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From Mission to Competition: The Experiences of 10 LDS Missionary Student-Athletes Returning to Competition in the National Collegiate Athletic Association Division I

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From Mission to Competition: The Experiences of 10 LDS Missionary Student-Athletes Returning to Competition in the National Collegiate Athletic Association Division I

Cover Page Footnote

LDS stands for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

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Introduction

NCAA DI Student-Athletes/Returning LDS Missionaries

Of interest in the current study was that some missionaries for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) are NCAA DI student-athletes who leave behind their particular sport for 18 (for females) to 24 (for males) months. However, upon their return, they are often expected to readily compete at a very high level. This type of transitional experience—in and out of sport—has been investigated by a number of scholars (e.g., Cosh, LeCouteur, Crabb, & Kettler, 2013; Lavalley, Gordon, & Grove, 1997; Lavalley, Nesti, Borkoles, Cockerill, & Edge, 2000; Russell, Cottingham, Barry, Lee, & Walsh, 2018). In general, these researchers have found that a transitional period can be an extremely strenuous and difficult process for the athlete(s) involved, especially in relation to the physical toll it takes on their bodies. Yet, there is no research to date that is dedicated to the transitional experience of LDS missionaries who are also collegiate student-athletes as they return from missions and matriculate back into collegiate sport.

Transitioning from an LDS mission back into NCAA DI college sport is also a unique experience. For one thing, over the course of a mission, LDS missionaries devote little time towards physical and mental training (Edgley, 1996). Although the many hours of riding a bike and/or walking may provide some cardiovascular strength, muscle atrophy still commonly occurs; this means that they return from a mission in a potentially detrimental physical and mental state.

Becoming a Missionary for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

Applying, becoming, and serving as a missionary for the LDS Church has been described as both a trying and beautiful experience (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2018). First, those who voluntarily choose to serve a mission apply to the headquarters of the LDS Church located in Salt Lake City, Utah (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2018). After a period of time (i.e., generally a few weeks), the leadership within the LDS Church then determines where each prospective missionary will spend their time as a full-time missionary; the *call to serve* is then transmitted (via email or snail mail) to the newly called missionary (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2018).

The mission call elicits both excitement and angst for those who have applied because missionary service is conducted worldwide (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2018). This means that the prospective missionary could be called to serve anywhere including, for example, in Africa, Argentina, Mexico, and/or the United States. Missionaries leave everything behind (e.g., education, social life, family, friends, athletic careers, vocations, etc.) as they demonstrate “their love to the Savior, who charged, ‘Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature’” (Edgley, 1996, p. 2; see also Mark 16:15 in the King James version of the Bible, 2013). In addition, some who engage in missionary service (which begins as young as 18 and 19 years old) will return to DI competition upon completion of their mission time.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of LDS missionary student-athletes returning to NCAA DI competition. Questions of interest included: What types of effects does this transition have on the returning missionary student-athletes’ spiritual and athletic identities, in addition to their sport performances? What is the nature of these identity and performance effects (e.g., could they be both

positive and negative)? And, will these changes in the NCAA DI students' identities last beyond their returning to play in NCAA DI sport?

Methods

Procedures

By selecting a qualitative research design for the current study—Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR; Hill, 2012)—we wanted to “work within the context of human experiences” (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 6). In addition, we wanted to make meaning out of those individual and collective experiences that NCAA DI LDS missionaries went through when returning to DI sport.

According to Hill and colleagues (Hill, Knox, Thompson, Williams, Hess, & Ladany, 2005), Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) is “predominantly constructivist, with some post-positivism elements” (p. 197). Related to researcher ontology and axiology, CQR researchers believe that there are socially constructed, multiple, and equally valid views of the “truth” (i.e., constructivist thought); in addition, they acknowledge, therefore, that researcher positionalities inevitably influence the entire research process; so, they should be discussed directly at the outset as well as throughout. CQR is perfect for “studying the inner experiences, attitudes, and beliefs of individuals, because it allows researchers to gain a rich, detailed understanding that is not usually possible with quantitative methods” (Hill, 2012, p. 14). As a result, the aim of those who utilize CQR is to re-represent as closely as possible how participants view their own world (Hill, 2012), while at the same time recognizing that researcher worldviews also have an impact on how the data is interpreted and the themes are constructed.

