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## **SOUL-TRAINING: THE WHY, WHAT, AND HOW OF SPIRITUAL FORMATION IN SPORTS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Sportspeople know how to train and prepare their bodies for competition. The question this article seeks to explore is how sportspeople should approach training and preparing their souls. The Willardian corpus provides sportspeople a framework for understanding spiritual formation. This article examines the “why,” “what,” and “how” of soul-training, how Christians in sports can engage in spiritual formation. Sportspeople train their souls to experience God’s presence and worship him on and off the competition stage (why). In order to do so, they train their souls by following Christ as his apprentices, leading to transformation into his likeness (what) by cooperating with the Holy Spirit through intentional practice of spiritual disciplines (how). Spiritual disciplines are repeated practices of the mind, body, and heart that rely on God the Father, cooperate with the Holy Spirit, and are directed by Christ. Applications and examples of spiritual disciplines for sportspeople are provided.

*Keywords: Education, Sport Management, Professional Development*

### **Introduction**

The notion of training in the present to pursue future goals is not a foreign concept to coaches, athletes, and trainers. Sportspeople know how to train and prepare their bodies for competition. The question this article seeks to explore is how sportspeople should approach training and preparing their souls.<sup>1</sup> All too often, the Christian consideration of the soul focuses only on salvation (Lanker, 2019). Said another way, Christians emphasize the notion of saving the soul while neglecting the concept of training the soul. However, salvation is not the *telos* of Christian living, rather the beginning.

Human beings thrive by growing towards their God-given *telos*, they flourish by pursuing their values-informed goals (King & Whitney, 2015; Schnitker et al., 2019). Questions revolving around human growth and development transcend cultures and disciplines. While a thorough redaction of human growth is beyond the score of this article, the topic of spiritual formation in the sports world warrants closer attention.

Sanctification<sup>2</sup> is a controversial concept within the Christian faith as different faith traditions approach spiritual growth and holiness from different perspectives. This article takes a Protestant perspective while still relying on other Christian traditions. Within Protestant theology and ministry, there has been a neglect of pneumatology and attention on spiritual growth (Porter,

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<sup>1</sup> Different disciplines define the human soul in distinct ways. For the purposes of this article, the soul refers to human spirituality in the context of Christian spiritual formation.

<sup>2</sup> For a helpful examination of sanctification, see Willard’s (2012) *Renovation of the heart: Putting on the character of Christ*, p. 226, as well as Webster’s (2003) *Holiness*, pp. 77-98.

2010; Kärkkäinen, 2002). Scholars and practitioners alike have identified a “sanctification gap” in which Christians frustratedly acknowledge the disconnect between their goal of conformity with Christ and their current spirituality (Lovelace, 1973; Coe, 2009). In other words, the sanctification gap refers to the chasm between the spiritual and moral ideal of Christlikeness and current location on one’s faith journey.

Several questions flow from the acknowledgement of a gap between spiritual goal and present reality. How do Christians navigate such a gap? What is God’s role and what is our role in breaching this gap? Is human effort inconsistent with *sola gratia* and *sola fide*? Does bridging this gap look differently for different cultures and sub-cultures?

### **Help from Dallas Willard**

Dallas Willard’s corpus of work provides Christians a framework for understanding spiritual growth. Willard was a beloved pastor, mentor, and phenomenological philosopher influenced by the views of Edmund Husserl (Willard, 1984; Porter, 2013; Moon et al., 2018). While providing Christians a framework for engaging in spiritual formation, Willard was not afraid of asking or answering the question as to why we should pursue moral goodness when Christ accepts us just as we are (Meyer, 2010). Willard’s works on spiritual growth have received little scholarly attention over the past two decades and are, admittedly, more professional than academic in nature, intended for practitioners, pastors, and laypeople (Porter, 2010). Even so, Willard’s writings offer a coherent framework for understanding spiritual formation for all people. Furthermore, Willard’s ideas surrounding spiritual formation translate well for sportspeople.

