

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### **Spirituality and Basketball Fanship: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis and Synthesis**

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#### *Abstract*

The world of competitive sport affords an individual the opportunity to enter a spiritual community adding meaning that transcends one's current understanding of life (Parry et al. 2007). Previously established dimensions of sports fanship (group affiliation, psychological commitment and team identification) share characteristics commonly associated with religious or spiritual affiliation indicating that fans may generate substantial life meaning from observing sporting encounters. In the present study, 12 male basketball fans (M=32.42; SD=7.97) completed semi-structured interviews immediately prior to viewing a competitive match at the 2011 European Basketball Championships (Vilnius, Lithuania). Interviews were structured under four headings; 1) the most memorable moment as a basketball fan, 2) thoughts, feelings and emotions attached to their team, 3) affiliation to the team in the context of the fan's meaning of life, 4) connection with members of the fan's sporting community. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was employed to analyse interview transcripts. Raw data clustered into four dimensions; 1) devotion, 2) obscure emotions, 3) connectedness, and 4) universal values. The results indicate that sports fanship is characterised by, and synonymous with, an established understanding of spirituality derived from membership of wider spiritual and/or religious communities. The findings hold implications for the marketing and membership of local, amateur and professional sports clubs and brands, as well as community development, health and welfare.

Keywords: Spirituality, Fans, Basketball

#### *Introduction*

The study of religion and spirituality as it applies to sport has gained prominence over the past thirty years culminating in the production of a number of seminal texts dedicated to the topic (Hoffman 1992; Higgs 1995; Magdalinski and Chandler 2002; Baker 2007; Parry et al. 2007; Watson and Nesti 2005; Parry, Nesti and Watson 2011). Supplementing this literature, work has emerged that has sought to synthesise thinking grounded in theological doctrine with modern conceptualizations of spirituality in considering wider applications to sport (Preece 2006, 27). As Parry et al. (2007) suggest, the scope of enquiry in this field has expanded to the extent that it now encapsulates "the individual sportsperson's or team's experiences to the organization and management of sports institutions, and to the wider community of stakeholders in sport-media, spectators, fans and so on" (p.2).

The term "spirituality" is central to this paper and some conceptual introduction is needed. As this article is essentially phenomenological in approach, spirituality is in the first instance defined as an essentially human, if not *the* quintessential human, phenomenon, apprehended and/or experienced subjectively by human beings and objectively by others observing and interpreting such apprehensions in themselves, others and/or human relationships. Amplifying Wilber's (2000) integral approach, it

may be argued that that the phenomenon of spirituality includes immanent, transcendent and essentially human aspects. Immanent aspects refer to spirituality as a given phenomenon of consciousness already existing in potential form in all human beings as manifest in attitudes, experiences and behaviour such as love. Transcendent aspects include higher developmental and/or transpersonal levels and/or lines of consciousness. Essentially human aspects include immediate apprehensions or direct experiences referred to as peak experiences by Maslow (1971).

Phenomenology may be defined as the study of phenomena that reveal themselves to consciousness (Heidegger 1927; Husserl 1917). Phenomenology may be broadly described as a philosophical movement that has permeated the human, social sciences with regard to any orientation attitude, approach, design, strategy, method, or technique with lived experience as its subject matter (Edwards 2002, 4-6; Spinelli 1989, 1-10). A general phenomenological orientation, which assumes the interrelatedness of all phenomena, bridges artificial, conceptual distinctions between such terms as body, mind and spirit; the emphasis is rather on the lived experience of such phenomena, in this case, spirituality. By its very nature any phenomenological investigation is novel in its concern with revealing fresh experiential reality and then interpreting meaning in an ongoing hermeneutic dialogue in which all interpretation will inevitably only be partially true. The special focus of this research is on the experience and meaning of sports fandom as a particular phenomenon.