Researchers implementing CQR also use nine key principles to guide their work: (a) an inductive or bottom-up approach; (b) the use of open-ended questions in their interviews; (c) a reliance on participant words versus numbers; (d) a belief in the importance of context for each entire case; (e) a small number of total cases are explored in depth; (f) multiple perspectives from at least three primary research team members and one external auditor are included; (g) a consensus process amongst team members in data analysis; (h) a strong emphasis on the role of culture, trustworthiness, and ethics; and (i) a continuous return to raw data to verify conclusions (see p. 8 in Hill, 2012). The different team members assembled within a group using CQR may see the data differently; however, the strength of more than one interpretation adds to the richness of the data analysis constructed by the team.

In terms of the interview process, Lauer and colleagues (Lauer, Zakrajsek, Fisher, Bejar, McCowan, Martin, & Vosloo, 2018) put it succinctly when they stated, “the researcher and participant work together to construct a narrative about the participants' experiences, and probes within a semi-structured interview guide point participants toward specific aspects of their experiences” (p. 43). In other words, CQR researchers set up conditions by which it is hoped that participants feel like their flow of thought(s), idea(s), and experience(s) will be explored together. In addition, the smaller sample sizes used by CQR researchers allows for saturation as well as for the participants' words and experiences to be interpreted with contextual depth.

Participants

Ten US NCAA DI current and former (i.e., within the last 10 years) returned missionary student-athletes participated in the current study (eight self-identified as male and two self-identified as female; see Table 1). All participants were required to have

served a full-time mission for the LDS Church. These student-athletes participated in four different sports (baseball, cross-country/track and field, football, and swimming). Male student-athletes were slightly older ($M = 25.8$ years of age) compared to female student-athletes ($M = 24$ years of age). All self-identified as US citizens, European American, and heterosexual; in addition, five were married and three had children. Participants had served missions in Africa, North America, and South America. Standard within the LDS Church mission protocols is that male missionaries serve for 24 months, while female missionaries serve for 18 months (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2018).

The Role of the Researcher in the Study

The research team was comprised of five U.S. members. One was a professor in sport psychology, another was an assistant professor in sport psychology, two were doctoral students in sport psychology, and one was a doctoral student in sport management. All five self-identified as US citizens, White, and heterosexual; two identified as female and three identified as male. Two had children while three did not. Two self-identified as Christian and were members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints who had served LDS missions; two were also Christian that self-identified as Episcopalian and Evangelical; and one self-identified as non-denominational. In addition, three played collegiate sports (soccer, tennis, and track and field) and one was an ex-NCAA DI strength and conditioning coach.

Bracketing Interview, Biases, and Positionality

Before collecting data, all team members reflected on their positionality in relation to DI sport, religion, spirituality, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In their first meeting, they discussed these reflections with each other. In addition, the first author underwent an individual bracketing interview (Rolls & Relf, 2006) conducted by the second author using the same interview guide that was used with the study participants (see below). Based off of the bracketing interview, as well as the group biases discussion, team members went into the current study assuming the following: (a) race, gender, and religion would all be factors impacting NCAA DI missionary student-athlete identities and experiences; (b) the fact that two of the five research team members had served an LDS mission and currently belonged to the LDS Church would create its own set of individual and unique biases; (c) sexuality along with race, gender, and religion would play a factor in the participants' experiences in sport and in the LDS Church; and (d) having a strong sense of spirituality—because of serving a mission—may be both advantageous and disadvantageous for some returning NCAA DI missionary student-athletes.

In addition, the first author engaged in several self-reflective practices throughout the current study. Self-reflectivity is a “tool to enhance awareness of our situatedness and, subsequently, to be more receptive to perspectives that approach the world from a different position” (Saukko, 2002, p. 88). The first author continuously self-reflects in three main ways: (a) by keeping a personal journal; (b) by engaging in meditation; and (c) by praying. By self-monitoring and recording their thoughts, feelings, impressions, connections to religion, physical states, and emotions throughout the entire research process, the first author became more aware of and was able to verbalize their inherent positionality.

In addition, the research team also played a vital role in helping the first author throughout the entire research process. In particular, the first author was challenged by

the research team on many occasions throughout the data analysis process to think about the ways that their experience of serving a mission themselves may have been different from both the reality of the experience that participants were describing as well as the way that the rest of the research team was constructing participants' experiences.

Data Generation

After Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, 10 participants were recruited by the first author/interviewer via purposeful sampling (Miles & Huberman, 1994) built upon existing professional contacts. These professional contacts were asked to share a flyer detailing the research project and contact information for the first author. After hearing from an initial number of participants, the first author/interviewer established new contacts via snowball sampling (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Eight male and two female LDS returned missionaries/DI college student-athletes volunteered via email to participate in the current study. The first author/interviewer then emailed each participant an informed consent form and they set up individual interview times to be interviewed that were convenient for them. All 10 participants were interviewed by telephone.

