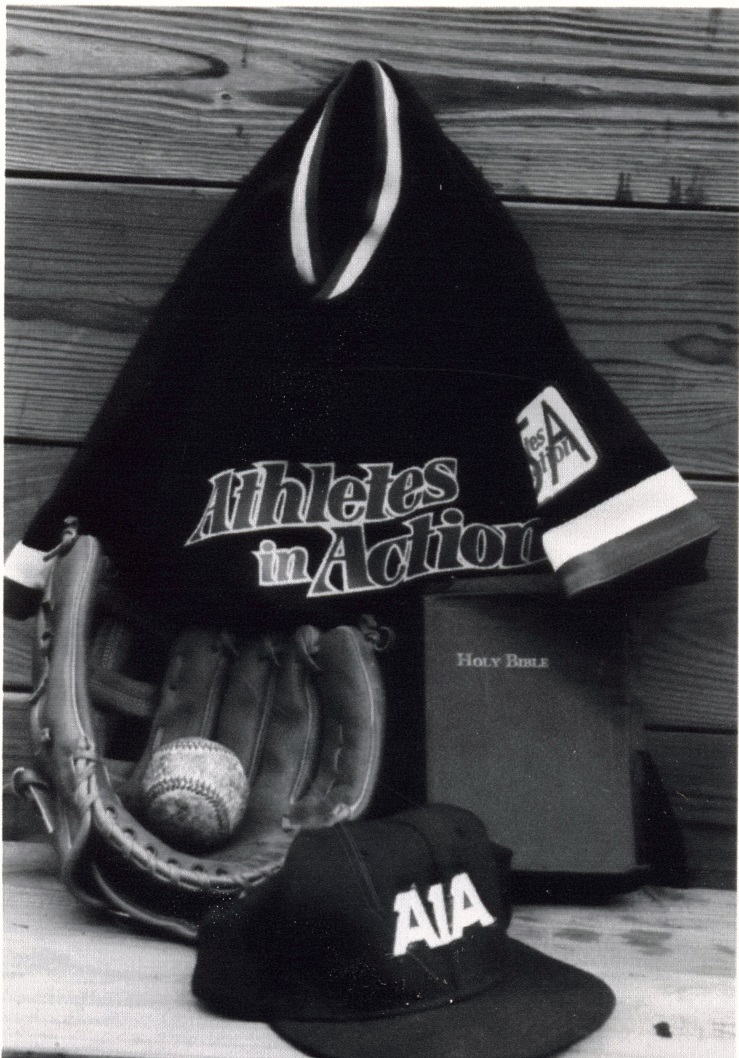
Chapter 11: Religion

# 11.1. Christian sports organizations

Christian sports organizations have become a taken-for-granted part of the religion and sports landscape. The following list consists of religious sports organizations.

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***Athletes in Action is one of the major Christian sport organizations worldwide.***

To be one the list, the organization must emphasize both religion and sports in its mission statement. Therefore, the Catholic Youth Organization is not on the list because sports are not a primary focus even though the CYO” sponsors many sport leagues and events.

The list as of mid-2019 follows:

## Major Evangelical Organizations

Athletes in Action (AIA)

Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA)

Pro Athletes Outreach (PAO)

Sports Ambassadors

## Other Organizations

* Association of Christian College Athletics
* Association of Christian Youth Sports
* Athletes International
* Baseball Chapel  
  Catholic Athletes for Christ
* Champions for Christ  
  Christian Athletic Association
* Christian Bowhunters of America  
  Christian Golfers' Association (CGA)
* ChristianHomeschool Sports Ministries
* Christian Rodders & Racers Association
* Christian Skaters International Ministry
* Christian Sports International (CSI)
* Christian Surfers International
* The Christian Sport Bike Association
* Christian Team Ministries  
  Christian Youth Athletic Association
* Cowboys for Christ  
  Fellowship of Christian Anglers
* Golf Fellowship  
  Hockey Ministries International  
  Hoops of Hope Basketball Ministry
* Islamic Solidarity Sports Federation
* Infinity Sports
* International Christian Tennis Association
* International Sports Federation (ISF)
* Kristen Idrettskontakt
* Maccabi USA
* Match Point Tennis Ministries
* Motor Racing Outreach
* Motorsports Ministries
* Muslim Sports Association
* Muslim Women's Sport Foundation
* Muslimah Sports Association
* National Christian College Athletic Association
* National Muslim Athletic Association
* On Goal Soccer  
  Pro Athletes Outreach
* Pro Bull Riding Outreach   
  Push The Rock Sports Ministry
* Racing for Jesus  
  Racingwith JesusMinistries
* Run to Win Outreach
* Snowboarders & Skiersfor Christ USA
* Sports Association for Jesus
* Sports Crusaders
* Sports Reach
* Team Faith   
  Team Jesus Ministries  
  Upward Sports Ministry
* Wheel Power Christian Cyclists

**Note:** This is a partial list; there are hundreds, even thousands of local organizations with similar missions worldwide. It appears that well over 90 percent of religious sports organizations are Christian with nearly all being tied to fundamentalist beliefs.

