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# God has a plan: moral values and beliefs of Christian athletes in competitive sports

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## ABSTRACT

Kretschmann R, Benz C. God has a Plan: moral values and beliefs of Christian athletes in competitive sports. *J. Hum. Sport Exerc.* Vol. 7, No. 2, pp. 495-519, 2012. Christian athletes are people with specific and distinctive moral guidelines in everyday life as well as in competitive sports. No matter if they are competing in triathlon, athletics, or playing soccer, if they are playing in the lowest or highest division of their sport, or if they are being faced with unmoral situations, that is what we expect. They therefore stand in contrast to some athletes of today's competitive sports who do not seem to have any guideline at all anymore, who would not shy at anything to win a competition and who therefore give competitive sports a rather negative touch. But is that really the case? Do Christian athletes fulfil this expectation? In the following study some light will be shed on the world of Christian sportsmen. Their ways of thinking, coping and acting in regard to morality in sports will be explored, interpreted and analyzed. **Key words:** CHRISTIAN ATHLETES, COMPETITIVE SPORTS, MORAL VALUES, MORL BELIEF, SPORT ETHICS

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## INTRODUCTION

As soon as people hear of the combination of sports and religion they think of it as a rather strange and unusual combination. Being religious in the sense of being Christian and doing sports on a highly competitive level somehow does not fit together in the mind of most people. Boxill (2003, p. 107) claimed that the “intrinsic nature of competition is immoral” because competition is selfish, egoistic, “involves treating others as means, as enemies to be defeated, or as obstacles thwarting one’s victory or success, to be removed by any means possible”. Hoffmann (1992, p. 221 cited Slusher, 1992, pp. 227-236) stated that religion “holds up ideals of human perfection by legalism and by external absolutes that deny athletes the opportunity to be authentic”. With statements like that, it has often been challenged and doubted that a Christian can indeed successfully participate in competitive sports.

But how do Christian athletes cope with the “immorality” of professional sports? What moral values and beliefs do Christian athletes have in competitive sports, in which, according to Hoffmann (1992, p. 221 cited Slusher, 1992, pp. 227-236) “the highest morality [...] is the honesty to confront both the inherent pragmatism that underlies our games and the fact that we really don’t expect players of games to demonstrate the high ideals traditionally associated with sportsmanship”?

Every day we read or see the news of athletes breaking the rules of competition. But it seems to be a lot harder to find athletes with distinctive moral guidelines, so athletes such as soccer player Pedro Zamballa. Zamballa received an award for fair play for the reaction he showed in a match on November 2nd in 1969. The goalkeeper of the opposing team had collided with one of his own teammates so that both were unconscious. Zamballa could have scored an important goal, but he decided not to. Zamballa’s team lost 0-1.

Athletes of whom we somehow expect to have distinctive moral guidelines like Zamballa are Christian athletes. We expect them to obey the rules of the competition, to respect the limits that are given and also to demonstrate values such as fair play.

This study is trying to find out if this expectation is true. It is therefore dealing with the relation between faith, morals and sports.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Philosophical Inquiries*

#### *Ethics of Christianity versus Ethics of Sports*

The comparison between Christian ethics and ethics of sports was not as easy and successful as expected. Even the three volumes of the handbook about the basic relation between religious and profane ethics by Hertz et al. (1993a, 1993b, 1993c) did not provide useful information. The only useful conclusion for this study was Güldenpfennig’s claim (2000) that sports cannot be reached through the ethics of religion, but only the other way around.

Hoffman (1992) and Syed (2010) raised another issue: “Although beliefs provide a rational basis for the moral act, it is faith that provides the motivation to act” (Hoffman, 1992, p. 218). So not what you believe in is important but the fact that you have something you belief in. Faith is less a matter of theology than psychology. Examples for this phenomenon are former world triple jump record holder Jonathan Edwards

who once said that faith was pivotal to his success, but who is now an atheist and the famous boxing champion Muhammad Ali who said that Allah was the cornerstone of his success.

#### *Sports and religion: a bad combination*

There are different views on the existing relationship, or how the two relate to each other. Coakley (1986), Higgs (1992), Lay (1993), and Gldenpfennig (2000) argue that there are a lot of crucial differences between sports and religion which makes it difficult for the two areas of life to be combined. First of all sports are competitive and individualistic, whereas religion is non competitive and communal. Besides, sports are instrumental and goal orientated, whereas religion is expressive and process orientated. Sports are part of the secular, material, profane world, whereas religion is part of the sacred and the supernatural. Sports are clear-cut and crude whereas religion is mystical and pure. Sports are concerned with competition, so with beating someone, and thus bring out the raw edge of emotion more than anything else.

#### *Sports and religion: a good combination*

Other authors, who claim that sports and religion is a good combination, are for example Prebish (1984), who is often cited by Coakley (1986), and Sternberg (2003).

Prebish argues that sports are religion because like religion, sports "can bring its advocates to an experience of the ultimate" (Coakley, 1986 cited Prebish, 1984, p. 318). Other critics claim that sport is religion-like, because both are "grounded on the same natural impulses that give rise to religion in society" (Coakley, 1986 cited Prebish, 1984, p. 319). Both emphasize asceticism, both set certain times as special, both have rituals, both have heroes and legends, both have places and buildings for communal gatherings, both have procedures and dramas linked to them, and both have an institutionalized organizational structure.

But not only because sports are religion-like, can the two be easily combined according to some authors. Religion can also provide a psychological support for religious athletes. The stronger an athlete believes in Christian values, the better he or she is in sports. According to SRS (SRS is an abbreviation for the German sports organization 'Sportler ruft Sportler'), Christian athletes have advantages in sports because God helps them to cope with loss, disappointment, defeat etc.

#### *Christian athletes in competitive sports*

Hoffman (1992, p. 216) claims: "athletes enjoy a remarkable range of freedom to act unethically within the framework of the rules". When the moral conduct of a player is lower than the one set up by the game, he probably competes unfairly and often violates the rules. The more experience one thereby has in competitive sports, the more one adopts the ethical code of sports. But when the moral beliefs of an athlete are higher than the ones found in sports he might have to refrain from participating. And that is exactly what we expect to happen with Christian athletes, especially in contact sports or sports that stand in the middle of the media's attention.

But when you listen to Christian athletes, the one thing, which is mentioned over and over again, is that they try to use their God-given athletic talent as good as possible. Doing sports or participating in sports should mainly be done to honour God. Is it true that Christian athletes have the tendency to consider it as the "ethical responsibility to play as intensely as possible without viewing sports or their performance in terms of the broader social and moral context" (Hoffman, 1992, p. 219 cited Colossians 3:23) – true to the maxim: "Whatever your task, work heartily, as serving the Lord and not man"?

### **Empirical approaches**

The amount of empirical studies existing in the field of sports and religion is rather small. Beller et al. (1995), Conrad and Lau (2010), and Kelly et al. (1990) are some of the few authors who carried out studies to examine the relation of ethics, sports and Christianity.