Interview Guide

The first and second author created the interview guide used in the current study. The aim was to construct questions that captured participants' spiritual identities, mission experience, and transition back into DI sport (e.g., "How do you define LDS spirituality?"; "How does LDS spirituality differ from LDS religion for you, if it does at all?"; "What was your transition like back into sport?" In what ways does your LDS spiritual identity relate to your DI performance, if at all?").

In addition, all participants chose a pseudonym to represent themselves in the data. The interviews averaged 48 minutes in length. After the interviews were audio-recorded, one research assistant plus the first author/interviewer transcribed them verbatim. The participants were then emailed their verbatim transcripts and asked if they contained an accurate re-representation of the interview. They were also asked if they wanted to make any changes. No changes were requested by any participants in the current study.

Data Analysis

After research team members each independently read all transcripts for general understanding, there were five major steps they took related to the CQR data analysis process. These included: (a) creating a broad *domain* list that captured the unique and meaningful topic areas explored in the interviews; (b) constructing *core ideas*—from participants' own words—to summarize the narrative; (c) developing a *category* structure which captured all of the within-domain data after coming to consensus; (d) conducting a *cross-analysis*, where the first and second authors explored the raw data further to give frequency labels (i.e., typical, general, variant) to each category; and (e) sending out the final domain and demographic tables, as well as the transcripts to the external auditor for feedback (Hill, 2012). The external auditor read through all transcripts and the domain table and then added suggestions that prompted further exploration of the domains and categories by the research team.

Throughout research group meetings and the data analytic process, the act of returning and re-returning to the raw data was a common occurrence for each group member. The continuous of returning to the data elicited and solidified the emerging domains that served as the scaffolding for the entire study (Hill, 2012).

As a result of these processes, a final domain table was constructed (see Table 2). All participants were then sent the final domain table (e.g., member-checking; Creswell & Poth, 2018). No participants requested any changes to the domain table. Finally, to ensure that trustworthiness occurred, the research team made a commitment to three criteria: (a) they established the integrity of the data; (b) they tried to balance subjectivity with reflexivity, and (c) they tried to communicate their findings clearly and with applicability not only to research but to practice (Hill, 2012).

Findings

The purpose of the current study was to explore the experiences of LDS missionary student-athletes returning to competition in the NCAA DI. Four major domains were constructed by the research team after reviewing transcripts multiple times and coming to consensus: (a) *the development of an LDS missionary identity*; (b) *challenges associated with returning to DI student-athlete identity*; (c) *benefits of mission identity on DI student-athlete identity*; and (d) *practical implications for sport psychology professionals and other support staff*. Each domain contained multiple categories of experiences. Overall, it appears that participants' perceptions were that both the benefits of and challenges with serving an LDS mission—and being gone for between 18-24 months from NCAA DI competition—had significant implications on their athletic identity as well as their return to performance.

Domain I: The Development of an LDS Missionary Identity

This first domain was constructed to illustrate the heightened sense of spiritual identity that NCAA DI student-athlete missionaries felt as a result of having served a mission. The four categories under this domain included: (a) *experiencing a deeper connection with God*; (b) *more opportunities to work out faith in daily life*; (c) *going from a “self” to “other” orientation*; and (d) *acclimating to a different culture*.

Experiencing a Deeper Connection with God

Many participants felt that because of their development as a missionary for the LDS Church, their personal connection to God was made deeper. This connection was described as cyclical; in other words, because they were dedicating their lives towards the betterment of others, participants felt that this provided a deeper meaning to their lives and a stronger connection to God. For example, Sarah mentioned “My personal connection with God was actually a beautiful thing throughout this whole [mission] experience...my connection was made stronger [by]...serving Him and His children”. In addition, Scott described that as a result of serving a mission, his personal connection with God was “the most influential part of my life, and my mission allowed me to go out and share that with people all day long and with everyone that I could talk to.” It appears, therefore, that actions work on an LDS missionary to increase a sense of belief or connection to God.

