

# **Promoting the Spiritual Growth and Character Development of Student Athletes**

**Presented by:**

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## **Introduction**

In 1997 several people in Philadelphia began to gather to look at a deeper side of sports. There is a tendency today to say that sports is taken too seriously. On the contrary, these people thought sports is not taken seriously enough. This group of innovative thinkers had a lot of experience in sports and ranged from an athletic director of a NCAA Division I school in Philadelphia to a former general manager of an NFL team to the director of CYO sports for the Archdiocese of Philadelphia. They intuitively and experientially knew that sports had the ability to open them up to transcendent moments and even connect them in a new and different manner to their God. They wanted to make more explicit the inherent good that they had experienced in sports.

From early, informal conversations through a series of more formal gatherings and attendance at conferences, came a decision to start an institute on sports and spirituality. The intention was to begin to make the connections between sport and spirituality in a more formal way. It was thought best to align this institute with a college or university. This venue would provide more credibility and also provide more access to research and perhaps even funding. Neumann College recognized the importance of this initiative and in 1999 proposed to house the Center for Sport, Spirituality and Character Development (CSSCD or The Center) on its campus in Aston, Pennsylvania.

## **Why sports and spirituality?**

It has been said that music is the universal language. Sports can also be seen in a similar light. There are not many things in the world that are as popular as sports; sports is a significant part of our contemporary world. What if sports, if viewed properly, could be used to help facilitate a deeper connection with God? What if sports could help athletes learn more about themselves and even God?

A glance at the history of sports reveals that sports have always been connected with spirituality. From the Greeks to the Romans to the primitive peoples, sports were a way of pacifying, pleasing, and/or promoting God or the gods. Sporting events were a part of the festivals and rituals of the ancients and were used to assure a deeper relationship with God or the gods. It is really not until the influence and restrictions of the

Puritans in the West that the disconnect between sports and spirituality becomes evident. The Center seeks to restore the connection between God and the athletes.

### **Groundbreaking Study Uncovers Needs in Intercollegiate Athletics**

In the work that the CSSCD had been doing for several years around the country with colleges and universities, we had heard anecdotally that the schools' mission statement and values were integrated into most parts of the school except the athletic department. We desired to see if this was more than hearsay and to see if this was actually the case. We contracted with Villanova University's Office of Planning, Training and Institutional Research to assist us in developing a survey instrument which would move us from the anecdotal to the factual.

Beginning in November, 2005, the assessment tool entitled *Mission Integration in Athletic Departments of Catholic Colleges and Universities* was sent to athletic directors at Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities (ACCU) member institutions. The purpose of the survey, designed by the CSSCD, was to identify best practices and needs regarding the integration of an institution's mission/vision/values into its athletic program.

A total of 139 institutions completed surveys, comprising 80% of the 174 institutions surveyed. Findings from Neumann College's research combined with analysis of UCLA's Study: *Spiritual Life of College Students: A National Study of College Students Search for Meaning and Purpose*, and examinations of intercollegiate athletic programs uncovered critical areas of need worth addressing when attempting to promote the spiritual growth and character development of student athletes.

### **Uncovering a Need: Coaches**

The numeric data from Neumann's groundbreaking study suggest the pivotal role that coaches play in mission and spirituality. Findings revealed that concerted effort is made to involve coaches in mission activities as more than 8 of 10 coaches participated in mission activities over the last year. Four of 10 institutions perceive coaches as having responsibility for implementing mission/vision/value.

These findings accord well with the qualitative observation by fully one in five respondents that the coach is the key agent of spiritual development among student athletes. Yet the data did not reveal if coaches are effectively *equipped* to live out that role. Opportunities exist to equip coaches and other athletic department staff with tools and language necessary to assist with their process of defining mission integration into athletics.

## Coaches Training

At Neumann we realize the significant role that coaches play in the life of the student-athlete. While the administration and professors are vital to college life, the importance of a coach on the collegiate level (or any level for that matter) cannot be overstated. The coaches may not feel especially able or equipped to facilitate the growth and development of an athlete. The coaches usually know the skills and techniques of their specific sport but beyond that they tend to feel deficient. For some examples of what we have done at Neumann College, please refer to Appendix A: “A Model for a Coaches’ Session on Mission Integration” and Appendix B: “Thought Provoking Questions for Coaches.”

The Center’s approach to helping the coaches is manifold. Our athletic director initiates them in the mission of the college and how that can be taught to the student athlete. The staff of the Center frequently does presentations at staff meetings on such topics as: conflict management, maintaining good boundaries, listening skills, developmental issues etc.