Spirituality includes such notions as the search for sacred, divine or non-material aspects of life (Good, Willoughby and Busseri 2011, 540). Hyman and Handal (2006, 264-267) propose that people often seek spiritual meaning devoid of the requirement to align themselves with a specific religion with 'spirituality' seen as being more inclusive and less constrained by institutionalised beliefs and practices. Spirituality can be considered as a devotional journey or an inner moral orientation associated with a sense of belongingness, meaning and acceptance (King 1996, 344; Litwinczuk and Groh 2007, 14). Chally and Carlson (2004, 60-65) identified three dimensions of spirituality as being a connection that one has with, 1) the world, 2) with others and 3) with a supreme power and oneself. Within this understanding it is important to note that whilst spirituality may be located within religious practices, to be religious or follow ecclesiastical doctrine is not a requirement of modern spiritual tradition (Tanyi, 2002, 500-502). Transformations in our understanding of 'spirituality' are driven by contemporary culture and changing society as an individual seeks alternative channels to connect with the universe (Hoover 2006, 2-6; Hedlund de-Witt 2011, 1057-1059). According to King (1996, 344-345) observing or engaging in creative disciplines such as art, music and nature has the power to evoke feelings of harmony and serenity promoting spiritual well-being. Sports events have been seen to invoke similarly powerful and non-material responses in players, spectators and residents of a host country with expressions of nationalism coming with profound emotional attachment (Bruce 2014, 32). Furthermore, Coakley (2004, 102) proposes that these expressions of meaning are equally strong or even stronger to people today than those represented by any traditional form of religion.

Spiritual practices are readily evident in sport in collective displays of celebration, team rituals, sports stadiums used for communal gatherings and the hierarchical structure adopted in many sporting organisations (Obare, 2000). Parry et al. (2007) suggest that sport offers the chance to join a spiritual community or a ground of faith that provides athletes and supporters with the opportunity to experience significant life meaning. Further to this, Parry et al. (2007) describe a number of levels at which sports fandom can generate and embody meaning, for example, acceptance, being a part of a larger community, associating your identity with that of your club, revering of athletes as heroes or gods and reverence of aesthetic perfection. Notably, worship is frequently expressed through the rituals cultivated by sport supporters (Obare 2000, 35-40). Hawkins (2000) notes that congregations and fans at spiritual gatherings and sports competitions respectively, display similar behaviours such as; collective waving, chanting and clapping. Synonymous with these rituals is the belief, on the part of a supporter, that individual and collective investment may evoke religious or sacred forces with a view to influencing objective reality, i.e, the outcome of a match or moment in a game (Eastman and Riggs 1994, 249-251).

Athlete testimonies (Pienaar, 2000), research reports (Dillon and Tait 2000, 91-100) and philosophical accounts (Saint Sing 2005, 227-229) collectively provide support for the existence of a spiritual dimension to sport. Although Crust (2006, 17-31) provides a cautionary note in questioning

the widespread application of spiritual practice to sport, it is evident that dimensions of spirituality permeate a fan's lived experience when following his or her team. Employing an inductive, phenomenological approach, this study seeks to explore personal experiences, understanding, and meaning attached to a fan's support for, and investment in, a national basketball team. This study builds on our current understanding of spirituality and sport fandom through the application of a hermeneutic epistemology with data collected in a real-world setting.

## ***Methodology***

### *Phenomenological approach*

Given that spirituality manifests as an increased state of self-awareness; exploration of it should be conducted by attempting to uncover one's consciousness. A phenomenological approach treats people's lived experiences as a context within which meaning is constructed as human consciousness is directed to all objects and subjects involved in a particular experience (Willig 2008, 57). Therefore, when attempting to understand the meanings attached to certain expressions and occurrences, descriptive accounts of relevant experiences should be acquired (Koch 1995, 829). Since in phenomenology, meaning is constructed through interpretation of collected descriptions, this approach commits to continuous reflection and to revealing new discoveries as reality changes. It also means in depth investigations of essential structures of reality. This changing reality includes the consciousness of the phenomenologist as well as the phenomena revealing themselves to one's consciousness. The approach is subjective to the extent to which meaning is attributed to the lived –world as it appears to the phenomenologist. Personally significant meaning often occurs in the form of insights during or after an experience, such as in or after particularly meaningful sport fan's experiences. It is objective to the extent to which the phenomena are accurately interpreted and agreed upon by phenomenologists. The hermeneutic epistemology adopted implies ongoing interpretation in pursuit of an ultimately unrealisable final truth. This article may be viewed as novel or original to the extent to which it faithfully documents, describes and interprets a basketball 'fanship' phenomena in relation to spirituality.