This is not the first article to propose an application of Willardian thought to the cultivation of virtue in athletes (Roberts, 2020). Moreover, this is not a case for Muscular Christianity.<sup>3</sup> However, this article is distinct in its use of Willard’s works to highlight the *why*, *what*, and *how* of spiritual formation in an athletic context. When a muscle is not used, it atrophies. In the same way, the human soul will atrophy without intentional exercise. People train for their sports, why not also train the soul so they can better follow Christ? People train in sports, and they can train in their spiritual lives, as well. Christians in sports can train their souls in a similar way that they train for their sport, with a goal, a plan of action, and intentional effort.

### **The Why, What, and How of Soul-Training**

Why should a person train his or her soul? What does soul-training look like? How does a person train his or her soul? These are the three questions this paper seeks to answer. (1) Why: soul-training allows people to experience God’s loving goodness by paying attention to his beauty and glory everywhere. A person trains his or her soul for awareness of, proximity to, and intimacy with God in everyday life and in sports. (2) What: soul-training grows people in Christlikeness. Soul-training involves being an apprentice of Christ and following Christ in the daily activities of athletics, which produces transformation. (3) How: soul-training occurs through intentional practices of discipline fueled by grace, directed by Christ, and in cooperation with the Holy Spirit. Christians in sports can train their souls through intentional practices on and off the competition stage.

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<sup>3</sup> For a thorough treatment of muscular Christianity, see McAloon (2006) and Watson et al. (2005).

## **Grace: Soul-Training Fuel**

Before embarking on a theological exploration of growth, a discussion of grace is necessary. This is because grace, an unmerited gift, initiates and sustains a person's ability to grow. Grace, intention, and effort thrive off each other (Willard, 2002, p. 25). Spiritual disciplines are not a means to salvation, rather a means to experience God. Spiritual disciplines are not formulaic, rather a way to encounter God (Willard, 2002, p. 112). Spiritual disciplines cannot save, but they can strengthen. Christians are saved by grace, not paralyzed by it. Discipline becomes legalism only when divorced from right relationship with Jesus. The ability to be an apprentice and disciple revolves around grace. God initiates, enables, empowers, and sustains disciples through his grace. Willard (2006) said it well, that "the true saint burns grace like a 747 jet burns fuel on takeoff" (p. 60). Grace powers and fuels soul-training.

How does grace influence a Christian's participation in sports? Sportspeople often struggle with the notion of grace – unmerited assistance, a free gift – because much of sports culture fosters an attitude of earning, proving, and striving for perfection. Moreover, sociologists Hughes and Coakley (1991) contend that athletes tend to overconform, thereby positively deviating to the messages perpetuated by sports culture, such as "pay the price" and "shoot for the top" (p. 308). This means that athletes oversubscribe to their salient athlete identity and overconform to the norms of sports culture. However, do messages of "sacrifice for the game" and "strive for distinction" belong in the kingdom of God?

Grace is a key concept for sportspeople because striving for perfection and excellence is noble until athletic results determine a person's dignity; at that point striving is harmful. Rejecting grace and seeking to validate one's identity through athletic performance is both theologically incorrect and psychologically maladaptive. In one study, Houlberg and colleagues (2018) discovered that a performance-based identity (rigid perfectionism, fear of failure, contingent self-worth) is associated with psychological ill-being (anxiety, depression, shame, low life satisfaction). In contrast, athletes who are motivated by a higher purpose maintain standards of excellence while giving themselves grace when they fall short. In other words, striving for perfection is only problematic when accompanied by perceived inability to meet standards or when perceived as necessary for proving one's value. Thus, grace relates to participation in sports because an athlete's ability to play is a gift and being gracious to oneself is a key component to healthy, adaptive striving. Willard (2006) spoke of grace's role in growth, and the sentiment applies both to sports and spiritual formation: "Grace is not opposed to effort; grace is opposed to earning" (p. 60). God's grace fuels and sustains sportspeople as they pursue excellence in their game and Christlikeness in their spiritual journey.

## **The Why: Experiencing and Enjoying God's Presence**

Christians can look to the cross for God's grace embodied in the person of Jesus Christ. In addition, Christians can experience God's grace every day by enjoying his presence. When we turn our attention to God, we realize he has been paying attention to us all along, offering us unconditional love and grace (Barry, 1992). We train our souls to turn our attention towards God, cultivating experiential knowledge and deepening our faith.