# 11.2. Ramadan as an issue for Muslim athletes

In the second chapter of the Quran, it is written that “whosoever of you is present, let him fast the month, and whosoever of you is sick or on a journey, a number of other days.” This is a reference to Ramadan, a 30-day holy period during which the 1.5 billion Muslims worldwide are not allowed to eat or drink anything from sunrise to sunset and are required to pray additional times during the day.

Such a fasting period has long created challenges for Muslim athletes whose competition schedules occur during the 30 days of Ramadan. But in most cases, athletes have been able to combine their fasting with their sport participation through careful planning and support from their teams, teammates, families, and friends.

Additionally, the Quran and other Islamic texts indicate that there can be exceptions to the fasting rule, and for those who have sufficient reason not to fast on particular days during Ramadan, it is possible to fast on subsequent days or make other sacrifices to make up for not fasting.

The issue of how athletes handle Ramadan became important in 2012 when the London Olympics overlapped with the Muslim month of fasting. Ramadan went from July 20 to August 18th and the Games began on July 27th and went through August 12th. This was the first time in 32 years that this overlap occurred and it raised questions for the more than 3,000 Muslim athletes participating in the 2012 Olympic Games. (1980 was the last time there was overlap).

Some of the athletes chose to follow the fasting rules carefully, whereas others claimed that as athletes traveling away from home and representing their faith and their country, they could break the fast, or at least drink water during the daylight hours because their health would be in serious jeopardy if they did not do so as they practiced and competed. Some athletes who chose to fast decided they would use the sunrise and sunset times in Mecca as their guide rather than the actual times in London where daylight at that latitude lasted more than two hours longer than in the Muslim holy city.

In anticipation of these challenges and dilemmas of faith, some National Olympic Committees from largely Muslim nations asked the IOC to reschedule the Games to follow Ramadan, but the IOC had refused to make a change. There were also requests from committee members to make accommodations in the competition schedules of Muslim athletes so they could compete and fast without jeopardizing their health. But the IOC refused this request as well, saying that such scheduling exceptions would create a logistical nightmare.

In response, some National Olympic Committees brought to London special dieticians who could prepare the special foods eaten during Ramadan and work with athletes to schedule meals just before sunrise and just after sunset.

A search through the news stories during the Games does not turn up any stories about Muslim athletes collapsing or experiencing serious health problems due to fasting. But we don’t know if the performances of Muslim athletes were negatively impacted due to fasting.

The challenges created by Muslim religious beliefs gives new meaning to the “Hunger Games” at the same time that it shows that combining religion and sport is not always an easy task.

# 11.3. Self-indulgence for the “glory of God”: Christian witness in high-performance sports

***Note****: When this op-ed piece was published in a newspaper, it evoked hundreds of responses. The topic of religion is not readily discussed analytically. People’s religious beliefs and the passions underlying them are very deep. However, the article did generate considerable discussion among students in sport sociology courses. Here it is:*

Sports do produce jobs and they bring people together to share events and experiences involving cooperation and emotional unity. Sports teams can serve as symbols of groups or ideologies (like national flags do). But in another sense, sports involve occasions and experiences created for their own sake, for the simple pleasure of participation in and of itself. It is this dimension of sports that provides individuals with opportunities for new experiences and allows them to engage in experimentation leading to self-discovery and development.

Sports are unique because they’re not part of the world of necessity; they’re played voluntarily, and they consist of freely chosen actions. Because of their purposelessness, they open the door to experiencing oneself and one’s relationship to the rest of the world in new ways. They are perfect settings in which to experiment and explore new dimensions of self. These are the things that make sport unique as a part of our human experience.

In societies where many resources are devoted to sports, where bond issues are passed to build multi-million dollar arenas, where the budgets of college sport teams are often greater than the budgets of [academic] colleges and schools within major universities, where church services are rearranged to accommodate spectator interests in football playoff games, where high school students are ceremoniously rewarded for athletic achievements and highlighted in the news media, there seems to be a tendency to continually “invent” and “re-invent” reasons for why sports are worthwhile. In societies where massive resources are not spent on sports, there is no need to invent these reasons. This is why the link between “character” and sport participation is so often discussed in the U.S., and why many Americans become upset when athletes engage in behaviors that call into question these beliefs. The people who believe that sports build character reject “wayward” athletes as exceptions to their beliefs and call for punitive and disciplinary action to rid sports of these “bad apples” before they spoil the rest of the “character-filled bunch.” For a sociologist, this is an interesting phenomenon.