Kelly et al. (1990) examined the relationship between competitive orientation and religious orientation. The athletes were asked why they were competing in sports. Three answers were thereby possible. The first answer was competitiveness, the second answer was goal orientation, and the third answer was outcome or success orientation. The result of the study was that an intrinsic religious orientation, meaning one that valued religion without regard for its usefulness, was associated more closely with competitive and goal orientation than with other orientations, while precisely the opposite effect was observed for students with extrinsic religious orientations. Furthermore, stepwise regression analysis showed athletic experience and extrinsic orientation to be the strongest predictors of a success orientation, whereas the strength of belief in traditional Christian doctrines was a major predictor of the adoption of a goal orientation.

Although the trend in this study was not strong, empirical data might suggest that what people believe religiously may affect how they think about sports and ultimately how they may conduct themselves in sports situations.

Beller et al. (1995) examined whether religious education courses affect moral reasoning about competition among athletes and non-athletes. The expectation was that individuals were able to generalize these teaching to their personal, social and competitive lives through religious studies.

The result of their study was that non-athletes scored significantly higher than athletes, athletes of individual sports scored significantly higher than athletes of team sports, and women scored higher than men. But the study did not examine and therefore cannot answer if moral reasoning of women changes over time when doing sports as well. Another result was that problems with moral reasoning mainly occur in division one sports. But that negative effects of sports on moral reasoning can be found in all levels of sports when you compare moral reasoning to the one of non-athletic peers.

The important bottom line which was drawn from this study was that competition itself is neither good nor bad, but that it is the emphasize we put on winning that negatively effects moral reasoning and moral development

Conrad and Lau (2010) examined the influence religious beliefs have on the way religious athletes compete in sports. How do religious athletes use their faith to accomplish certain tasks in competitive sports? Is there a difference between religious athletes and non-religious athletes? To answer these questions, Conrad and Lau did some quantitative and qualitative research. The quantitative research method consisted of a questionnaire, which was sent to 98 athletes in total. The athletes were active on different competitive levels in various sports. The qualitative research method consisted of a phone-interview, which was based on guiding questions, and which was carried out with 12 athletes in total. The results of the research were first of all that there is no significant difference between the way religious and non-religious athletes are competing. That is why Conrad and Lau combined the group of the “non-religious athletes” and “religious athletes” into the group of the “not very religious athletes”. The result was that very religious athletes disapprove of superstition while not very religious athletes agree to it. Besides, very religious athletes get their power and strength to compete from their faith in God, while not very religious athletes get it from their coach, teammates, friends, and also from the practice itself. Very religious athletes said that

sports are prior to anything, such as the community, family and friends, while not very religious athletes said that all the things just mentioned had about the same priority in their lives. Very religious athletes also said that they live their faith in God in public, which means that they wear “Jesus T-Shirts”, “make a cross” while doing sports, speak about their belief in public, while not very religious athletes strictly separate their beliefs from sports. The last difference Conrad and Lau found out was that the two groups of athletes had different characteristics in their personality disposition. While very religious athletes considered the value of honesty as most important, the other group preferred values such as perfectionism, time-management, having goals etc. Both groups had the same motive to do sports, which turned out to be fun. Besides, they agreed in their definition of goal, which is to always try to compete as best as they can.

Summarizing the results showed that Christian athletes differ from non-Christian athletes in aspects such as superstition, importance of sports, living ones faith and personality disposition, but that they have the same motives and goals.

## METHODS AND DESIGN

### *The qualitative interview: a combination of the episodic and the problem centred Interview*

We used a combination of two qualitative interview methods, namely the episodic and the problem-centred interview (Flick, 2009; Lamnek, 2010). The episodic part of the interview included a combination of narration and interrogation, which is very common in everyday life and therefore very natural as well. The athletes were asked to talk about their narrative-episodic knowledge, which is based on their own experiences. The problem-centred part of the interview guaranteed that a theoretical concept already existed before the collection of data actually started. Overall, the problem-centred interview is a mixture between deduction and induction, meaning

Besides, the interview also contained a short introductory part, independent from the qualitative part of the interview, to collect all the necessary demographic data, such as gender, age, type of sports, highest level of competition, current status of participation, confession and strength of religious belief (Table 1).

### *Interview guide*

The qualitative interviews followed an interview guide (Foddy, 1993; Kvale, 1996). Some of the questions the athletes had to answer were already formulated prior to the interview to make sure to have a certain guideline during the interviews. The guiding questions were the following:

- ‘What are the most important values of an ethically good human being in general?’
- ‘What are the most important values of an ethically good athlete?’
- ‘What is your personal character like? Do you live up to the expectations that you have on others, so to your personal moral guidelines?’
- ‘What conflict potential do/did you experience in sports?’
- ‘What moral limits do/did you have when competing?’
- ‘How do/did you compete? What coping strategies do/did you have when competing?’

### *Sample*

The study’s participants included 10 Christian athletes (Table 1), which are either still competing or have been competing in sports on a very high competitive level. In total six of the participants were male and four were female. The age of the participants varied between 18 and 42. The athletes came from team sports, as well as individual sports. Three athletes were not active in competitive sports anymore.

For the purpose of the study, it did not matter if the athletes were still active in sports; the only requirement was that the athletes were religious at the time when they did competitive sports. To find out how religious they were, the athletes were asked to classify the strength of their religious belief on a scale from one to 10, with one being not very religious and 10 being very religious. The confession did not matter, as long as it was Christian.

Another requirement was that the level of competition was high, meaning that it was at least the third highest national level existing in the sport. The term “competitive sports” was therefore not equalized with the term “professional sports”. Although some of the athletes might belong or belonged to the very top of their sport in Germany, most of the athletes were not able to earn a living through competing in their sport. All athletes’ names were anonymised via pseudonyms.

**Table 1.** Sample Characteristics (n=10).

Athlete	Name	Age	Gender	Type of Sports	Highest level of competition	Status of participation	Confession	Strength of religious belief (1-10)
1	Barbara	18	female	Soccer	2 <sup>nd</sup> division	active	Catholic	6-7
2	Eddy	23	male	Soccer	3 <sup>rd</sup> division	active	Protestant	10
3	John	28	male	Baseball	1 <sup>st</sup> division + National team	active	Protestant	10
4	Thomas	24	male	Triathlon	Ironman (1 <sup>st</sup> place in his age group)	active	Catholic (resigned)	10
5	Andrea	42	female	Handball	1 <sup>st</sup> division	not active	Protestant	8
				Mountain biking	National top (8 <sup>th</sup> place at European Championship)	active		
6	Chris	28	male	Mountain Biking	Top 40	active	Protestant	8
7	Alex	29	male	Volleyball	Federal level	not active	Protestant	9-10
8	Kathy	30	female	Shot Put, Discus	National level	not active	Protestant	9-10
				Soccer	below 3 <sup>rd</sup> highest national level	active		
9	Sandra	32	female	Triple Jump	National level (5 <sup>th</sup> place at German Championship)	not active	Protestant	8
10	Ralf	39	male	Ski Alpine	National level	not active	Protestant	8

### Data analysis

We used the Grounded Theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) for data analysis due to the fact that there is hardly empirical research and evidence in the tackled research area.



