ponty, perception is the cornerstone of human experience, which ultimately guides every conscious action. As human beings, we perceive with our senses (i.e., sight, sound, taste, feel, or smell). Perception is not necessarily *of* something, especially if the *of* in that general idea indicates a relationship to something in the external world of the observer and/or the one experiencing the phenomenon (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012). For example, a strength and conditioning coach might notice a lack of strength in a particular individual among a certain group of athletes (i.e., the “background” being the group as a whole in the space that is the weight room). That coach could place meaning on that single athlete, and, as a result, assign action for that particular individual (e.g., higher weight and less repetitions).

Perception itself is both a bodily form and a more general form, similar to the concept or idea of language, which is both material (e.g., words on a paper) and signifying/significant (e.g., meaning of the words/language). For example, Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012) talks about how the eye or the hand are already a form of language, because both are able to move and respond. Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012) points out that perception's role within phenomenology is paramount, because it ultimately supplies a direct experience of the events and/or phenomena of the world for human beings. According to Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012), individuals experience the world by perception and as a result, each individual's perception of the world is completely unique to them. Perception helps to form the foundation for all human experience and understanding, namely the figure/ground relationship.

Further, Merleau-Ponty's central focus surrounding perception aims not only towards the contingent functionality, but also and more importantly, at the bodily functionality within human experience. For example, when one enters a weight room ready to work out for one hour, they could go in with a plan in mind for exactly what it is that they want to accomplish. That individual might know that their body is going to be able to handle certain movements and weight amounts. However, someone else entering the weight room who is less advanced compared to the first individual might not have a plan of action; in addition, they might not know what it is they should or are able to do. Both individuals are entering the same space—the first, an expert, and the other, a novice; however, both will have different experiences because each person's bodily functionality will be different, thus resulting in different perceptions. The concept of perception is according to the beholder and that takes place within the permanent field or dimension of existence (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012). Thus, perception not only concerns itself with the mental state, but also with the physiological state and behaviors.

Experience, in conjunction with perception, is not simply a conscious representation of the world. Both experience and perception are more like transactions between the individual and the world that the individual lives in (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012). These relational transactions express a given situation, for example, like the mere presence of a blue sky on a beautiful sunny day or a brilliant color from a beautiful piece of art. Once these situations present themselves, we learn from these lessons/experiences. According to Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012), when we learn from the lessons that perception and experience elicit, these lessons are expressed via the phenomenological principle of intentionality.

**Figure/ground.** As described previously, a unique characteristic within existential phenomenology is perception. Perception contains a figure/ground relationship, meaning that we as human beings perceive some things in the world (“figures”) while other things remain in the back and serve more as the “ground” or foundation upon which these figures are derived. To be able to understand the lived experiences of participants utilizing existential phenomenology, one must apply the figure/ground concept as proposed from German Gestalt psychology. With this approach, researchers are able to explain that perceived phenomena always appear as meaningful or significant *wholes*; however, some aspects of the phenomena will also stand out as *figural* (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012). In other words, the *figural* aspect is what is predominant in the person’s perceptions as opposed to the contextual ground—the “background”—of those perceptions. Within existential phenomenology, and qualitative research in general, the context (figure *and* ground) is important in discovering the meaning/essences within experience. Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012) has stated that anything that might be visible (i.e., a “figure”) also involves a ground.

A figure is most often found in relation to the ground upon which it sits (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012). The ground is that which ties or holds figures together and thus connects them to each other. In relation to a figure, the ground usually acts as a support for which figures are located. A figure can at times overlap or become separated from other figures; however, the ground cannot be separated from the figures because it is the foundation upon which the figures emerge. In addition, it is within this figure/ground relationship that an understanding of the essences and/or meanings of an experience can emerge. For example, if one were to embark on a phenomenological research project and were to use interviews as their method of inquiry to study spirituality of student-athletes but did not recognize the background—or “horizon” as Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012) refers to it—of the individuals that they were interviewing (e.g., US NCAA DI), the full essences or meanings of those participants’ experiences would not be fully understood. In order to construct truths from one’s lived experience(s), context is essential; thus, we see the important role of figure/ground. As Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012) stated, “We must...reject as abstract any analysis of bodily space that considers only figures or points, since figures and points can neither be conceived nor exist at all without horizons” (p. 103). Therefore, the ideas of intentionality, being, experience, world, and this figure/ground relationship are all essential aspects that make up a single phenomenon (e.g., lived experience of spirituality for student-athletes in the current study). By being aware of the other major tenets of phenomenology, the ultimate essences or meanings of an experience can become known.

**Intentionality.** Intentionality, according to Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012), refers to the relatedness that each human being has with the world. This relatedness is salient for everyone throughout their lifetime because it ultimately forms and molds the life that one lives. In

addition, the interconnectedness that each individual has with the events, objects, and phenomena in the world are integral in how perception and experience are shaped.

For Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012), intentionality refers to *being here*. In other words, intentionality does not entail plans or an agenda but rather the aspects of mental states and bodily functions that consists of their *being* and *aboutness* in reference to the things, objects, state of affairs, or events that they are associated with. Merleau-Ponty differed from other philosophers in that he included the human *body* aspect of intentionality rather than just the mental aspects.

As human beings, we are never simply being passive when stimuli are presented but are rather receiving in relation to the stimuli we come in contact with in the world. As a result, what we perceive to be figural when stimulated is also highly influenced based off of the background related to that figure (e.g.; figure/ground—the figure of a barbell sitting on top of a squat rack with the ground being the rack itself as well as the other weight equipment within the gym).

### **The Four Existential Backgrounds**

**Body (corporeality).** The bodily experience of a human being gives perception meaning beyond that established simply by thought alone (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012). Throughout history, humans have existed because of their bodies; the body is foundational to perception, experience, and ultimately to the existence of all humans. The vantage point from which we perceive is via the body that we inhabit. The body perceives, moves, gestures, sexualizes, and allows for experience to take place among the objects within our world. The body has a very unique and sometimes peculiar role: it is a participant in the world in which we live, but it is also the window through which the world, our world, is perceived (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012). Merleau-Ponty expressed the significance of *meaning* because of the *body* as the fact that we give *meaning* to objects and experience because of the *body*. Giving meaning to the space around

itself begins to describe the significance of how the body evolves and grows, and most importantly, the way space begins to become modified as the body itself grows. For example, what might seem difficult for a younger athlete (e.g., performing pull-ups or a barbell back squat in the weight room) can no longer seem difficult for an adult athlete because of the actual growth of the human body. The body develops its own capacity for action and thus builds up its own sense of familiarity over time.

The *meaning* that we place on things as human beings is different not only based off of individuals' perceptions and experiences but also off their own human *body*, arguably where both perception and experience originate. The embodiment of any human experience is simply demonstrating the significance and capability that the body has as a vessel of expression. This expression often, according to Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012), concerns itself with sexuality; as human beings, having the ability to express ourselves with one another via sex symbolizes existence, and sexuality is a vital and original form of that existence.

The body is capable of awakening a person to relationships and is a phenomenon in and of itself. This *lived body* as Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012) refers to it, is the wholeness of our being as one and is an experience of self and what we perceive in the world. The body interconnects with *others*. Expressing one's body and using one's body to give meaning to the space that it surrounds on many levels is done with another human being. Forming and sustaining relationships with *others* (e.g., intimacy, friendly, or familial) is a critical part of human existence.

This particular ground—*body (corporeality)*—was extremely influential as it relates to the current investigation. The embodiment aspect, as Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012) points to, of the lived experience of spirituality was evident as many of the student-athlete participants shared

what their bodily experiences were like as it related to their LDS upbringing and identity. This is discussed in further detail in the coming chapter.

**Others (relationality).** The experience that one individual has with another has often been a topic of discussion that has been theorized and broken down by philosophers, authors, and theologians for decades. One theologian, Buber (1923/1937), has portrayed the relationships between two human beings in one of two ways: as either “I-it” or an “I-Thou” experience. In the “I-it” relationship, the person relates to everything and/or everyone in their world as mere objects, things that can be used for their pleasure. In this particular type of relationship—the “I-its”—an individual does not take into account the whole humanness and uniqueness of the other. As a result, this person will typically treat the other as an object. On the other hand, “I-Thou” individuals engage in relationships that tend to be more a meeting between two equals; as a result, they truly recognize the other for their own uniqueness and humanness as themselves (Buber, 1923/1937). The dialogue between two people within the “I-Thou” approach tends to elicit dominant features such as spontaneity and honesty in their communication. In other words, the full worth of both persons becomes apparent.

Similar to Buber, Merleau-Ponty took notice of the importance of having relationships and being able to connect with others throughout his work. Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012) reminded us what happens when human beings are born into this world. Newborn infants are first and foremost oriented and attracted to their mother’s face, not towards objects in the world. Thus, for the most part, the first actual “objects” that human beings see when they are presented and born into this world are smiles of other people; the relational and relatedness aspects are thus initiated. Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012) wrote about the importance of relationships, often referring to other people as “doubles,” “twins,” or “fellow travelers” along the path of life.

The concept of dialogue between two or more individuals emerged in Merleau-Ponty's writings as well. Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012) described how in the "experience of dialogue, a common ground is constituted between me and another; my thought and his are interwoven into a single fabric" (p. 370). Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012) went on to say that when engaged in this kind of dialogue, the two parties involved are "collaborators in perfect reciprocity: our perspectives slip into each other, we coexist through a single world" (p. 370). Coming to better understand the unique humanness of each individual can further delineate the common shared experience of living in the world together. Related to sport, Martin, Eys, Paradis, and Evans (2013) found that the concept of *others* can influence team cohesion which can ultimately influence performance. Carron, Brawley, and Widmeyer (1998) defined cohesion as "a dynamic process reflected in the tendency for a group to stick together and remain united in the pursuit of its instrumental objectives and/or for the satisfaction of member affective needs" (p. 213). Influenced from this aforementioned definition, Martin et al., (2013) suggested that one way we can develop cohesion with others/teammates is to enhance the communication and interaction between individuals/teammates. When communication and interaction are developed and are seen as important concepts throughout the entire team culture, team success can be experienced more often (Martin et al., 2013). Human existence, experience, and perception, therefore, can be shaped by the relationships we have with one another. In addition, similar to the other tenets within the existential phenomenological approach, the concept of *others* is directly correlated with the *world* we share together.

**World (spatiality).** According to Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012), the world is not separate from the human being, but rather the individual and the world co-construct and relate to one another. The foundational and paramount concept of experience is thus enveloped in the co-

construction of the world and the individual. As touched on previously, this aforementioned co-construction of the being and the world is referred to as intentionality (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012). In addition, the *being-in-the-world* expression is derived from this relationship/co-construction. What is important to remember is that the intentionality that represents this being and the world is brought into action via the body. The body—as previously discussed—moves, gestures, sexualizes, and is essential to be able to form action. As a result, the body is thus available to ultimately experience and then derive meaning from those experiences. According to Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012), there is a direct relationship/connectedness between being in the world and making sense of the world. For example, when one is in the weight room performing barbell back squats, the only experience they have during that time is of themselves and the barbell that they are squatting. The action of squatting is part of what takes over their own being and they cannot separate the being of themselves from the world in that exact moment. Once again, the important aspect to take from this is the direct relationship that occurs between the being and the world, which directly affects the kind of experience that an individual can have.

To further this point, Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012) states that, “Things coexist in space because they are *present* to the same perceiving subject and enveloped in a single temporal wave” (p. 288). The experience of the individual emerges because of their perception of the event. The relationship that one can take with an event/situation in the world will be/could be completely different from another. For example, if two individual coaches were watching an athlete perform a barbell bench-press, one coach might choose to see the weight being removed from the rack and then up and down through the air while the other coach might look at a fixed point—the athlete’s chest while performing the movement. Both subjects are set within the same space; however, each individual’s perception of the same space/event will be different. This

experience of spatiality is planted within us and is set within the world (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012). Being set within the world is influenced by what generates one's perception of *time*.

**Time (temporality).** There are certain ambiguities in how Merleau-Ponty both perceived and described *time*. However, according to Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012), this ambiguity cannot be ignored “for the ambiguity is in the things” (p. 176). Most would tend to agree that time is rather objective; when it is 1 o'clock in the afternoon Eastern Standard Time (EST), it is simply 1 o'clock in the afternoon EST. However, according to Merleau-Ponty, time takes on a more subjective experience, not merely an objective positionality. In other words, the awareness of an individual's perception of time would depend on the event that has actually happened/is happening.

To further expound upon this point, Merleau-Ponty indicates that the most imperative unit of time is the *present*. The present is where growth, learning, and progress are able to emerge. Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012) wrote that:

It is by being what I am at present, without any restrictions and without holding anything back, that I have a chance at progressing; it is by living my time that I can understand other times; it is by plunging into the present and into the world, by resolutely taking up what I am by chance, by willing what I will, and by doing what I do, that I can go farther. (pp. 482-483)

In existential phenomenology, time is understood as a continuum. For Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012), time does not follow a linear path (i.e., past, present, future), but more concerns itself with the future, the essence and/or meaning of having been (i.e., experience), and the now/present. For example, when one enters the weight room for a workout, they have often discovered that the objective nature of time seems to slip away. An individual can find

themselves lost in the essence of just being there, in that experience, in the weight room, working out, sweating, listening to music, and nothing else seems to exist in that moment; this is similar to the concept of “flow” or “in the zone” as described in other sport psychology literature (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Flow state results when a person performing an activity (e.g., playing a sport) is fully immersed in a feeling of complete focus and presence. This experience of full psychological involvement often occurs when the challenge of the task is just a bit higher than the skills of the performer, so they have to be completely focused on what they’re doing (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). For example, when a basketball player seems to be making every shot that they shoot, when a golfer shoots birdie after birdie on every hole, or when a quarterback throws 20 for 20 in a game; these experiences could be considered the flow state.

The future, according to Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012) is better understood as the potential for an individual to be-in-the-world, as touched on previously. The future is intimately connected to the present moment, because it represents the impact and occurrences of the many different experiences that an individual can have. The lived present “contains a past and a future within its thickness” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012, p. 288). This present moment represents the interconnectedness of having been someone and the potential for growth and/or more experiences towards being someone perhaps different. To summarize in Merleau-Ponty’s (1945/2012) own words, “the ambiguity of being in the world is expressed by the ambiguity of our body, and this latter is understood through the ambiguity of time” (p. 87). Thus, once again, we can see the saliency of perception in relation to the other important concepts within existential phenomenology that connect with time; how one perceives the essence or meaning of their experiences has a direct effect on their perception of time.

In summary, we can now see the importance of the “background” of lived experience and the vital role that it plays in everyday life. Whether it is body, others, world, or time, each background sets the stage for how the individual experiences the phenomenon. Within the current study, the background of body seemed to be of the utmost relevance to the student-athlete participants. This understanding was important for me and the research team to understand (before going into the current investigation) because we needed to select the most appropriate methodology that would bring light to the individual LDS lived experience of spirituality while participating in NCAA DI athletics.

## **Procedures**

### **Participants**

There were nine participants interviewed for the current study (see Table 1). Each participant was a current NCAA DI student-athlete who also identified as a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS). Five of the nine participants had served a full-time mission for the LDS Church. Four of the participants self-identified as female and five self-identified as male. Eight identified as heterosexual or “straight” and one identified as homosexual or “gay.” The participants currently participated in four different NCAA DI sports (cross-country/track and field, football, soccer, and volleyball,). Their mean age was 22 years old.

