

## **Perception Of Young Athletes On Pre-Match Prayers**

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### **Abstract**

In the world of sports, pre-match prayers by young athletes have become a popular phenomenon, especially in developing countries and it can be individual or team affairs. This study examines young athletes' perception of pre-match prayers based on religiosity and protection. The study employed a descriptive survey design. Data were collected from 389 young athletes from different states in Nigeria at the National Youths Game 2021 using a questionnaire. The questionnaire's Cronbach's coefficient alpha was 0.73. Frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were used to analyse the data. The results of this study revealed that a total of 1013 (65.1%) favourable responses and 543 (34.9%) unfavorable responses to pre-match prayer based on religiosity. While, pre-match prayers based on protection results revealed that, a total of 1099 (70.6%) favorable responses and 457 (29.4%) unfavorable responses. It concludes among other considerations that sport-related prayers by young athletes are all derived by extrinsic motivation with secular goals in mind. The findings of this study could be used as an effective technique for sports psychologists, coaches, and managers, and parents to deal with religiously inclined young athletes.

*Keywords:* Sports, Young athletes, Prayer, Religiosity, Protection, Psychology

### **INTRODUCTION**

Spirituality in sports is pivotal in most parts of the world. Joel (2021) stated that religiosity and spirituality are now an integral part of international sports, and have been accepted as an essential phenomenon among athletes, especially in sub-Saharan Africa. Prayer is an important aspect of spirituality and it is the common religious practice of communicating to God. Willett et al (2014) and Aicinen (2018) noted that prayer is perhaps the most commonly religious/spiritual resource used by athletes.

It was asserted that religious activity such as prayer is usually found in sports environments. Through prayer, athletes try to transcend the profane world into a more sacred, holy sphere to contact God (or a paranormal entity/ a higher power). Prayer and other religious and spiritual activities are crucial components of psychological coping strategies used by sportsmen and women and they play a key role in the sports life of most athletes globally (Jirásek, 2018). Scholes (2019) noted that prayer expressions are common among the National Football League athletes in the U.S and it is raising concerns among fans and media personnel. Elsewhere, Czech et al. (2004) observed that prayer is not only a personal and private silent practice but also a team custom. While Jirásek (2018) declared that praying is a religious and not a superstitious or magical behaviour. He further stated that peak performance can also be achieved through athletes' engagement in spiritual activities.

There are various sport-related prayer requests by athletes. Aicinena (2018) revealed that prayers by athletes are all derived by extrinsic motivation with secular goals in mind such as protection and victories during sports matches. Aicinena further revealed that the primary goal of most sport-related prayers is to increase the chance of success. Maranise (2013) confirmed that prayer is the most common religious activity used in sports as a technique for coping with uncertain and stressful situations, nervousness, and anxiety, and as a motivational device, particularly at elite contests, which is why coaches permit athletes time for prayer if necessary. Similarly, Najah et al. (2017) noted that athletes with higher religion/ spirituality and prayer lifestyles have the capacity to cope with anxiety compared with those with lower level of religion/ spirituality and prayer lifestyles. Guntoro and Putra (2022) observed that during matches at Indonesia National Football League when a goal is scored, it is common to see players on a team come together by praying or giving thanks to celebrate according to the teachings of their respective religions. And this phenomenon is also common in all sports in most parts of the world.

In the world of sports, pre-match prayers by young athletes have become a popular phenomenon, especially in developing countries and it can be individual or team affairs. Czech et al. (2004) ascertained that teams engage in prayer at religious services prior to games, or form circles to prayer at sporting events. Krieider (2003) noted that athletes often pray for divine interventions before a match and he also asserted that athletes pray for opponents to lose the match. Thekdi (2021) affirmed that most athletes do engage in prayers before every game. While Ronkainen and

Nesti (2020) confirmed that athletes value prayer before a crucial sports contest. In Nigeria, it has been observed that most athletes have the habit of praying before, during and after a sporting contest either personally or as a team (Ugba, 2017 & Joel, 2021). Pre-match prayers is a process where individual or a group communicate to God or a superior higher power about a match before it begins.