According to Corbin and Strauss (2008), the process of analyzing the data can be divided up into three main steps, which are three sequential phases of coding: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding.

Open coding is a procedure for developing categories of information. During this phase of coding, phenomena and problems mentioned by the interviewees - in this case Christian athletes - are labeled and summarized in abstract terms, so open categories, with the help of a word-to-word analysis. The goal of the open coding is to collect as many relevant aspects as possible, which were mentioned in association with the research question by the interviewees.

Axial coding is a procedure for interconnecting the categories, which have been built in the open coding phase. It is therefore necessary to explore the relationship between the categories and to make connections between them. The so-called 'coding paradigm' (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) should help to interconnect the categories and to analyze data properly.

The purpose of selective-coding phase is to identify a central category, also known as core category, as the central phenomenon of the study through analyzing the data. This category should describe the central phenomenon to which all the other categories refer, so it should integrate everything, which is described in the story. It should be the central point of the theory and therefore also the leitmotif. One therefore has to examine which category has the biggest explanatory value. This phase of coding, finding the core category, displays the core of the Grounded Theory.

Also important in this phase is the procedure of building a story that connects the categories producing a discursive set of theoretical propositions. A story line has to be constructed around the core category, which includes all the other categories, but has the core category in the centre as a permanent point of reference.

## RESULTS

### ***Moral values and beliefs***

#### *Classical values of society*

What are the classical values of society that should guide, instruct, recommend, advise and evaluate human behaviour? As expected, there was not one single correct answer, which was given by the athletes, but several ones, which were often very similar. They confirmed Morgan's statement (2000, p.18) that "moral values concern how we should conduct our lives so that our actions do right by others, contributing both to our own good as well as that of others" and that therefore someone who has embodied values such as fairness, justice, and equality, so "moral respect that we owe each other" is an ethically good person.

One value which was often mentioned by the athletes in reference to the category 'classical values of society' was the value of 'integrity'. If someone acts according to the values and principles one holds, that person is said to be integer. One athlete, John, characterized it as 'not only seeming to be honest, but being honest', so as something more than honesty. Another athlete, Ralf, added that honesty is just a part of integrity. Sometimes the value 'honesty' was mentioned in association with the value 'integrity', sometimes it was also mentioned as a value by itself.



Some athletes also split up the value 'honesty' into 'classical honesty', 'honesty towards others' (Ralf), and 'honesty towards oneself'. The latter was explained by Chris as a type of honesty which also includes the concept 'search for truth' (Chris), so a certain 'reflection' of the own actions and character. Associated with the construct 'reflection' is also the value 'ability to accept criticism'. 'Honesty towards others' on the other hand also includes the value 'reliability'. Only if a person is honest to you, you know that you can rely on this person.

So why has the value 'honesty' been mentioned most often by the Christian athletes in association with the moral values of an ethically good person? One possible answer for this phenomenon might be Chris' answer that 'honesty says a lot since it influences all the other things somehow. How you treat other people'.

It is therefore not the value of honesty, which is most important for Christians, but the way one treats one's fellow beings, including oneself. The claim, that it is most important for Christians how you treat your fellow beings, can be confirmed when looking at the other values which were mentioned.

The value 'respect' also plays an important part. Here again the athletes differentiated between the values 'respect towards oneself' and 'respect towards others'. Another value, which was sometimes used for, or mentioned in reference to the value 'respect' was 'acceptance'. As Ralf said, respect towards others also includes 'accepting others how they are, trying to understand them how they are' and not trying to change them.

The last characteristic which was mentioned in association with the category 'classical values of society' was the value of 'love', or 'altruism'. Whereas some interviewees, such as Thomas, indeed mentioned the concept 'altruism' in terms of someone who 'doesn't think of oneself, but of the things one can do for others first. How does it help others that I'm alive [...] so really more than helping others', other athletes only mentioned the constructs 'loving oneself' and 'loving others' in association with the classical values.

### *Commandments*

Next to the category 'classical values of society', the 10 Commandments were also mentioned in reference with the most important characteristics of an ethically good person.

*'The most important characteristics? Spontaneously, I would think of the 10 Commandments' (Alex).*

But when looking closer at the examples the athletes gave, it becomes obvious that there is not much of a difference between the category 'Commandments' - so living like a Christian - and the category 'classical values of society'. The only difference is the belief in God.

No matter if the moral values, which the athletes mentioned, were grounded on their faith or on the values of society, the values which they said to be most important for an ethically good person were the same - honesty, integrity, love, altruism and respect. This result only confirms Hoffman's claim that the profane ethical schemes share the general character of Christian schemes, which is that "there is a way in which all practical moral questions require some reflections that, if not explicitly theological, are at least the profane equivalent of it" (1992, p. 218 cited Gustafson, 1981, p. 71) and that the Bible is the point of reference for the classical values in society. There would be no general ethics or moral guidelines in society without the Bible, which brings us to the conclusion that a Christian who believes the category 'Commandments' to be a

very important point of reference for an ethically good person, automatically includes the category 'classical values of society' as a point of reference as well.

But of course, as Ralf states, it is not enough 'that one has certain ethics' and values. One indeed has to follow and live them as well. John thus introduced the concept 'role model' in this connection.

### **Competitive sports**

Boxill (2003, p. 107) claims that "competition involves treating others as means, as enemies to be defeated, or as obstacles thwarting one's victory or success, to be removed by any means possible". This claim completely contradicts the moral guidelines, which Christian athletes have according to the results of the interviews.

The athletes were asked what they considered to be the most important characteristics of an ethically good athlete. The moral value, which was mentioned most often, was the value 'fair play'. According to Boxill (2003) and Simon (2003), one of the preconditions that an opponent is not looked at as a destroyer therefore seems to be given when Christian athletes are competing.

But the athlete Alex also said: 'Although one talks about it a lot, the realization still leaves a lot to be desired'. He mentioned a little episode from his volleyball career. Although the coach had been telling the athletes 'that not only the athletic achievement, but also the character' (Alex), plays an important role, these things only came second when it came to winning a competition. The coach decided to let his team lose the game to avoid playing against the best opponent in the competition, and to thus avoid dropping out of the competition. Although one might just call that a 'strategic skill' (Alex), Alex had experienced this situation as very unfair since none of the players was read into the coach's plan. This example does not describe sports as cruel as Boxill's quotation (2003), but it already shows the difficulties that are present in sports to live moral values such as fair play.

When the athletes were talking about the value of fair play, they also divided the value 'fair play' into two main aspects, which were 'playing by written rules' and 'playing by unwritten rules'. The general category 'fair play' was said to be 'the value which stands above everything' (Chris) and which therefore 'goes far beyond of what the rules dictate' (Andrea).

#### *Playing by written rules*

According to the athletes such as Barbara, 'playing by written rules' of the competition is one aspect of fair play. A value, which was often mentioned in reference to the value 'playing by written rules' was the value 'accept limits' and the example of doping. Andrea for example said:

*'The doping question actually cannot come up for such an athlete, because he would then try to move the limits which are set, and which he cannot or doesn't want to correct in any other way [...] and that is unacceptable for me'.*

According to Andrea, the value 'playing by written rules' stands for accepting the limits set by the written rules of the competition. It is not justifiable to move these limits, just to increase one's chances of winning in any way.