### **Bracketing Interview**

Following Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, one overarching question was developed for the current study: “What is your lived experience of spirituality as an LDS student/practitioner?” Before inviting participants into the research, my advisor—who was a trained qualitative interviewer—conducted an audio-recorded bracketing interview (Rolls &

Relf, 2006) with me utilizing this one question. The bracketing interview did not remove all my presuppositions, as it is impossible to achieve total reduction of all preconceived knowledge (Sohn et al., 2017). However, what the bracketing interview did do was simply allow me to become conscious of my own assumptions thus allowing a purer way for me to see the participant's world (Husserl, 1954/1970). As an active LDS member, my assumptions going into the study were: (a) that I knew what other LDS members' practice of spirituality was/looked like because of my own (e.g., reading the scriptures, praying, attending church meetings and temple worship, fasting, serving a mission, community service, meditation, etc.); and (b) I assumed that this study would elicit conversations about serving LDS missions and the impact that a mission can have on an individual. As a result, after listening to the audio-recording of my bracketing interview, I added these to my own identification of my biases and kept these in mind as I was thematizing all other interviews.

### **Pilot Study**

In addition to the bracketing interview, I also conducted a pilot interview with an LDS NCAA DI student-athlete to gain experience with the phenomenological interviewing technique (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The actual question that was asked to the pilot interviewee as well as the other participants for the current study was: "Think of a time—when participating in your sport—when you were aware of your spirituality and describe what stood out to you in that situation(s)." Both the bracketing and piloting interviews aided in the overall rigor for the current study (Sohn et al., 2017). The pilot interview, in fact, served as the first official interview for data analysis and also contributed to the overall thematic structure. The pilot interview was also given IRB approval.

## **Main Study**

I utilized a combination of convenience and snowball sampling (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to recruit participants for the main study. For example, I spoke with a variety of colleagues and friends who knew current LDS NCAA DI student-athletes and asked them if they would be willing to pass along my contact information (i.e., email and/or phone number) and an informational email about the study to prospective participants. Once a participant had responded to me directly via email or phone and had indicated a willingness to participate in the study, I then set up a time for a phone call/the interview to be conducted at a time that was convenient to the participant.

All interviews were conducted via phone call. Because all interviews were conducted via phone, all informed consent forms were emailed to the participants prior to the interview time. After explaining the informed consent form and the procedures to the participants, I then asked them to sign the form; then, they emailed the form back to me prior to the interview along with any concerns and/or questions they had. No concerns and/or questions were present for the participants prior to the interview(s). Each participant also chose a pseudonym for anonymity purposes before the interview began.

Phenomenological interviews are open-ended and unstructured thus allowing time to explore relevant issues and experiences surrounding the topic at hand (Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 1989). During the interview, it was hoped that the interviewee felt like an equal counterpart, ultimately helping to guide and direct the interview alongside me, the interviewer. As Polkinghorne (1989) stated, this interview process can elicit central and personally relevant issues repeatedly throughout the dialogue between the interviewer and interviewee. In order for the interviewee to feel comfortable and thus express true deep and authentic reflection, I tried to

demonstrate the utmost respect and non-judgmental attitude towards the true expert of the phenomena at hand: the interviewee/participant/the person describing their experience.

In other words, the student-athletes interviewed were the experts of their own experience as it related to the given phenomenon. Thus, I allowed them to guide the interview as necessary after the initial question had been asked. I also implemented probe questions at appropriate times. All probing questions were asked with the intent to promote continued description and interpretation by the interviewees (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). After the interviewees had said all that they desired, I then proceeded to ask: “Is there another time that you were aware of your spirituality in your sport that you would like to share?” During the interviews, my aim was to obtain rich description of the phenomena from the participants worldview. In addition, my presuppositions were revisited time and time again throughout the investigation process because this form of inquiry is a continuous beginning (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012). Thus, a continuous reflective practice on interpretations of both my experience and the phenomenon that was studied (Finlay, 2012) was implemented. For example, as mentioned previously, my personal practice of journaling, prayer, and meditation were utilized throughout this entire investigation.

Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim, lasting an average of 42 minutes. Interviews lasted until it felt like the topic had been exhausted or saturated; this is when interviewees/participants introduced no new perspectives on the research topic (Groenewald, 2004). In addition, saturation was also achieved when the perceptions shared by a student-athlete began to sound very similar to that of another student-athlete participant (Sohn et al., 2017).

Throughout the interview process, I tried to avoid asking “Why?” or “How does that make you feel?” questions, mainly due to the fact that these questions steer the participant away from their actual lived, figural experience. Instead, in conducting the interviews, I strove to ask

questions that opened the door for “fresh, complex, rich description of phenomenon as concretely lived” (Finlay, 2012, p. 173) by the student-athlete participants. I asked questions that centered around the concept of “What is that experience like?” or “How does this lived experience present itself to you?” (Finlay, 2012); as stated earlier, I asked participants to think of a time in their sport experience of when they were aware of their spirituality and to describe what stood out to them in that situation(s). With this approach, I attempted to discover “the way things hang together” (the “essence” of the lived experience) and to “grasp” the logical and fundamental structure of the lived experience as it is perceived meaningful for the participant (Dukes, 1984, p. 199).

It appeared that the interviews yielded an increase in awareness for each participant regarding their experiences and inner thoughts as they pertained to spirituality as an LDS NCAA DI student-athlete (Corbin & Straus, 2008). It was my hope that the interviews were used by participants to discover the meaning of fundamental themes in their lives (Kvale, 1996), particularly surrounding the lived experiences of spirituality as an LDS NCAA DI student-athlete. In retrospect, and after engaging in member-checking with each participant (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Thomas & Pollio, 2002), all appeared to enjoy the experience of being interviewed and contributing to this project. They believed that it was “exciting” to be interviewed for something as novel as this (i.e., their lived experience of spirituality as an LDS student-athlete) compared to just being interviewed about their sport, as they have been numerous times in the past. I not only had the opportunity to get to know new and wonderful individual student-athletes, but I felt self-empowerment as a result of going through the interview and being able to share this spiritual journey with them. In fact, often times during an interview, both the participant and myself identified that we were feeling the spirit of the Lord as a result of talking

about spiritual and very personal experiences. Immediately following most of the interviews, both myself and the participant expressed the feelings that we both had during our conversation—peace, comfort, and solidarity. Because I think they felt comfortable during the interviews, they would often go on 15 to 25 minutes about their own individual experiences without me saying a word; thus, this gave me deep and rich context behind each experience. Tears of both sadness and joy were shed during some of the interviews as a result of talking about matters that were very difficult, happy, and life-altering for many of the student-athlete participants. Both spiritual and mental capacities were free in a sense during the conversations that perhaps would not have been there if, for example, I had utilized a structured interview guide. As a result, the experience for both parties involved (i.e., me and the participant) often resulted in what I understand as spiritual edification (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2007).

### **Protection of Participants' Privacy**

Participant anonymity was always of the utmost importance and was protected in the following ways:

1. All artifacts that could potentially identify specific [including transcripts] participants were anonymized, and the original copies and recordings will be destroyed following a three-year time period.
2. This included digital recordings which were stored on a password-encrypted computer in my home office until transcription was complete; I then destroyed the audio files.
3. Transcriptions and thematic analyses were also stored on a password-protected encrypted computer in my home office, all hard copies were anonymized and were stored in my home office, and they will remain there in a locked cabinet for a three-year time period

after which the data will be destroyed. Consent forms and data are stored in separate locked cabinets in my office so that forms cannot be matched to data (Kaiser, 2009).

### **Data Analysis**

After the interviews were completed, the objective when analyzing the data was then to focus in on the richness, depth, and quality of description of the lived experiences of the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In addition, throughout the interview process, I utilized a reflective research journal (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This journal was a means to write down any immediate impressions that I had as well as experiences and any other pertinent information during the interview and immediately following the interview process that I had. For example, many student-athletes seemed to get emotional at some point during the interview (e.g., the sound of choking back tears or a hushed voice and a deep breath); it was during these time periods when I would make a note in my journal about the topic that was being discussed and what was happening to the student-athlete in that moment.

As influenced by Sohn et al. (2017), first, I read the transcripts as a whole, writing down any notes and impressions about the participants' experiences and selecting a word processing feature (i.e., an electronic highlighter) to highlight the different words and phrases that seemed to shed light on the lived experiences of spirituality of LDS student-athletes. After reading through each transcript at least once, I then read through them once again, now with the aim of identifying meaning units. Meaning units as defined by Lincoln and Guba (1985) are "the smallest piece of information about something that can stand by itself, that is, it must be interpretable in the absence of any additional information other than a broad understanding of the context in which inquiry is carried out" (p. 187).

Meaning units have a direct impact on what the eventual main themes will be. These meaning units provided terms of delineation as well as discovery of preliminary themes and main themes (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). After discovering meaning units throughout the transcripts, I then continued to analyze the data, as the objective was to find and discover the “lived experiences” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 75) of the interviewees. As Van Manen (1990) described, “The basic purpose of phenomenology is to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence; a ‘grasp of the very nature of the thing’” (p. 177). As a result, the aim was to *grasp* the lived experiences of LDS NCAA DI student-athletes in relation to spirituality. The discovery and implementation of meaning units aided in support of the rigor of the current study as well (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004).

After analyzing—from the highlighting and discovery of meaning units, to preliminary themes, and then eventually to main themes—I then named each main theme. The mission throughout the analysis was to discover roughly 3-4 main themes in every transcript that were similar across transcripts; ultimately, we ended up constructing four main themes and 11 subthemes. These main themes provided meaning that was seen throughout the data (Morse, 2008). During this process, as Finlay (2012) describes it, my central concern was “to return to embodied, experiential meanings of the world directly experienced” (p. 173) by the student-athlete participants. My advisor also read every transcript and proceeded to engage in the same process.

**Transdisciplinary Phenomenology Research Group (TPRG).** The TPRG at the University of Tennessee aided in further delineation and insight into the analytical process for the current study. Four of the nine transcripts were presented to the TPRG over a 20-week period. During the TPRG sessions, each transcript was read aloud, with one reader as the primary

investigator/interviewer and the other as the participant/interviewee. Throughout each reading, the group would pause periodically to discuss any possible meaning units and/or thoughts that stood out. The first author, along with two professors with significant expertise in utilizing existential phenomenological research inquiry—one who is a committee member on this dissertation—would take notes as the readings and group discussing progressed. Ultimately, this process allowed me to compile a set of notes that were then used in the final interpretation of each transcript and the final thematic structure and analysis. The TPRG is unique to the University of Tennessee- Knoxville (UTK) and unique for this particular step through the data analysis process of phenomenology/existential phenomenology inquiry. Sohn et al. (2017) described the TPRG as “an interdisciplinary group of faculty members and students. Some have years of experience with our (UTK’s) methods and others join in order to develop and refine their skills” (p. 128). The TPRG provided “an exemplary way to develop expertise in research methodology that can only be mastered through reflective practice and feedback from others” (Sohn et al., 2017, p. 128). In addition, the TPRG signed a Confidentiality Waiver that was included in the IRB application.

The TPRG was highly influential in enhancing the rigor of the current study. This is because the group challenged me in terms of reflecting on the differences between transcript readers that are present at the time of interpretation (Sohn et al., 2017). In addition, it also revealed “assumptions that the researchers may not have observed that are influencing findings, and ultimately confirms that the findings can be interpreted in a similar fashion by others” (p. 137). For example, in one instance while reading through one participant transcript, I was noticing the actions and applications of their resiliency and grit during a particularly difficult time period. On the other hand, a member of the TPRG was noticing the lack of control that this

student-athlete was experiencing as a result of losing her spiritual strength. My focus seemed to be on what this student-athlete was doing well during such a difficult time while my colleague/member of the TPRG was focusing on her struggles and loss of self-control. It was moments like these that allowed me to view the lived experiences of the student-athletes from a different lens and keep my own biases in check.

In addition to the guidance, input, and support of the TPRG as it related to thematic analysis, my advisor and myself also discussed and analyzed our preliminary findings. After presenting my thematic findings to my advisor—and after the meetings with the TPRG—she and I also further delineated and reflected upon what we had at that stage of the data analysis process. We concluded that the TPRG and I had in fact formed a strong foundation of thematic structure and analysis. After further deliberation, reshaping, and reflection, my advisor and I then finalized the thematic structure (see Figure 1, discussed in Chapter 4).

Establishing validity and reliability for the current study was also of the utmost importance. For example, phenomenological research is thought to be valid if it “produces a thematic structure supported by the data and verified by the participants” (Post & Wrisberg, 2012, p. 104). The validity portion of the current study came from myself, the research group (TPRG), my advisor, and, most of all, confirmation from the participants after interviews and thematic analyses had taken place. For example, I utilized Creswell and Poth’s (2018) description of the nine procedures that are implemented to increase trustworthiness/validity in qualitative research in the current study: (a) prolonged engagement and persistent observation; (b) triangulation; (c) peer review and debriefing, (d) negative case analysis; (e) clarification of researcher bias; (f) member checking; (g) rich, thick description; (h) collaborating with participants, and (i) external audit (see pp. 389-394). Glesne (2011) has stated that all of the

aforementioned procedures do not need to take place in every study; however, it was my aim to utilize them all to enhance trustworthiness/validity.

This means that (a) I first sat with the participants' responses longer both during and after the interviews. This prolonged engagement with the data allowed me to come to better understand, on a more intimate level, what was being said; (b) I then triangulated (Carter, Bryant-Lukosius, DiCenso, Blythe, & Neville, 2014) my methods by analyzing each voice from every interview—this included the tone of voice, the periods of pause, the influx of voice, and/or the speed and/or rate of which experience was being shared; (c) I used peer review—the TPRG and my advisor—which was vital in establishing validity and rigor; (d) throughout the analysis, I also occasionally searched for and discussed elements that did not support patterns that emerged from the data analysis; (e) as mentioned previously, I intermittently revisited my own biases via journaling, meditation, and prayer; (f) as I describe in further detail below, member-checking was done by sending the student-athlete participants their transcripts as well as the final thematic analysis; (g) I think that my invitation to each participant throughout each interview to “describe more,” “tell me more about that,” or “paint us a picture of that experience” allowed for rich and thick description of lived experience; (h) I made it known from the very beginning that the participants were the experts and that I was merely observing and listening to their experiences; A continual collaboration with participants was of the utmost importance throughout the entire investigation. And, (i) finally, I invited and worked with an external auditor who helped analyze my own biases in my writing throughout the thematic structure, data analysis, and the document. I believe that each of these processes strengthened the overall findings.

The reliability portion of the analysis was evaluated by assuring that the thematic structure captured the participants' many different lived experiences (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). In

addition, because reliability can be understood as the ability to replicate particular methods within a study—and, as a result, attain consistent results across people and time—I was careful to elucidate all phases of the research process, from start to finish. Member checking was also implemented (Patton, 2002). Member checking was done by participants/interviewees so that they could review the ultimate thematic analysis that was constructed by me, my advisor, and the TPRG (Sohn et al., 2017), and tell us if it fit their experience; each participant agreed with the final thematic analysis.

### **Summary**

In summary, the methodology chosen for the current investigation was found to be extremely effective in terms of getting at the essence of the lived experiences of spirituality as it related to the given population. Many of the experiences shared by participants were profound and novel as they related to the phenomenon of spirituality in DI college athletics and the overall research conducted thus far in sport studies (i.e., sport, spirituality, and religion). In the next section, I present the actual results of the interview analyses, the thematic structure that was constructed from those interviews, and how participants' lived experiences of spirituality as LDS student-athletes can contribute to both existing literature and future research, particularly in the fields of religion, spirituality, and sport psychology.