At Neumann each of our teams has a chaplain. The Center facilitates the sports chaplain program and attempts to enrich the relationship between the coach and the chaplain. We gather the coaches and chaplains together by seasons (Fall, Winter and Spring). We offer a meal and allow the coaches and chaplains to meet and learn from one another.

The Center also organizes an annual retreat in December for the entire athletic department and also the chaplains. The purpose of this evening gathering is to help them to step aside, have a meal and enjoy one another’s presence. We usually have speakers and offer some time for reflection.

During the summer, when things are relatively quiet, the Center has participated in a day offered by the athletic department. Along with some coaching training and input from athletic trainers, the Center tries to show the coaches just how sports and spirituality connect and presents some practical ways in which this can happen.

## Uncovering a Need: Students

UCLA’s findings uncover a void in spiritual formation among the nation’s college students. Findings include the following: 75% of college students are searching for meaning and purpose, 53% report the classroom has had no impact on their spiritual development, and 30% reported having a spiritual experience while engaging in athletics.

The Center sees great potential in that the athletic experience can be one of many tools colleges and universities use to affect the character growth and spiritual development of their students. In Neumann’s study, there was a high level of agreement among respondents (4.4 on a scale of 5.0) that there *can be a connection between sports*

*and spirituality*. This affinity was not as strongly reflected in the narrative data where almost 20% “were not sure whether sports add to spiritual development” and one can surmise that a good number of the 48 non-respondents shared this doubt.

### **Captains Training**

Neumann College hosts team captains programming before each season. We feel education for the captains is important because there is a tendency for the athletes and even coaches to take a captaincy position as a popularity contest and thus not expect much from the captains in terms of responsibility of leadership. In these sessions we try to get the athletes to reflect upon what their position means to them, their teammates and coaches. We use a lot of scenarios and role playing in these sessions. Examples of this type of session can be seen in Appendix B.

Please refer to Appendix C: “Leadership through Athletics” and Appendix D: “Thought Provoking Questions for Athletes.”

### **Uncovering a Need: Utilizing Community Service as a Means of Spiritual Growth**

Ninety-four percent of the institutions in Neumann’s study reported athletes involved in service projects while a similar proportion (92%) wrote in examples of community service as a way they put mission/vision/values into action. Community service was also the most frequently mentioned vehicle for effectively integrating mission/vision/values into athletic programs.

Far and away, community service is the most common means of mission actualization. Yet, in puzzling contrast, in the narrative comments, only three institutions specified community service as adding to the spiritual development of their student athletes. This is a striking disconnect. One hypothesis is that community service is viewed as inherently good and is certainly “done a lot,” but is not seen as transforming hearts and minds. Perhaps this should be viewed as an opportunity to help schools make the transition from community service projects to facilitated service learning experiences for their student athletes.

Almost 75% of the nation’s Catholic colleges and institutions have either one or zero chaplains serving their athletic program. Yet the use of sport chaplains was cited as an effective strategy used to integrate mission into the athletic program second only to community service projects. The service learning model used at Neumann is facilitated by the team chaplain.

## **Chaplains Training**

Each of our sports teams has a chaplain. Appendix C contains the job description of Neumann's sports chaplains. This is the tenth year for our program. The chaplain program is directed by the Center for Sport, Spirituality and Character Development. Our chaplains come from the community at Neumann College and they are administrators, professors and staff. They are chosen for their ability to connect with students, their passion for sports and their commitment to the spiritual growth of the student-athletes.

The chaplains are another adult presence in addition to the coach for the student-athletes. While they support a winning attitude, their main responsibility towards the team is a relationship of caring. The chaplains lead community building exercises, facilitate service projects for the teams and attempt to keep up with the academic aspects of the athletes.

We offer training sessions for the chaplains on a yearly basis. Presentations have been done by our staff and we have also been assisted by some of the professors from our pastoral counseling staff. We have presented on such topics as: listening, boundary issues and praying with the teams.

Please refer to Appendix E: "Sport Chaplain Program at Neumann" and Appendix F: "Service Project Model for Student Athletes in the Franciscan Tradition" for more information about Neumann College's sport chaplains program.

## **Pulling it Together**

Evidence suggests that today's college students are longing for a stronger connection with the transcendent and for a deeper sense of meaning in their lives. This evidence has been demonstrated by UCLA's research on the spiritual life of college students. The work of Arthur Chickering, Jon Dalton and Liesa Stamm, especially in their book *Encouraging Authenticity and Spirituality in Higher Education*, also shows that spirituality is becoming more and more a concern in colleges and universities around the country.