But playing by the written rules is not the only aspect being a part of fair play. There is something which is much more important than obeying the written rules of the competition.

*Playing by unwritten rules*

'Playing by unwritten rules' is what distinguishes some athletes from others. No athlete is forced to play by the unwritten rules and no one is punished when ignoring them. It is a decision that every athlete has to make for himself. This is why the category 'playing by unwritten rules' seems to be of even greater importance than the category 'playing by written rules' for Christian athletes. Everything again leads to the values of respect and honesty, which means to the way how one treats one's fellow men. Do not get furious when things are not working out. Do not let your opponents provoke you. Do not get into fights. Respect your opponent and his accomplishments. Respect the fans. Be honest, be authentic, be integer - even if it is for your disadvantage. These were some of the examples, which were mentioned in association with the unwritten rules of sports.

According to the athletes, one of the most important values of an ethically good athlete is the value of honesty, which is also connected with the values 'integrity' and 'authenticity'. One athlete, Eddy, told an episode from his soccer career.

It was a match where the team had to play a relegation play-off and was ahead with one goal. The opponent scored a goal as well, but the referee had not noticed it since the ball went through a little hole in the net. The referee therefore decided on punt, whereupon Eddy went to the referee to tell him that the ball had been in. The consequence was that the team lost the match and that his teammates were furious at him. When asking Eddy how he would react if teammates and even the coach were putting pressure on him to not react like that again, he responded that he would not do anything differently. So in this case the athlete seemed to have a clear line of how to behave. He thus contradicts Hoffman's claim (1992, p. 219 cited Colossians 3:23) that Christian athletes misuse the maxim "whatever your task, work heartily, as serving the Lord and not man", since they consider it as the "ethical responsibility to play as intensely as possible without viewing sport or their performance in terms of the broader social and moral context".

A little trickier seems the situation when athletes are watching teammates not behaving the way they would behave. There does not seem to be a clear line on how to behave when witnessing teammates lying, and not being integer.

A further value, which was mentioned in association with the category 'playing by unwritten rules' of sports and 'fair play', was the value 'love'. John said the following:

*'It is hard during a game to actually see your opponent as a human being [...] in the sense of actually loving him, [since] there is this feeling of competition [but the important thing is] that one really knows where the priorities are, so that it isn't sports'.*

This example thus does not say anything else than to respect your opponent, to respect his athletic performance and achievements and to treat him like you would like to be treated. The expression 'love' is more likely to be used as a synonym.

The athletes therefore agree with Simon's opinion (2003, p. 19) that sports should be an "activity in which the competitors are committed to viewing their opponents as fellow persons equally engaged in meeting the challenge set by the contest itself".

Another aspect, which was mentioned in association with the value 'respect', was the value 'reflection'. Chris, a mountain biker, for example said:

*'If it doesn't work, one shouldn't blame others for that, or maybe the ground, the wrong tires and so on [...]. [Instead one should realize] that it is up to you [so you should] just accredit that the opponent was better at that day'.*

What the athlete is trying to say is: Do not blame others for not showing the best you can. Show respect towards the opponent by reflecting his and also your own athletic achievement and therefore try to get a 'handling with victory and defeat which is reflected' (Andrea).

Another aspect, which was mentioned in reference to the category 'play by unwritten rules', is not as closely connected to the value 'respect' as the ones before. It is the effort to provide a fair competition by giving your opponents the same chances of winning as you have yourself. This effort is represented through the values 'do not prevent other athletes from doing the best they can' and 'the stronger the opponent, the better'. These values support Simon's (2003) and Boxill's (2003) opinion that when a game is played fairly, and when the competitors are evenly matched, they both take pleasure in the game and try their best to win. Then the opponent is not looked at as a destroyer but as a challenger. He is respected and the competition might even lead to friendship since the opponent makes you demonstrate your best ability.

The most important value in sports seems to be the value 'fair play'. The values associated with an ethically good person and athlete were very similar, if not even the same, although only a few of the athletes stated clearly that there is no difference between the values they have in everyday life and the values they have in sports.

### **Coping strategies**

#### *Talent is a gift from god*

The subcategory 'talent is a gift from God' came up when the athletes were asked whether or not it represents a conflict for them that in sports only winners are worth something. Players who are on the very top of their career are represented as heroes, whereas players who have a "poor form" are represented as losers.

The most current example in Germany during these days of the female soccer World Cup 2011 is Birgit Prinz. Since she was not able to show her best athletic performance in the first two games of the World Cup, she was criticized by the media to such an extent that she even thought about resigning from the team.

One might expect that this represents a conflict potential for Christian athletes since God rather supports the poor and weak, rather than the strong and successful. When the athletes were confronted with this claim, most of them could not confirm it. Explanations were that there are also winners such as King Dave (Andrea) in the Bible. Others referred to the Christian work ethic and said that 'talent is a gift from God'. Kathy explained:

*'I would rather say, [...] I received a gift. I cannot sing, I cannot play the flute or anything else, I am just not musical. I am bad in languages, I am bad with names, but I have this gift to have this ambition, or for example to be good in sports. [...] Sports are my gift, so playing soccer for example. [...] And I think that God has not given me this for nothing. And that's why it would be stupid to just waste this gift, just because I want to be weak, because I don't want to win. [...] I am already weak in so many others things'.*

The value 'use your talent' is thus connected with the subcategory 'talent is a gift from God'. Since the athletes received their athletic talent from God, they see it as their responsibility to do the best they can to use their talent. Otherwise it would be a waste of talent. The athletes thus confirm the claim Coakley (1986) and Eitzen and Sage (1989) make. "Whatever your task, work heartily, as serving the Lord and not man" (Eitzen & Sage, 1989 cited Colossians 3:23). They (p. 157) argue:

*"Just as a business person is responsible to God to develop his or her talents to the fullest, so is an athlete equally responsible. If God has granted one athletic abilities, then one is obliged to use those abilities to glorify and honour God; anything less than dedication to task is insufficient".*

Coakley (1986, p. 54) gives a prominent example by citing Vince Lombardi, a former and also religious football coach, who once said:

*"When we don't use our abilities to the fullest, we are not only cheating ourselves and the [team], we're cheating the Lord".*

Another aspect the athletes brought up was the opinion that God gives you the talent because you might have a certain purpose for him – such as being his missionary who tries, as Eddy put it, 'being a light in the world'. By using your talent the best way you can and by playing for God, you do Him a favor and please Him. These thoughts are expressed with the values 'honour God' and 'play for God'. Eitzen and Sage (1989, p. 157) also refer to this issue in saying: "Hard work, training, and unremitting dedication by athletes not only lead to success but are seen as ways of using God-given abilities to glorify God".