## **Faith as Experiential Knowledge**

Faith is a resolved, trusting belief that motivates someone to act in certain ways that reflect their belief. Having espoused a robust philosophical realism, Willard (2009) defined faith as “commitment to action, often beyond our natural abilities, based upon knowledge of God and God's ways” (p. 20). Willard (1999) contended that people could intimately know God experientially. Spiritual growth begins with an understanding that people can actually grow, that people really can spend their days in God's presence in a way that transforms them (Willard, 1988, p. 10; Moon, 2010). Willard (2002) elevated models of the faith (e.g., Teresa of Calcutta) as people who lived with “the Lord always before them” (p. 114). For Willard, belief was more than orthodox ideas; rather, belief included right living (Meyer, 2010). We train our souls knowing that we can really know God and grow in the likeness of Christ.

The “why” of soul-training is to enjoy God's presence by knowing *and* experiencing him. In this way, grace and faith must infiltrate both the head and heart. Head-knowledge is intellect and wisdom, i.e., I know I am supposed to set a screen and then flare to the corner during the baseline out-of-bounds play. Heart-knowledge is experiential and personal, i.e., I have run this baseline out-of-bounds play dozens of times and know what it feels like to fake in one direction and cut in the other. Both types of knowledge are necessary in both sports and spirituality. The difference between knowing about God and knowing God personally is the same as knowing the proper mechanics to shoot a jump shot (drive from the legs, snap the wrist, hold the follow-through) and actually getting in the gym to practice. Soul-training revolves around creating opportunities to develop deeper faith in and experiential knowledge of God.

## **Debunking Dualism and the Sacred-Secular Divide**

A full account of Willard's ontology is outside the capacity of this article.<sup>4</sup> Even so, a brief debunking of any traces of dualism is helpful for this article's purposes. Christian theology rejects dualistic anthropology. On the one hand, Hebrew anthropology was holistic, not compartmentalized, using the term soul (*nephesh*) interchangeably with throat or breath, strongly implying the view of the human person as an integrated whole (Moon, 2010; Lanker, 2019). On the other hand, Greek anthropology took a more dualistic approach, considering the soul (*psyche*) as immaterial and distinct from the body (Lanker, 2019). New Testament readers sense the Apostle Paul's frustrated efforts to debunk his contemporary Hellenistic dualists (1 Cor 6:19-20). A historically Christian anthropology embraces the view of the human person as an inextricably embodied soul and soulful body.

In this way, Christian spirituality and spiritual formation do not neglect human physicality, rather embrace it (Lanker, 2019). Spirituality is awareness of and connection to the transcendent. Christian spirituality is, therefore, connection to, intimacy with, and worship of the triune God revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. Christian spirituality necessitates involvement of the body; the body is necessary for spirituality (Willard, 1988, p. 29). Spirituality is not an “extra or superior mode of existence,” nor a “hidden stream of separate reality,” nor a “separate life running parallel to our bodily existence” (Willard, 1988, p. 31). Rather, spirituality is the reality of our existence and embodied connection to the transcendent. Intentional engagement of the body is a key component of growing spiritually (Willard, 1998, p. 353; Willard 2002, p. 159). Habituated

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<sup>4</sup> For a thorough examination of Willard's ontology, see Moreland (2015).

choices carried out in the body become engrained in the mind and character. Thus, spirituality requires intentional, embodied living.

Therefore, training the body to live out our spirituality-seeped values is crucial for discipleship. Transformation requires holistic participation with God's grace in which the body, mind, heart, and spirit cooperate with God's grace and Spirit (Willard, 2002, p. 79). Furthermore, the Christian faith does not divide our daily living into spiritual and sacred categories. Rather, belief in a good, omnipresent, sovereign God imbues mundane activities with meaning and potential (Austin, 2010). Belief in God's omnipresence in creation leads to a sacramental worldview and understanding of daily activities (White, 2018). Willard (1988) admits that regular daily activities such as grocery shopping can function as spiritual disciplines (p. 157). Worshipful discipleship is not restricted to specific locales; rather, opportunities for discipleship extend ubiquitously, granted a worshipful heart posture and the presence of God's Spirit (Yount, 2019).