## CHAPTER 4

### Results and Discussion

The body, by withdrawing from the objective world, will carry with it the intentional threads that unite it to its surroundings and that, in the end, will reveal to us the perceiving subject as well as the perceived world. (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012, p. 74)

The aim of this study was to explore the lived experiences of spirituality for National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I (DI) student-athletes who also identified as members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS). Using an existential phenomenological interview approach (Thomas & Pollio, 2002), I conducted nine interviews. In this chapter, the thematic structure that was constructed from the data analysis of the participants' interviews is provided. In addition, themes and subthemes are discussed and illustrated that are supported by direct quotes from the participants of the current study as well as supporting literature.

#### Overall Summary of the Thematic Structure

Figure 1 (shown below) shows the thematic structure that was constructed from participants' interviews and data analysis. The figure depicts what I believe —after thorough TPRG and advisor data analysis—to be the most meaningful to the participants. The heart, the aspect that seemed to be the most salient to the lived experiences of NCAA DI LDS student-athletes, was intimately related to their identity as members of the LDS faith. The thematic structure consists of four major themes—and subthemes—related to participants' experiences of spirituality as LDS NCAA DI student-athletes. Those themes are: *LDS Identity*; *Balance Between LDS Identity and Athletic Identity*; *LDS Identity During Times of Crises*; and *LDS*

*Identity in Relationships.* The four aforementioned themes represent the embodiment of what it meant to be an LDS student-athlete at the highest level of college athletics (i.e., NCAA DI).

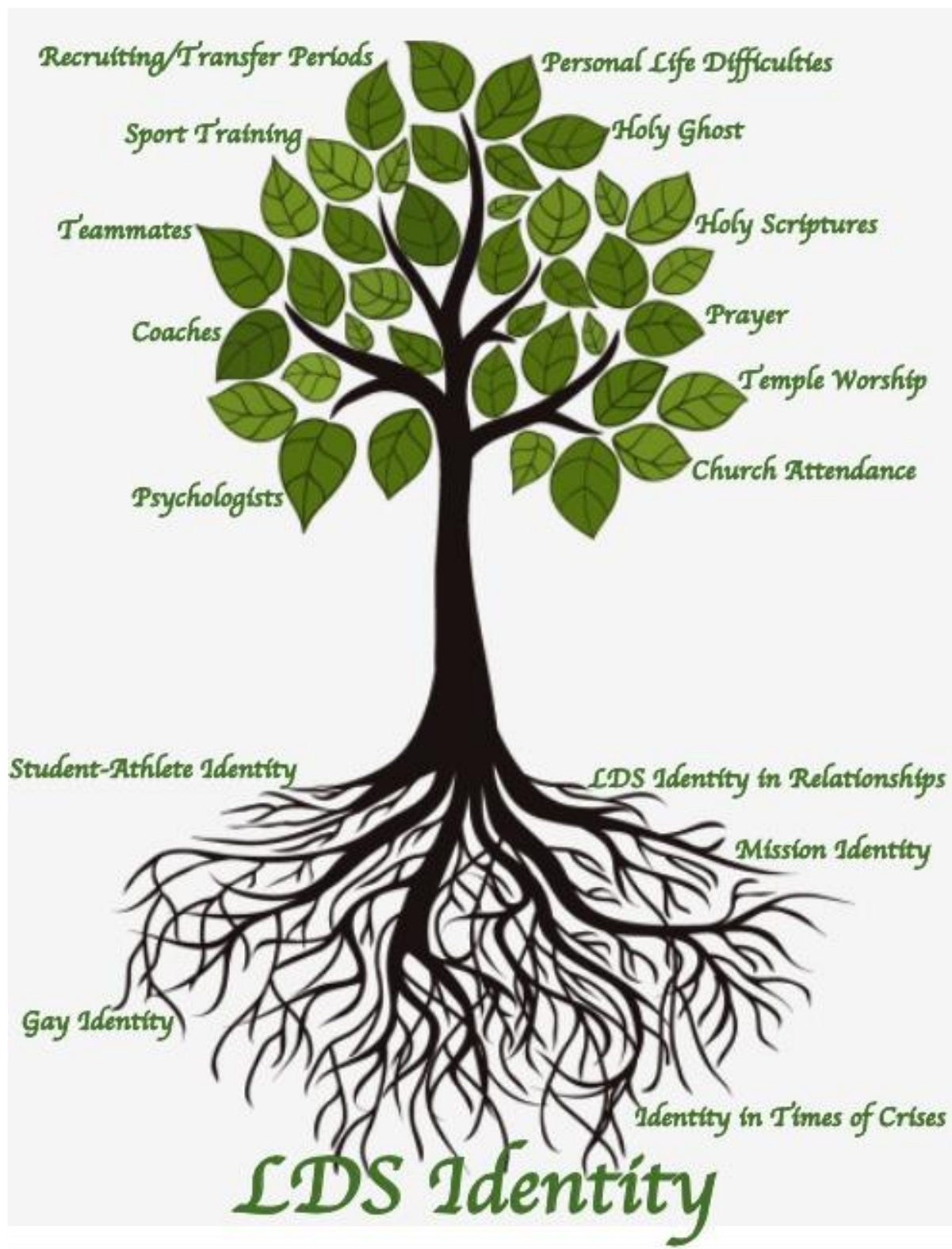


Figure 1. Thematic Structure

## Theme #1: LDS Identity

The first major theme is *LDS identity* and was one of the first to be constructed from the analysis. The talk of identity seemed to surface over and over again during all the interviews with the student-athletes. Scholars using existential phenomenology, as outlined previously, believe that human experience and existence emerges within one of four major grounds of *world, body, time, or others* (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012; Thomas & Pollio, 2002). In other words, what is figural or meaningful for an individual can appear against one of these four grounds. For the participants interviewed in the current study, what was figural for them – LDS identity - stood out as being at the center of, the embodiment of being a student-athlete.

For example, the ground of *body* is one of the primary ground against which the student-athletes engaged in some kind of spiritual practice and/or self-identification. In fact, the body was a constant ground, or background, to their lived experience of LDS identity.

From a broader perspective, LDS identity informed these student-athletes' LDS and sport practice which helped them mitigate the challenges of their sport experience. Likewise, these LDS and sport practices then informed the LDS identit(ies) of these student-athletes. An LDS identity was at the heart/center of the lived experiences for these student-athlete participants. Subthemes included *mission identity* and *gay LDS identity*.

For many, their LDS *spiritual* identity—and being a child of God—was by far their most important identity. Kent described it this way:

Like OK, I am a college athlete, but before that I am a child of God, and that carries a little bit more weight. Maybe all the stuff isn't quite as big of a deal or is that life isn't as threatening as I think it is. And coming at things from that perspective was helpful...

Similar to Kent, Elizabeth's—a college volleyball player—spiritual identity seemed to stand out more in her life compared to the other identities that she had:

Your spiritual identity is pretty constant, you know that you're a child of God and you know that, that you always have someone in your corner who loves you and who is rooting for you, and, I don't know, you know, like everything is a lot more linear, I think because you know what you're supposed to do and life isn't always easy

**Mission identity.** Over half of the student-athletes interviewed (five out of the nine; 4 men and 1 woman) had also served LDS missions throughout the world prior to their NCAA DI sport experience (between 18 and 24 months). Many of those returned missionaries/student-athletes appeared to carry their “missionary” identity with them into their student-athlete experiences. Jim, a college football player, described what it was like for him to converse with teammates about why would sacrifice two years of athletic eligibility because of his service as a missionary:

My teammates wanted to know why in the world I would sacrifice 2 years of my athletic career or at least push it back to go to Thailand and teach about Jesus Christ and that was the moment where I, I recognized the significance of what I was doing, what I was about to do and, and how it, it became a very, very relevant part of my identity here at

University X...that I was the kid going to Thailand on an LDS mission.

A mission experience can be very different from one missionary to the next for those that chose to serve missions in the LDS Church. For example, some missionaries serve in the United States; thus, the likelihood of having a comfortable apartment to live in and other accommodations nearby is high for those missionaries compared to others like Jim who was going to serve in Thailand and live in a cinderblock studio home/apartment with no real accommodations nearby.

In the early days of the Church for missionaries serving worldwide, the participation in and playing of sports was not uncommon (Alston, 2014; Embry & Brambaugh, 2009). In fact, playing sports in the “mission field” provided the missionaries an unorthodox tool to use as proselyting representatives of the Church. In relation to LDS missionaries playing sports, Embry and Brambaugh (2009) stated, “sports are affording a golden opportunity for missionaries to make friends and to preach and teach by example as well as word” (p. 65). Early missionaries of the Church serving in places such as Japan, Great Britain, Germany, Samoa, Australia, and South Africa (Alston, 2014; Embry & Brambaugh, 2009; Woods, 2012) played and participated on basketball and baseball teams as a means to introduce people to the Gospel (Embry & Brambaugh, 2009). While the “Cumorahs” (an LDS baseball club in South Africa during the early-to-mid nineteenth century) and other “Mormon baseball teams cannot claim large numbers of converts, they succeeded in reinventing the Mormon image in South Africa. Press coverage was positive” (Alston, 2014, p. 126). Through sport, and the newspaper and radio coverage, “the missionaries were able to break down some barriers, develop some great lasting friends and eventually introduce the gospel of Jesus Christ into the lives of some young players, their families, [and] sports fans” (Embry & Brambaugh, 2009, p. 71).

Participants in the current study who had served a mission also described how challenges experienced on a mission can become opportunities for growth and maturity. Because of the many ups and downs of serving a mission, one can come away from serving a mission much more mature and self-confident. Jim described his experience in this way:

For a lot of missionaries, the confidence to be different, the confidence to, to do those things, many times, is derived from serving a mission, from the experiences that you have there. I came home from my mission a much more confident person than I left. Many

coaches had made the comment to me about how impressed they were that I did come back and be in, be ready to play. It wasn't just about the physical aspect of it, but about the, the overall holistic kind of player mentality. I found that the Lord inspired in me confidence in those promises in crucial moments.

And, as Bob—a football player—put it:

Overall, a mission ended up really helping me, because that's how it's been in college football, it's such a balancing act of trying to do academics and football...a mission helped me a lot of with planning and time management.

**Gay LDS identity.** In contrast, Gertrude, a college cross country runner and the only self-identified gay participant, described how her LDS identity got in the way of her student-athlete identity. In fact, at times, her running identity was the only thing that saved her. As she put it:

I kind of started to resent that I couldn't progress as an athlete because I was a member of the church...holding that identity felt very isolating to me...that identity as a runner empowered me and kind of balanced out where I felt like the religious identity was holding me back. My spiritual identity and my religious identity are definitely separate, although the context of my spirituality was just held through The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints...so I guess my spirituality, what I believe in a lot is about accountability and the time that I have to myself to make choices and live with the consequences...it's just being accountable to the choices I've made in my training. It's been very freeing to...use sports as a like 'This is what makes my life worth living' sort of.

Gertrude went on to describe another very important part of what makes her a human being, which was her sexual identity. Gertrude identifies as a gay woman. Gertrude is also open about her identity. As a result, coaches, athletic administrators, teammates, friends, family, etc., know about her sexual orientation. An individual member in the LDS Church is permitted to be “gay” and still participate in all LDS Church activity; however, that individual is not allowed to act on their gay feelings or tendencies (i.e., engage in any sexual contact with another of the same sex) in the LDS Church—this is considered a sin (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1995). Thus, being gay in the LDS Church can be hard for many reasons, not the least of which is that any homosexual activity in the LDS Church is considered a sin because sexual activity (occurring only in marriage) should only be between a man and a woman (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1995). Gertrude described how hard being gay has been as she continues to identify as an LDS member:

Being LGBTQ at a place like University X, it’s been hard to feel peace because I have to acknowledge that I made the decision to go to school that has hard policies on you know, LGBTQ people and that’s outside of my control, so what I can control is showing as myself, you know being authentic, kind of following, following the rules that I agreed to follow, but it’s been tricky to find peace in that...I’ve never viewed myself as like gross or broken or disgusting because I felt that attraction, so that’s where I’ve been really like grateful for where my spirituality was at that point, because you know not everyone feels that way when they start experiencing those feelings...my spirituality was very much on my side during all of this.

Gertrude, therefore, focused on things that were in her control (i.e., being herself, being authentic, adhering to university rules, etc.). Yet, this experience still proved to be difficult for her.

Therefore, it seemed that throughout the interviews, LDS student-athletes' identities were heavily influenced by the LDS culture/Church that each student-athlete belonged to. Being an LDS member and trying to implement the standards and practices that exist within the LDS Church—as well as being a student-athlete—had a profound impact on how each student-athlete experienced their spirituality. Thus, as depicted in Figure 1., the heart and embodiment of these student-athletes' lived spiritual experiences were intimately connected to their LDS identities, especially if they were in line with the teachings of the LDS church.

## **Theme #2: Balance Between LDS Identity and Athletic Identity**

The second major theme that was constructed from participant interviews was whether or not they could balance their LDS identity and practices while still participating in sport. This centered mainly around *church attendance* and *temple worship* in addition to *the use of prayer* and *reliance on the Holy Scriptures*. These activities can be viewed as some of the most influential practices of the LDS religion, more commonly referred to as religiosity (Bénabou, Ticchi, & Vindigni, 2015).

**Church attendance and Temple worship.** The participants touched on the importance of being able to attend and worship with other church members in an LDS chapel every Sunday. In fact, Ashley, a college soccer player, grew up having a strong stance against not playing on Sundays because Sunday worship and honoring the sabbath day was something that was strongly emphasized by her family, something that she took very seriously growing up with her sister. This meant that she believed she had to abstain from playing sport/soccer on Sundays. Growing

up, Ashley described how she and her siblings were taught from a young age about the importance of Sunday worship at the chapel. And, perhaps even more importantly to her, this meant being able to attend church so that she could partake of the sacrament. Ashley shared her experience in relation to the sabbath day and her athletic identity in this way:

When me and my sister were asked about playing on Sundays, we were like “No, like we’re not playing on Sunday.” So that was a huge stand we took and they (the coaches), like agreed to that and they let us play. My dad told me, like, if you’re good enough, they’ll keep you, but if you’re not and you don’t play on Sundays, they’re not going to keep you. However, one coach down the road told us (her and her sister) like “I love you guys, but we, we want you to play on Sunday though. Like so you’re either going to play on Sunday with us or you’re not on our team.” So, we just looked at each other and said “OK, bye, we’re not on the team,” like it was pretty easy, easy answer to that...I took that stand from then on out, it was just easy, easy answer like, No, I’m not playing, so, yeah, I just making that decision at a young age, definitely made it so much easier once I got older. They just didn’t understand like how important it was for us to show up to church that day and partake of the sacrament and keep the sabbath day holy, cause that was just huge for us growing up...I was just grateful that I got to go to church growing up on Sundays.