#### *God loves me anyways*

The coping strategy 'God loves me anyways' describes the belief of Christian athletes that God loves them no matter if they win or lose. It is a very important belief, especially in professional sports, since it reduces the pressure of always having to win. This is a big problem a lot of athletes are faced with. Eddy, who used to play soccer in the third division in Germany, explains:

*'In soccer or generally in sports it is often the case that an athlete gets defined by his personal athletic performance because it often becomes the most important thing in life'.*

The better the athletes are and the more they are in the focus of the media, the more expectations from other people come into play and the more they receive an identity which is based on their accomplishments in sports. As long as they are successful this usually does not present a problem, but as soon as they cannot convince anymore, it is different. Eddy adds:

*'It is really difficult. A team consists of 25 players, and only 11 are paying, and if you are not among the first 11, then you often get the feeling that you are worth less than the ones who are always playing'.*

In such a situation it is very helpful to have external support and this is where God comes into play. God is described as the rock you can always lean on by the athletes such as Andrea. No matter if it is in times of success when he helps you not to lose touch with the ground or in times of defeat when he cheers you up. Eddy also said:

*'And I know that I'm still a valuable person even if it doesn't go well in sports [...]. Or that I don't have to worry so much about the future as other players, some players worry the entire time if their contract gets extended [...] that gives me a little bit of relief then'.*

The coping strategy 'God loves me anyways' thus does not only take the pressure of always having to win from the athletes, it also gives them another perspective of the future and thus prevents them from falling into the famous "hole". Thomas explains:

*'God is going to be there for my entire life. God is not leaving me when I stop doing sports or he doesn't like me less because of that'.*

This therefore confirms Coakley's (1986), Sternberg's (2003), Syed's (2010), and especially SRS's claim, who all argue that religion can provide psychological support for religious athletes.

#### *God as the greatest motivator*

The coping strategy 'God as the Greatest Motivator' came up in association with the question whether or not Christian athletes can be as successful as non-Christian athletes. Christian athletes are often confronted with the assumption that they are not able to be as successful as non-Christian athletes since one expects them to be preoccupied with trying to live according to the Bible and with therefore not being able to develop the willpower, which another athlete might have.

SRS on the other hand claims that the stronger an athlete believes in Christian values, the better he is in sports. John told us:

*'Well, I have also heard coaches saying: 'Oh the Christians cannot become good professional athletes or really good athletes, because they just do not have enough ambition', because sport don't occupy the first place in their life [...]. I think that is contradictory, because if you want to do something for God as a Christian, then you want to do that with a 100%. And I cannot imagine that I would try harder for a team or a title, than I try for God, who has given his son, who has really given anything for me, for him I also want to give everything, everything I have, that is the greatest motivation for me'.*

With the coping strategy 'God as the greatest motivator' the athletes try to disprove the claim especially coaches seem to have. They thus state that nothing can motivate them more as God. Since he has given everything for them, Christian athletes stand in his guilt and have to try the best they can to please him.

This is also what Eitzen and Sage (1989) stated, when saying that for a Christian giving less than 100% is seen as a violation of God's law. They (p. 157) also refer to an example given by a Christian NFL player, who said:

*"I now approach Sunday afternoons as a worship service. The Bible tells me: 'Present your bodies as living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service or worship'. God has blessed me with a large body, great strength and the ability to play this difficult game. My responsibility is to play to 100% of my ability as a way of thanking Him for what He's done for me".*



Another aspect, which was mentioned in association with the coping strategy 'God as the greatest motivator', was the value 'God is watching'. Since God is watching you no matter what you are doing, because 'God wants to be in every part of my life' (Sandra), he recognizes whether you are trying to give your best. The values 'God is watching you' and 'God wants to be in every part of your life' thus support the subcategory 'God as the greatest motivator'.

### **Authenticity of Christian athletes**

#### *Personal reflection of Christian athletes*

The characteristics and thus values the athletes described themselves with were 'give your best', 'nobody is perfect', 'we are all humans', 'personal reflection', 'do it better next time' and 'it's a process'.

The value 'give your best' refers to the athletes stating that they are always trying to fulfill their own moral guidelines. Chris for example said:

*'Of course I try to fulfill them and I also think that I fulfill them most of the time'.*

With saying this, Chris and the others athletes wanted to make clear that they do not only have the moral values such as honesty, integrity, authenticity, love, respect, but that they also want to live according to those values themselves.

The value 'nobody is perfect' often followed the value 'give your best'. This value was associated with the statement that the athletes were not perfect and that they sometimes also failed to fulfill their moral guidelines. Chris stated:

*'I'm realistic and know that it doesn't always work and that probably you are not always able to do it and maybe to a little percentage you don't even always want it'.*

Chris thus even claimed that one does not want to be perfect all the time, which contradicts the statement that one tries to give the best to fulfill one's moral guidelines.

*'But this statement also points to the next value, which is closely connected with the value 'nobody is perfect'. It is the value 'we are all humans', with which the athletes tried to justify the fact that they were not always able to live up to their personal moral guidelines. „As I said, it can happen. We are all human beings' (John).*

*'I think that I have higher expectations towards myself to start with [...]. Of course you notice again and again like every human being that [...] things don't work out the way you want them to work out. Yes, as I said, if you took the Commandments [as a measure], then one could try so hard, but still fail at some point. [...]. But that's no reason for me not to try it' (Alex).*

With saying this, the athlete claims that one could do and try anything to be perfect, but it would still not work out – because 'we are all humans' and thus sinners.



But the good news according to the athletes is, if we act wrongly and realize that we did so, we can still learn from this experience. This is what the values 'personal reflection', 'do it better next time' and 'it's a process' describe. When the athletes had to describe their personal character they said that they always try to reflect their actions. The authenticity of this statement became clear as soon as the athletes were asked how they would describe their personal character. Most of them automatically reflected if they were fulfilling the moral values they had mentioned in the earlier part of the interview. Chris for example said:

*'It is always very important to me, that when I do something [...] which turns out to be wrong, that I try to become aware of it'.*

So only when they reflect the things they have done wrong and therefore take the mistakes they did seriously, they can learn from their experience, avoid 'that one acts the same way again' (Alex), and 'do it better next time'. Kathy added:

*'Well, it is a process in my case. I do realize that I have reacted very differently way back or that I didn't think about a lot of things that I think about now'.*

To do it 'better next time', to 'give your best', and 'process' are thus the most important aspects in being authentic. But also the help and experience of other people seems to play a role, as Andrea stated:

*'If no one talked to me about faith, I wouldn't stand at the spot where I am standing today [...] I want to speak to people about the things which personally [...] helped me'.*

### **Conflict potential**

In order to find out about the conflict potential for Christian athletes, the athletes were asked what difficult situations they have ever experienced in their sport. They should be stimulated to remember any moment where they did not act properly according to their personal moral standards, or moments when they were shocked by the behaviour of opponents and teammates. We were asking about they ever acknowledged a specific conflict potential in their sport. One answer given by Kathy was:

*'Well I think there are more likely critical situations, which you cannot avoid in sports'.*

What became obvious through the interviews was that sports somehow must be different than everyday life, since they have certain characteristics, which make you experience critical situations more often. These specific situations, which are given in sports, can be explained with the value 'specific characteristics of sports'. This value would support internalist views of ethics in sports saying that sports have a "significant degree of autonomy from the wider society" (Simon, 2007, p. 35).