### *Participants*

Twelve male participants were recruited in situ outside the basketball venue that was hosting the 2nd group stage of the European Basketball Championships 2011 in Vilnius, Lithuania, 7th-12th September. The average age of the participants was 32.42 (SD=7.97) years and the participants were of seven different nationalities (Finish, French, German, Lithuanian, Macedonian, Russian and Slovenian). Having provided consent to participate in the study the participants completed questionnaires assessing their loyalty, and financial and psychological commitment to their national basketball team. This approach has been employed previously as a means to gauge 'sports fanship' and thus served to act as a filter ensuring only those individuals with a significant attraction to the team were included in the study (Bee and Havitz 2010, 147). The participants reported that they had followed their national team for 13.83 (SD=7.64) years scoring an average of 5.42 (SD=2.11) on the financial commitment scale (1=not spending any money; 10=spending all available funds). With the exception of the Lithuanian fan, all of the participants had travelled to Vilnius with the specific purpose of supporting their team at the basketball championships. Ethical approval for the study was granted by the research ethics committee of the lead author's institution.

### *Procedures*

Semi-structured interviews were employed as a data collection method in order to collect descriptive accounts of basketball fans' experiences as required by a phenomenological approach.

Participants were recruited and interviewed on site at the 2011 European basketball championships. It was hoped that the natural setting of the interview would help the participants to feel comfortable in their surroundings and emotionally and physically safe and secure (Smith, 2008). Participants were briefed as to the nature of the study, received details regarding the interview process, were informed that their interview would be recorded and that records and transcripts of the interview would be stored securely and used only for research purposes. All participants provided written informed consent and acknowledged that they understood their right to terminate the interview at any stage. All interviews were recorded using two digital voice recorders (Sony ICD-UX200). The interviews were conducted in English although participants were encouraged to use their native language to describe any phrases that they felt they were unable to clearly express in English. Professional translation services were subsequently employed to ensure that an accurate account of the interviewees' *talk* was recorded.

The interview format was arrived at on the basis of a number of epistemological, philosophical and practical considerations. Adopting a semi-structured interview schedule affords the researcher the opportunity to hear from the participant about a particular aspect or experience from their life (Willig 2008, 68). This approach supports the inductive nature of the present work and is commensurate with a perspectivist outlook. Furthermore, the interviews were time constrained with the interviewer cognisant of each participant's sports tourist status and the need to minimise any imposition and reduce disruption to the participant's preparations for their team's upcoming match. Interviews consisted of open-ended questions structured under pre-set headings. The open ended nature afforded the participant freedom to explore their own understanding of the phenomenon in question. The use of headings was adopted for two reasons; 1) to maintain focus ensuring that in a time constrained interview situation sufficient data of relevance was extracted and 2) to enable the research team to better consider commonalities in the participants' responses when the data was analysed.

Each interview commenced with a series of introductory questions (e.g., "what are your thoughts on how the Championship is going so far?") before progressing to the body of the interview schedule (e.g., "what is your most memorable moment from your time as a basketball fan? "can you describe the time when you felt most attached to your team? What were your emotions at this time? How were you feeling?", "describe how it feels when you are with other *enter team* fans" and "describe the role that following *enter team* plays in your life". At appropriate times during the interview probing questions such as "why was this important to you?" and "how did this experience make you feel?" were utilised to encourage participants to elaborate on their experiences. The interviews lasted for an average of 18m:56s with a range of 30m:32s to 5m:17s.

Trustworthiness of the data was ensured through the non-directive interview questions. According to Willig (2008) although the interviewer should be aiming to steer a participant to provide answers that facilitate answering the research question, space should be left for the interviewee to express his/her views and redefine the topic. Therefore, the interviewer was conscious of asking open-ended questions and being more direct only at times when making participants elaborate on their views or attempting to better understand their expressions. In order to collect authentic data, participants were interviewed in social surroundings in a natural environment, therefore allowing participants to feel more comfortable and as a result encourage honest and open responses.