This world is full of God's presence; there is no sacred-secular divide. Although sacraments do impart special grace, human beings are still able to behold and connect with God in the mundane, everyday activities of life, such as sports. God is not merely the principality, rather the centrality of human existence. What this means is that God is not "Item #1" on a person's list of priorities and activities. Rather, God is the why, meaning, and purpose behind each item on that list of priorities and activities. Awareness of purpose and *telos* direct soul-training (King & Whitney, 2015; Schnitker et al., 2019; Lanker, 2019). Faith in a present God gives deeper meaning and purpose to participation in sports. In each training, drill, run, pass, and play, God is inviting people into his bigger story. Certainly, this world is broken and in need of the redemption only Christ can provide (Gen 3; Rom 3:23-25, 18:23-25). And yet, God made and declared it good, and he is present here and now (Gen 1; Ex 33:12-23; Matt 28:20b; John 14:15-28). God's omnipresence has implications for how we view and inhabit the world.

## **Sports as Spheres of God's Presence**

Recognizing God's glorious presence everywhere changes an athlete's perspective in several ways. Although the purposes of this article do not include an in-depth theological rationale for sports as worship, a few points can be made in relation to God's omnipresence. Acknowledging and inviting God's presence into sports sanctifies the activity, making sports an act of worship (White, 2018). When people engage in sports with right motivations and actions, sports can be worship to God (Ellis & Weir, 2020). One part of our *imago dei* lies in our role as creators, participating in the continuation of God's creation, and sports are certainly an outlet for creativity (Visker, 1994). Another element of humankind's image-bearing stems from our relationality, exemplified in sport's inherent cooperation and connection (Weir, 2008).<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, God calls human beings to the office of priest, to sum and offer up praise to God (Naugle, 2002; Wright, 2010). Worship is our nature and *telos*. Gratitude and worship are right responses to God's presence. Sports are a good gift from God, and when we play and compete, we are thanking God for his gift, worshipping in mind, body, heart, and spirit (Visker, 1994; Goheen, 2003; Weir, 2008). Sports can be conceived as a grateful, celebratory response to God's gifts and presence (White, 2018). Indeed, sports are fallen and sinful like the rest of creation, but their inherent nature is that

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<sup>5</sup> Weir (2008) does well to point out the etymology of "competition" as derived from the Latin roots *com* (with) and *petere* (petitioning, seeking; p. 101). Thus, we should not view competition as rivalry and opposition, rather striving together.

of a good gift and opportunity to worship God (Wolters, 1995, pp. 72-95; Goheen, 2003). Remembering God's presence during competition can serve as a source of strength and courage, liberating athletes from fear and empowering them to compete freely. Paying attention to God's presence in sports has worshipful implications for the sportsperson.

Soul-training entails developing experiential knowledge of God by practicing paying attention to God's glorious presence in everyday activities, such as sports. Christ declared that in his presence people "may have life and have it to the fullest abundance" (John 10:10). This abundant life is the "why" behind soul-training (Willard, 2018). Willard (2002) expresses that practicing disciplines leads people to "full participation in the life of God's Kingdom and in the vivid companionship of Christ" (p. 26). We train our souls to cultivate experiential knowledge of God, worship him in all we do, and experience life to the fullest with Christ.

### **The What: Discipleship as Apprenticeship**

"Why" people train their souls is to enjoy God's presence in everything they do. "What" people do to train their souls is follow Christ. Following Christ involves spending time with him, which, in turn, makes people more Christlike. Said another way, spending time with Christ is both the goal and means to Christlikeness. Jesus does not ask people if he can enter their hearts; rather, he extends an invitation, "follow me" (Matt 4:19, 8:22, 9:9, 16:24, 19:21; Mark 2:14, 8:34, 10:21; Luke 5:27, 9:23, 9:59, 18:22; John 1:43, 10:27, 12:26, 21:19). Thus, one's faith journey and discipleship with Christ is not centered around a single decision, rather a daily devotion. Faith does not revolve around the date of conversion and commitment, rather the everyday following. Discipleship is less about attendance and more about apprenticeship. In the past, people would enter their desired profession by becoming an apprentice to a master or teacher of that profession. In a way, Christians are apprentices to Christ in the way that they follow, spend time with, and desire to become more like Christ. The "what" of soul-training is following, discipleship as apprenticeship.