Similar to Ashley’s drive to want to attend church on Sundays and partake of the sacrament even if it meant she couldn’t be a part of a team, Bob—a college football player—also made church attendance a priority beginning while he was in his collegiate athletic recruitment process. Bob needed to know where the nearest chapel was to his future apartment/school and when church meeting times were so that he could make the effort to attend every week. Similar to other

student-athletes interviewed from the current study, both Bob and Ashley expressed their sincere desire to fulfill all of God's commandments as student-athletes, one of which they believed strongly to be keeping the sabbath day holy. Bob shared his experience in relation to recruitment and sabbath day worship in the following quote:

When visiting some of these schools, I kept asking myself 'Am I going to be able to like live my religion here?' and that was something, I was kind of worried about that because I wanted to be able to attend church regularly.

A more specific type of LDS worship is known as Temple worship. Similar to church attendance in the LDS Church, attending the Temple is also considered a holy place to worship and where one is able to perform numerous sacred ordinances within the LDS Church (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1993). However, the Temple is different from a regular chapel in that it requires a recommend from a local Church leader; this recommend is given on the basis of one being "worthy" or obedient to God's commandments and only members of the LDS Church are allowed to get this recommend and enter the Temple.

Kent expressed how his Temple attendance helped during some particularly stressful events in his own life as a college football player. In relation to his personal Temple worship practice, he stated that:

I used a lot of prayer, but kind of what my, my real like go-to was, like going to the temple. We did that every week. There was even a while where we were going twice a week...the opportunity to go to the temple kind of helped me to unplug and forget about what was going on with football and by the time we were done with the temple, and I came back out into the real world...like my perspective on the situation had changed and it had changed, it had gone from like 'I can hang.' The temple was a place to help me get

completely detached from, like completely mentally detached from the stress of football plus school, and kind of get my mind immersed in something else...like unplugged from the stressors of daily life, I would come out the other side and have a, a rotated perspective on those stressors in a way that the stressors were smaller, and less threatening and I felt again, more connected to my purpose as an eternal being.

It appears then that the Temple can be a place of refuge and comfort for many LDS student-athletes who are competing at the NCAA DI level. Similar to an LDS chapel, both the Temple and chapel are places to commune with God, sing hymns, learn more about the Gospel of Jesus Christ and dedicate oneself to said Gospel through covenants made with God (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1993).

**Prayer.** Each interviewee of the nine mentioned the act of prayer in some way when asked about what comes to mind when thinking about experiencing spirituality as an LDS student-athlete. They expressed their profound and reliable relationship with prayer and how prayer played an integral role—both on and off the playing field—throughout their athletic careers. In other words, prayer proved to be a guiding force for most of the LDS student-athletes that were interviewed. As Joe described in relation to how he utilized prayer as a college football player during his pre-game ritual:

When we take a knee during pregame, those that are inclined to say a prayer in the end zone and, that's definitely a moment where I've recognized like, kind of gotten a chance to step back from you know the crowd, fans, and the other team, even I guess myself in a sense, just to thank God for the opportunity to play the sport that I love and to be blessed to be at this institution and to further my education...and recognizing my own spirituality, recognizing God and just thanking Him for, for all that I have, kind of being

able to zoom out and take a step back...I like to pray just because I feel like it's a way for me to connect to, to my heritage, it's a moment where I'm able to, reflect on my identity, not only in my faith but in my, my heritage and who I am as a person...it allows me to take a step back and remember, you know, there's more to life than just football, so I think it's one of my favorite aspects of my, my pregame prayer ritual.

This action allowed him to take a psychological and spiritual step back before the game to recognize his own spirituality as an LDS student-athlete. Similar to Ballard and Wilson's (2017) findings from their interviews with 3 professional elite athletes, prayer was described by Joe as an aspect of his pre-game ritual/routine. The act of kneeling in the end zone as a football player to supplicate with Heavenly Father allowed Joe to step back from the game that God had given to him and to thank God for the game of football and for his ethnic and religious heritage. Joe's pre-game prayer was also an opportunity for him to take a different perspective on football and even on his life in general in that moment.

Similar to Joe, Kent was another college football player who expressed a deep and reliable relationship with prayer. However, Kent used prayer as a motivator and stress reliever during his athletic career:

Prayer is kind of way for me to go back to, this greater power that I feel connected to, and kind of anchor myself to God, and go to Him for help, to kind of ask Him, like to lighten the load a little bit for me. But I think, like even the act of prayer, I think that the act of prayer demonstrates a certain level of optimism...and that if I continue to do my best, things will work out well. I use prayer as a way to tap into a greater power as a source of purpose and, motivation, drive, and to help me on my way...I feel that like, you're not doing it alone...you have the being that created the universe beside you.

Tracy, a college volleyball player, also described her use and practice of prayer as a way to help her get through difficult times as a student-athlete, especially as it related to her mental health:

Just like having these moments of being so alone and I would just like cry while I was praying because I was just like Heavenly Father, like I don't know what's going on, and like, I don't know why I feel like this mentally and emotionally...I just wanted comfort from Him (God) and life, I mean obviously like when we pray, it's hard because we just want Him to fix what's going wrong, but like that's not how He works. And so I just kept praying about it...praying is a big one obviously for me, especially, like in those times where it's really, really hard like that's when I need prayer the most and even though, I might not feel like doing it, like that's something that I know I need to do...as I'm praying, He's listening to what I am saying...He was listening the whole time.

The act of prayer for many LDS student-athletes in the current study seemed to provide comfort, strength, and direction in times of need. In the current study, participants mentioned that prayer was also utilized to alleviate anxiety and stress in uncertain athletic times (i.e., recruitment, transferring, relationships with coaches). Participants felt that prayer was something that was always available, in any moment, at any time. They expressed the availability aspect of prayer and how at any time they had the reassurance in knowing that He was there for them, always listening.

**Reliance on the Holy Scriptures.** Alongside church and Temple worship is another spiritual avenue that many student-athletes touched on during the interviews, that of reading and relying on the holy scriptures. There are many ways to feel the guidance and influence of the Holy Ghost as an LDS member; however, reading scriptures is one avenue that many seem to take. Reading the scriptures for members of the LDS Church, as discussed earlier in the current

document, can include the “standard works” (i.e., *The Book of Mormon*, *The Holy Bible*, *The Doctrine and Covenants*, and/or *The Pearl of Great Price*). These standard works were often talked about throughout the interviews that were conducted. As a result of reading the holy scriptures, the student-athletes expressed the experience of feeling the influence of the Holy Ghost more abundantly in their lives.

As a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, reading the scriptures is highly encouraged and emphasized (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2018b). The holy scriptures can provide the base for lessons and talks given on Sundays in LDS Chapels, and LDS members are also highly encouraged to study the scriptures at home, at school, or wherever they are able to, both individually and in family units. As a result of reading the scriptures, LDS members are reminded of how powerful these holy set of words are/can be in order for the Holy Ghost to be able to provide support and guidance in their lives. Elizabeth, a college volleyball player, touched on her personal experience and reliance of reading the holy scriptures, stating that:

Another aspect is just like reading the scriptures every day...I remembered being exhausted and homesick and honestly just kind of terrified to go practice every day and like the only thing I really looked forward to everyday was reading my scriptures...everything is made right with God and Christ. And I remember every day, I just clung to those scriptures when I needed it and like, being alone or finding an alone space on campus and just reading and silently crying...like without that, I would have been miserable and I would have had no hope.

The scriptures proved to be a light in Elizabeth’s life during some harder times as a student-athlete. She finished her remarks by saying that:

I would say that the scriptures just give messages of hope and it lets you, it really reminds me that there's more to life than the hard things that I'm going through right now and it allowed me to take a step back from this thing that was really freaking me out and this like stressful situation and it allowed me to just feel loved and to feel peace.

Similar to Elizabeth's experience of reading the holy scriptures and the "reliance" type of relationship that seemed to exist for her in these sacred words was Tracy's experience. Tracy mentioned that "staying true to what she knew was right" during the many ups and downs of being a student-athlete would bring her happiness and comfort, especially as it related to her personal struggle with depression. As she stated:

Staying consistent to the way that I knew it was best to live my life. Like I grew up going to church every Sunday, and reading the scriptures...and like, the feeling that I get when reading the scriptures, like I knew that if I continued and made that effort, like I would be blessed and like I may not see like immediate blessings, but I knew that if I was consistent with that, I wouldn't look back and be like why didn't I keep doing those things that I knew would make me happy.

**Guidance from the Holy Ghost.** LDS church members believe that those who utilize the spiritual avenue of reading the scriptures have the opportunity to experience the influence and guidance from the Holy Ghost (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2018b). As a member of the LDS Church, one receives the gift of the Holy Ghost after being baptized into the Church. Receiving the gift of the Holy Ghost is central to the membership of the LDS Church. According to LDS doctrine, as a gift given to one, the Holy Ghost "is the Comforter. As soothing voice of a loving parent can quiet a crying child, the whisperings of the Spirit can calm our fears, hush the nagging worries of our life, and comfort us when we grieve" (The Church of Jesus

Christ of Latter-day Saints, Duncan, 2020, p. 1). As a result, the Holy Ghost plays a crucial role in the lives of LDS members, as mentioned by LDS student-athletes in the current study. All participants had been baptized members of the LDS Church at the age of eight. As a result of being baptized, they were also given the gift of the Holy Ghost, by one who possessed the proper power and authority (i.e., the holy priesthood) in the LDS Church (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2018b), immediately following their baptism.

Participants in the current study mentioned that the Holy Ghost guided them more often when they involved themselves in the aforementioned practices. This guidance steered some student-athletes in one direction and others in a different direction. For example, in relation to the Holy Ghost, Ashley described her own experience and how she feels its influence and guidance in her life:

It's the best feeling ever, you feel safe for sure, when I feel the spirit the strongest, I can't stop smiling and I just have the warm, fun butterflies (laugh), the super giddy and protected...yeah, protected and safe and just I feel loved for sure...the Holy Ghost will always, always be with you and protect you and guide you...so that you can play the sport you love and also keep the Gospel as a standing member of the Church.

Similar to Ashley's experience, Elizabeth described how guidance from the Holy Ghost was experienced for her:

In church we get these like roles or callings and they basically mean, it means you just get assigned or asked to do a certain job and if you accept, then you do it and those have taught me to like just put your head down and get to work or do things that you don't necessarily want to do, which I think really, relates to, relates to volleyball and sports in general. I just learned a lot and it was really hard and I struggled but when you learn the

most and you grow the most when you like embrace that struggle, and I really like decided that I needed my spirituality in order to survive, and I think a lot of people do and I'm really grateful I have the Holy Ghost because like not everyone does and, and so being able to come to University X where it was encouraged for me, to hone in on my spiritual side, like I was really grateful for it and it was really, like really quickly, I saw that that was going to be a big part of my identity.

Receiving guidance from the Holy Ghost and reliance on the holy scriptures—along with the other aforementioned LDS spiritual practices—were mentioned consistent across all interviews with participants. In other words, the lived experience of spirituality for each participant in the current study was in large part informed by what they *did*—the *practice of*—spiritual principles in everyday athletic life.

In addition, each aforementioned subtheme was closely connected in some way while the major theme of LDS identity served as a constant presence or background in the lived experiences that were shared by the student-athletes. Their individual spiritual lived experiences seemed to also directly inform and influence the mental and physical aspects of being an NCAA DI student-athlete as well.

### **Theme #3: LDS Identity During Times of Crises**

The third major theme related to participant interviews focused on how LDS identity was mobilized during times of crisis as a NCAA DI student-athlete. The utilization of spirituality and how the aforementioned spiritual practices and self-identification stood out the most was during specific time periods/events. Subthemes included *recruiting /transfer periods*, *personal life difficulties*, and *sport training*. As a caveat, each subtheme seemed to co-exist with one another

in some form. This co-existence seemed to run deep within many of the experiences shared from the student-athletes that were interviewed.

**Recruiting/transfer periods.** One period that stood out over the course of these interviews related to NCAA DI LDS student-athlete spiritual identity and practice was during recruiting and transferring periods. They described relying on their spiritual framework—as it related to their LDS faith—during these challenging times more so than at any other time in their college careers.

For example, Bob utilized prayer and guidance from the Holy Ghost during his recruitment out of high school. As a college football player, Bob wanted to serve a mission right after high school graduation. As a result, he needed to find a team/school/program that was willing to wait for him for two years so that he could play football after his time serving as a missionary. Bob shared his experience this way:

Coaches kept asking, ‘Are you going to serve a mission? Is this something that you’re set on?’...and I told them all that I wanted [was] to serve a mission and that kind of made things difficult because people will either, had already filled up their like missionary slots and most weren’t really interested in waiting so I kind of that a moment when I kind of struggled a little bit because I felt like I was doing, you know I was supposed to be doing, you know, kind of like doing what I felt the Lord wanted me to do and then kind of every, all the schools we were talking to, just kind of fell away...but of all of the visits I took—especially out of junior college—I think one that I was definitely aware of like my spirituality and like the fit to wherever I was and things just didn’t feel right, like at my first visit. It was cool but it wasn’t really what I wanted to, what I wanted to join. Kind of the whole time I was there, I was getting like a feeling, you know I was always praying

about it, it was a big time decision that it was just wasn't a good fit...mainly a lot of it was just kind of going off of like promptings from the spirit I really feel like, and I kind of took.

Jim, another college football player, also discussed how he utilized his own spirituality during his recruitment period. Jim was not heavily recruited out of high school and he did not know where he wanted to nor where he could play. However, he described that "through much prayer and consideration," he chose the current institution that he is at now. As Jim shared his story:

University X is one of the institutions in, in the United States that really kind of has respect for members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and to be Christian...and the coaches respected my decision to serve a mission and they were actually enthusiastic about it...over the course of my two years serving, I had, I was able to send emails back and forth and kind of share my experience with these people and when I returned, I returned to a group of friends that I already had an established support network at University X...and they really had a lot of respect for what I had done, at least a small understanding of what I had done and that really set me up for what would have been a hard experience...my mission really set me up going into camp with confidence...it's ok for me to be different and it's ok for me to stand up for what I believe and even more so, my teammates already had that respect and they had the understanding that they would stand up for me, for my beliefs...in using these experiences, it's made me a better football player and a better influence on the team and they also recognized my integrity, I think which is important to me and in building a trusting relationship with the coaches.

Jim described how his mission trip and faith in his Heavenly Father made the transition home after two years easier for him and allowed him to currently thrive on his team. Jim continued on, stating that his mission had, in fact, actually empowered him to be a better football player and provided him with better decision-making abilities:

To recognize that because I tried to do everything that God wanted me to do, He has put me in a position where I could go out and make things happen and so I just tried to do my best to do that...I came home from my mission a much more confident person and it's because God doesn't care about football, but He does care about young men...God doesn't care about some, some specific objects or activities but He does care about me and the effects that those things can have on me and so, I, when I try and make decisions during more difficult times, I really try and consult my Heavenly Father through prayer, through seeking guidance from the Holy Ghost and many times for me, it has taken the form of me choosing between two good things and so I pray, and I seek and know which Heavenly Father would have me to do and sometimes, it, it becomes clear to me, through the Holy Ghost to those, those feelings...when I'm praying and considering a certain decision, I really, I try to make decisions and pray and ask Heavenly Father if I'm doing the right thing and I try and move forward with something and that's what I've done.

