

Religion and sport: Do prayers help players?

At the Champions League final there is likely to be evidence of faith, with players making the sign of the cross and other religious gestures. But does belief really boost sporting performance, asks Matthew Syed.



All eyes will be on Lionel Messi, the world's greatest footballer, when he walks out with Barcelona in the Champions League final. If you watch carefully, you may see him crossing himself as he strides onto the pitch.

On the opposing side, Manchester United striker Javier Hernandez has been known to pray on the pitch.

Messi and Hernandez are not the only footballers to reveal their beliefs during the pursuit of their sport. Real Madrid star Kaka has often talked about his faith, praying on the pitch and thanking God for his rapid recovery from a broken back.

Other sportsmen, from Muhammad Ali to Jonathan Edwards, the triple jumper, have also spoken about the power of faith. They believe in different theologies, but all would assert they have benefited from their convictions. As Ali put it in the build-up to his clash with George Foreman in 1974: "How can I lose with Allah on my side?"

The Brazil football squad combine prayer with on the field success

Atheists will regard the idea that religion can make a difference to outcomes in sport as fanciful. But it is possible to put aside the issue of whether or not God exists and just examine the impact of faith on performance.

This is what Jeong-Keun Park of Seoul University did in 2000 by studying the performances of Korean

athletes. He found that prayer was not only a key factor in coping with anxiety but also in attaining peak performance.

A quote from a participant in Park's study encapsulates the findings: "I always prepared my game with prayer. I committed all things to God, without worry. These prayers make me calmer and more secure and I forget the fear of losing. It resulted in good play."

This echoes extraordinary research about the power of faith from the world of medicine. In the 1960s, a series of studies found that **heart disease is far less common among the religious than in the general population**, even after controlling for different lifestyles. Later studies extended this finding, including a paper in 1996 which found that mortality rates in secular kibbutzim are nearly twice that of their religious counterparts.

It seemed that religious beliefs conferred real health benefits.

As Anne Harrington, Professor of Medical History at Harvard University, puts it: "There is an innate capacity for our bodies to bring into being, to the best of their ability, the optimistic scenarios in which we fervently believe".

Matthew Syed is the author of Bounce: The Myth of Talent and the Power of Practice

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