Athletes are open to considering this connection between sports and spirituality. We offer a course at Neumann College on "Sports and Spirituality" each semester for the past seven years. Usually half of the class is made up of Neumann student-athletes. Encouraging to note is that the athletes are very open to seeing new and deeper aspects of God in their sports experience.

The Center for Sport, Spirituality and Character Development at Neumann College strives to address this growing need amongst college students by connecting with a significant part of college life: athletics. We believe by reaching out to the athletic department through the coaches, the chaplains and the captains we can foster a deeper awareness of God and facilitate a growth in the spiritual development of our athletes.

## Resources

Neumann College Center for Sport, Spirituality and Character Development (2006)  
*Mission integration in athletic departments of Catholic colleges and universities:*  
[http://www.neumann.edu/mission/center/ACCU\\_Study\\_Report\\_Color.pdf](http://www.neumann.edu/mission/center/ACCU_Study_Report_Color.pdf)

UCLA Higher Education Research Institute (2003) *The spiritual life of college students: A national study of college students' search for meaning and purpose*  
<http://www.spirituality.ucla.edu/>

Chckering, A.W., Dalton, J.C., and Stamm, L. *Encouraging Authenticity and Spirituality in Higher Education* (2006) San Francisco; Jossey-Bass.

## **Appendix A: A Model for a Coaches' Session on Mission Integration**

There is a tendency for college administrators to hold coaches responsible for the implementation of mission and spiritual values into the athletic department without any kind of training for these coaches. The need for this kind of training especially becomes more needed when the norm today is coaches who are not full time faculty or administrators of the school, let alone what is to be done for assistant coaches.

Also, there is a tendency for these same coaches to say that they have no idea of how to connect mission and athletics. We believe these coaches have more of an idea than they might think and might even be doing this, but they are not aware explicitly that they are doing this. They are already facilitating character development and spiritual growth in their young athletes, but they don't realize this. A key point to call their attention to is that we are not expecting the coaches to be perfect nor saintly, but just trying to assist them in their quest to help these young people to mature emotionally and spiritually.

The following is meant to help coaches (head and assistants) to become more aware of what they are doing and why they are doing it.

### **Session**

Note: This type of session would best be led by a respected, credible coach in the athletic department. She/he could give their own reflections for the group, probably as part of (c.) below. There should be adequate time for quiet reflection here.

1. Have the coaches reflect upon a coach who was significant to them. Ask them to recall an example of what this person did for them and how it impacted them.
  - a. time by themselves
  - b. small group
  - c. large group (with reflections by leader here)
2. Have them consider how they attempt to model what they learned from their old coach in their own coaching.
  - a. time by themselves
  - b. small group
  - c. large group (with reflections by leader here)
3. Let them consider how these reflections on their past experiences connect up with what they know about Jesus and how he lived.
  - a. time by themselves
  - b. small group
  - c. large group (with reflections by leader here)
4. Could be meaningful to have player speak here
  - a. he/she could reflect upon what was most helpful to them

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## **Appendix B**

### **Thought Provoking Questions for Coaches**

1. Am I trying to bring out the best in my players?
2. Is winning-at-costs what matters to me bottom line?
3. Do I treat the starters any different from the bench players?
4. Would I ever risk the health of a player by playing them when injured, just to win a game?
5. Do I show respect to the officials? Do I bait the officials just to get the calls?
6. Would I be willing to bend the rules to win a game?
7. How do I treat a player who has made a mistake or even lost the game for the team?
8. Would I run up the score on an opponent to embarrass the coaches and players?
9. Am I positive with the players when criticizing them?
10. Can I compliment an opposing player for their good play?
11. Do I take advantage of teachable moments to help the young players to realize life lessons?
12. Am I interested in what is going on in the lives of the young people not just on the court, but also off the court?
13. Am I a good role model; do I demonstrate good example to my players?
14. Have I established enough of a relationship with my players that they would seek me out after graduation?
15. Have I contributed to the ethical and character development of my players?

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## **Appendix C: Leadership Through Athletics: Captains Training**

### **First Presentation: Introduction and what is a leader?**

1. Introduction: Name, year, sport, what being captain/leader means to you (5 minutes)
2. Explain why we are here (5 minutes)
  - a. tend not to talk about leadership/being a captain
  - b. they all have had experiences with leadership
  - c. learn about life thru sports
  - d. leader/captain is an important part of a team—can influence others in a positive way
3. What is leadership? (30 minutes)
4. The challenges of leadership (5 minutes)
  - a. stresses, conflicts, pressures
5. What is a captain? (40 minutes)
  - a. Popularity contest
  - b. Are there privileges/obligations/responsibilities?
  - c. What problems/distractions need to be faced?
    - (1) blame
    - (2) race problems
    - (3) conflicts
    - (4) fears?