Elizabeth, a college volleyball player, mentioned that her life as a new freshman at a competitive and fast-paced DI institution seemed overwhelming at first. Her new life as a college student, coming straight out of high school, was difficult and foreign for her and it was something that she did not know how to handle. She recalled how helpful it was to have a mental strength coach (aka sport psychology professional) at her institution to help her through this process, and how the concepts that were taught to her from her mental strength coach seemed to

relate very well to the concepts and teachings in the Gospel of Jesus Christ as taught in the LDS Church (Mosley et al., 2015; Sarkar et al., 2014; The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2018b; Vernacchia, 2000). Elizabeth stated that:

We have a mental strength coach at my school and a lot of the stuff that he taught me as soon as I arrived as a freshman really resonated with me, just because of what I felt like I had been taught in church already...I made it a big goal to be really teachable and to be humble and to not like make the practice about me, but about just trying to get in my coach's shoes and be reasonable and I really felt like that related to how I've been taught my whole life to act and I noticed this difference, this sense to when I was being humble and selfless outside of volleyball, it helped me be a better volleyball player, and so my whole volleyball career as a college athlete kind of has just been this way...but stepping back and realizing that when I'm my best self, and even when I'm my best volleyball self, like I'm playing my best and I'm learning a lot, it's when I'm doing the things that I know are right, that I know are right spiritually...we have been taught to be teachable and to not be hotheaded and those are attributes that we connect with Christ and that's who we're trying to be like...this mindset really helped me during this period of coming straight out of high school into college competition which was really hard at first.

As student-athletes at an NCAA DI level, the individuals in the current study are expected to carry a heavy load including both academics and athletics. For example, not only are these young adults expected to attend strength training and practices (often in the early mornings before class and then usually again in the afternoon), but they are also expected to do well in a full load of classes throughout the day; they also have study hall in-between. Travelling to and from

competition is always something they must deal with as well. They also have to find time to put in film study for their individual sports/positions. In addition, these young men and women are also trying to find quality and long-lasting relationships with other individuals (i.e., spouses, partners, boyfriends, girlfriends, family members, and friends). This type of schedule could be perceived as difficult for anyone, let alone a college student-athlete. In other words, NCAA DI student-athlete life is demanding.

In summary, participants in the current study relied on their LDS faith and the many spiritual learned practices that came along with it when they were balancing their athletic identity with their LDS identity. This reliance on LDS spiritual practices seemed to surface more and more during difficult athletic time periods like recruiting and/or transferring. In other words, the concept of religious adherence (MacIlvaine, Nelson, Stewart, & Stewart, 2013) seemed to play a significant role in these student-athletes' lives, especially during difficult time periods. They also were cognizant of their LDS identity when facing relational challenges in their collegiate athletic careers as well.

**Personal life difficulties.** Participants also talked about experiencing their spirituality during other personally stressful times, whether in or outside of sport. For example, Kent talked about how the power of prayer and Temple attendance were two outlets he implemented into his life during some difficult and toxic relationships with strength and conditioning coaches. As he stated:

I was most aware of my spirituality and it was, it was when I was like most stressed and I felt like, kind of needed help to have a bit of burden lifted. I felt like when I was going into battle with the strength coaches...it was psychological warfare in there...one example of actually being in the weight room...the head strength coach out of the blue,

he comes up and gets about 2 inches from my face and says ‘Kent, do not F with me’— I’m keeping things edited (laughs)—‘do not F with me or I will have your f’in ass off this team before you can blink.’ So anyway, that was kind of, that was my first experience of sort of realizing what to expect with the strength coaches...then I was going to practice and, practice for me was very mistake-laden in the beginning because I was completely relearning everything. So, it was, you know I was either stressed about going to practice or I was stressed about going into the weight room. And so that’s, that’s the source of stress for me...and my spirituality would come in, afterwards once I had, I had a chance to sort of step away from the situation, and I, I used a lot of prayer, but kind of what my, my real like go to was, was like going to the temple.

Kent continued, saying:

So, I’d go through the week, you know, I’m up at like 4 in the morning to go to conditioning and then after conditioning, I’ve got some class that I’ve got to be to and then, practice after that, and then, and then I’ve got homework that I’ve got to do and generally before I’m done with homework, it’s time for me to go to bed so I can get at least like 5 or 6 hours of sleep and so I go through that and throughout the week, I’m kind of, you know, those things really start to weigh on me and I start to see myself as um, an extremely stressed college athlete and going back to the temple and praying, was kind of, a chance for me to like pump the brakes on everything, and again, sort of reorient myself to like ‘Oh yeah! Like, Ok, I am a college athlete but before that I am, like I’m a child of God,’ and that carries a little bit more weight.

Unfortunately, Kent had experienced some verbal abuse from his strength and conditioning coaches. This is something that no student-athlete should have to endure. However, the practice

of turning towards God and Jesus Christ to feel comfort, peace, and hope in moments of difficulty via Temple attendance and prayer helped support him through this difficult and abusive time period.

**Sport training.** One last period where student-athletes in the current study described being aware of their LDS identity was during training and practice in their own individual sport. Practice and games at an NCAA DI level can be both a mentally and physically exhausting experience. For example, similar to Kent's experience of training and carrying the load of being a student-athlete, Jim—another college football player—described how his own spirituality, and in particular his own 2-year mission experience, helped him get through fall football camp:

So, fall camp is a grind. No matter where you go, fall camp as a collegiate football player is a grind and anywhere from 4 to 6 weeks of just football and you play football all day, every day and you play football on Sundays sometimes and on Saturdays and it doesn't matter. You just play ball. And for a lot of guys, they get what's referred to commonly as the "camp blues," because you just kind of, your life becomes this endless cycle of football and you don't really know what day it is. You just get up and follow the schedule for the day and, and you go to sleep at night and repeat the next day. But, one thing that helped me to avoid the 'camp blues' is the identity that I have as, as a child of God, and I can, but I just mean a lot of times, football players and, and student-athletes, they get in college and they, they start to form their identity around um, the things that they do, or they've had this identity coming in from high school. You know they are a football player and for a lot of people that's really hard because they realize that sometimes, the things that they do, aren't enough to motivate them...but for me, a

football player was never my primary identity...my primary identity has always been a child of God, a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Elizabeth, a college volleyball player, also talked about her spiritual reliance during her sport training. She stated that her relationship with her own spirituality actually made her a better volleyball player in her eyes:

Even when I had really hard days in volleyball and I would be crying, in my bed alone and the only thing that would bring me comfort was my knowing, like my spirituality and it actually, allowed me to keep going in volleyball and to probably be more optimistic, than if I, like wasn't because the times when I forgot to like be spiritual and to not turn to God, those were the moments where I sulked and I probably like thought negative or emphasized too much on my mistakes and when I'm spiritual, it really gave me a lot of hope of like if I keep working hard, I'll get better or if, even I keep working, things will turn out however the way they're supposed to...my spirituality allowed me to focus on getting better as a volleyball player and student-athlete instead of worrying about my shortcomings.

Challenging moments in sport, therefore, provided a place for student-athletes to not only develop physically and psychologically but to lean on their LDS identity as well. Whether it was in the weight room or during transitions, many of the student-athletes described how being in touch with their LDS identity helped them get through the hardest part of being an NCAA DI athlete.

#### **Theme #4: LDS Identity in Relationships**

For all participants in the current study, the striving or straining together aspect of NCAA DI competition seemed to be very apparent and important in relation to their spiritual lived

experience. It seemed, in large part, that their spirituality was informed by/within their personal relationships with others (i.e., *teammates, coaches, psychologists*).

**Teammates.** Bob, a college football player and returned missionary for the LDS Church, experienced one difficult personal life event in particular that related to his teammates. Bob had a teammate who took his own life during an off-season of football. As Bob and his teammates were going through this difficult mourning process, many of his teammates turned to him for guidance and advice, knowing that he was a religious man and a returned missionary for the LDS Church. Bob shared his experience this way:

Unfortunately, one of our teammates took his own life, and that was a real like (whisper *damn*) kind of an eye-opening experience I think for everybody. Like everyone was just like shocked, like we didn't know what to do...we all just had a talk as a team to help everybody through this grieving process and just trying to do those type of things. A lot of guys kind of kept asking me, like 'Well, what do you think about it, Bob?' Or, 'What's your opinion?' 'What is this?' 'What's that?' And just being able to have this experience of similarity, like my mission, getting asked a ton of questions, it definitely gave me a kind of confidence to look at these type of difficult situations, like you know this is, this is what I think, you know...then we ended up having a little service for him and for just the football team and people that knew him in the facility. You know, our head coach actually reached out to me and asked if I could come and speak...it definitely made me aware, that whole experience of my spirituality and kind of being able to answer questions for like when people were coming in that situation, in that moment and being able to just kind of try and help guide people through this horrible situation...I felt like I needed to make sure I was taking care of myself and my spirituality because with guys

holding me to a little bit of a different standard, there was that, that chance they were going to ask something.

Bob was able to utilize his own spiritual framework to facilitate and help his teammates while still making sure that he took care of himself. Because of his time spent as an LDS missionary and his continual and active membership in the Church, he was able to feel comfortable enough to lift his teammates and coaches during a difficult time.

Ashley, a college soccer player, seemed to stand out the most in terms of her own development and practice of her own spirituality that involved other individuals. Her spiritual lived experience was largely influenced by her family, and, in particular, her sister who is older but also a highly competitive soccer player. Ashley described her experience about relationships in relation to her spirituality by stating:

I've always been like aware of my spirituality, especially, growing up, playing with my sister. We never played on Sunday, then going to University X, I also didn't have to play on Sunday and then, so and then I transferred to University X and I had to play on Sunday and that was a shocker for me. I was like, 'This is weird,' but super cool, because there were a lot of members at University X and we got to go to church together...that was awesome because I got to pray with them and take the sacrament at church and we all showed up in our jumpsuits (warm-ups) one Sunday, which was super funny. But it was super cool...I felt the spirit super strong because it's like, we were able to leave like the team setting and go do what's most important on Sundays and take the sacrament...I was like 'Wow, like this is awesome that I still get to do what's most important to me and play the game that I love with my teammates.'

Ashley was able to experience her own LDS identity as strengthened by being with others; in particular, her sister and her teammates made a great impact on how she moved through the lived world of NCAA DI athletics. The impact of important other LDS women in her life allowed her a greater expression of freedom to do what she felt was right in accordance with her beliefs as a member of the LDS Church.

**Coaches.** Bob, a college football player, shared the gospel with his teammates because they did not know what he actually believed in as a member of the LDS faith. Bob also had a coach who was highly impactful during this time in his life; this particular coach was also a member of the LDS Church in addition to also being Bob's position coach. As a result, Bob spent many hours with this individual talking about schemes, reviewing tape, and talking technique and tactics as it related to football. Apart from the football conversations that he had with this particular coach, Bob also shared many conversations about life moments and spiritual matters:

My position coach, that was a member of the Church was really big for me, just having somebody that would have kind of understand, was like to get where I was coming from and had similar beliefs, so that was huge for me...it was also nice to have that mentorship outside of football with my coach, as well as like he was more than a football coach, you know, because we could, I mean if I was ever disturbed, I would go into his office and we could talk about anything, because he understood. Like that was huge for me. You know being able to come out of practices and there was this one practice when I first got here and I was really stressed with school. I just got into classes and like everything was going crazy and I felt like I was just doing everything at once and couldn't do anything right and I remember going to this coach, and you know, he actually was able to give me

a blessing in his office...and that was a really cool experience for me, like for him to just be able to be there, like ‘Brother so-and-so,’ that was cool to have that kind of guidance with that, a role model, you could say.

In addition to Bob’s position coach being a member of the LDS Church, Bob also mentioned a positive spiritual relationship that he had with his strength and conditioning coach as well; he went on to say that:

Like I said I had a position coach who was a member of the Church, but then we had a couple of different people on the staff, like one of our strength coaches was very, very religious and like really open about it. He was always really cool about me being a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, like we talked about it all the time, like different similarities, differences, things like that, but always in a good way. You know like always in a way that was like just both of us, kind of like learning and talking together which was really cool, and that definitely was another reason why I felt so comfortable here at University X.

**Psychologists.** Tracy, a college volleyball player, described her relationship with a psychologist who was there for her during a particularly difficult time of her career in the following way:

Seeing the psychologist was just, so like validating because, he was like you know you’re really struggling and this is a hard thing and it’s hard if you can’t talk to anyone about it and so, and like it didn’t automatically make everything better, like I was still like, just having these moments of being so alone and I would just like cry while I was praying because I just like Heavenly Father, I don’t know what’s going on, and I don’t know why I feel like this, but it just, like the fact that I could have “so-and-so,” an

adult who was like licensed and he was telling me that, that helped...and so it was just someone validating how I felt and like telling me how strong I was that I had been like making my way through this was really helpful during this time period...that experience was hard, but I'm so grateful for that experience and how much closer it brought me to my Heavenly Father.

For Tracy, having a relationship with this particular psychologist over the course of her career as an NCAA DI student-athlete created a safe space for her to truly express how she felt; in return, she received validation and much needed empathy during a difficult time period in her life.

As an NCAA DI student-athlete, many have the opportunity to work with sport psychology consultants. These consultants provide a unique and valuable service to student-athletes and staff by teaching them mental performance skills and strategies (Beauchemin, 2014; Brown, 2014; Ferrante & Etzel, 2009; Fogaca, 2019). However, Tracy suffered from major depression; therefore, she needed a licensed professional psychologist to help her deal with her emotional and physical challenge. Luckily, she was able to receive the help she needed from a psychologist on staff. This relationship—along with the relationships that she had with her teammates—proved to be a vital source of comfort and hope at a much-needed time during her collegiate career. Tracy continued by describing the impactful relationships she also had with her teammates and her Heavenly Father over the course of her collegiate career. She stated that:

I'm just so much more grateful for like the tender mercies that I recognized and like my friends and teammates that I saw all my life and like I was able to recognize that the people in my life were there because He (God) loves me and like I have these people because He's blessed me with them and all the good things in my life come from Him

and so that's made our relationship stronger because I was able to recognize all the good things that I had during this experience.

Finding gratitude in a difficult situation can be hard for anyone, yet Tracy proved she could do it through her resiliency and grit during her difficult times.

### **Summary**

In summary, the participants from the current study discussed both their LDS identity as well as the spiritual practices they have utilized during certain stressful time periods when they needed them the most. The lived experiences of spirituality for these student-athletes seemed similar across each interview; however, each participant's story also differed in some way unique to their individual experiences and spiritual framework. The meaning (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012) of these participants' lived experiences of spirituality while they were current NCAA DI athletes seemed to surface and stem from their self-identification as members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Their spirituality was *lived* and practiced uniquely because of their upbringing and practice as a member of the LDS Church. In the next chapter, I describe the conclusions for the current investigation, practical implications for those who work with LDS student-athletes, and some important future directions for this line of research.

## CHAPTER 5

### Conclusions, Recommendations, and Practical Implications

The world must not exist around us as a system of objects whose synthesis we perform, but rather as an open ensemble of things towards which we project ourselves. (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012, p. 407)

Despite salient research in spirituality, religion, and sport (Ballard & Wilson, 2017; Czech & Bullet, 2007; Davies, 1965; Gabana, D'Addario, Luzzeri, Soendergaard, & Wong, 2019; Hoffman, 1992, 2010; Hoven, 2014; Mosley et al., 2015; Nesti, 2004, 2011; Parry et al., 2011), zero literature exists in regards to NCAA DI sport and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS). Similar to other spiritual experiences of NCAA Christian student-athletes (Egli et al., 20014), LDS student-athletes have unique challenges and experiences as it relates to their spiritual and religious framework. Thus, an investigation of such a phenomenon (i.e., the lived experiences of spirituality for LDS NCAA DI student-athletes) might provide useful information for those that work with this population of student-athletes (i.e., coaches, sport psychology consultants, psychologists, athletic administrators, etc.)