More Opportunities to Work out Faith in Daily Life

Returned missionaries/DI student-athletes also described how they had more opportunities to work out their faith in daily life—through action—when they were on a mission as compared to being a college student-athlete. They did this through reading the scriptures every day, saying prayers (morning and night, plus multiple times throughout the day), fasting more than once monthly, and listening to and singing church music/hymns. For example, Grant described a routine of reading and studying important texts as follows: “Studying the scriptures [daily] really puts things into perspective and

allows for clear and clearer understanding of what I need to do to deepen my relationship with God and that can allow for greater growth for me personally.” Jake, another participant from the study, also mentioned the importance of scripture study:

As a missionary, I believed that God would respond to the situations that I was encountering, and by reading the Bible, God’s word, and the scriptures, I was able to understand these principles and then apply them and see how it affected the people that I was serving.

Going From a “Self” to “Other” Orientation

It was clear from the interviews that missionary student-athletes focused on helping others in whatever ways they could while they were on their mission trips. This shift in identity from a “self = athlete” focus to an “other” focus seemed hard at first for many participants. As Rose mentioned:

Oh, missions are really, really hard! And they are really hard because you’re on your feet all day, you’re always doing things...there’s no time for yourself, but by investing myself in other people, I was truly able to see and feel God’s love for them and that was something I never really had experienced before...and that was one of the best things about my mission was coming close to people, feeling that God loves them so much, even though their lives were completely different than yours.

Grant, who also experienced this “self” to “other” orientation, described its effect on him personally:

The choices I made as a missionary, and now, have eternal rewards. [As a missionary] I was doing what I should be doing, like trying to serve others and putting others first, that includes over myself, which was really hard at first.

Acclimating to a Different Culture

Many participants also described how challenging it was to acclimate to a new culture. For example, Bob mentioned:

From my mission, what I can understand is a difference in culture...it’s just different from my own culture and circumstances and that provided me with...a new perspective that I gained...that helped me to be able to not be so materialistic in my transition back to normal life.

Similar to Bob, Grant also experienced difficulty in acclimating to a different culture compared to that of his own (the US):

The difference of culture was really hard for me at first. You know, the American style of living and how poor these people live in place X [mission location], compared to here and how difficult that was to see and just accept, that was extremely hard.

Domain II: Challenges Associated with Returning to DI Student-Athlete Identity

After returning home from a mission, NCAA DI student-athletes transition back into their university lives. Of the 10 participants, eight had played at least one year of DI sport prior to serving a mission. According to participants in the current study, these experiences could be described in the categories of: (a) *being de-trained physically, technically, and mentally*; (b) *understanding spirituality differently*; and (c) *going through acculturation*.

Being De-trained Physically, Technically, and Mentally

One of the drawbacks to being a missionary is that one can devote little time to physical, psychological, and tactical training while they are serving a mission. For student-athlete missionaries in the current study, this meant that returning to collegiate sport was a huge challenge to overcome once they returned. For example, Bob mentioned:

When I got back from my mission and started working out again, and not training or working out really for two straight years, having not thrown a baseball, swung a bat, and that was really, really hard but thankfully [University X] had a great strength coach and staff that helped with this transition and that helped ease the burden as you start back into it...but it was still a shock.

Benny also experienced a slow start upon return from his mission. As he stated:

Getting back into baseball where I was taking ground balls again, and I was hitting and stuff, it was actually coming back to me, but it was coming back at times a lot slower than others, and that was hard to see in myself because I knew what I was capable of.

Moving from “Other”- Back to “Self-Focused” Identity

Participants also described the phenomenon of moving back into an identity—“DI student-athlete”—which focused on “self” versus “other,” exactly the opposite of what they had experienced as missionaries. Being a DI student-athlete was described as being centered on oneself as an athlete—on improving and getting better physically. Scott went into detail about how this aspect of changing identity was difficult for him: “I really had a hard time with adjusting...again as a student-athlete. I feel like as a student-athlete often everything is about *me*...it’s really easy just to get so self-absorbed...because as a missionary it wasn’t about me at all.”

Scott went onto say:

It’s like how to recognize that it’s not a bad thing first of all to, take care of yourself and have these goals...it’s a little bit of guilt like, ‘Is it okay to dedicate so much time to myself?’ But I had to just recognize that it’s a good thing and it’s something that I love.

Going Through Acculturation

Participants described how they had culturally acclimated to the customs of the people they served in their missions. This included learning a different language, eating different foods, and getting used to a different climate. However, coming back to the United States was difficult for many because food was plentiful, the weather was different, and everyone was speaking English. In other words, participants in the current study—especially those who served outside the US—noticed the amount of resources the US had versus the countries where they served; they became more aware of the inequities between the US and other countries. For example, Bob told a story about going to a restaurant in US upon return from his mission and the amount of money that was spent just for one meal:

I just remember feeling so empty inside knowing that we were spending, or my parents were spending, like 200 bucks on a dinner, a short-lived dinner, when people in place X, their base salary as a schoolteacher or a police officer was 100 per month! That really hurt me inside.