### **Missing distance in sports**

The first specific characteristic of sports that came up was the theme 'missing distance in sports'. The category 'missing distance in sports' contains two aspects, one approaching 'missing spatial distance', meaning that you cannot just walk away from difficult situations; the other approaching 'missing temporal distance', meaning that you are under time pressure.

Andrea described the problem of time pressure and therefore the aspect 'missing temporal distance' in sports as the following:

*'In handball [...] you are always under a certain time pressure, which you don't have to this degree when you are riding the bike. When playing handball you of course also get in certain conflicts since you are emotionally involved somehow and since you experience provocations in a way, which you certainly do not experience in normal everyday life. [...]. To still be able to say that my opponent is the one I want to respect is hard, especially when you are really in a situation where you do not have any temporal distance to a provoking scene'.*

According to this quotation, it is more difficult to live up to the moral value of respect in sports than in everyday life because you are always under a certain time pressure. Since the temporal distance to situations is missing, you do not get to reflect and to act according to the moral guidelines you have for yourself in everyday life, which leads to the consequence that you might end up behaving wrongly out of impulse. With this statement Slusher's claim, which was cited by Hoffman (1992, p. 221), is confirmed:

*"The instinctive nature of ethical decisions in sport does not allow for reflective moral reasoning; hence gut reactions constitute a more authentic moral response than some internal struggle to adhere to a higher, absolute, external standard".*

There are also some other examples, which will illustrate this in the following. When the athletes were asked if they could remember a situation in which they had not acted according to their moral values, Alex answered:

*'For sure there were one, two, three situations in which you react differently out of reflex and where you do not have the guts to change your opinion immediately a few seconds later'.*

Chris added:

*'Well, [how I react] differs, it of course also depends on the situation'.*

According to these quotations, it seems as if ethical decisions are usually made on an ad hoc basis in sports and have little evidence for consistency, even if the athletes have distinctive moral guidelines in everyday life. Instead, they also act upon the values 'reflexes' and 'gut reaction'.

This is exactly the reason why Slusher (1992) argues that religious athletes should not even try to act upon their religion-based morality in sports because they would not be authentic. In his opinion morality in competitive sports should be guided by feelings and not by strict religious guidelines, since sports are part of a system in which the so-called "situation ethics" are applied.

Referring to missing spatial distance, meaning 'you cannot just walk away' from difficult situations in competitive sports, Kathy described it as follows:

*'I have an opponent, who is constantly fouling me. Now out there in society I can get out of people's ways or I can talk to them, but in sports it is really the case that you are in a totally different situation and that you rather cannot give way [...]. In normal life I would now say, ok, then I will think about it, or I take myself back, or walk away or solve the problem later somehow and I can react totally different then in sports'.*

In everyday life people have the possibility to walk away, to escape, to create a certain distance to a difficult and problematic situation with another person. But in sports the game always has to go on despite the problems you might have with an opponent. Although you might be furious at your opponent, you have to stay as calm and focused as possible; you have to remain in control of the situation.

According to the interviews this seems to be more difficult in team sports such as handball and soccer than in individual sports such as athletics. What makes the value 'missing spatial distance' more difficult in these sports is the issue 'body contact'. Here one can speak of the second dimension of the value 'missing spatial distance' in sports: You cannot walk away from conflicts in sports, and you do not have a lot of spatial distance to your opponent. But most athletes nevertheless stated that the issue 'body contact' does not represent a conflict potential for them since it is part of the game. Kathy for example said:

*'To foul someone is a critical topic in my sports anyways, but I think it's just part of it'.*

She thus confirmed Hoffman's claim (1992) that social custom, something that everyone does, is used as an excuse that injuries are part of the game at least to a certain extent. But although Christian athletes do not regard 'body contact' as a conflict potential, it makes the impression that the more body contact is involved, the more challenging becomes the fact that you cannot walk away from difficult situations.

This can be observed when looking at Kathy. She said that it of course gets really difficult to stay calm and to act upon your moral values in a soccer game when you have an opponent who constantly fouls you. So when the amount of body contact seems to be more than the rules of a game allow, players feel treated unfairly by their opponents. Since the game has to go on, they might not be able to solve the conflict. When someone provokes them the conflict might even escalate. The value 'provocations', 'emotions' and 'adrenalin' thus influences the value 'missing spatial distance' as well. All of them influence the way athletes behave and compete in competitive sports.

#### *Live your faith*

The category 'live your faith' is another value which came up in association with the value 'conflict potential' in sports. The results of the interviews showed that living your faith, which is one of the most central aspects in the life of a Christian athlete, can become quite difficult depending on the type of sports the athlete competes in.

The reasons, why it can become quite difficult for a Christian athlete to live his faith, especially in sports such as soccer, were explained by Eddy:

*'I want to live my faith actively, but that is difficult, there are many different cultures in a club, many different players [...] and in soccer there is a lot of money involved. And a lot of soccer players are pretty egocentric and you don't get the chance to actively live your faith. And I noticed that in the first year when I moved to L., that it was difficult for me to live my faith [...]. In the Bible it says, that you should be a light in the world, and I try that in all areas of my life, but it is of course easier to live your faith when you are together with lots of Christians than in a team where a lot of the players do not know what faith is and are not interested in it either'.*

According to Eddy it is quite difficult for a Christian athlete to live his faith in soccer because of the phenomena 'ignorance', 'missing interest', 'missing knowledge', and also 'egocentrism'. Besides, there are also the typical characteristics of professional sports such as 'egocentrism', 'money', 'arrogance', 'partying', 'women', 'alcohol' and so on. The only way to cope with all these issues and values is when being surrounded by people supporting you and sharing your belief.

Since no sport gets more public attention in Germany than (male) soccer, it is not surprising that Eddy, the athlete playing in the third division in soccer, was faced with more difficulties and conflicts, than the athletes doing sports such as triathlon, mountain biking, athletics, volleyball, super-ski etc. But Andrea adds:

*'I think the bigger the [public] attention is, not necessarily the more difficult it gets, but the more differentiated [an athlete] maybe needs even professional help from outside, which supports him in the way [he] presents himself, or [...] [in choosing] what statements he makes'.*

The support of fellow Christians, especially if an athlete is doing sports which are in the media's centre of attention, is therefore of great importance for a Christian athlete. If they do not have people in their team with whom they can share their faith, they need this support from outside. Andrea explained:

*'Back then I always said that faith is for example a very personal thing, I didn't want to bother anyone with that and then I experienced, if no one had spoken with me about faith, I wouldn't stand at the same spot where I am standing today.[...] I would like to share that with other people'.*

According to this quotation, it is also logical that it is especially difficult for young athletes to live their faith in competitive sports. They are not able to reflect the things that happen around them to the extent grown up adults reflect them. They are not aware of the fact how important it is to live your faith. If children are thus defined by their athletic performance from an early age on, when they do not have a stable personality yet, it is logical that the pattern of thought of competitive sports has a lot of influence on them. Ralf, an athlete who started doing super-ski at a very early age, is a good example for that phenomenon:

*'I think that this became a problem for me, because I have grown into this focus on performance from an early age on and I think, that the way you think is influenced a lot during that time and that I have also transferred these to other aspects of my life now. [...] And I think that thereby certain aspects of life get out of sight without necessarily noticing it. Because it is a way of thinking which you have practiced over the years and which you think to be normal and not bad'.*

To sum up, one can claim that the conflict potential 'live your faith' depends on the type of sports and on the level of sports since the crucial aspect is the amount of media attention a sport gets. The higher the level of competition, the more attention of the media, the more money and the more pressure is put on the athlete. These results therefore confirm the claims of Beller et al. (1995) to a certain degree. They claimed that competition itself is neither good nor bad, but that it is the emphasize we put on winning that negatively effects moral reasoning and moral development, because the result of their study was that problems with moral reasoning mainly occur in division one sports.