Past research has shown the efficacy of studying both religion and spirituality within the context of sport (Czech et al., 2004; Evans & Petersen, 2015; McKnight & Livingston, 2018) and how attending to the *whole person* (i.e., mind, body, *and* spirit) can add value to understanding sport participants (Gabana et al., 2019; Jirásek, 2015; McKnight & Livingston, 2018; Nesti, 2004, 2011; Sullivan, 2010). However, as mentioned previously, prior to the current investigation, no research had been conducted surrounding spirituality as it relates specifically to NCAA DI student-athletes who also identify as members of the LDS Church. Therefore, the aim of this study was to explore the lived experiences of spirituality for NCAA DI student-athletes

who also identify as members of LDS Church. In this chapter, the major findings of the study are discussed first. Then, *connections to and extensions of previous research*, practical implications, and finally some recommendations for future research are offered.

## Major Findings

Overall, four major themes and 12 subthemes were constructed from the phenomenological interviews (see Figure 1) in the current study. All four major themes centered on the embodiment of identity as a current NCAA DI student-athlete and member of the LDS Church. As touched on previously, those who espouse existential phenomenology believe that human experience and existence emerges within one of four major grounds: *world*, *body*, *time*, or *others* (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012; Thomas & Pollio, 2002). All major existential phenomenological grounds emerged as important in the lived experience of spirituality for LDS DI student-athletes (i.e., the phenomenon) in the current study; however, the background of *body* seemed to be a constant presence for the participants. Although all existential phenomenological backgrounds played significant roles, the background of *body* represents the most common experience among all nine participants as it relates to their LDS upbringing and identity. The other grounds (i.e., *world*, *time*, and *others*) were also seen within the shared lived experiences participants described. For example, the ground of *world* was represented as a significant ground against which participants engaged in some kind of spiritual self-identification and practice (i.e., found in Theme #1: *LDS Identity* and Theme #2: *Balance of LDS Identity and Athletic Identity*; see Figure 1); this ground—along with the ground of *body*—encompassed the figural subthemes of LDS mission identity, gay identity, prayer, church attendance and temple worship, reliance on the holy scriptures, and spiritual guidance from the Holy Ghost. The grounds of *time* and *others* were represented as the primary grounds against which the student-athletes utilized and

experienced their spirituality most often during difficult times and with other individuals; the grounds of *time* and *others* encompassed the figural subthemes of relationships with teammates and coaches, support staff (e.g., psychologist and mental strength coach), recruiting and transferring periods, personal life difficulties, and sport training (i.e., found in Theme #3 : *LDS Identity in Times of Crises* and Theme #4: *LDS Identity in Relationships*; see Figure 1). Taken together, the figural themes that were constructed from the interviews suggested that, for these participants, the experience of spirituality as an LDS NCAA DI student-athlete represented an embodiment of identity—this identity that was intimately related to their LDS upbringing, background, and membership.

The description of the themes is the most important aspect within phenomenological writing (Finlay, 2012). As a result of using existential phenomenological interviews (Thomas & Pollio, 2002), the themes constructed in the current study were both consistent with and diverged from previous research. Although the participants shared their “lifeworlds with others,” they also had their “own unique vantage point” (Finlay, 2012, p. 180). These unique vantage points also contained similarities that can be seen across the four major themes and subthemes (see Figure 1). For example, the figure and ground relationship (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012; Thomas & Pollio, 2002) highlighted in Figure 1 depicts the unique intertwining of the physical embodiment of being an NCAA DI student-athlete while at the same time having as their primary identity—the heart and foundation of their identity—living one’s life (and practice) as a member of the LDS Church.

Perhaps the most significant finding of the present study was the saliency of the time periods or events where participants felt their lived experiences of spirituality. The time periods where participants were most acutely aware of their LDS identity and spiritual practice usually

involved, to some degree, a certain amount of stress or pressure. As previously touched on, competition at the NCAA DI level is the highest in all of college sports in the United States; as a result, student-athletes can experience burnout (di Luzio, Martinent, Guillet-Decas, & Daigle, 2019; Vealey, Armstrong, Comar, & Greenleaf, 2008) and other stress-inducing events during their collegiate career. During these stressful time periods—and consistent with previous literature—many collegiate (Christian) athletes turn to some form or practice of spirituality including prayer, church worship, reading the scriptures, and guidance from the Holy Ghost (Egli et al., 2014; Egli & Fisher, 2017; Mosley et al., 2015). What is unique about the findings constructed in the current study is that LDS student-athletes described in detail how they used their deep and reliant relationship with prayer to God during recruitment out of high school, when choosing the right program/institution, during the experience of mental illness, and during difficult relationships with those on a coaching staff that they were forced to interact with. This practice of spirituality was deeply intertwined with/because of their LDS identity. Similar to other studies (Houlberg, 2017; Kelly, 2015), the student-athletes from the current investigation described that their spiritual identity was the most important part of what made them a human being, and, perhaps most importantly, it also broadened their identity so that their athletic identity was not the primary identity they had.

A second significant finding from the current study was that of the relational aspect with other individuals as it pertained to the lived experience of spirituality while participating in NCAA DI sport. Having and building relationships that informed participants' spirituality proved to be paramount for many of them. Building and having loving relationships in life in general has been shown to be an integral part of supporting and sustaining one's motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). In past literature focused on the experience of sport spirituality, spirituality has been

represented as more of a solitary journey (Ronkainen et al., 2015). However, the participants from the current study expressed time and time again that their relationship to spirituality was greatly influenced as a result of their contact with others/teammates and coaches—both in good and bad ways (i.e., the abusive strength and conditioning coaches that Kent experienced). The relationship aspect of each individual’s lived experience of spirituality was seen across all interviews; expressing their beliefs about spirituality to others appeared to create not only conversation but, in some cases, deep connection with other teammates and coaches. As a result, participants seemed to have an increase in a more *holistic* type of motivation (i.e., mental, physical, and spiritual) as a result of their (mostly positively) relationships with others in collegiate athletics.

Another important aspect of the results constructed in the current study was the mental health journey that one student-athlete in particular—Tracy, a volleyball player—had gone through as expressed in her interview. Tracy described experiencing depression and anxiety as a student-athlete. Not only was she experiencing these psychological difficulties, but she also expressed her sadness at not having the support from some of the members of her coaching staff; she described not feeling validated and supported during this particularly difficult time of her sporting career. One reason she felt alone was because the coaching staff “strongly encouraged” her to see the “mental strength coach” instead of a clinical psychologist. While the MSC was trained in performance enhancement techniques, dealing with depressive symptoms is the job of a clinical psychologist. And, because the coaching staff did not want their athletes to see a clinical psychologist, Tracy had to be covert about seeking help from this type of professional.

Results from one study in particular conducted by Wolanin, Hong, Marks, Panchoo, and Gross (2016) indicated that nearly 25% of collegiate athletes have reported clinically relevant

levels of depressive symptoms. While Tracy finally received the help that she needed after seeing a psychologist, this process seemed to greatly affect and even exacerbate her psychological distress. For her, it was important to find out what was available to her as a student-athlete at her institution (i.e., psychologist) and then to receive the necessary help; however, since the coaching staff was not supportive of her seeking clinical psychological help, this made the process doubly hard.

Tracy expressed how her spiritual identity also felt in crisis at this time as well. She felt a loss of control in her life that she had not previously felt prior to her major depression and anxiety. Even though she continues to battle depression and anxiety, she expressed her gratitude about her Heavenly Father for the small and tender mercies that she believes have been given to her through these difficult times. She credits the act of prayer, the help and support of an empathetic psychologist on staff, and the support of teammates for her happiness and the hopeful state that she is in today; having social support from these types of significant others is also supported in previous literature (Fogaca, 2019; Tomalski, Clevinger, Albert, Jackson, Wartalowicz, & Petrie, 2019).

A fourth significant finding from the current investigation was that while LDS NCAA DI student-athletes' lived experiences of spirituality was an important part of who they are as human beings, this aspect of their identity was only one part of their identity. Similar to previous research, their bodies also played a significant role in their overall experience of being a student-athlete (Roe & Parker, 2016; Waller et al., 2016). While participants were asked to describe the lived experience of the human *spirit*, this spirit had to deal with the very real issues of the flesh including grueling training schedules as well as unique challenges of NCAA DI sport. The best thing about these results is that they highlight the fact that support staff (including from

psychologists, administrators, coaches, parents, spiritual leaders, sport psychology consultants, etc.) can provide student-athletes the opportunity to discuss their spiritual identities as a part of their overall growth and holistic development.

Lastly, a fifth finding from the current study was that five of nine participant student-athletes had served a mission for the Church. These individuals seemed to have more to express in terms of actual spiritual lived experiences as an LDS NCAA DI student-athlete. These returned missionaries appeared to acknowledge a deeper understanding of their own spirituality and how that was expressed in the world in general and in DI sport in particular. Not only did it seem apparent that these returned missionaries were able to express more in terms of an actual amount of dialogue, but they also seemed to have more than one perspective related to their spiritual identity because of the 18 months to two years they served in a different country or place. Their service as missionaries seemed to generate more conversation with teammates and coaches as well (especially for the participants who did not attend an LDS Church-owned university). In addition, the returned missionaries seemed to carry an added sense of self-confidence with them going into their college experiences, whether that was related to their academics or to their sport itself.

### **Connections to and Extensions of Previous Research**

Findings from the current study are unique in that literature related to LDS NCAA DI student-athletes' experience is non-existent. As a result, these findings contribute to the general literature focusing on religion and spirituality as well as specific literature focused on sport/performance psychology and spirituality and religion. Thus, findings from the current study are novel from the point of view of the existing literature. Nevertheless, some of the results are

consistent with previous studies associated with spirituality, religion (especially Christian faiths), and sport.

**Turning to spiritual practice in times of crises.** For example, for NCAA DI student-athletes, balancing sport, academics, and relationships can be a difficult thing. Research has indicated how difficult this balance can be, especially for incoming freshman who are not used to such a demanding schedule (Jolly, 2008; Navarro & Malvaso, 2015; Umbach, Palmer, Kuh, & Hannah, 2006). Thus, the practice of turning towards God and Jesus Christ to feel comfort, peace, and hope in moments of difficulty has been linked to better psychological adjustment (Exline, 2013). As touched on previously in Tracy’s account of experiencing depression and anxiety during her collegiate career, some athletes may utilize their practice of turning to God and Jesus (via prayer, church attendance, and reading the scriptures) to experience more positive feelings, in addition to seeking clinical help. In contrast, experiencing negative emotions towards God (e.g., anger at God, feeling abandoned) and/or religious struggles (e.g., Gertrude) experienced can cause detriments to performance (Exline, 2013). In fact, the title for the current investigation— “If I’ve Got God on My Side, I Can Do It” —was chosen specifically because it portrays the profound effect that these student-athletes felt when God was on their side. The terms “living right” and “doing the things I know I should be doing spiritually” came up time and time again during the interviews; this suggested that participants felt the need to be spiritual, have an intimate and healthy relationship with God, and use these avenues to better themselves as student-athletes. The feeling of having the “being that created the universe on my side” (said by Kent) seemed to give an added sense of self-confidence and fortitude to them. Faith in knowing that you can be successful and do hard things seemed to stem, in large part, from their faith first and foremost in God.

One spiritual tool that was often expressed throughout the interviews was the utilization of prayer. Most of the student-athletes interviewed expressed their deep and personal relationship with prayer. The act of prayer seemed to provide comfort, strength, and direction in times of need. In past literature, prayer has been shown to be an important practice for many different athletes, especially Christian athletes (Bade & Cook, 2008; Ballard & Wilson, 2017; Czech et al., 2004; Czech & Bullet, 2007; Coakley, 2009; Egli et al., 2014). In the current study, participants mentioned that prayer was also utilized to alleviate anxiety and stress in uncertain times (i.e., recruitment, transferring, relationships with coaches). And, prayer is something that is always available, in any moment, at any time. Similar to Ballard and Wilson's (2017) findings, prayer could also be used as a pre-ritual/pre-game routine; one participant in the current study expressed his deep connection to prayer as part of his pre-game routine. The act of kneeling in the end-zone as a football player to supplicate with Heavenly Father allowed him to step back from the game that God had given to him, thank him, and for a second, reflect on his blessings; this allowed him to take a different perspective of football and of his life in general in that moment. This pre-game prayer routine demonstrated the efficacious power that prayer can have as also indicated in previous research (Bade & Cook, 2008; Czech et al., 2004; Hochstetler, 2009).

**Experiencing growth and resiliency in times of crisis.** The aforementioned findings are also consistent with already existing literature demonstrating how spiritual and religious practice provides athletes with greater psychological resilience (Mosley et al., 2015) and as a protective factor against stressors and negative life events (Peres et al., 2007). Participants in the current study described experiencing resiliency and grit during these aforementioned adverse times. Grit as defined by Duckworth (2016) is “sustained passion and perseverance for especially long-term goals” (p. 7). Resiliency, on the other hand, is defined by Fletcher and Sarkar (2016) as “the

ability to use personal qualities to withstand pressure” (p. 136). Grit and resiliency were also buoyed through relationships with others; relying on someone else and having the accessibility and reliability to turn to someone else, especially in times of need, seemed to be salient. These findings are also consistent with other studies that found psychological distress to be lower among LDS religious individuals that had a strong spiritual support group (Allen & Heppner, 2011; Allen & Wang, 2014).

In previous research, it has also been demonstrated that religious student-athletes who feel comforted by God in their times of disappointment or struggle may not only be able to bounce back and learn from failed experiences but also able to experience spiritual and religious growth (Park, Edmondson, & Blank, 2009). In fact, numerous student-athletes from the current study expressed their gratitude to God for some of the difficulties that they had experienced. This sense of gratefulness provided these student-athletes with humility and greater faith in God’s plan for their lives as student-athletes. These findings are also supported by previous research by Gabana and colleagues (2019) who found that those who identified as both spiritual and religious scored significantly higher in dispositional gratitude than self-identified spiritual/non-religious and non-spiritual/non-religious athletes; the gratitude aspect also resulted in better overall performance for some (Gabana et al., 2018; Gabana et al., 2019; Gardner & Moore, 2007). In addition, some of the “personal qualities” that make up resilience (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2016) seemed to be related to participants’ spiritual practices and their self-identification as LDS members including the use of prayer to overcome adversity and withstand difficult times (e.g., transitional periods).

**Experiencing spirituality together.** Another result was that many student-athletes from the current study expressed their positive experience of practicing their spirituality personally as

a student-athlete but also implementing that practice with a teammate and/or within a team setting. For example, Sunday worship with others provided participants a sense of companionship and rest; they reported how their mind, body, and spirit seemed to be rejuvenated and nourished as a result of weekly church attendance (Mosley et al., 2015; Sarkar et al., 2014). In addition, two student-athletes described similar experiences of meeting other teammates and classmates for the first time and having a conversation about their LDS mission experience. Because of their spiritual identity of being an LDS returned missionary, a new and unique bond between themselves and their teammates was created. In sum, many participants shared the importance of being able to bond over something like spirituality, and how it benefitted their overall experience as a whole (Eime, Young, Harvey, Charity, & Payne, 2013). These findings are similar to other study results suggesting that there is a relationship between attending religious services and a decrease in college students/student-athletes' experiencing of depression and anxiety (Kay, Gaucher, McGregor, & Nash, 2010; Jansen, Motley, & Hovey, 2010).

