

# Is There Enlightenment in a Basketball Hoop?

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“What are sports really?”

Perhaps it is an easy question, perhaps not, but I ask it for several reasons. Most generally, it seems to me that sport is quite a common phenomenon throughout human societies, as widespread across the globe as religion. Its ubiquity, as well as its connection with spiritual practices, strikes me as being more than mere coincidence, but to explain this I will need to fill you in on some details.

Scientific study, for example, into the human brain is amassing a premium of evidence for the proposition that somehow human brains are “wired for spirituality” in the same way that we are wired for mathematical reasoning and emotional response.

Some experts, such as those Andrew Newberg describes in his book *Why God Won't Go Away*, have used special techniques to peer into neural processes and have observed marked similarities in the brain -states of Buddhist monks in meditation with Catholic nuns in prayer, noting the particular activity in certain regions of their brains.

These disparities in brain -states from those observed when people are not in deep meditation or prayer are thought to shed some light on the testimonies of people who, during deep meditation, claim to experience a sensation of floating or losing their identities by merging with something greater than themselves. Scientists relate these accounts to the changes observed in the parts of the brain that are thought to control spatial orientation and the sense of selfhood.

It seems to me that if it is true that somehow we are hard -wired for God in this way, it is not a big jump from heretosee that we could somehow be hard -wired for sport. In fact, this latter notion seems very much more intuitive than the previous one, perhaps especially because I subscribe to a belief in biological evolution.

We humans all have bodies. These bodies reached their present form over millions of years of minute adaptations, during most of which we were spending a lot of time chasing food and running away from predators. In other words, our bodies, in evolutionary terms, are accustomed to a lot more exercise than has been afforded us by the settled life of the last few thousand years, which most of us humans who are not still hunter-gatherers are now living.

It seems more than reasonable to me to explain sport in this way as the natural outgrowth and fulfillment of this need for physical exercise, as well as the need for social bonding that any human group needs and that team sports require.

I think it is therefore reasonable to say that, just as our minds may be built for spiritual experiences, our bodies seem to obviously be built for the physical exertion that sports involve.

Yet, as you might have guessed, the connection to spirituality does not stop there. In fact, it is apparently quite common for very devoted athletes to experience the same sorts of strange, almost otherworldly things, which people claim to experience during deep prayer or meditation.

Michael Murphy, a writer on the subject of spirituality and sports, has documented many accounts by athletes who testify to these experiences in books such as *In the Zone*. He relates the testimonies of sprinters who testify to the sensation of floating while running, much in the same vein as deep meditators do. Fascinated by this idea, I made a point of asking around to see if this might really be true.

I asked first-year track runner Teresa Collins whether she had ever felt like she was floating during a sprint, and, to my surprise and delight, she told me that she had, saying that it involved a necstatic feeling of effortlessness and detachment from surrounding events.

Even more intrigued now that it seemed to be a real phenomenon, I asked sophomore basketball player Chris Ikpoh if he could relate to sensation of floating during his games, and he

said that he could not, but that what I was describing sounded very similar to what he always called “being in the zone” during times on the court, when, as he said, “Every move you make seems slowed down. Everything you want to do is so clear. When you take the shot, there is no big. No matter what everyone else is doing, you don’t hear them.”

After hearing all of this, it made me extremely curious about what sort of relationship sports has to the human experience of spirituality. I wondered, “Are athletes experiencing their respective sports as a link between them and their creators?”

Whether or not God actually exists, if our minds are wired to experience God, then somehow this spiritual function of the brain will find a way to rear up its head. I was always comfortable with the notion that its head reared through religious practice, but now it seemed to make sense that this metaphorical head was also coming through in the practice of sport.

Yet the connections do not even stop there. Religious practice has been documented in many scientific studies to be highly correlated with lower levels of stress in people. Religion is, in other words, a stress-reducer.

Many doctors also claim that vigorous physical exercise helps to breakdown stress-causing chemicals in the body, such as adrenaline. So sports can be a stress-reducer. And no-brainer, you say. Everyone knows that if you’re feeling angry or stressed, you go for a run to burn it off. Of course this is so.

Yet this sheds light for me on a seemingly completely disparate topic: why sports and religion are so important among African-American communities. According to a 2001 survey by George Gallup, some 65 percent of Americans believe that religion can be the answer to today’s ills, yet comparatively some 85 percent of African-Americans subscribe to this viewpoint. I had always vaguely wondered about it, being an African-American myself, and completely missing the connection, as I do not agree with this particular belief.

Given the economic and social conditions that many African-Americans live with, however, generally battling more impoverished conditions, more racial prejudice, and so forth, stress seems to be an understandable physical reaction for many Americans of African descent.

If sports and religion are stress-reducers then, they therefore seem to make perfect sense as reactions to the life ills of African-American people.

Ultimately, all of this is simply the sort of thing that attempts to view sports in a completely new light.

The question of “What are sports really?” seems suddenly to be quite a complex one. Are they a venue to enlightenment? Are they potentially just as valid forms of spiritual practice as prayer or meditation? Are they somehow just as important and innate to humanity as even our notions of God?

These seem like big questions to me, but may be just a few years ahead of their time, as I do not expect to see the Pope advocating sit-up over “The Lord’s Prayer” any time soon.