### **Christ as Teacher and Christians as Apprentices**

Willard espoused a view of Jesus as teacher (Meyer, 2010; Moon, 2010). Christians live as students and co-laborers of Christ (Willard, 1998, p. 273). To be an apprentice of Christ requires shared presence and daily following (Willard, 1998, p. 276). The goal of discipleship is that our outer life would reflect an inner reality of conformity with Christ. In other words, the goal of disciples is that "doing and saying what [Jesus] did increasingly becomes a part of who we are" (Willard, 2002, p. 159). We are to live our lives the way Jesus would live if he were us (Willard, 1998, p. 283). Spiritual formation for Christians is "focused entirely on Christ," with the goal of "conformity to Christ that arises out of an inner transformation accomplished through purposive interaction with the grace of God in Christ" (Willard, 2002, p. 22). Apprentices want to become like their teachers, and Christians want to become more like Christ.

Unfortunately, in the current day and age, "Be yourself!" is a common, celebrated piece of advice. The problem with this advice is that, according to Christian theology, to be yourself is to be a mess. The self without Christ is fallen and broken (Jer 17:9). People are dead in sin without Christ, but alive and washed new in Christ (Rom 6:11; 2 Cor 5:17). God instructs his people to be holy as he is holy (Lev 11:44; 1 Pet 1:16). Holiness is a gift given in the person of Jesus; people could never be holy without God making it so. Yet, people can pursue holiness by spending time

with Christ and becoming more like him who is holy. The apprentice does not want to remain the same, with the same basic skillset and knowledge. Apprenticeship, like discipleship, is about becoming more like the teacher.

Becoming more like Christ does not happen in singular moments, rather the culmination of a life. The goal of being an apprentice to Christ is to “become the kind of person who routinely does what Jesus did and said” (Willard, 2006, p. 60). However, if a person wants to respond how Jesus would respond, it is not enough for her to try her best in that moment. A person cannot act in a moment how Jesus would act without having trained and prepared the way Jesus did (Willard, 1988, p. 10). This sort of training and preparation make sense in sports. A basketball player that trains five hours each week cannot realistically expect to perform at the same level as Michael Jordan. If a soccer player never practices far-range shots, she should not expect to score a goal from distance like Carli Lloyd in the 2015 World Cup Final. If Christians, as apprentices of Christ, want to behave like Jesus, it is not enough for them to try to behave like Jesus in certain moments. Christians must live and train the ways Jesus lived and trained in order to be able to act in a Christlike manner in certain instances.

Spiritual formation relies on the principle of indirect training. The notion of practicing through indirect training resonates with sportspeople. To sink free throws late in the game, a basketball player runs ladder sprints and immediately steps to the line to practice free throws. According to the principle of indirect training, a person often must train indirectly for what he or she cannot train for directly (Smith, 2009, p. 23). In a similar way, Willard argued that indirect training was necessary for spiritual formation (Willard, 1998, p. 200; Mangis, 2000). People train for something now in preparation for what they know or expect might happen in the future. We intentionally and regularly practice spiritual disciplines so that we can respond in a moment like Christ would if he were us.

Although he is fully God, Christ practiced spiritual disciplines as a means to prepare for his earthly ministry and spend time with his Father (Luke 4:1-13). To model Christ is to practice spiritual disciplines. Willard (1988) said it well, “A baseball player who expects to excel in the game without adequate exercise of his body is no more ridiculous than the Christian who hopes to be able to act in the manner of Christ when put to the test without the appropriate exercise in godly living” (pp. 4-5). Stepping up to the plate without having practiced and expecting to successfully get on base is as foolish as a Christian who hopes to model Christlikeness without having trained for godliness. Christlikeness is a by-product of spending time with Christ. Spiritual formation involves becoming more like Christ by spending time with Christ, following in faithful discipleship.<sup>6</sup>