### **Second Presentation: Real Issues that Captains/Leaders Face**

1. A series of role plays and a case study designed to help the leaders to focus in upon real problems that occur on their teams. These can help the leaders to see how they would react, see how others react and offers the opportunity to dialogue with the group on the outcome of the role play.
2. The role plays:
  - a. The two participants are a coach and a player. The issue involved concerns the player being taken out of the starting line-up. The role play begins with the player asking for a meeting with the coach and let the two leaders take it from there.
  - b. The two participants are a captain and a teammate. The issue is that the player is having a negative influence on the rest of the team. The team has lost five games in a row and the player has been bad mouthing the coach in front of other players.
  - c. The two participants are a coach and a captain. The issue is that the team has just lost a crucial game with their arch rivals and are headed into the most significant part of the season. The coach needs the captain to “rally the troops” and get the team back on the right track.

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3. A Case Study:

You are a captain on your team. Right before a key playoff game you stumble upon one of your teammates smoking grass in the dorms. He is not a starter but usually plays some significant minutes during the games. You are with several other players and they kind of make a joke out of it and move on. You play the game, win it and the player who was smoking the grass plays pretty well and makes a significant contribution to the win. The next game is for the conference championship. What is your reaction to this, if anything. How would you justify your reaction?

**Third Presentation: Sport and Spirituality piece.**

1. Some questions for them to reflect upon individually before we move to the next piece.
  - a. How have sports helped you to come to know yourself better? Think of one incident and consider how and why this helped you.
  - b. Think about one time when a loss taught you something worthwhile about life.
  - c. Think about a time when sports taught you to think about others and not just yourself.
2. Self-knowledge: how has sports taught them about themselves? What are some life lessons that have come through sports to them.
  - a. talk about limitations
  - b. talk about losses
  - c. talk about good things that they have come to know about themselves
3. Self-transcendence: what this means, what does it take to go beyond yourself, why is it good?
  - a. Remember the Titans (the end of the movie)  
--how does this demonstrate self-transcendence?

**Evaluation**

1. Was this the best time for them? Time during the week, the semester before the season,
2. Were there other topics that would have been better to discuss?
3. What was best about the sessions?
4. What would you like to see changed?

## **Appendix D: Thought Provoking Questions for Student-Athletes**

### **1. Self**

- a. Do I take care of myself physically: Do I get enough sleep? Do I snack too much? Am I too concerned about my weight or not concerned enough?
- b. Do I have an injury that I am not telling anyone about?
- c. Am I taking care of myself emotionally: Is there something bothering me that I am afraid to tell anyone? Has something happened to me in sports that bothers me a lot, for instance an error made or getting cut from a team or not forgiving a teammate?
- d. Do I take care of myself spiritually: Do I pray frequently? Do I ever read the Bible? Am I able to talk about God with my friends or parents? Am I aware that God has given me the ability to play sports, to have quickness, speed, agility?

### **2. Teammates**

- a. How do I relate to my teammates? Do I pay attention to what is going on in their lives? Am I aware of what their needs may be?
- b. Have I ever thought of calling a teammate who has been injured to see how they are doing?
- c. Have I ever thought about speaking with a friend who has been cut from a team?
- d. How do I treat a teammate who has made a mistake during a game? Have I thought about talking to them after the game?
- e. Have I ever been jealous of a teammate? Have ever been happy for a teammate messing up or sad when then did well?

### **3. Opponents**

- a. Do I treat my opponents with respect and fairness?
- b. Do I do too much trash talking or taunting?
- c. Do I try to cheat when I am playing against someone else?
- d. Have I ever thought about or consciously tried to hurt an opponent?

### **4. Coaches**

- a. Am I aware of the good that my coaches have done for me?
- b. Do I talk behind my coaches back and make fun of him or her?
- c. If I had a conflict with a coach, would I be able to talk with them in an honest way?
- d. Do I ever say something nice to my coach?

### **5. Officials**

- a. Do I treat officials or referees with respect and dignity?
- b. Have I argued a call with an official too strongly?
- c. Am I aware of how important officials are to a game?
- d. Have I been able to forgive a official for a bad call that he/she has made?