### *Data Analysis*

Qualitative procedures were followed employing an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach to analyse and interpret the participants' experience of, and understanding for, the phenomenon under investigation. This approach was selected based on Smith's (2008) observation that IPA is committed to examining people's perceptions of major life experiences. The first stage of IPA sees the researcher familiarise themselves with the text contained in the interviews (Willig and Rogers 2008, 54). Although transcription took place within one full day of each interview taking place the researcher sought to gain separation from the interview process and therefore enhance objectivity by electing to analyse the data four months after the interviews had been transcribed (Willig 2008, 56).

Reading and re-reading of the interview transcripts occurred as well as taking notes of initial thoughts and observations. These initial notes included descriptive labels and associations which facilitated the process at the second stage of IPA when deriving themes from the text and attempting to understand the text through thematic labels. The third stage comprised of organising the labels into higher order themes based on the clustering of lower order themes into coherent units (Willig 2008). Member checking was undertaken by a third party who was not connected with the study but who had extensive experience of qualitative research processes. The final thematic analysis was revisited multiple times over a period of three months and themes were revised based on discussion with the third party reviewer and the interviewer's own reflective practice. Consequently, twenty lower order themes were clustered into six dimensions which were then used as a basis for an analytical narrative interpretation supported by verbatim extracts from the interviews.

## ***Results and Discussion***

Twenty lower order themes emerged from the data which clustered into four dimensions: 1) devotion, 2) obscure emotions, 3) connectedness, and 4) universal values.

### *Devotion*

The dimension of devotion was constituted from four lower order themes; loyalty, commitment, psychological/emotional investment and love/worship. Such themes have traditionally described channels through which people have been reported as either developing or consolidating relationships with God or a higher power (Wuthnow and Mellinger 1978, 234). The emotional and psychological investment described by the participants reflected an experience that went beyond the physical realm, incorporating aspects of euphoria and peak experiences that have been reported during episodes of prayer.

“I am a very emotional man so it's hard to put into words how you feel to be in the centre of that match. You need to go there, to see it, to see others doing that and make it charm you, psych yourself up and then to understand that you have done it when the final whistle blows.”

It should be noted that the participants' experiences of following their team served to provide moments of extreme despair in contrast to the euphoric episodes already discussed. Accounts such as “you feel like you'd die from nerves, “I fear that moment, I fear what we felt” and “It was very painful, I'd live shorter just because of this game” served to highlight the polarizing nature of devoted sports fanship.

The idea that sport is seen as a devotional or spiritual journey is not a new concept (Parry et al. 2007, 15) however the current study suggests that this understanding may describe the experiences of 'invested' supporters as they follow their team. An intangible connection between fans and players was something that ran through the participant's dialogue. Of interest was the idea that the fans felt that their devotion exerted both an influence over their team's performance and that this investment was reciprocated by the players.

“We do our best as fans and we know that our support truly helps our team to play better”

“It means so much to us, and it means a lot to the team. We are very committed to the team, you know, and the team to us.”

The idea of engaging in or witnessing a peak performance that is achieved through seemingly effortless superhuman physical feats has been associated with a transcendence of ordinary human capabilities (Gaillardetz 2005, 30-33). Such reports are reminiscent of the origins of the Olympic movement with Herculean feats of strength, skill and speed defining the Gods in ancient Greek

mythology. Appreciation of individual player abilities and admiration for a 'god-like' ability to accomplish physical feats were cited in the present study.

“The Dream Team was something that really got me into basketball. When I saw those guys and what they were capable of and what they could do on the court. That really got me into basketball.”