**Recognition of the spiritual part of sport.** Finally, findings from the current study suggest that participants recognized their own spirituality directly within their individual sport settings (Kelly, 2015; Houltberg et al., 2017). Whether it was in the weight room, on the practice field, or before a game, many of the student-athletes described their experiences of not only praying, but also conversing with others (teammates and coaches) over the topic(s) of spirituality, and in most cases, their spirituality as it related to their membership in the LDS Church; one student-athlete/football player in particular described his experience of having numerous conversations with teammates and coaches about the LDS Church, about scriptures (e.g., The Book of Mormon or The Holy Bible), and about his broader views on spiritual matters

from his own LDS perspective. In other words, they felt “spiritual nourishment” within the practice of sport itself.

### **Practical Implications**

Results from the current study provide several practical implications for sport psychology and other professionals in NCAA DI sport to consider. Due to the lack of literature existing surrounding LDS NCAA DI student-athletes, it would appear that those who work with LDS student-athletes—as well as friends and family members—would benefit from a greater understanding of how they can use *all* of the resources that are available to them to include spirituality in their work with this population.

**Coaches.** For example, coaches who work with LDS NCAA DI student-athletes can allow them to feel like they can practice their religion and/or spirituality in addition to being an athlete (i.e., allow time, space, and dialogue for spiritual and/or religious practice). Coaches can also place emphasis on *whole* student-athlete development over the entire course of student-athletes’ collegiate careers (i.e., provide regular check-ins and ask the student-athletes what they might be doing for spiritual development and psychological development outside of sport). In addition, coaches should be sympathetic, patient, and supportive towards those LDS student-athletes who are returning home from an 18-month to 2-year mission; knowing that spiritual and/or religious practice might be important to LDS NCAA DI student-athletes who are returning missionaries, coaches can also provide spiritual resources for all LDS student-athletes (i.e., LDS chapel locations, contact information of local LDS leaders, or nearest LDS Temple location/hours of operation).

**Parents.** Parents can regularly check-in with their children/student-athletes (i.e., a text message or phone call). It is also important for parents to know the academic resources that are

available for their children/student-athletes (i.e., tutors, study hall hours/locations, professor's office hours, etc.). In addition, knowing the spiritual leaders for each of their children/student-athletes (i.e., Bishops, Stake Presidents, or other LDS local leaders in their area) can enhance the likelihood of student-athletes' spiritual and religious practice. If possible, parents should also be prepared to financially provide for essentials (i.e., food, room, books, gas, etc.) over the course of their children's/student-athletes' collegiate careers.

Parents can also provide unconditional love and support over the course of their children's/student-athletes' careers. Also, parents can be an example of what it is like to live in the world, yet not be of the world (as stated in John 17:16) by regularly bearing testimony of Jesus Christ, or, of what they personally know that brings long-term happiness, guidance, and comfort as it relates to matters both inside and/or outside the LDS Church.

**Athletic administrators.** Because athletic administrators can be a liaison between the coach and the student-athlete, results from the current study also suggest that athletic administrators can provide resources for the LDS NCAA DI student-athletes (i.e., church meeting hours/locations, Bishops contact information, place to purchase scriptures or church attire, etc.). In addition, athletic administrators can emphasize the importance of being on the same page with all of their coaches for each individual sport. Knowing each coach and their methods of coaching could enhance student-athletes' experiences. Also, athletic administrators can regularly check in on their coaches as well so that they too are truly reflecting integrity and support for both their coaches and their student-athletes. Athletic administrators should also provide opportunities for community service for student-athletes. The LDS Church has a strong tradition of service (e.g., missionary work; The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2018a); so being able to provide opportunities could enhance the overall well-being of student-

athletes. Being willing and open to student-athletes who are serving or who want to serve an 18-month or 2-year mission is also highly suggested from the findings of the current study. As mentioned previously, five out of the nine participants served a full-time mission. Knowing how to help these individuals transition home and back into NCAA DI college athletics could provide a smooth transition. In addition, providing material that they could potentially take with them on their individual missions to allow for a smoother transition home after the mission has concluded (i.e., playbooks, at-home workouts, etc.) could also be beneficial.

**Sport psychology consultants.** Sport psychology consultants who work with LDS NCAA DI student-athletes could try to understand how these student-athletes might heavily rely on spiritual “tools” alongside mental tools/skills. Even going to the extent of discussing what the student-athlete would like to include as a spiritual element of training in conjunction with mental training can greatly benefit the consultation relationship. Second, sport psychology consultants can also provide resources and suggestions for student-athletes – should they choose to look these up - that pertain to spiritual edification and development (i.e., church meetings/locations, local Bishops contact information, or nearest LDS Temple location/hours of operation). Third, having a firmly established list of referral sources (e.g., psychologists, counselors, etc.)—both referral sources that identify as LDS members and some that do not—would be important. Lastly, educating oneself as a sport and performance psychology professional on the basic doctrine and practice of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church’s websites: [churchofjesuschrist.org](http://churchofjesuschrist.org); [comeuntochrist.org](http://comeuntochrist.org)) can also add benefit to the consultation relationship.

**Mental health clinicians/providers.** Knowing how important it is to provide effective mental health counseling, mental health counselors/clinicians/providers should know and accept

the fact that these student-athletes might heavily rely on spiritual “tools” alongside mental health consultations/practices. Mental health clinicians/providers should also be able to provide resources and suggestions for student-athletes related to spiritual edification and development (i.e., church meetings/locations, local Bishops contact information, or nearest LDS temple location/hours of operation), should they choose to look these up. Working in *collaboration* with sport psychology consultants and other coaches on staff is also a paramount step in best helping these student-athletes. In addition, knowing other referral sources who possibly identify as members of the LDS Church (e.g., psychologists, counselors, social workers, sport psychology consultants, coaches, counselors, administration staff, etc.) could also greatly benefit LDS NCAA DI student-athletes. Finally, discussing to what extent student-athletes would like to include a spiritual element of training in conjunction with mental health consultation is also suggested from the findings of the current study.

**Spiritual leaders (i.e., bishops or other LDS leaders).** Spiritual leaders for LDS NCAA DI student-athletes should be open to and supportive of the student-athlete’s own unique and individual experience as it relates to sexuality and spirituality. In addition, spiritual leaders can also provide regular “check-ins” and availability for meetings/appointments with student-athletes. Working in collaboration with other support staff (i.e., sport psychology consultants, coaches, academic staff, psychologists, etc.) is also another suggestive practical implication. Providing resources for each student-athlete (e.g., scriptures, other church material, social media outlets, etc.) can also prove to be helpful during times of difficulty for many student-athletes.

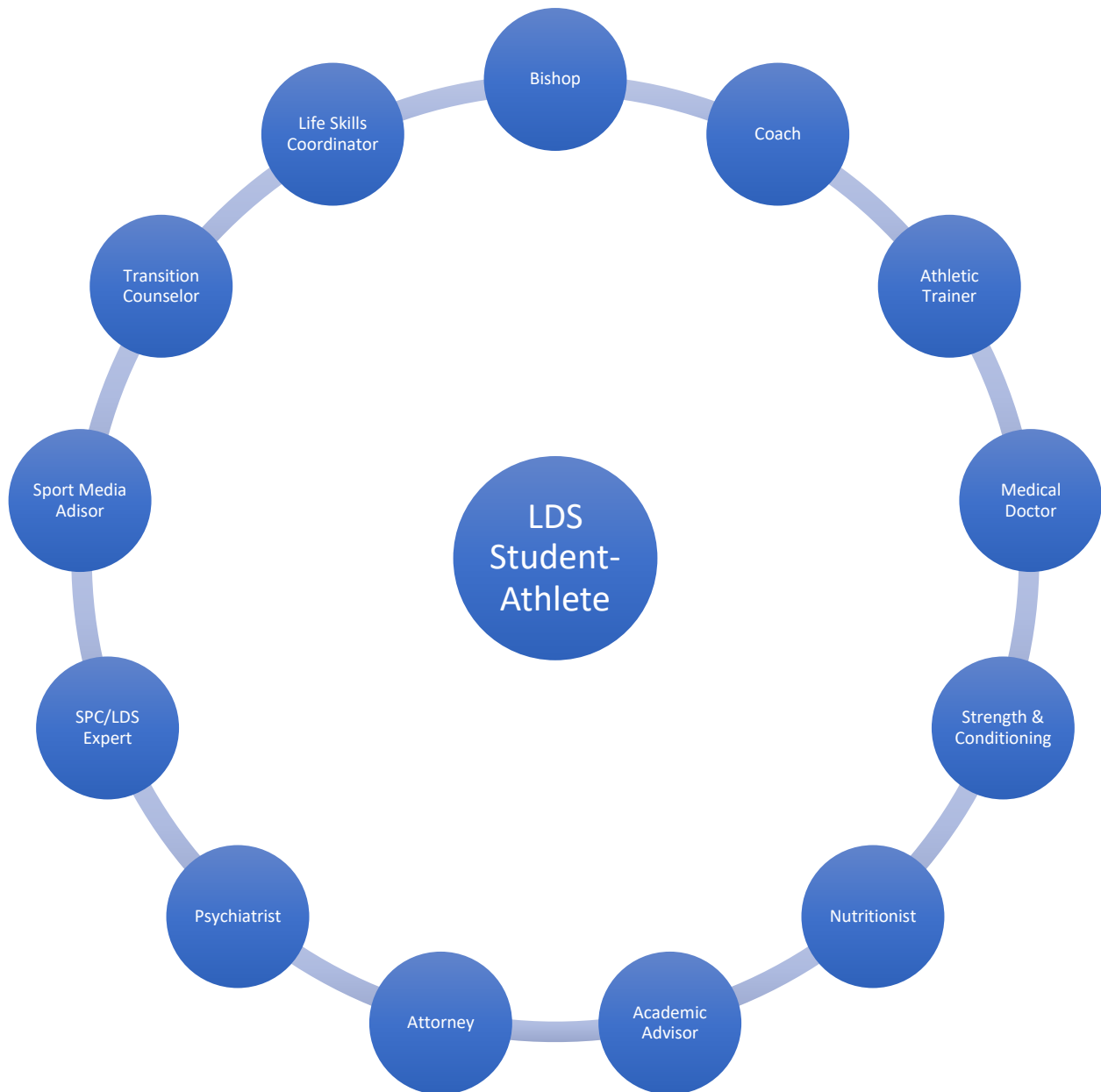
Spiritual leaders can also regularly bear testimony of the truthfulness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and that He as our Lord and Savior. In addition, spiritual leaders might also know the coaches and other athletic support staff of each student-athlete that they tend to, thus being able

to collaborate when necessary. Spiritual leaders might also set objectives with their student-athletes to be able to enter the Lord's house also known as the Temple. Throughout each individual student-athlete's career, it is also suggested that spiritual leaders be patient and provide unconditional love towards each student-athlete along their journey.

**Family members and friends.** Family members and friends can provide love and support over the course of their student-athlete's college careers. Family and friends might provide regular check-ins (i.e., a text message or phone call) to show support. In addition, it would be of benefit to the student-athlete if family members and friends serve as a resource for what is available to the student-athlete (e.g., sport psychology consultants, psychologists, Bishops, academic tutors, financial aid counselors, etc.). Student-athletes tend to get bogged down by the minutia that exists in a college setting (e.g., class, practice, film study, homework, etc.); thus, family and friends can be available and plan outings or activities with student-athletes. For example, they could engage in activities that are outside sport and academics with the student-athletes whenever possible.

**LDS student-athlete wellness model.** Finally, a figure of what a holistic care system might look like for this particular population (i.e., LDS student-athletes) based on Waller and colleagues' (Waller et al., 2016) holistic care model can be seen below (see Figure 2). This model is designed for "caring for the body, mind, and spirit" (p. 228) of the student-athlete:

What makes models of holistic care in collegiate sports viable is the genuine 'care of the soul' by the sport chaplain and concern for the humanity of the athlete on the part of the athletic administration as well as those in the collaborative chain of care (p. 238).



**Figure 2. LDS Student-Athlete Wellness Model (*Heuristic*); adopted from Waller et al. (2016)**

Student-athletes who are members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) have unique challenges and obstacles that they face throughout their careers. Some LDS student-

athletes are returned missionaries, thus not able to play, practice, or compete in their sport for 18-months to 2-years; these returned missionaries also give up their scholastic work and academics to pursue what they have been called to do. In addition, LDS athletes go through what many other thousands of college athletes experience throughout their careers as student-athletes. For example, Amirault and Orlick (1998) conducted an investigation on how college student-athletes balance the many different aspects of their lives, which centered on the wellness of the individual during their training. Most of the athletes within their study indicated that their lives were unbalanced during these training times and athletic activities; they attributed this unbalanced life to their sole concentration on physical development, which as a result, made them neglect social, intellectual, and spiritual growth (Amirault & Orlick, 1998). However, when von Guenther and Hammermeister (2007) conducted a similar study where they interviewed college student-athletes about their perceptions of athletic success, they found the opposite; results indicated that athletic success was coupled with “perceptions of balance in other aspects of life and that lifestyle balance was related to overall athletic success and excellence” (p. 1048). Both findings demonstrate the need for caring for the “whole” person within an athletic department, including not just care for the body but for the mind and the spirit as well.

This “whole” person or “holistic” development forms the foundation for future work with LDS student-athlete wellness moving forward. Inspired by previous work (i.e., Egli et al., 2014; Moore et al., 2018; Roe & Parker, 2016; Waller et al., 2016), this LDS student-athlete wellness model contains the pieces of what it takes to care for and develop all aspects/dimensions of an LDS student-athlete. With few exceptions, the LDS student-athlete wellness model mirrors the conceptual holistic care model set forth by Waller et al. (2016; see Figure 2).

Waller and colleagues (Waller et al., 2016) presented a conceptual model of holistic care for student-athletes. This structure can potentially allow each and every athlete of every program to fully develop and flourish not only as athletes but as citizens, spouses, parents, and human beings. Waller et al.'s (2016) conceptual holistic care model consists of 13 different roles/positions/professionals who care for the “whole” student-athlete; these roles are: Chaplain, coach, athletic trainer, medical doctor, strength and conditioning coach, nutritionist, academic advisor, attorney, psychiatrist, sport psychology consultant, sport media advisor, transition counselor, and life skills coordinator. Each role/position plays an integral part in helping student-athletes develop and flourish on and off the field.

**LDS bishop.** In the current conceptual LDS student-athlete wellness model, instead of utilizing a “chaplain” as presented in Waller et al.'s (2016) model, an LDS “bishop” is utilized. An LDS bishop is called to care for and administer to “the spiritual well-being of the members of their Church units. One specific spiritual responsibility that bishops ...have is to be a common judge. As a common judge, the bishop...conducts worthiness interviews, counsels members, and administers Church discipline” (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2018c, p. 1).

Each member of the Church resides within a ward. These wards are led by bishops. Bishops serve the ward members—this includes student-athletes—in their spiritual and temporal needs. A bishop supports and guides members through the ups and downs of life via the structure and principles set forth by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. When the LDS student-athlete is struggling spiritually or simply wants to be edified spiritually, the bishop has been called within the LDS Church for these purposes. In the current LDS wellness model conceptual framework, therefore, the bishop will serve the LDS student-athlete as their spiritual leader and counselor.