### **The How: Disciplines of the Mind, Body, and Heart**

The “why” of soul-training is learning to pay better attention to and enjoy God’s presence. The “what” of soul-training is following Christ as his apprentice and, as a result, becoming more Christlike. The “how” of spiritual growth is practicing spiritual disciplines in cooperation with the Holy Spirit. Often, new believers know that they want to follow Jesus, but they do not know how (Wright, 2010). This “how” involves intentional habits of discipline. Sportspeople understand discipline. Becoming great in any area of life requires training and practice, and a person’s faith is

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<sup>6</sup> For more on discipleship, see Willard, 1998, pp. 281-310.

not any different. Athletes spend hours upon hours each week training their physical bodies, but a person must also train her soul. Scripture encourages spiritual formation, noting that “while physical training is of some value, godliness is valuable in every way, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come” (1 Tim 4:8). Soul-training involves gradual growth benefiting us in the present and for eternity.

### **Willardian Triangle of Spiritual Growth**

People can grow spiritually by setting a goal to spend time with Christ and become more like him, identifying a path of following Christ as his apprentice, and committing to intentional cultivation of habits. A coach does not tell an athlete to become great by starting with a five-minute mile or squatting four-hundred pounds (Willard, 1988, p. 8). Rather, athletes become great by committing to small details done with consistent excellence. The intentional cultivation of habits is a key element of growth. Willard espoused a triangle of spiritual growth with Christ in the center, and the Holy Spirit, our experiences, and spiritual disciplines each at a corner. Thus, spiritual growth is centered on Christ and involves relying on the Holy Spirit’s power, maturing through trials, and practicing spiritual disciplines. Following Christ requires the guidance, conviction, discernment, and intercession of the Holy Spirit (John 3:5, Rom 8:10-13, Gal 5:22-28). People cannot grow without the Holy Spirit; he is vital for following Christ (Yount, 2019). Furthermore, life experiences mature and grow people, specifically trials and supportive communities (Rom 5:3-5; James 1:2-4; Heb 10:24-25). Lastly, planned discipline shapes people over time and helps them put on a new heart (Phil 2:12-15; Col 3:12-17; 2 Pet 1:5-10). Spiritual disciplines practiced over time can transform a person into Christ’s likeness.

### **Spiritual Disciplines and Holistic Discipleship**

Willard contended that training and practice are key components of the process of spiritual formation (Mangis, 2000). Soul-training is less about trying harder and more about humble, intentional practice (Meyer, 2010). Spiritual disciplines are repeated practices of the mind, body, and heart that rely on God the Father, cooperate with the Holy Spirit, and are directed by Christ. Spiritual disciplines align the mind, body, and heart with God for the purpose of worship and sanctification. Spiritual disciplines are ways to abide in Christ (John 15:4) so God can grow fruits of the spirit (Gal 5:22–23). They are outward, physical disciplines that transform the inward heart, renovating the heart to bring sin to the surface for healing (Willard, 2002). Spiritual disciplines remind people of the presence of God, focus on the character of God, and mold people to be more like their Teacher, Jesus.

People train their souls through intentional thoughts, emotions, and behaviors in the mind, heart, and body. Discipleship consists of more than just a few hours in church each week; discipleship is holistic, involving mind, body, heart, spirit, and community. In this way, soul-training adds meaning, purpose, and worship to the thoughts, emotions, and behaviors of the mind, heart, and body. It is not just the couple hours in church or explicitly spiritual practices that comprise following of Jesus, rather the entirety of a life. Spiritual formation is not limited to explicitly spiritual practices (e.g., daily devotions, weekly Bible study, church attendance); rather,

discipleship is everything a person does, granted a certain heart posture. God desires for people to follow him holistically, with all they have, with “heart, soul, mind, and strength” (Mark 12:30).<sup>7</sup>