Two predominant motivations for following a team have been reported in the literature, namely supporting a team who outwardly prioritise winning and regularly achieve success or supporting a team with an emphasis on a beautiful, aesthetically pleasing style of play, a team ultimately fulfilling their potential (Sukhdial, Aiken and Kahle 2002, 77). Such emotions are often associated with pursuits that are more overtly grounded in artistic and aesthetic traditions, e.g., art or dance (Arnold 1990, 164). As King (1996, 348) notes such feelings of harmony are spiritual by nature. Hamilton (2011, 29) poetically addresses this concept in his critique of the changing nature of how sports performers and spectators view athletic achievement. Hamilton states “Our love for sport becomes distorted through loving the lower things more than the higher. We love winning more than virtue so that there is an overemphasis on winning, thus disordering our affections resulting in evil” (p.29). The accounts of the basketball fans sampled in this study showed a definite tendency towards self-actualisation rather than on a winning philosophy with words such as “beauty”, “graceful”, “dynamic” and “smooth” being used to describe the physical act of performance. The present study confirms that basketball fans associate with both the physical and aesthetic qualities of the game. It is interesting to note that this appreciation was reported to extend to both home and away team players, indicating personal, interpersonal, communal and transpersonal forms of spirituality (Wilber 2007, 88).

The participants reported that supporting their team was synonymous with feelings more commonly understood as love and worship.

“We’ve been supporting, worshipping our team in these Championships so far but we always love our team”

Although the concept of ‘love’ often appears in sports literature in anecdotal form, e.g., a love of the game, there is also an argument in sports psychology that an athlete’s love for his/her sport tends to be reduced to theories of motivation (Nesti 2007, 120-123). Similar views are apparent when considering sports fans; as suggested by Klugman (2009, 37) an emotional connection felt by a supporter towards their team is an expression of love rather than an attempt to enhance one’s self-concept (as frequently advocated in sport spectatorship studies). The participants reported that this adulation and support principally manifest as chanting and clapping behaviours that are synonymous with some religious or spiritual congregations adopted as rituals expressing worship of a higher power (Hawkins 2000).

“And then it all starts, nobody saves themselves, nobody saves their drums, neither they save their voices or legs or sweat dropping through their dyed faces and other parts of body.”

In an applied sporting context, themes such as loyalty, commitment, sacrifice and emotional investment have been identified as areas from which an applied practitioner might seek to locate strategies to develop team identification and cohesion in athletic groups (Wann, Royalty, and Rochelle 2002, 213). It would appear that groups of supporters inadvertently adhere to similar collective principles and as such sports franchises might consider ways to promote these themes amongst their fan base. Encouraging large groups to engage in synchronous movement (waving) and communal chanting may promote a hedonic, enriching shared experience that brings supporters closer to both fellow spectators and the athletes that they are following. The outcome of this work might see an increase in fan devotion resulting in an increase in financial, emotional and spiritual investment in following the team and related community spin-offs.

### *Obscure Emotions.*

The higher order theme of ‘transcendent feelings’ emerged as an expression of personally significant feelings and emotions that reached transpersonal dimensions, for example, apprehended as a subtle heart experience. Lower order themes in this category were largely of an existential nature. The results suggest that transcendent feelings such as sensing the game, illusion and joy/euphoria were often referred to by fans as something unexplainable or mystical, however, very vivid in their experiences.

“Then I didn’t have any doubts left, the victory was ours. I felt it with my heart, it wasn’t strategic, it wasn’t forecast, it wasn’t anything you can understand with your brain it was my heart that felt it, I knew that because of what I saw on the court: the enthusiasm of the players, their devotion and their eyes revealed that for me.”

A number of participants described their state of mind as an illusion, as a place where daily life constraints and realities did not feature.

“Here, it’s like an illusion after which we go back to our real lives.”

Such reports are in line with the assertions of Bernache-Assollant, Bouchet, Auvergne, and Lacassagne (2011, 85-86) who highlight the capacity for sport to induce people to break away from the constraints (physical, psychological and spiritual) of their daily lives. This thinking is evident in the notion of self-spirituality (Aupers and Houtman 2006, 202) that in the deeper layers of the self a person is able to find authenticity and sacredness. This understanding meant that transcendent feelings were experienced by fans as a result of them finding an inner unpolluted ‘kernel’ which allowed them to be emotionally and mentally free.

The fans reported sensations synonymous with Csikszentmihalyi’s (1990) original conceptualization of optimal flow experiences with moments of total immersion in the present and a perception of slowing down of time.

“We were yelling, we just couldn’t believe what we were seeing. The result was not believable. That minute was worth a million pounds and would last forever.”