***Sport psychology consultant.*** Another change from Waller et al.'s (2016) holistic care model is that of the “sport psychology consultant” role. In the current framework, the professional skills of a qualified sport psychology consultant who also understands the area of transitioning home from an LDS mission for LDS young men and young women will continue to be utilized; this person should also be familiar with the traditional concepts, doctrines, and standards of the LDS Church for members/student-athletes who do not serve missions. In fact, The LDS Church has developed a manual and curriculum specifically for the purposes of helping LDS returned missionaries transition home (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2016); the curriculum is designed as a “resource to help returned missionaries...strengthen righteous habits and become self-reliant” (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2016, p. 1). The manual is also designed for leaders of the Church to work with returned missionaries. Aside from working with returned missionaries, the sport psychology consultant will also work with non-returned-missionary student-athletes of the LDS faith, thus allowing for Christian/LDS spiritual practice to become a possible psychological and spiritual tool for them during consultations. Both of these “new” roles—a bishop and an LDS sport psychology consultant—could potentially prove to be very efficacious for LDS student-athletes.

This means the current conceptual framework includes 13 different positions/roles: Bishop, coach, athletic trainer, medical doctor, strength and conditioning coach, nutritionist, academic advisor, attorney, psychiatrist, sport psychology consultant/trained LDS content expert, sport media advisor, transition counselor, and life skills coordinator (see Figure 2). In addition, the aim of the LDS student-athlete wellness model is to help each individual student-athlete develop and flourish inside and outside the classroom. Using the LDS student-athlete wellness

model, the aim is to assist the “whole” person—mind, body, and spirit—towards self-empowerment and development.

Finally, delivering high-quality mental training to student-athletes is a vital component within the framework as well. However, in order to deliver these services efficaciously and with the student-athlete’s best interest in mind, it is imperative that sport psychology professionals are competent and well-versed about the culture that they are working with. Understanding the culture, or developing what Brown, Gould, and Foster (2005) call “contextual intelligence” allows consultants to be much more successful gaining entry and cooperation.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

It is hoped that results constructed from the current study provide a strong foundation for future researchers interested in the LDS culture and other Christian domains as it relates to the embodied sport experience. While LDS NCAA DI student-athletes’ experiences of spirituality were focused on in the current study, other researchers might consider examining LDS NCAA DI coaches’ experiences of spirituality. This is because many participants from the current study referred to the relationships that they had with their coaching staff. Most of these relationships seemed to play significant roles – both positive and negative - in their development and overall experience of being a college student-athlete. A caring coaching practice can have profound implications on the overall well-being and ultimate performance of the student-athlete, as results from Fisher and colleagues have indicated (Fisher, Bejar, Larsen, Fynes, & Gearity, 2017; Fisher, Larsen, Bejar, & Shigeno, 2019; Fisher, Shigeno, Bejar, Larsen, & Gearity, 2018; Knust & Fisher, 2015). Both the coach and the student-athlete play vital roles in the overall success and performance of a competitive DI college program; hence, it would be efficacious to understand through additional research how both parties view the phenomenon of LDS spiritual identity.

In addition, as described previously, the sample of athletes in the current study was limited to eight European American females and males and only one self-identified person of color. However, there are numerous racial identities experienced by members of the LDS Church (i.e., African American, Asian, LatinX, etc.; NCAA, 2019) who also identify as NCAA DI student-athletes. Only one student-athlete of the nine who were interviewed identified as gay as well; therefore, it would be of benefit to the field of sport psychology for researchers to conduct a study with those who identify across the sexual orientation spectrum (i.e., heterosexual, bisexual, homosexual, pansexual, etc.; Gleaves, 2016; Morris & Van Raalte, 2016) who also identify as LDS members. Being an LGBTQ+ ally, especially for those LGBTQ+ individuals who also identify as members of the LDS faith, is very important. There is literature that supports the difficult and emotionally challenging circumstances that these individuals have to face in such an ultra-conservative religious culture (Dehlin, Galliher, Bradshaw, & Crowell, 2014; Dehlin, Galliher, Bradshaw, Hyde, & Crowell, 2015; Johns & Hanna, 2011). In addition, investigating the experiences of LDS athletes who have converted to the Church after eight years of age and/or who do not come from LDS families/upbringings would also be a worthwhile pursuit for future research.

Finally, future researchers might investigate the implementation of a more holistic care system for LDS student-athletes as described in the practical implications section (i.e., LDS Student-Athlete Wellness Model). This is because research has shown the efficacy of caring for the *whole* student-athlete (Egli et al., 2014; Roe & Parker, 2016; Waller et al., 2016). Findings from the current study appear to suggest that there is a benefit to spiritual nourishment during the NCAA DI sport experience according to LDS student-athletes. Hence, such research could provide additional models of application for both college and professional settings.

## Conclusions

The results from the present study suggest the following conclusions:

- 1) LDS NCAA DI student-athletes rely on their LDS identity/background during times of difficulty.
- 2) Spirituality is not always a solitary journey. The participants within the current study indicated how their individual lived spiritual experiences were, in most cases, lived and shared with other individuals (e.g., teammates, coaches, family, friends, and support staff members).
- 3) Spirituality is not always enough in terms of support throughout an LDS NCAA DI student-athlete's college career. Thus, a more holistic approach within NCAA DI programs is needed.
- 4) A sport psychology consultant is not always enough in terms of support for an LDS NCAA DI student-athlete's mental training and mental health. Thus, a more holistic approach within NCAA DI programs is needed (i.e., psychologists, counselors, sport psychology consultants, spiritual leaders, coaches, etc.).
- 5) LDS NCAA DI student-athletes who are also returned missionaries of the LDS Church utilize their 18-month to 2-year mission experience within their collegiate experience as student-athletes.

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## **APPENDICES**

Appendix A: Table 1

| Pseudonym | Age | Nationality | Race             | Sexual Orientation | Gender | Age of Baptism | Relationship Status | Sport               | University                   | Scholarship Athlete | Major                          | Mission         |
|-----------|-----|-------------|------------------|--------------------|--------|----------------|---------------------|---------------------|------------------------------|---------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------|
| Kent      | 23  | American    | Caucasian        | Heterosexual       | Male   | 8              | Married, 1 Child    | Football            | Utah State University        | No                  | Psychology                     | Brazil          |
| Bob       | 24  | American    | Caucasian        | Heterosexual       | Male   | 8              | Single, No kids     | Football            | University of New Mexico     | Yes                 | MBA                            | Iowa, USA       |
| Jim       | 21  | American    | Caucasian        | Heterosexual       | Male   | 8              | Single, No kids     | Football            | Stanford University          | No                  | Engineering                    | Thailand        |
| Johnny    | 20  | American    | Caucasian        | Heterosexual       | Male   | 8              | Single, No kids     | Football            | Utah State University        | Yes                 | Undeclared                     | No              |
| Ashley    | 22  | American    | Caucasian        | Heterosexual       | Female | 8              | Single, No kids     | Soccer              | Utah Valley State University | Yes                 | Psychology                     | No              |
| Tracy     | 23  | American    | Caucasian        | Heterosexual       | Female | 8              | Single, No kids     | Volleyball          | Brigham Young University     | Yes                 | Experience Design & Management | Washington, USA |
| Jim       | 23  | American    | Pacific Islander | Heterosexual       | Male   | 8              | Married, No kids    | Football            | Stanford University          | Yes                 | Management & Engineering       | Samoa           |
| Elizabeth | 21  | American    | Caucasian        | Heterosexual       | Female | 8              | Engaged             | Volleyball          | Brigham Young University     | Yes                 | Business                       | No              |
| Gertrude  | 22  | American    | Caucasian        | Homosexual         | Female | 8              | Single, No kids     | Cross Country/Track | Brigham Young University     | Yes                 | Public Relations               | No              |

**Appendix B: Table 2**

| <b>THEME #1: LDS Identity</b> | <b>THEME #2: Balance Between LDS Identity and Athletic Identity</b> | <b>THEME #3: LDS Identity During Times of Crises</b> | <b>THEME #4: LDS Identity in Relationships</b> |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|
| Mission Identity              | Church Attendance & Temple Worship                                  | Recruiting/Transfer Periods                          | Teammates                                      |
| Gay Identity                  | Prayer                                                              | Sport Training                                       | Coaches                                        |
|                               | Reliance on the Holy Scriptures                                     | Personal Life Difficulties                           | Psychologists                                  |
|                               | Guidance from the Holy Ghost                                        |                                                      |                                                |

### **Appendix C: Recruitment Email**

#### **The Lived Experience of Spirituality for LDS NCAA DI Student-Athletes**

Dear LDS NCAA Division I student-athlete:

As an LDS NCAA DI student-athlete, you have a unique perspective on spirituality. Your personal experience of competing at an NCAA DI level while also identifying as a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints can contribute greatly to the sport, religion, and spirituality literature.

My name is Matt Moore and I am a third year PhD student in Sport Psychology and Motor Behavior at The University of Tennessee. I am currently working on my dissertation aimed at gaining a better understanding of the lived experience of spirituality from LDS NCAA DI student-athletes. Participation in this study is completely voluntary and all information will be held in strict confidence. In other words, no references will be made in oral or written reports that could link your participation to the study.

I would greatly appreciate your participation. If you are willing to participate in the interview, please respond to this email and we will organize a time that is convenient for you. I anticipate the interview taking roughly 45-60 minutes. Additionally, the time frame can be adjusted based on your availability.

Thank you for your consideration. I look forward to hearing from you and learning more about your experience of spirituality as an LDS NCAA DI student-athlete.

Best,  
Matthew J. Moore, MS, Doctoral Candidate  
Leslee A. Fisher, PhD, advisor

## **Appendix D: Informed Consent Form**

### **The Lived Experience of Spirituality for LDS NCAA DI Student-Athletes**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

As an LDS NCAA DI student-athlete, spirituality plays a unique role in your life. You have been invited to participate in a research study designed to explore the lived experience of spirituality for LDS NCAA DI student-athletes.

#### **INFORMATION ABOUT PARTICIPANTS INVOLVEMENT IN THE STUDY**

If you consent to participate, you will be contacted via email to set up an interview at a time that is convenient for you that will last approximately 45-60 minutes. To ensure complete understanding and intent of this project, each participant will be asked by the Primary Investigator if there are any questions and/or concerns before participation. Each participant will be given approximately one week to look over this document, ask any questions, and express any concern if necessary, before an interview takes place. Questions will target information about your personal experience of spirituality as an LDS NCAA DI student-athlete. Interviews will be audio taped to allow the research team to qualitatively analyze the themes from the interview. After the interview has taken place, the participant will also be asked to participate in a review of their own interview transcription. The transcription of each interview will take place as soon as possible immediately following each interview to ensure accuracy of what was said and to retract anything the participant deems retractable. Thus, a continuation of support and participation from the participants will be asked to last approximately one month in length (a 45-60-minute interview initially, following a review of accuracy of their own interview transcription, which will take place after each interview). The results of this study will be used to inform sport psychology professionals and NCAA athletic support staff of the importance of cultural competency. In addition, this study will help fill the large existing gap in the LDS sport literature.

#### **RISKS**

The risks related to your participation in this study are no greater than those you would encounter in daily activities. However, if a participant has any questions and/or concerns before participating in this project, please feel free to reach out to the Primary Investigator (Matthew Moore) either via email or phone listed below.

#### **BENEFITS**

You may not directly benefit from your participation in this research study. However, the information you provide in this study will be valuable for NCAA athletic support staff and sport psychology professionals to understand spirituality from an LDS student-athlete experience. Your participation will also increase the existing body of knowledge on sport, religion, and spirituality.

## **CONFIDENTIALITY**

The information in the study records will be kept confidential. Data will be stored securely and will be made available only to persons involved in the data analysis, unless participants specifically give permission in writing to do otherwise. All investigators will treat your interview as strictly confidential. Your part in the study is confidential.

No reference will be made in oral or written reports that could link participants to the study. The members of the research team are the only ones who will have access to audio recordings. Audio recordings will be destroyed once the interviews are transcribed. The interview transcript and informed consent document will be stored securely and accessible only to research personnel.

## **EMERGENCY MEDICAL TREATMENT**

The University of Tennessee does not “automatically” reimburse subjects for medical claims or other compensation. If physical injury is suffered in the course of research or for more information, please notify the investigator in charge (Matt Moore, 801-995-0384).

## **CONTACT INFORMATION**

If you have any questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact the researcher, Matt Moore, at mmoor133@vols.utk.edu, and (801) 995-0384; or his advisor, Leslee Fisher, at lfisher2@utk.edu, and (865) 974-9973. If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a participant, you may contact The University of Tennessee’s Office of Research and Engagement, (865) 974-7697 or utkirb@utk.edu.

## **PARTICIPATION**

Your participation in this study is voluntary; you may decline to participate without penalty. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or without loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed your data will be return to you or destroyed.

## **CONSENT**

I have read the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study.

Participant Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Investigator’s signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix E: IRB Letter of Approval



January 08, 2020

Matthew James Moore,  
UTK - Coll of Education, Hlth, & Human - Kinesiology Recreation & Sport Studies

**Re: UTK IRB-19-05609-XP**

**Study Title:** The Lived Experience of Spirituality for LDS NCAA DI Student-Athletes

Dear Matthew James Moore:

The UTK Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed your **application** for the above referenced project. It determined that your application is eligible for **expedited** review under 45 CFR 46.110(b)(1), [edit: category/ies (1) and (2)]. However, the Board determined that approval of your application is dependent on a satisfactory response to the following **administrative stipulations**.

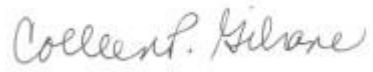
You must respond to the following provisos using the PI Response to Review form found in your "Incomplete Tasks" and labeled as a "Submission Correction" located in the iMedRIS system online. NOTE: DO NOT complete a new Form 1, Form 2, Form 3, etc. to answer any provisos. Please use the PI Response to Review form to create any necessary revisions to study documents. Call the IRB at (865) 974-7697 with any questions.

### **Submission stipulations**

1. Please revise the study application to describe how the PI will verify the requirements for recruiting student athletes at each institution (for example, by contacting the Athletic Director to inquire).
2. Please carefully review the entire application to ensure all references to storing data in the PI's home office and to the PI and Co-PI being the only ones who will have access to the audio recordings have been removed.

Further review by the IRB is contingent upon submission of a satisfactory response. In the event the IRB does not receive a response to this letter **within 60 days**, this project will be considered inactive and reactivation may require resubmission of the original application for Board review.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Colleen P. Gilrane".

**Colleen P. Gilrane, Ph.D.**

Chair

### **VITA**

Matthew James Moore was born on April 17th, 1987 in American Fork, Utah. He is the son of Ron and Annette Moore. He is married to Arminda (“Mindy”) Moore and they together have one daughter, Maya Moore. He attended the University of Utah where he obtained both his Bachelor of Science degree in Exercise and Sport Science and his Master of Science degree in Sport and Exercise Psychology. Matt was a doctoral student at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville from 2017-2020 under the tutelage of Dr. Leslee A. Fisher. Matt graduated with his PhD in August of 2020. His PhD is in Kinesiology and Sport Studies with a specialization in Sport Psychology and Motor Behavior. After graduation, Matt accepted his first full-time academic job as a Visiting Assistant Professor of Sport Psychology at Miami University (OH).