A similar process occurs when individuals dedicate most of their lives to highly specialized forms of sport. How do they justify their expenditure of personal resources? How do they explain giving up the relationships and experiences taken for granted as part of growing up by their peers? How do they explain why their families have been disrupted or why so many family resources have been spent on their participation? How do they deal with the uncertainty and explain the pain and injuries that are a part of highly competitive sports? How do they deal with the fact that if they don’t win, they may not be allowed to continue playing or allowed to move to higher levels of participation?

Sport participation, especially at high levels of competition, is a tremendously self-indulgent activity; it is driven by a spirit of self-promotion. What would a coach at a major university say to players who were just as concerned with the feelings and fates of their opponents as they were with their feelings and fates in the competition? Most coaches I know would call in the psychologists to treat this “sickness.” Competitive games are largely grounded in self-promotion; athletes don’t turn the other cheek.

What does a person do whose life is lived within the context of playing games? This is not a problem for most children, but it can be a problem in the lives of adults. Some people might say that sports are simply fun whereas others might use external rewards like money or fame or a desire to achieve social acceptance as justifications for playing games. Some people might use sports as platforms for engaging in community service and other good works whereas others might use spiritual justifications grounded in religious beliefs to justify and even “sanctify” their participation. Of course, all these justifications could be used at once.

But whenever so many personal resources are devoted to a self-centered development of physical skills exclusively applied to a highly specialized athletic event, and when participating in a sport has generally ceased to be fun and enjoyable, a person needs to come up with a system of justification. This may be the reason why religion is combined with sport participation by so many athletes in highly competitive sports in the United States. According to many Christian athletes, an added benefit to this combination is that religion often helps them control anxiety in the face of the uncertainty and danger of competition. In other words, it helps them do their best. And as my coaches often told me: “if you do our best, you can win.”

Can any behavior be done for “the glory of God”? Are the content and consequences of behavior unrelated to its value as a form of “Christian witness”? What would a Christian say if a prostitute said a prayer before a night of hard work and proclaimed her actions on a Friday night to be offered as a form of Christian witness? Most Christians would stand back in shock and disbelief or simply laugh at the ridiculous nature of her use of religion. But what if a boxer said a prayer before going into the ring to punch another human being into senselessness and submission, killing (perhaps not intentionally) brain cells in the process? And what if the boxer dedicated his athletic career to Christ and proclaimed it a form of Christian witness?

Interestingly, many Christians have no problems with this! And even fewer have problems with football players dedicating behavior that regularly injures teammates and opponents as a form of Christian witness. Of course, most football players don’t intend to injure others, but that benign intent does little to heal the cartilage and bones of fellow players in traction or on crutches as a result of their “loving hits”. How are the “hits” causing these injuries part of the life that Jesus described in the gospels?

Do Christian pitchers throw brushback pitches to intimidate batters? Do Christian base runners slide into second with their spikes up to break up the double play? Do Christian basketball players use their elbows to keep opponents away from rebounds? For many reasons, some related to distorted definitions of masculinity, these actions have become accepted as part of highly competitive sports in this country. But how have they become accepted as forms of “Christian witness” as well? This is tough to explain, and as a sociologist, I’m very interested in any theology that would sanctify this behavior. Such a theology is one that I would fear rather than embrace. Its impact on our world is potentially devastating.

It is only when the freedom and voluntary aspect of sports is minimized, and when the control of the experience leaves the hands of the participants themselves that we “make” sport into something other than a personal experience open to a variety of personal meanings. For example, the widely believed notion that sport builds character was developed during the early part of this century when schoolmasters took control of student sports teams and activities and incorporated them into the formal structure and curriculum of the school. How could this sponsorship of fun and physical activity be justified in a culture that emphasized the work ethic to the point that it was believed that work was a basis for eternal salvation? How could money be spent sponsoring activities that were done for their own sake; because they were fun and young people simply enjoyed them?

Spending money on fun for its own sake was not something that could be explained at a school board budget meeting. So those who wanted to control student activities outside the classroom, and those who saw the potential for activities allowing students opportunities to experiment and explore new dimensions of self, came together in an uneasy alliance and created a “justification” for school-sponsored sport. They explained that sport built “character,” moral character. Once this link was made it opened the door for defining sport participation as a morally legitimate activity, one that could even be sponsored by church organizations that shunned such physical frivolity in times past. On an individual level, sports participation came to be defined as a form of “witness” expressing one’s religious values in addition to one’s character, regardless of the kinds of behaviors involved in sport participation. This is an interesting aspect of our complex culture.