This intuitive sense of realisation is also analogous with religious and spiritual experiences such as Enlightenment, which in Buddhism is explained as an intuitive realisation of the truth (Forman 2004). Such feelings have previously been reported when engaging in extreme sports as one adopts an almost symbiotic relationship with one’s surroundings (Parry et al. 2007, 35). Murphy and White (1978) have previously talked at length about transcendent experiences in sport as related to feelings of peace, attachment and calmness with these accounts focused on the individual sportsperson’s experience. The findings of the present study suggest that such transcendence can occur as a result of merely observing sport as long as the observer is sufficiently invested in the moment (team).

### *Connectedness*

Chally and Carlson’s (2004, 61) description of spirituality as describing one’s connection with the world, with others, with a higher entity and with oneself was apparent in the higher order theme of ‘Connectedness’. Forman (2004, 2-7) noted that spirituality, as opposed to more institutionalized religion, is obtainable and accessible due to its personal dimension. One of the themes that emerged from the interviews was personal meanings and values as participants were eager to express their personal stance on why basketball is important to them. A significant proportion of participants felt that their fanship had given them a sense of empowerment.

“It gives me a feeling of satisfaction, that it’s we Lithuanians; our team did that, our team won. It gives me a well-founded sense of pride. That’s the most important thing.”

“they are a much bigger country, much more successful country and we are Macedonia, a small country, you know but we’ve won and it’s very good feeling”

This result is in line with the findings of Eastman and Riggs (1994, 270) who showed that sport fans aim to be socially and culturally empowered and in order to achieve that they develop personal rituals during games. In the present study, fans reported sitting in the same seats, wearing of identical clothes when on winning streaks and singing specific songs at critical points of the game. Relatedness to a team or individual player has been proposed to represent a domain that carries meanings and beliefs that are often stronger to people today than those encapsulated by any traditional form of religion (Coakley 2004, 20-27). In this vein, a number of participants felt that basketball gave them an opportunity to express who they are as humans as well as to represent the ideals of their nation.

“The last minute of the match against Greece that was the moment that has touched me the most. A very important moment in Macedonian history”

As noted by Bernache-Assolant et al. (2011, 73) sports games often provide supporters with an opportunity to express their identity since they support a particular team as a part of their individual identity. In the present study feelings of identity were often seen to grow into patriotism as a number of fans felt that their basketball team represented them as individuals whilst at the same time being a symbol of their nation’s status as well as transpersonal ideals. Such higher order meaning is a central theme in the psychology of spirituality and religion (Frankl 2000) and has been suggested to serve a role in the motivation and subsequent success of elite athletes (Noakes 2003, 178).

Participants highlighted the importance of being among other fans when supporting their team, a notion central to Kahle and Closes’ (2010, 24) assertion that group affiliation is a crucial element of sports fanship, generating a sense of belongingness and human enrichment.

“It is not even a question, I mean, one is not a soldier in a battlefield. It’s either all of us or none of us, team on the court and team in the stands, it’s not possible in any other way, how? 113 decibels in the arena it’s a few times louder than a fighter plane, it’s feasible only when the whole nation support their team as one fist.”

“We are like one entity, 2000 bodies, one entity. And we are going through the same process after the winning or the losing.”

Kahle and Close (2010) suggest that through group affiliation fans are able to transcend states of consciousness and connect with each other and a power beyond themselves irrespective of the arena in which this experience occurs. Furthermore, Kelly (2011, 165) highlights the significant role that feelings of community hold in Christian spirituality.

“I think we also feel connected when the team is going the right way. We are supporting the team and there is a bond, a connection between us”

The sense of the spiritual being defined more as a phenomenological experience rather than being confined to traditional religious settings aligns with Lawrence’s (2011) explication of new age spirituality where individuals seek enlightenment and belonging through the ‘journey’ rather than from a place or specific dwelling. Similar accounts are evident in collections of players engaging in pre-match team prayer where, irrespective of religious affiliation or belief in a physical God, players give themselves over and harmonise with teammates in a shared spiritual experience (Hoffman 2011). Although the topic of public displays of a religious nature in sport has received examination from both a theological (Hoffman 2011) and ethical viewpoint (Kreider 2003) it is evident from the accounts of the fans in the present study that feelings of shared purpose and collective unity resulted in powerful hedonic sensations being experienced when following one’s team and watching them play.