**Moral limits***Hurting someone on purpose*

*'Body contact' was one of the issues which was originally expected to represent a strong conflict potential for Christian athletes, but turned out to belong to the category 'moral limits'.*

*'[Winning] is not so important to me that I would risk an injury or something like that in this case. I wouldn't do that. Or to get an advantage through such ways, I personally probably could not be happy about it' (Chris).*

According to Chris, 'body contact' is not a problem for Christian athletes as long as one does not try to hurt the opponent on purpose. The issue 'hurting someone on purpose' and risking a person's health intentionally just to win the competition is one thing that the athletes regard as a 'moral limit' or moral barrier. Hurting someone on purpose would be against the values they associate with fair play. If you hurt something on purpose, you are fully aware of your behaviour. You have reflected your intention and therefore intent to exactly behave like you do. That is one of the moral limits.

When being asked about the limits of body contact, John differentiated between specific areas of the body where body contact takes place. He mentioned the example of boxing as his personal moral limits. He said:

*'I think it's of course a different thing if I climb into the boxing ring, or if I kick against a ball. I mean, I don't know if I was able to box, [...] I don't know if I could hit someone in the face. But I think there are definitely Christians, who say, how I can slide into someone in baseball, or how can I foul someone in soccer-I mean that's part of the game. [...] for a boxer it's probably nothing different than playing baseball for me'.*

This example shows that the issue 'hitting someone in the face' is also linked with 'moral limit'. This is not very surprising since the question whether or not boxing can be morally justifiable is always present in sports. But when looking at John's quotation, although he mentioned boxing as his personal moral limit, he also stated that it is probably exactly the same thing to hit someone in the face for a boxer, as fouling someone is for a soccer player. In both sports, body contact is 'part of the game'. Athletes, who decide to participate in this type of sports, can only participate if they accept and are aware of this fact, no matter how intense the body contact might be. Because of this precondition it is also logical that none of the athlete stated that the amount of body contact involved in their sport represented a conflict potential for them. It thus appears to be very difficult to find a clear moral limit of how far one can go in regard to 'body contact'. Eddy confirmed this by saying:

*'A boundary actually doesn't exist. Well, I think it's difficult to draw a boundary'.*

Thus there is no definite moral limit or moral barrier, which tells a Christian athlete when and where to stop. But something, which helps the athletes at least to a certain degree to find a subjective moral limit, is their moral conscience. Andrea said:

*'The moral conscience is probably a good criterion and measurement which helps you there'.*

*Cheating on purpose*

The second theme, which came up in connection with the category 'moral limits' of Christian athletes in competitive sports, was the issue 'cheating on purpose', which is linked to the issue 'doping'. There was the expectation that cheating, which includes doping, would be regarded as a conflict potential by the athletes, but again it was rather seen as a moral limit.

When speaking about the topic of doping, the athletes such as Andrea stated the following:

*'Of course I also knew in mountain biking that there were opponents who doped with pretty high certainty, who were ahead of me then and that hurts, it isn't any fun to compete against them'.*

According to this example, it is really frustrating for Christian athletes to have opponents who dope since they feel like having to obey the rules as Christians. As soon as they get the feeling that it is only them who act according to the rules, it becomes more and more difficult for them to enjoy competing. Kathy stated:

*'When you are religious you think, oh the others they are so lucky, they can do anything [...] and I poor girl have to stick with the rules'.*

But despite of these thoughts and impressions, Christian athletes still see it as a moral limit not to cheat on purpose. What might indirectly support them, are the expectation of other people towards them. Kathy for example said as well:

*'Just because [...] my teammates know that I am a Christian [...] you get judged in a totally different way'.*

But when looking at the example above and below, it becomes obvious that it is not resisting the temptation of doping what is the biggest challenge for Christian athletes, but seeming credible in sports where doping is widespread. John for example said:

*'Well, I also know a Christian cyclist, who for example took part in the Giro D'Italia and such things, and it is of course difficult to be credible in such a sport, since the first thought is of course: 'They are all doped', because it's hard to imagine that you can retrieve such a athletic performance'.*

**Core category: God has a plan**

When the athletes were being asked what moral limits there are in competitive sports, they first of all answered that there is not really a limit, which exists.

*'[...] It is of course difficult to draw a line [...]. I think it's difficult to say that until there it's ok, but everything beyond cannot be forgiven' (John).*

There is no clear boundary; the lines are vague and blurry. But still, they also mentioned that the best guideline is the personal moral conscience. Actions, which the athletes could not compensate with their moral conscience, were cheating on purpose and hurting someone on purpose - so trying to change the limits of competition intentionally. One can thus claim that Christian athletes see it as their duty to accept the moral limits given to them because they are a part of God's plan. This has the consequence that they

are able to accept them in contrast to other athletes who have internalized a “win-at-all-cost-attitude” and only strive for success. The core category and belief ‘God has a plan’ is therefore a benefit for Christian athletes. This is how the category ‘moral limits’ is connected with the core category.

Hoffman’s (1992) claim was that the characteristics of competitive sports make it difficult for Christian athletes to participate and might lead Christian athletes to refrain from participating. The athletes were confronted with this assumption and argued as the following:

*‘This isn’t only the case with the combination of sports and religion; this is the case with everything. So when I do my tax return and decide not be completely honest, [...] or what did we talk about lately, for example the question if a Christian can have stocks to get more money [...], these marginal questions exist everywhere. But I think it would be a pity to decide not to face these situations because of that. I think it would be good if one had the heart to be an athlete and a Christian’ (Kathy).*