Similar to Bob's experience, John described his own experience of going through acculturation upon return from serving his mission:

After I got back, I really started to realize that life wasn't just about me. There are millions of repressed children out there in the world, and I saw that as a missionary. I think my mission was fundamental in helping me realize that life wasn't just about me. It was a realization that hit pretty hard coming back home and seeing all of the opportunities that this country [US] has to offer.

Domain III: Benefits of Mission Identity on DI Student-Athlete Identity

Of additional interest was that participants also described how their increased changes in self-identity - through the experience of their mission - played a role in making the transition back into DI athletics easier for them. For example, this included: (a) *being able to put things into perspective*; (b) *being more mentally and spiritually resilient*; (c) *being able to set effective daily, weekly, and monthly goals*; (d) *being able to persevere*; and (e) *experiencing new spiritual aspects as a student-athlete/returned missionary*.

Being Able to put Things Into Perspective

Participants' views of "winning" and also of sport as the former "be all end all" changed as a result of their mission experiences. They described believing that there was now more to life than sports and winning. Sarah mentioned that: "I'm a child of God and that is because that worth never changes and that's who I define myself as; I will not always be a student-athlete." John also talked about this broader perspective and how it helped him with other aspects of his life:

A mission shifted my entire perspective in a sense...like this [a mission] is two years of my life that I'm dedicating, but it's not just two years, it's for the rest of my life that I'm making a decision...I'm choosing to elevate my level of dedication, my level of commitment to God and I'm trying to think less about myself, and think more about how I could be of service to people who may be in pain, or in need...this was fundamental for me, especially after I got home and back into football and school.

Being More Mentally and Spiritually Resilient

In a related vein, participants also expressed the ability to go through hard things—like athletic practice or school—and learn from them after having served their missions. As Scott stated:

The mission was harder definitely and because of serving a mission, like getting [back] into running, I knew that I could do it. I mean I had done a lot of hard things in those two years and I had overcome a lot of difficulties and for the most part on my own so I knew that even though running was very difficult you know what, I could do it. It gave me a lot of confidence.

Benny also talked about the profound effect that his mission had in his life not only in sport, but outside of sport as well:

A mission just showed me how I could grow not only on a personal level, but spiritually. Because of serving my mission, it helped me so much, on an athletic and professional level, like in baseball and definitely now in my career, my educational level, and, I don't know how to describe it because it helped me so much.

Being Able to set Effective Daily, Weekly, and Monthly Goals

The ability to engage in daily and weekly planning as well as to set goals was reported as a benefit to athletic identity by participants in the current study. Grant described it this way:

Having the ability to look at a problem and say that my actions and my decisions can impact that problem. I don't feel like any problem is insurmountable now because of my mission. So, with time and devotion I can overcome just about anything. I also feel like confidence in my swimming that my mission has impacted me as well.

John also mentioned the newly acquired skillset of goal-setting as a result of serving a mission:

When I came home from my mission, I was still in this mode of setting goals and involving Him [God] in my goals through prayer or communication, and I just asked Him to help me with my new goals as a returned missionary. I was able to do that [goal-setting] because I learned it as a missionary.

Being Able to Persevere

In addition to knowing they could handle hard things, participants also described remaining calm and persevering through challenges in sport. For example, Grant stated:

One of the most dramatic ones was being able to respond to stressors and adversity calmly and relaxed and being able to stay level-headed and respond with ease and again with more calm and focus. I think I developed that on my mission to a very large degree.

John also talked about his personal experience of going through hardships as a missionary, and how that helped him in times after his mission:

There were moments on my mission where I really, really struggled. Then through that struggle, I felt like I was reminded of my love of God, of my love of Jesus Christ, of my love of trying to be the best individual that I could be through those difficult moments. This experience has definitely helped since I've been back as a missionary.

Displaying new Skills as a Student-Athlete/Returned Missionary

Participants also stated that they saw new opportunities to apply their newfound skills in the classroom, in church, or in personal relationships. This included displaying a greater sense of maturity by attending sport meetings early, being prepared, doing homework well and on-time, and being able to communicate better with teachers and coaches now versus prior to their missions. For example, Rose explained how she developed these skills as part of her mission experience:

Just the fact of getting up at the same time every morning and just like kind of having an attitude of like "This is the way it is and this is what I'm going to do," like quitting is not an option...it's something that I have also utilized now as a student-athlete.