The notion of a ‘play ethic’ as described by Preece (2006, 25-49), highlights the power of play, in its purest form, to provide opportunities for individuals to achieve peak experience, even apprehend God’s touch, through the freedom afforded by unconstrained, aesthetic movement. This metaphysical



was also evident in the theme '*connection with players*' and fans reported a synthesis with the players which was felt as empowering and providing a source of significant life meaning and morality.

“The idea that we live in the same town, that we have the same places to go, we have the same historical background, we have the same routes. They play their hearts out for the town, so for me it’s easier to support someone like that, I feel close to them and them with me.”

The findings of the present study indicate that fans, not only athletes, may experience a spiritual connection with each other and the players that they are supporting. The fans also reported a belief in the power of supporters to project positive energy to players which permeates the athlete’s physical being resulting in adaptive changes in either physical (performance) or psychological (concentration) outcomes.

“As an example, I could talk about last year in Turkey, when we were playing Spain and losing by 18 points and we gave men the power to fight back, we turned them on and they started to believe that they could win, and we won. And it’s all been said by our men to us, personally.”

Such beliefs form the basis of healing meditation, contemplation and /or prayer with empirical reports supporting the prevalent use of prayer for positive behavioural outcomes both within (Kreider 2003, 17-20) and outside of sport (McCaffrey et al. 2004, 860). While, it should be acknowledged however that the efficacy of prayer based interventions have been widely questioned with empirical research lacking methodological rigor (Masters and Spielmans 2007, 331), the vast body of related literature on meditation, contemplation and prayer provides sustained argument that regular practice is associated with neurological, intellectual, emotional, social and moral development (Alexander 2005, 9-20; Benson 1997; Berkowitz-Ohana, Glicksohn, and Goldstein 2012, 705-707; Wilber 2000).

### *Universal Values*

*Universal Values* emerged as a higher order theme encapsulating values of morality, pride, respect and sharing. As proposed by Hedlund-de Witt (2011, 1057-1058), spirituality represents an enabling factor for people to rethink their true values. The present results suggest that basketball fans tended to appreciate, respect and reframe such universally accepted values as morality, respect and sharing within the context of the game. Also, a number of the fans who were interviewed acknowledged that experiences during periods of fandom reinforced positive holistic values that were seen to be present within their daily lives.

“When we unrolled that flag for the first time during the time out, I saw it on the screen in the arena, it literally stopped my breath. Such a majestic feeling; it blew me away.”

“Well I want France to win, but I want them to win with good basketball, with some kind of passion. I don’t want them to win without fighting, you know. Sometimes we have to be ashamed of winning when we were lucky; because referees helped us or something like that.”

As noted by Carmody et al. (2008, 393-403), quality of life and physical health have been shown to be enhanced through the adoption of essentially human positive values which are, accordingly, also cornerstones of contemporary spiritual movements. For example, emotions such as enthusiasm, joy, pride and excitement have been shown to correlate with mindfulness, honesty and integrity (Obare 2000).

“This sport makes me the proudest”

“*Player’s name* is a very lovely guy and it makes me feel really proud that this German guy is becoming world famous”

“I want to be proud of our victory....I want to watch a game where everyone is involved”

Seligman (2011) covers in great detail the positive outcomes associated with experiencing “authentic happiness” born out of a positive, joyful mindset. Adopting a similar spiritual approach, Peale (1990) describes how a range of techniques based on repetition of Biblical passages can be used to build confidence and aid performance in a variety of business and sports situations. It is evident from these writings that dimensions of sports fandom as a spiritual pursuit not only contain but also have the potential to promote positive values that are seen to enhance a fan's spiritual experience of a game and also enrich the individual's life outside of sport. Given the comprehensive evidence base extolling the value of positive attitudes, beliefs and behaviour in the promotion of health and healing (e.g., Benson, 1997) it may be the case that following a team brings with it both spiritual and physical health gains. Such suggestions require further exploration and would appear to be conditional on the predominant values adopted by the subset of supporters that each individual resides within.