Holistic discipleship entails following Christ with mind, body, and heart and cultivating Christlike dispositions through intentional thoughts, actions, and worship. Sports are inherently cognitive, physical, emotional, and social activities. Thus, the Christian sportsperson has abundant opportunities to train his or her soul in and through sports. *Soul-training practices outside of sports* include disciplines of restraint or denial, such as silence or fasting; disciplines of engagement, such as study or confession; inward disciplines, such as meditation or prayer; outward disciplines, such as service or Sabbath; or corporate activities, such as worship services or retreats (Foster & Griffin, 2000). The notion that sports themselves can be spiritual practices is a contested claim (Austin, 2010; Roberts, 2020). The position of this paper is that sports and practices within sports can function as spiritual disciplines given a certain mindset. *Sports as soul-training* seeks to cultivate virtues that are by-products of participation in sports, i.e., patience, courage, self-control, perseverance, teamwork, etc. (Schnitker et al, 2020; Shubert et al., 2020). *Soul-training in sports* entails opportunities to practice seeking the presence of God during the most mundane and the most intense elements of sports. Below are some examples of practicing spiritual disciplines in sports.

### **Soul-Training in Sports**

The following section examines two categories of spiritual disciplines: practices of abstinence and engagement. Willard conceptualized spiritual disciplines through these two categories (Willard, 1988, p. 158). Abstinence refers to replacing earthly desires and pleasures, though not inherently wrong, with deeper desire for God (Willard, 1988, p. 159). Engagement refers to rewiring our attachments to proper attachments (Willard, 1988, p. 176; Rohr, 2017, p. 5). What follows is the use of abstinence and engagement to suggest sports-specific spiritual disciplines.

### **Spiritual Disciplines of Abstinence<sup>8</sup>**

The Discipline of Fasting. Fasting traditionally involves abstaining from food for a significant period of time. However, people can fast from singular substances, items, or practices as a way to practice relying on God. Consider the football player who decides to fast from his phone during every bus trip. He spends half the bus ride in prayer without technological distraction, and the other half spending meaningful time with different teammates. Consider the track captain who commits to fast from complaining around her teammates. She resolves to never audibly utter

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<sup>7</sup> Perhaps spiritual theology can contribute to the understanding and practice of integrating belief and practice. Spiritual theology provides support for studying and suggesting how people can grow spiritually by bridging the gap between systematic and practical theology (Coe, 2009, p. 43). Spiritual theology examines the Spirit’s role in Scriptural interpretation *and* his transformative work in the lives of believers, an avenue of study that practically equips theologians and pastors to grow towards holiness and love (Coe, 2009). The Holy Spirit works in the lives and hearts of believers (Rom 8:11) and animates Christ’s Church (1 Cor 12:13; Eph 4:11-12). Thus, a spiritual theology studies the truths of Scripture *and* the ministry of the Holy Spirit, a ministry that elevates Christ, explains the process in which people can grow in Christlikeness, and offers directives for spiritual growth (Aumann, 1980; Coe, 2009).

<sup>8</sup> For more on disciplines of abstinence, see Willard (1988), pp. 159-175.

any sort of complaint about the weather, workout, soreness, or dining hall options, thus leading and serving her team while cultivating a spirit of positivity.

**The Discipline of Silence.** Practicing silence removes excess noise and allows us to better listen to others and God (Willard, 1988, pp. 163-165). Consider the coach who gets to her office early. But before she starts any work, she spends an intentional ten minutes in complete silence and stillness to dedicate her day and work to God, to listen to God, and to center her mind on God's presence.

**The Discipline of Rest.** To cease and rest indicates something deeper than merely a pause on work. To rest is to release the need to accomplish and produce, to relent that we are not God (Dawn, 1989). Rest is hardwired into our design; human beings were not created for ceaseless work (Gen 2:2-3; Ex 20:8-11; Deut 5:12-15). Despite regular rest practice's positive association with greater satisfaction with life, many consider rest as merely recharging for the return to more work (White et al., 2015). Athletes typically conceptualize rest as physical rest. However, perhaps rest is more than a behavior and includes mindset. Rest involves orienting our attention towards God and cultivating a "Sabbath heart" (Buchanan, 2007, p. 33). Consider the track athlete who is required to engage in training activities seven days of the week. Though she cannot take an entire day off, she allots herself one unstructured night per week to reset and rest her mind. Her restful reorientation includes prayers of thanksgiving and trust, as well as time to engage in a leisure activity she enjoys.