Religiosity plays an important role in the lives of many athletes. Jirásek (2018) affirmed that religiosity is culturally and socially constructed. Studies have revealed that many athletes engage in prayers due to their religious beliefs (Jackson & Wood, 2018; Aicinen, 2018; Jonathan & Jeffrey, 2015). It was ascertained that sports have a connection to religion through athletes and their religious faith and beliefs (Jirásek, 2018). Athletes generally consider their religious beliefs to be highly significant in their athletic careers (Roychowdhury, 2019). Jaber et al. (2023) stress that the belief of spiritual practice in different religions is defined as an essential source of mental and physical peace, consequently, enhancing athletes' performance in training and competition by being more apt towards spiritual practice, such as prayers. Sovran (2013) observed that in sub-Saharan Africa, several individuals still believe and are affiliated with spiritual/religious institutions and religiosity is a common phenomenon. Guntoro and Putra (2022) concluded that the greater the level of athletes' religiosity, the happier their lives are perceived and the lesser the level of their anxiety.

With respect to athletes' beliefs in religious practices such as prayers, Trothen (2019) gave examples of athletes' affirmation statement based on their religious beliefs, such as "God decided that our team should win tonight". Similarly, French (2015) asserts that to get God out of sports, the anti-religious crowd would need to get athletes out of sports. Baker (2018) is of the opinion that highly religious athletes believe in the role of God in all spheres of their lives, including their sports training or matches. While Kučič and Spehnik (2015) noted that with religiosity success may be easily achieved in sports.

Sports participation is accompanied by many uncertainties such as minor injuries or life-threatening injuries, and unsafe space among others due to the overweening importance of winning at all costs. Grey-Thompson (2017) argues that success in sporting contexts is often dependent upon prioritizing participant protection, well-being and welfare. Consequently, Oliver and Parker (2019) confirmed that athletes pray for protection on the field to confront the violent nature of

sports contests. It was also observed that religious practices such as prayer can serve as a protective factor against life anxieties (Khalaf et al., 2015). Elsewhere, Jaber et al. (2023) observed that religiosity can protect individuals, and athletes inclusive from mental and spiritual difficulty. Their findings further revealed that athletes' spiritual attitude also has a significant effect on their psychological safety. Ong et al. (2018) stress the need for young athletes to engage in sports in a safe and protective atmosphere.

Young adults engage in sports than any category of individual due to their strength and energy prowess. Joel et al. (2024) stated that young adults' sports participation is higher than any other age bracket worldwide. Bolarinwa (2021) concluded that young adults develop strength, coordination and teamwork through sports engagement and it aids prevention of non-communicable diseases and improves physical, mental and social health. According to Amarkhil et al. (2023), Sports participation has several social and cultural benefits in contemporary societies, including psychological and sociological ones.

Although sport and religiosity have been discussed from various perspectives, research assessing the perception of young athletes on pre-match prayers based on religiosity and protection is still limited. To date, to the best of the author's knowledge, no study has comprehensively explores the perception of young athletes on pre-match prayers based on religiosity and protection. Thus, the need for this study.

### **Research Questions**

1. Does pre-match prayers aid protection among young athletes?
2. Does pre-match prayers based on religiosity among young athletes?

### **METHODOLOGY**

A descriptive research design was used to describe the perception of young athletes on pre-match prayers based on religiosity and protection. The population of the study comprised 3,926 young athletes from 35 States that participated in the National Youths Games 2021 in Ilorin, Kwara State, Nigeria. Convenience sampling was employed to recruited participants. Information from the respondents was obtained using a self-constructed and validated questionnaire. The questionnaire was titled “Perception of Young Athletes on Pre-Match Prayers Questionnaires (PYAPPQ)”, which was used to gather data from respondents. This instrument was subjected to a reliability test

with the use of Cronbach Alpha and Spearman Rank methods; which yielded a reliability score of .73r. Cronbach Alpha and Spearman Rank methods were used to establish the internal consistency of each of the question items. Access to participants was sought through the coaches/managers of the state teams. The state team coaches/managers who agreed and were willing for their athletes to participate voluntarily in the study were required to tick the consent statement "I agree to allow my players to take part in the research" in the questionnaire consent form prior to being instructed to fill out the questionnaire. After extracting four incomplete respondents, a total of 389 young athletes participated in this study, with 56.8% males (n=221) and 43.2% females (n=168). Over one-third of the sample (44.5%) were aged between 14 and 16 years old, with the least common age bracket being below 7 years old (5.4%). The sample data was analyzed using descriptive statistics of frequency counts and percentages.