### **Conclusion**

The present study sought to investigate sports fandom against a backdrop of dimensions of spirituality as understood through the eyes of fans supporting their nations at an international basketball competition. The findings concur with the proposals of Parry et al. (2007) indicating that sports fandom has the capacity to lead sport supporters to significant life meaning realized through spiritual transcendence. This research provides a phenomenological account of a limited number of basketball fans' psychological and emotional investment in their team to the extent to which the participants, values and beliefs were both shaping, and being shaped by, experiences whilst being a spectator and observing one's team. According to Hedlund-de Witt (2011, 1062) one of the key functions of spirituality is to encourage people to consider true values in their lives. Similarly, the results of the present study suggest that basketball fans not only appreciate universally accepted values such as morality and respect within the game but are in some cases integrate those values in to their daily lives. The study confirmed the findings of Sukhial, Aiken, and Kahle (2002, 73) indicating that although some sport fans are primarily concerned with their team winning, for a significant majority in the present study the beauty of the game and the team playing to the best of their ability was considered more important. This finding has been discussed in light of the potential implications for health and well-being that may result from congregating and sharing a meaningful life experience through supporting a sports team with a large body of similarly invested sports parishioners *vis a vis* fans. This insight might prove useful as marketing departments look to establish advertisements for the team based in part on winning whilst emphasizing the inherent beauty in aesthetic movement. If this phenomenon is true across different spectator groups and is seen to not be moderated by a need to hold particular religious beliefs this may be enough to encourage the altruistic usage of sports funds for community development, health and well-being.

A number of identified areas such as *patriotic feelings* and *appreciation of team effort and/or physical ability* would benefit from further research in order to further explicate the spiritual components inherent in these themes, such as love and enthusiasm, both of which suggest transpersonal consciousness. The present work suggests that feelings of national identity may serve to moderate the extent to which fans give themselves over to supporting their team. As such future work might consider focusing on supporters from a given nation to investigate in more depth associations between nationality, identity, spirituality and sports fandom. Furthermore, future research should consider investigating spiritual dimensions of fandom in a range of sports. The context of the present study was a European Basketball Championship. It is plausible to suggest that European basketball fans may differ from American ice hockey fans or Asian cricket fans in the extent to which they value winning, aesthetics, individual or team contributions.

Considering the fans' accounts from a higher spiritual plane, for example that pure contemplative realm where everything is perfect, empty or open (Wilber 2000; 2007), the sports fans transpersonal experiences differ sharply from the crowd hooliganism and violence often reported after

national soccer matches. In their collective reverence for their particular sports team, as well as identification with and adoration of individual sports heroes/heroines, the sport fans consciousness is transformed. Their descriptions of devotion, transcendent feelings, connectedness, universal values, appreciation of the game, and enhanced personal meanings reflect such peak experiences described as B values by Maslow (1971). Adoration of revered community leaders and/or ancestors, both living and dead, has been described as the essence of all religious and spiritual traditions (Edwards 2011, 335-338).

The phenomenological, hermeneutic approach taken in this paper requires the reflexive recognition that all phenomena in the lived world are inextricably interrelated. There is recognition that the literature review, research design, openness of the phenomenological approach and repeated reading of participants' descriptions allowed the fresh phenomena relating to the participants' spiritual experiences to be faithfully revealed and documented in the form of a tabulated audit trail for evaluation by other researchers. At the same time there is recognition that interpretation is never ending and that the data could be interpreted further in multiple ways, for example, third order values may differentially reveal further abstract higher, deeper or broader interpretations which include meanings and values such as love, enthusiasm, identification, transformation of consciousness, morality and self realisation.

It is acknowledged that there exist a number of limiting factors that impact on the findings of the present study. Limited sample size, time constrained interview conditions, and difficulties with achieving consensual validation of the interviews all represent areas for critical consideration. These limitations should however be set against the authenticity of the participant group and the natural environment in which data was collected. Due to the paucity of previous research related to spirituality and sports fandom, it is too early to draw firm conclusions regarding practical implications of this study. The present work has however served to raise awareness of spiritual dimensions inherent in sports fandom and has provided some tentative suggestions as to how the findings may be of interest for fans, athletes, and sports marketing companies, as well as of value for individual, interpersonal and community development, health and welfare.

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