Domain IV: Practical Implications for Sport Psychology Professionals and Other Support Staff

Participants were asked during the interview how DI support staff (i.e., coaches, sport psychology consultants, nutritionists, athletic directors, parents, etc.) could make their transition from mission to competition easier. The different categories constructed to represent this domain consisted of: (a) *offering different physical training regimens and*

nutrition programs; (b) improving communication between the student-athlete(s) and their support staff; and (c) opportunities for sport psychology professionals.

Offering Different Physical Training Regimens and Nutrition Programs

Participants suggested that it would be helpful for support staff to individualize strength and conditioning and nutritional programs for student-athletes upon their return from a mission. Some returned missionaries expressed the desire for a training program with more intensity and frequency while others expressed regret because they felt like they were asked to push their de-trained bodies too hard. For example, Adam said:

I think I would've focused more on like my nutrition plan and like what I was eating more than just my workouts and stuff, and so that I had an added sense of muscle. And so I think those two things would've probably helped me more with my transition back into sport.

Similar to Adam, Scott also wished he had done things different in regard to physical training upon return from his mission:

When I got home, I was training by myself, because I wasn't there with my team at first and that was so hard. I actually ended up redshirting an entire year just to get back into shape. It was so hard getting back into shape, especially by myself, that was probably the hardest and it could have been really helpful to receive more help or guidance or something from the coaches...somehow.

Improving Communication Between the Student-Athlete and Support Staff

Participants also expressed interest in improving the communication between themselves and their coaches primarily, but also with other support staff upon return from a mission. Sam reflected that:

I think something that probably would be very useful for coaches for missionaries coming back from a mission is just to like sit down and talk realistic expectations and say you know "Look, we understand you're coming back from a mission, you've been gone for two years, it's going to take some time." I think it can be hard for missionaries coming back from a mission going into college sports...where it's high pressure you know to perform at a high level.

Relatedly, because Sam internalized how far off he was from being the DI athlete he was prior to his mission, he also suggested that positive feedback from coaches and support staff would be helpful in the return back to competition:

So, I think just conversations on the side, outside of practice with coaches saying you know, like I said, "Look, it's going to take some time. We see that you're putting in the work, be patient with yourself." I think that would help a lot.

Opportunities for Sport Psychology Professionals

There are also opportunities for sport psychology professionals to create mental training programs for this unique population. For example, John mentioned how important his mindset was as an LDS student-athlete:

Choosing to adopt a positive mindset and be better for it and learn from it. I think mental toughness came from the adversity and I think it also came from making a decision that I was going to choose how I was going to think and how my mindset was going to be.

In addition, Rose also mentioned the importance of having mental health professionals on staff that could be available for the student-athletes:

Just having more people in the athletics area that are aware of mental health and aware of how to best prevent and help that, or just to be wary of that would be really helpful. There were resources that were available [at her university], but they weren't very organized, which made it hard.

Discussion

As stated previously, the purpose of the current study was to explore the experiences of LDS missionary student-athletes returning to competition in the NCAA DI. Questions of interest included: What types of effects does this transition have on returned missionary student-athletes' spiritual and athlete identities as well as on their sport performances? What is the nature of these identity and performance effects (e.g., could they be both positive and negative)? In addition, will these changes in returned missionary student-athlete identities last beyond their return to play in NCAA DI sport?

There were four major findings which converged with previous literature in addition to one other finding that diverged from it. For example, participants in the current study described having a newfound perspective on both themselves and the worlds they operated in as a result of dealing with mission "hard things." They reported that as their spiritual and mental skills and awareness moved from self- to other-focused, a kind of mental and spiritual resiliency took hold. This gave them a broader perspective on life and sport. This is a similar finding to previous research focused on athlete resiliency and the increased ability to get through hard things (e.g., Mosley, Frierson, Cheng, & Aoyagi, 2015).

A second important finding converging with previous literature relates to culture shock and transition in and out of sport. As participants in the current study described, returning from an LDS mission was a challenging experience. One aspect in particular that participants described was related to culture shock. According to Adler (1975), culture shock is "a set of emotional reactions to the loss of perceptual reinforcements from one's own culture, to new cultural stimuli which have little or no meaning, and to the understanding of new diverse experiences" (p. 13). Not only did participants experience culture shock in the initial stages of their mission trip, but they experienced culture shock upon their re-entry into the US (or from returning from their mission in another part of the US). Some of this re-entry shock related to seeing the discrepancy between the resources they had grown up with and the resources available in the places where they had served (i.e., both within and outside of the US). As Callahan (2010) stated, there are two main reasons for re-entry difficulty:

First, the sojourner changes through contact with another culture in the contexts of language, customs, dress, and worldview. Second, the condition of the original culture has changed. Physical, linguistic, social, religious, familial, and technological changes may have occurred during the visitor's absence. (p. 1)

In addition, at the same time participants were experiencing re-entry culture shock, they were required to train and prepare for competition in their particular sport at the highest collegiate level. Wylleman and Lavallée (2004) have also described how the transition in and out of sport can be an emotionally very difficult experience for high-level athletes and for those in their close environment (e.g., parents, children, friends, etc.).