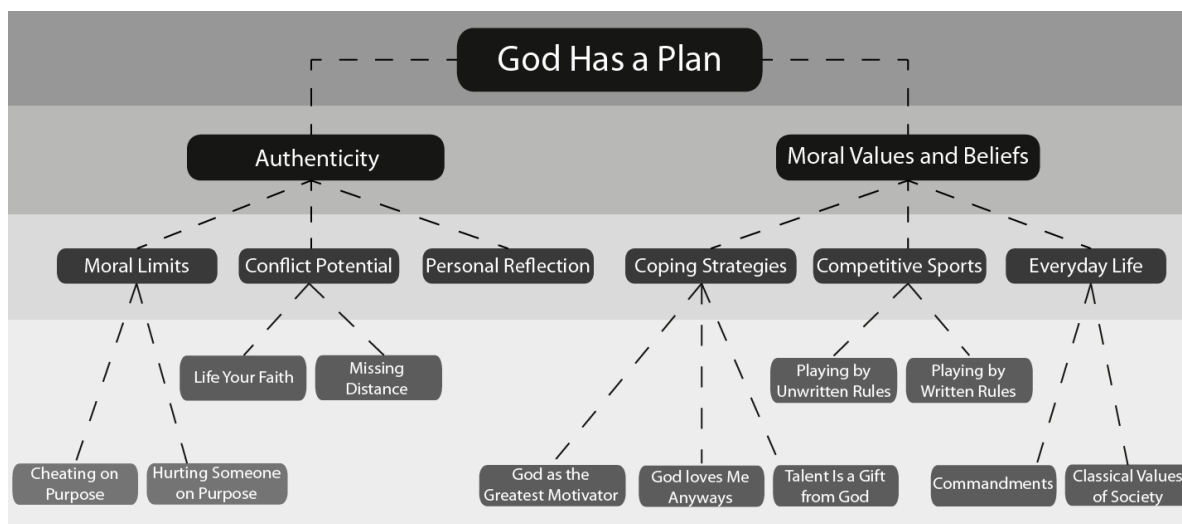
Kathy argued that it is not productive to run away from the difficulties of sports and everyday life by not participating. Instead, you have to face them and have to find tools and strategies, which help you to live with the difficulties. If you are not able to find a solution, but withdraw from all difficult situations instead, the consequence is that you will exclude yourself from society, which is not the goal of being a Christian. According to God’s plan, you should be a light for people and guide them through their lives. This is therefore how the core category ‘God has a plan’ and the category ‘conflict potential’ are connected.

The category ‘coping strategies’ represents the category, which is connected most strongly with the core category. One reason for that might be that the core category ‘God has a plan’ can be interpreted as a coping strategy itself, even if a very general one. The coping strategies are all beliefs, which make it easier for Christian athletes to compete in sports. They give the athletes certain benefits such as feelings of stability, ease, comfort, and fulfillment, which are very important in an unstable environment such as sports.

The first coping strategy ‘talent is a gift from God’ explains that God has not gifted you with your sportive talent for nothing, but that your talent plays a specific role in His plan. Therefore you have to use it the best possible way to honour God. In case that this does not lead to success, there is the coping strategy ‘God loves me anyways’ which gives the athletes the stability they need in hard times. This coping strategy reassures them that they are not only worth something as long as they are good in sports, but that God loves them anyways. If a Christian athlete is not on the road of success anymore, that might also be part of the plan. This belief therefore makes it easier for the athletes to deal with losses and defeats.

One might think that because of the belief ‘God has plan’, Christians take everything as it is and are therefore not as motivated to win as other athletes. But first of all, the Bible and the Christian work ethics order not to be lazy and secondly, Christian athletes see it as their duty to try the best they can to please God. Since God is always watching and since He wants to be in every part of their life, they have to give their very best. They have God as their greatest motivator. They know that God knows what is good for them and that the plan He has in mind is a good one. They live according to the principle ‘I want what God wants.





**Figure 1.** Hierarchical Model of Core Category "God has a Plan".

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to find out what moral values and beliefs Christian athletes have in competitive sports. Multiple questions came up in the investigation: What moral values do Christian athletes have in everyday life? What moral values do they have in competitive sports? Do these values differ from each other? Do Christian athletes really live up to their personal values? How do they react when being faced with unmoral situations in competitive sports? What conflict potential do they experience? What moral limits do they have? What tools, coping strategies and beliefs do they have to participate?

According to the interviews, Christian athletes usually have moral values, which are based upon the Bible in everyday life, as well as in competitive sports. Moral values such as honesty, respect, integrity, and acceptance are thus most important for them. In competitive sports these values are represented through the value of fair play.

Although their moral values in everyday life, as well as in sports, are oriented on Christian values, Christian athletes not necessarily appear to be saints when competing in sports. As they stated themselves, they are just human beings; meaning that they are not perfect and do not always act according to their personal moral guidelines. But what is more important than the fact that Christian athletes also fail from time to time is the way they cope with their failure. If they violate their moral values, the most important thing for them is to reflect and regret their behaviour and to learn from it. Only if this is done, they can change for the better. Reflection is therefore a very important tool for them to be able to live their faith the best way they can. This could also be observed when looking at the conflict potentials and moral limits they mentioned.

Conflict potentials they brought up were the missing distance in sports and the difficulty to live their faith, especially in sports, which are in the media's centre of attention. Both examples represent conflict potentials for them because reflecting one's own behaviour is made more difficult. This leads to the consequence that it is more challenging to act upon Christian guidelines. What role did reflection play in association with the moral limits of the athletes? One of the worst things for a Christian in competitive sports was to cheat and to hurt others on purpose. In general, one can thus claim that acting wrongly on purpose is something, which seems to be most condemnable for Christian athletes and represents their moral limit.

According to these results just mentioned, one can see that Christian athletes are at least most of the time authentic in the way they compete, although Hoffman (1992), Coakley (1986), and Eitzen and Sage (1989) might argue differently. There are various coping strategies and beliefs, which help Christian athletes to achieve this authenticity. The first coping strategy is the belief that one is gifted with an athletic talent by God and therefore has to do the best one can to use it. This coping strategy enables Christian athletes to reconcile doing sports with their conscience, even in the case of extreme contact sports. The second coping strategy is the belief that God loves you no matter if you are winning or not. It helps them to handle the pressure of competitive sports and supports them in coping with victory and defeat. The third coping strategy describes the belief that God is the greatest motivator an athlete can have. Since Christian athletes are aware of the situation that God gave everything possible for them, they see it as their duty to do the same and to always try to give a 100% for Him.

The fourth and also most important coping strategy is the belief that 'God has a plan'. This strategy is the core category of this study and thus the very basis of all the results. It describes the belief Christian athlete have in God. They share the view that everything in their life has a purpose, which is given by God. God knows what is good for them, which makes them accept everything that He has planned.

Overall, one can argue that the coping strategies are benefits of faith, which help Christian athletes to successfully participate in sports, to gain the necessary stability and motivation, and to cope with life in general. Even the core category 'God has a plan' by itself is able to do that. The main claim of this study therefore is that it is faith in God's plan and faith in general which make it possible for Christian athletes to participate in competitive sports in a way which might be even more fulfilled and stable than it is the case with non-Christian athletes. To put it on a more abstract level, one can agree to Hoffman (1992) and Syed (2010) who said that it is the belief in general and not the truth of religion, which helps athletes to be successful and to master challenges. So not what you believe in is important but the fact that you have something to believe in.

What might be interesting to investigate in further studies is whether or not a comparison between athletes of various religious beliefs in fact confirms this claim. In this study mostly Protestant athletes were interviewed which might also explain the similar results that came up. In general, it appeared as if the number of Catholic athletes, that are active on a highly competitive level in sports, is much smaller. One reason for that could be that the Catholic religion is still lived in a more conservative and traditional way and thus cannot be as easily combined with sports as the rather liberal Protestant belief. But this is just an assumption.

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