## RESULTS

**Table 1. Descriptive analysis on pre-match prayers based on religiosity among young athletes (n = 389)**

S/ N	Items	Favorable Response		Unfavorable Response		Total
		Frequen cy	Percent	Frequency	Percent	
1	Pre-match prayers are for fulfillment of faith	285	73.7%	104	26.7%	389
2	Pre-match prayers are ways of showing athletes belief	265	68.1%	124	31.9%	389
3	Pre-match prayers are means of seeking for God's interventions	231	49.4%	158	40.6%	389
4	Pre-match prayers are means of honoring the gods of the game	232	59.6%	157	40.4%	389
<b>Total (Percentage)</b>		<b>1013 (65.1%)</b>		<b>543 (34.9%)</b>		<b>1556 (100.0 %)</b>

Table 1 shows that on the four items raised to examine this variable; a total of 1556 responses were observed. The result revealed a total of 1013 (65.1%) favorable response and 543 (34.9%) unfavorable response.

**Hypothesis One:** There is no significant relationship between pre-match prayers and religiosity among young athletes.

**Table 2: PPMC Analysis of the Relationship between pre-match prayers and religiosity among young athletes**

S/N	Items	N	Frequency and Percentage				df	R	p – value	r <sup>2</sup>
			SA	A	D	SD				
1	Pre-match prayers are for fulfillment of faith	389	107 (27.5)	178 (45.8)	51 (13.1)	53 (13.6)	387	0.44	0.001	19.4 %
2	Pre-match prayers are ways of showing athletes belief		117 (7.5)	148 (38.1)	59 (15.2)	65 (16.7)				
3	Pre-match prayers are means of seeking for God’s interventions		121 (31.1)	110 (28.3)	71 (18.3)	87 (22.4)				
4	Pre-match prayers are means of honoring the gods of the game		97 (24.9)	135 (34.7)	65 (16.7)	92 (23.7)				
Column Total			442 (28.4)	571 (36.7)	246 (15.8)	297 (19.1)				

$p \leq 0.05$

Table two shows a PPMC analysis of the relationship between pre-match prayers and religiosity among young athletes (n = 389). Of the 1,556 responses observed, the result reveals a total SA response of 442 (28.4%), A 571 (36.7%), D 246 (15.8%) and SD 297 (19.1%) with a significant positive relationship between pre-match prayers and religiosity among young athletes,  $r = 0.44$ ,

$df = 387$ , and  $p < 0.001$ . This implies that pre-match prayers among young athletes in Nigeria has a significant relationship with them being religious. Therefore, the tested null hypothesis is rejected. The coefficient of determination ( $r$ ) of the result, indicates that pre-match prayers accounts for 19.4% variation in them being religious.

**Table 3. Descriptive analysis on pre-match prayers based on protection among young athletes (n = 389)**

S/N	Items	Favorable Response		Unfavorable Response		Total
		Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	
1	Pre-match prayers assured athletes injury free matches	215	55.3%	174	44.7%	389
2	Pre-match prayers protect athletes from evil intentions during matches	275	70.7	114	29.3%	389
3	Pre-match prayers build confidence in athletes during matches	308	79.2%	81	20.8%	389
4	Pre-match prayers protect athletes against opponent charms intentions	301	77.4	88	22.6%	389
<b>Total (Percentage)</b>		<b>1099 (70.6%)</b>		<b>457 (29.4%)</b>		<b>1556 (100.0%)</b>

Table 3 shows that on the four items raised to examine this variable; a total of 1556 responses were observed. The result revealed a total of 1099 (70.6%) favorable response and 457 (29.4%) unfavorable response.