# 11.4. Skateistan: Skateboarding and gender barriers

When Oliver Percovich followed his girlfriend, a social scientist, and an international aid worker, from Melbourne, Australia to Kabul, Afghanistan, in 2007 he had no idea how the trip would change his life. Percovich looked for a job, but there was nothing for a traveling research social scientist. There were no jobs of any kind available to him. So, he explored the city on the skateboard he brought with him from Australia. As he skated, his board attracted the attention of children and teenagers in the streets.

With his social science background, “Oli” – the name that resonated with the kids in Kabul – knew that half of the 3 million people in the city were under 16-years old, three-fourths were younger than 25, and all of them had been negatively impacted by an extended war on their doorsteps.

He also knew that Islam was an important part of the city’s social fabric and that he didn’t know enough about the culture to take it upon himself to solve any of the numerous problems he observed in the city. But he *did* know that the children were fascinated with his board, so he let them try it and gave a few basic lessons to those willing to take a ride. The children were so eager that he had more boards shipped from Australia.

Before long, Oli was teaching more kids than he could handle how to have fun with a skateboard. At first, it was only boys who asked to skate, but after a while, a few girls dared to ask him for a turn on the boards. Although a few of the girls said that their fathers and brothers approved of them skating with boys, Oli also heard that one of the girls had been beaten by her brothers when they discovered what she’d been doing.

This led Oli to seek the advice of a local mullah and to be careful not to let girls over the age of 12 skate with the boys. In his conversation with the mullah, he referred to a passage in the Quran in which the prophet Mohammed mentions girls running a race. The mullah was supportive and worked to see that parents and brothers were okay with the young girls skating with the boys.

Oli felt bad that the girls older than 12 could not give skating a try in a setting where they could be observed by boys and men. So, he and his now ex-girlfriend, Sharma Nolan wrote proposals asking for funding to build an indoor skating facility and sent them to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the embassies of countries known for their aid work in Afghanistan.

He was able to scrounge about $7,000 in donations, but in 2009, after his proposal was rejected by 20 organizations and his credit cards were maxed out, Oli was ready to head back to Australia. But his plans changed when the international aid offices of Norway, Denmark, Germany, and Canada funded his proposals with more money than he’d requested, and the Kabul Parks Authority gave him land outside the city to build a skate facility. What followed can’t be properly summarized here. However, Oliver Percovich has taken his grassroots program and turned it into a full-fledged youth training program with 4 full-time staff working with over 1,000 young people each week.

Publicity from an 8-minute documentary shown at the Sundance Film Festival and global media coverage has helped him; form a nonprofit organization called *Skateistan*; raise money to build a second and much larger facility in a nearby city; enlist assistance from noted skaters around the world; open another facility in Phnom Penh, Cambodia; earn an international award for his humanitarian work; and combine skating with educational programs for the young people in his programs.

The story of Skateistan was told in a 2011 feature-length documentary, *Skateistan: Four Wheels and a Board in Kabul*, and a 2012 book, *Skateistan – The Tale of Skateboarding in Afghanistan* by Jim Fitzpatrick (a grandfather of global skateboarding) and (the people of) Skateistan.

Learn more about [Skateistan](http://www.skateistan.org/). But remember that Oliver Percovich never set out to create a global program. His goal was and remains to provide fun through skateboarding to young people whose lives were and continue to be constrained by war. If he had begun with the pretentious notion of solving problems in Afghanistan, he would have failed.

## Reality check

The [historical timeline for Afghanistan](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-12024253) shows that violence and warfare have been a nearly ever-present part of the country, especially over the past half-century.

In 2012, two teachers and two young people in the Kabul Skateistan program were killed by a suicide bomber.

U.S. military troops had been a constant fixture there since 2001 following the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on 9/11. But these troops are now gone, which has led members of the Taliban to see an opportunity to bring an extreme version of fundamentalist Islam back to Kabul and the entire country.

Many people in Afghanistan fear that their lives will be in danger as the Taliban take control of the country. In 2013, there were nearly 3,000 deaths and over 5,600 serious injuries due to violence connected to the Taliban, and March 2014 was an especially bloody month as the Taliban has tried to create fear and political instability to disrupt upcoming elections. The elections marked the first time in Afghan history that power at the national level has been transferred through a democratic process. But with the Taliban regaining control of the country after the U.S. withdrawal, people fear a return to the extreme version of fundamentalist Islam imposed in the country during their first reign.

The fate of Skateistan during these events is difficult to predict, although it is sure to be impacted negatively. Sports in any form cannot escape the social and political forces that dominate the context in which they exist. Skateistan has brought together young people from a wide range of ethnic groups, but this will mean little when power struggles force people to take sides based on factors having nothing to do with who has skated with whom.