A third salient finding that converges with previous literature is that there is an opportunity for sport psychology professionals and other support staff members to work

with this unique group of NCAA DI student-athletes, especially in terms of using a more holistic approach to nurture their spiritual development. As Watson and Nesti (2005) suggested, in “fostering personal qualities such as perseverance, courage, and optimism, and encouraging an awareness of the spiritual, consultants can help athletes become more able to cope with the adversities and pressures of high-level sport” (p. 231). This finding is consistent as well with other researchers who have explored participants’ understandings of the benefit of spirituality as it pertains to performance in a variety of sport settings (Ballard & Wilson, 2018; Czech & Bullett, 2007; Dillon & Tait, 2000; Ronkainen, Tikkanen, Littlewood, & Nesti, 2015; Nesti, 2004; Sullivan, 2010; Vernacchia, McGuire, Reardon, & Templin, 2000). Further—and similar to Mosley et al.’s (2015) practical implications for those who work with Christian student-athletes—sport psychology and sport chaplains could integrate prayer and scripture study, collaborate with local LDS leaders, and/or simply engage in conversations about God or Jesus Christ with those LDS student-athletes for whom this is important.

In a similar way, sport psychology professionals could work in and through coaches and other support staff to make sure that they understand the unique needs of those DI student-athletes returning from an LDS mission. A caring coaching practice can have profound implications on the overall well-being and ultimate performance of DI student-athletes, as results from Fisher and colleagues’ work has indicated (i.e., Fisher, Bejar, Larsen, Fynes, & Gearity, 2017; Fisher, Larsen, Bejar, & Shigeno, 2019; Fisher, Shigeno, Bejar, Larsen, & Gearity, 2018). In addition, work by Hogue, Fry, Fry, and Pressman (2013)—who measured caring coaching environments by sampling cortisol levels—demonstrated how significant these positive environments are for improving performance.

A fourth significant finding that converges with previous literature is related to cultural sport psychology (CSP; Stambulova & Ryba, 2013). Cultural sport psychology scholars have defined CSP as increasing “cross-cultural understandings and deliver[ing] culturally sensitized sport services” (Schinke, McGannon, Parham, & Lane, 2012, p. 34). Participants in the current study described how they would have liked it if more sport support staff understood what they were going through, specifically upon their return to DI sport. This call from LDS student-athletes for an increase in cultural awareness for sport support staff could lead to a more nuanced and connected approach to service delivery. By becoming more culturally aware about Christianity and spirituality, sport psychology professionals (Egli & Fisher, 2017) as well as others could be of greater benefit to spiritual student-athletes.

One interesting divergent finding—especially as it relates to material put out by the LDS Church (2020)—is that serving a mission is not always beneficial, especially in terms of re-entry into sport performance for LDS DI student-athletes. Although all participants in the current study described the many benefits of having served an LDS mission (e.g., loss of ego due to switching from a self-to-other focus, developing resiliency, goal-setting, etc.), many also talked about the detrimental physical toll as well as emotional effects which occurred to their athletic performance as a result of serving a mission. For example, many described the toughness inherent in bringing a body back into DI shape after not having worked out in two years, as well as the expectations from coaching and strength and conditioning staffs who felt that this would be easy to achieve. In addition, participants also realized that in order to compete at this level they would

need to adopt a self-focus again; this kind of self-focused morality created guilt in some LDS returned missionaries that they weren't prepared to handle. Since some of the findings from the current study related to practical implications, we will focus on limitations and future directions for research in the final section below.

Limitations and Future Directions for Research

There were several limitations contained within the current study. First, in terms of demographics, all of the participants self-identified as White and heterosexual. This could be due to the fact that roughly 86 percent of LDS members self-identify as White and there are no statistics on how many LDS members are LGBTQIA+ (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2019). However, it would be important moving forward to interview both BIPOC and gay LDS DI student-athletes. Similarly, it would be important to interview more LDS DI student-athletes who self-identify as female since only two of the 10 participants in the current study self-identified as female. Finally, interviewing DI agnostic, atheist, evangelical Christian, Muslim, and other student-athletes would also be of interest in terms of cultural awareness and diversity of services that sport professionals should be delivering.