**Hypothesis Two:** There is no significant relationship between pre-match prayers and protection among young athletes.

**Table 4: PPMC Analysis of the relationship between pre-match prayers and protection among young athletes**

S/ N	Items	N	Frequency and Percentage				df	r	p - value	r <sup>2</sup>
			SA	A	D	SD				
1	Pre-match prayers assured athletes injury free matches	389	97 (24.9)	118 (30.3)	69 (17.7)	105 (27.0)	38 7	0.4 8	0.001	23.0 %
2	Pre-match prayers protect athletes from evil intentions during matches		115 (29.6)	160 (41.1)	37 (9.5)	77 (19.8)				
3	Pre-match prayers build confidence in athletes during matches		142 (36.5)	166 (42.7)	34 (8.7)	47 (12.1)				
4	Pre-match prayers protect athletes against opponent charms intentions		133 (34.2)	168 (43.2)	28 (7.2)	60 (15.4)				
Column Total			487 (31.3)	612 (39.3)	168 (10.8)	289 (18.6)				

$p \leq 0.05$

Table four shows a PPMC analysis of the relationship between pre-match prayers and protection among young athletes (n = 389). Of the 1,556 responses observed, the result reveals a total SA response of 487 (31.3%), A 612 (39.3%), D 168 (10.8%) and SD 289 (18.6%) with a significant positive relationship between pre-match prayers and protection among young athletes,  $r = 0.48$ ,



$df = 387$ , and  $p < 0.001$ . This implies that pre-match prayers among young athletes in Nigeria has a significant relationship with their protection. Therefore, the tested null hypothesis is rejected. The coefficient of determination ( $r$ ) of the result, indicates that pre-match prayers accounts for 4.4% variation in the protection among young athletes in Nigeria.

## DISCUSSION

Literature has proved that religious practices such as prayer are prevalent among athletes. This study explored the perception of young athletes in Nigeria on pre-match prayers based on religiosity and protection. Sports participation is not mere physical endeavour but a complex social phenomenon that influences and is influenced by various social experiences such as religiosity and spirituality. There are several literatures that argue both for and against using religion in secular phenomena such as sports (Trothen 2015; Bain-Selbo and Sapp 2016; Grano 2017; Higgs and Braswell 2004). Watson and Parker (2019) asserted that religiosity and spirituality should be a natural practice in sports as the practitioners, that is, the athletes are created in the image of God according to the holy book.

The result of the study indicated that there is an overwhelmingly positive relationship between pre-match prayers and religiosity with 65.1% of young athletes engaging in pre-match prayer because they are religious. This finding was not surprising, as literature has reported that religion plays a key role in the lives of most Nigerians (Omeje & Nweke, 2021) and the result corroborates with previous studies, Guntoro and Putra (2022) found out that Indonesia athletes are highly religious and religiosity has a positive relationship with life contentment among the athletes. Furthermore, Elyasi et al. (2011) concluded that athletes' belief in religion is high. Elsewhere, Jirásek (2018) revealed that the relationship between religiosity and sports participation is highly positive. While, in the study of Shoemake (2019), it was discovered that religious beliefs and practices are dominant in sports among athletes.

Also, the results of the study show that over two-thirds of the participants (70.6%) with favourable responses and less than one-third (29.4%) with unfavourable responses that pre-match prayers aid protection during matches. The result implies that protection during matches is one of the reasons why young athletes in Nigeria engage in pre-match prayers. In line with this founding, Igboin (2024) concluded that Nigeria is a praying nation. This finding is consistent with the study of Park (2000) who concluded that among coping strategies used by Korean athletes prayer is the second

adopted strategy. This finding is also in consonant with the study of Jaber et al. (2023) which revealed that athletes' spiritual practice has a significant effect on psychological safety, mental security and the ability to deal with stress. They further stated that in the holy book, God asks everyone to pray; because it is an important factor in creating peace and eliminating fear and sadness. This means that through spirituality, a person can achieve peace and protection.

The findings of this study have implications for sports psychologists, coaches, and managers, and parents to understand the role of religious practices such as prayers in the lives of young athletes, consequently, designing effective techniques in dealing with religiously inclined young athletes.

## CONCLUSION

The study's findings show that young athletes in Nigeria are engrossed in pre-match prayers due to their religious beliefs and for protection during matches/competitions. These revealed that prayers play a prominent role in the sports life of young athletes in Nigeria. The findings also indicated that sport-related prayers by young athletes are all derived by extrinsic motivation with secular goals in mind. It is therefore, recommended that parents/ guidance, sports psychologists, sports coaches and sports managers should appropriately utilize the benefit of religious practices such as prayer as a protective mechanism for young athletes against the uncertainties in sports such as injuries and mental health issues during matches/ competitions.

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Received on May 20, 2025

Accepted on June 25, 2025

Published on July 01, 2025

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