### **Spiritual Disciplines of Engagement<sup>9</sup>**

**The Discipline of Examen Prayer.** Prayer is communication with God. The Christian's prayer goal is to cultivate a disposition of ceaseless praying (1 Thess 5:17). Different prayer practices teach us unique information about ourselves and highlight distinct attributes of God. For example, pulling from St. Ignatius of Loyola, developing an examen prayer practice gives an individual space to slow down, explore one's emotions,<sup>10</sup> and look for God's presence in different spheres of life (Thibodeaux, 2015). Student-athletes are notoriously busy. Allocating intentional time for self-exploration creates space for the work of the Holy Spirit. Consider the collegiate swimmer whose 5 o'clock morning alarm signals a full day including two trainings and multiple classes. Although his schedule is brimming, he engages in a nightly prayer of examen in which he spends a few minutes praying backward through his day. An examen prayer practice can involve inviting the Holy Spirit, reflecting upon the day in thanksgiving, reviewing memorable emotional moments, and praying forward to tomorrow.

**The Discipline of High Fives.** This discipline involves cultivating the habituated practice of encouraging and connecting with teammates through physical touch.<sup>11</sup> Studies have shown that

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<sup>9</sup> For more on disciplines of engagement, see Willard (1988), pp. 175-190.

<sup>10</sup> Emotional intelligence and emotion regulation are key components of healthy spirituality (Scazzero, 2014). Heightened emotions often accompany competition. Willard (2002) espoused a view that emotions function as information about ourselves, but seldom instructions, contending that "feelings are good servants but terrible masters" (p. 122). In this way, emotions are legitimate but not necessarily righteous. Clinical psychologist Susan David (2016) asserts a similar perspective, that "emotions are data, not directives." Thus, emotional intelligence and regulation are salient areas for spiritual growth. For more on emotional intelligence, see Daniel Goleman's (1995) seminal work *Emotional Intelligence*.

<sup>11</sup> Admittedly, the COVID-19 pandemic and suggested social distancing protocols provides obstacles for engaging in interpersonal physical contact.

players on winning teams are more likely to touch each other than players on losing teams (Kraus et al., 2010). Steve Nash, former Phoenix Suns point guard, averaged 239 high fives per game, about five per minute of game action, or one every 12 seconds. Consider the starting point guard who blows out his knee half-way through the season. The team is devastated because he was their glue and leader. Instead of disengaging and checking out, he determines to give at least one-hundred high fives per practice.

The Discipline of Gratitude. Gratitude is the cognitive-affective response to recognizing oneself as beneficiary of another's benevolence (McCullough et al., 2001; McCullough et al., 2002), a life orientation and mindfulness towards noticing, appreciating, and savoring the positive (McCullough, 2002; Wood et al., 2010). Gratitude is associated with other virtues and positive mental health outcomes (Witvliet et al., 2019). Practicing gratitude is a historically Christian ideal (Ps 136; Phil 4:6; 1 Thess 5:16-18). Consider the soccer coach who requires each player to write three things for which she is grateful every morning of preseason. Preseason comes and goes, and players are still turning in small sheets of paper with expressions of gratitude. The athletes express gratitude to everyone: teammates, coaches, athletic trainers, bus drivers, student managers, and restaurant waitresses. Right before the conference tournament, the coach reads several of the gratitude notes from preseason to his team to remind them of their love for one another.

## Conclusion

This article relied on the Willardian corpus to offer sportspeople a framework for understanding spiritual formation. Specifically, we examined the “why,” “what,” and “how” of soul-training. Why sportspeople train their souls is to experience God's presence and worship him on and off the competition stage. What sportspeople do to train their souls is follow Christ as his apprentices, leading to transformation into his likeness. How sportspeople train their souls involves the Holy Spirit and intentional practice of spiritual disciplines. Spiritual disciplines are repeated practices of the mind, body, and heart that rely on God the Father, cooperate with the Holy Spirit, and are directed by Christ. Practical applications for sportspeople were provided. Sportspeople engage in rigorous, dedicated training regimens that prepare their bodies for competition. Sportspeople can also train their souls by relying on the Holy Spirit and his grace as they engage in habitual and intentional spiritual disciplines.

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