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Table 1
Demographics

Participant	Age	Sex	Ethnicity	Race	Sexual Orientation	Relational Status	Sport	Mission	Self-Identity
John Smith	27	Male	Scottish	Caucasian	Heterosexual	Married, 1 daughter	Football	North America	Christian
Sarah	24	Female	English	Caucasian	Heterosexual	Single, no kids	Cross Country/Track	North America	Mormon/LDS
Benny	31	Male	English	Caucasian	Heterosexual	Married, 1 daughter	Baseball	South America	Father/Husband
Jake	21	Male	White	Caucasian	Heterosexual	Single, no kids	Cross Country/Track	North America	Christian
Rose	24	Female	European	Caucasian	Heterosexual	Married	Cross Country/Track	North America	Wife
Scott	24	Male	European	Caucasian	Heterosexual	Single, no kids	Cross Country/Track	South America	Child of God
Adam	26	Male	Scandinavian	Caucasian	Heterosexual	Married, 1 son	Football	North America	Father/Husband
Bob	28	Male	Ireland	Caucasian	Heterosexual	Single, no kids	Baseball	Africa	Son of God
Sam Jones	27	Male	Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	Caucasian	Heterosexual	Married	Baseball	South America	Husband
Grant	22	Male	European	Caucasian	Heterosexual	Dating	Swimming	Africa	Member of the LDS Church

All names are represented by pseudonyms.

Table 2

Domains/Categories	Illustrative Core Idea	Frequency
<i>Domain I: The Development of an LDS Missionary Identity</i>		
a) Experiencing a deeper connection w/ God	Putting belief into practice (e.g., prayer, scripture study, church material study, church attendance, fasting); Relationship w/ Companions	10/10
b) Working out faith in daily life	Demonstrated faith in God's will; came to rely and follow the "Holy Spirit" more	8/10
c) Going from a self to other orientation	Sacrificing their lives to go and serve; Being Humble/Developing Humility	8/10
d) Acclimating to a different culture	New climate; new food; new language; no family and/or friends; living with a stranger; away from comfort; new "learning curve"	7/10
<i>Domain II: Challenges Associated With Returning to DI Student-Athlete Identity</i>		
a) De-trained physically	Walking and/or riding bikes all day long as a missionary, while also not training specifically for sport was detrimental.	10/10
b) De-trained technically	No sport specific exercises (atrophy occurs/weight gained and automatic processing diminishes)	8/10
c) De-trained mentally	Not having the competitive fire/mindset upon return; no "purpose"	8/10
d) Moving from other back to self-focused identity	Switching from "other" (selfless) to now "self" (selfish); not being able to study the Gospel like before	6/10
e) Going through acculturation	Getting back to normalcy; trying to understand how to be a US citizen/college athlete	10/10
<i>Domain III: Benefits of Mission Identity on DI Student-Athlete Identity</i>		
a) Putting things into perspective	Knowing that sport wasn't/isn't everything; there is more to life than me being just an athlete	10/10
b) Resiliency, both mentally and spiritually	Able to bounce back from adversity and learn from those experiences	6/10
c) Goal-setting	Knowing how to set affective daily/weekly/monthly goals as individuals and as a team	4/10
d) Be able to persevere	Able to continue pressing forward despite adversity and trying times; having the "broader perspective" as a guide	7/10
e) Displaying new skills as a student-athlete/returned missionary	More faithful and hopeful for sport and life in general; able to make spirituality a priority despite life's workload as a student-athlete; views failure differently; "spiritual skills" gained and employed (e.g., prayer). Maturity gained; able to know right and wrong and choose the right more often; able to work well with others (e.g., teammates)	10/10
<i>Domain IV: Practical Implications for Sport Psychology Professionals and Other Support Staff</i>		
a) Different physical training and nutritional programs	Suggestions for support staff to individualize S&C/Nutritional programs (every Elder/Sister will be different- tailored to individual needs)	10/10
b) Communication between RM/athlete and coaches/support staff	Having meetings (one-on-one and group) with RM's upon return; talking through together (coaches and RM) what needs to be done for a clear picture; having a mentor(s)	8/10
c) Opportunities for sport psychology professionals	Opportunities for sport psychology to work with this population- both mental health counseling and mental skills consulting.	8/10