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**6. Parents**

- a. Do I appreciate all that my parents have done to help me become a better athlete?
- b. Have I thanked my parents for teaching me how to play my sport?
- c. Have I thanked my parents for coming to my games and supporting me?

**7. God**

- a. Have I thanked God for my help which enables me to play sports?
- b. Have I ever gotten too angry and upset with God because of a sports event that it has hurt my relationship with God?
- c. Have I been able to ask forgiveness from God and been able to accept God's forgiveness, especially for something that has happened in sports?

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## **Appendix E: The Sport Chaplain Program at Neumann College**

### **Purpose**

The Sport Chaplain Program's (SCP) main purpose is to foster the Mission of Neumann College throughout the entire athletic community: athletes, coaches, staff and administrators.

### **Mission**

The Sport Chaplain Program serves to exemplify the mission and values of the Franciscan tradition while bringing a holistic perspective to the athletic program.

### **SCP Coordinator/Overseer**

The Director of Neumann College's Center for Sport, Spirituality and Character Development (CSSCD) assumes the position of Coordinator of the SCP. The Director of the CSSCD has the primary responsibility of recruiting candidates for the position of Sport Chaplain (SC). It is the goal of the SCP to have at least one SC for each athletic team. The SC serves at the discretion of the Director of the CSSCD, the College Athletic Director and the respective coach.

### **SC Position Description**

*Prior to accepting his or her role as SC the candidate will be made aware of the position responsibilities by the Director of CSSCD. The respective coach will also express his or her expectations; attendance at practices, games, post game presence, team meetings, etc.*

The SC at Neumann College provides personal and spiritual support to the student-athletes coaches and staff during the entire school year. The SC role is designed to be one of encouragement, vision and leadership. While being in concert with the coaches, the SC maintains a special relationship with the captains in assisting to develop their role in leadership through the filter of discipleship. The SC is called upon to provide a healthy, balanced perspective to the entire team, making athletics at Neumann College unique and in sync with the College's mission. The SC makes athletics at Neumann College special by being available to the student athlete offering a prayer during practice and/or before and after a game. He or she is also encouraged to work with the Campus ministry team to involve the team in community service, a keystone in Franciscan education.

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The Primary Responsibilities of the Sport Chaplain:

- Meet with the respective head coach (and possibly assistants) sometime before the sport season
- Become acquainted with the players and managers
- Attend some practices
- Attend as many games as possible
- Make the team aware of your availability (time and location)
- Secure important data for communications with coaches, managers and team
- Be a spiritual presence, before, during and after a game and the season

**SC and the Coach:** The coach serves as an integral member of the athletic community in making the SCP as rewarding as it can be. The coach/chaplain relationship is unique. They can assist and support one another in various roles: confidant, advisor, consultant. The SC can bring a different perspective to the coach that allows the coach to go beyond the competitive element inherent in sports. The SC can assist the coach in maintaining a balance between that which is beneficial for both the athlete and winning. The relationship attempts to maintain the perspective of “athlete first and winning second”.

The coach is asked to ;

- supply the SC with a team roster and schedule.
- articulate her or his expectations of the SC with the SC .
- introduce SC to the entire team and staff
- make team aware of the role of the SC
- express to team how SC will serve to enrich the program
- express specific expectations of SC to team and staff

**Appendix F:**  
**Service Project Model for Student Athletes in the Franciscan Tradition**

1. Pre-service gathering (25 minutes)
  - a. Begin meeting with reading the Prayer of St. Francis
  - b. Read from Matt. 25: 31-46 (Last Judgment )
  - c. Some moments of quiet
  - d. Questions/reflections that might be considered for discussion
    - (1) What did Francis mean by saying “in giving we receive?”
    - (2) Can you think of some examples of when you have received when you gave to another?
    - (3) Why does Jesus call us to serve the needy?
  
2. Some things to think about during you service event:
  - a. Get involved in the action; don’t just stay with your teammates
  - b. Meet the people at the site and listen to them
  - c. Don’t react to any negativity
  - d. *Cortesía*: maintaining respect for all people
  
3. Post-event gathering (**best** done right after or within a day or two of experience) (30 minutes)
  - a. Re-read Matt. 25: 31-46
  - b. Give them some time for silence/reflection (5 minutes)
  - c. Read Francis’ quote: “Preach the Gospel at all times . . . when necessary use words.”
    - (1) why do actions speak louder than words?
  - d. What was the most meaningful part of the service experience for them?
    - (1) give them some time to reflect by themselves
    - (2) have them speak in dyads or triads
    - (3) group reflection
  
  - e. End with a prayer

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