

Multimedia

***Spirit and Sport* Explores the Intersections of Sport, Religion, and Disability**

Kara Ayers^{1,2} and Breanna Coleman³

¹University of Cincinnati Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities,
Cincinnati Children's Medical Center

²University of Cincinnati College of Medicine

³Independent Researcher

Abstract

This book review of *Spirit and Sport: Religion and the Fragile Athletic Body in Popular Culture* by Sean O'Neil (2022) examines the intersection of disability, sport, and religion. O'Neil utilizes storytelling to describe how the acquisition of disability, often through trauma, translates to intense examinations of faith and the utilization of sport as a demonstration of humanity.

Keywords: disability, sports, religion

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Spirit and Sport: Religion and the Fragile Athletic Body in Popular Culture by Sean O'Neil is a contemporary exploration of the intersections of disability, sport, and religion. As O'Neil's first book, this publication utilizes an engaging storytelling approach paired with O'Neil's experiences as a hospital chaplain and cancer survivor to invite readers into a shared exploration. *Spirit and Sport* raises essential questions about the frailness of mortal human bodies and the role of their creation in understanding our bodies' limitations. From this central question, O'Neil layers perspectives on disability and sports to emphasize the impressive strength of the human body.

O'Neil begins *Spirit and Sport* by describing the personal experiences and observations that led him to write this book. He then introduces readers to a web of interconnected stories of people who are either born disabled or became disabled later in life. Following these profiles, O'Neil examines the stigma surrounding anxiety and depression among professional athletes through themes of enchantment and coincidence. Finally, O'Neil defines the interdependence and intersectionality of these topics, including the social costs of stigma and ideas of the natural world that fail to consider aspects of faith. The book's concluding chapter brings these topics together to discuss the reality of perspectives of disability interconnectedness and how viewpoints of popular culture are often misleading.

Spirit and Sport adds to the field of disability studies, which has long been criticized for its lack of practical application. Not the first to explore this intersection, edited books like *Sports, Religion, and Disability* (Watson & Parker, 2016) and *Theology, Disability, and Sport* (Watson, Hargaden, & Brock, 2020) utilized chapters by multiple authors, in contrast to O'Neil's more cohesive but singular perspective approach. These books and similar works

indicate a growing interest and invite further questions about the intersectionality of disability, sport, and religion.

While the strength of *Spirit and Sport* is its coverage of well-known profiles in a novel way, it fails to do so with a clear sense of the positionality of the author. Readers learn O'Neil has anxiety, depression, and Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD). With brevity, O'Neil notes his skin cancer diagnosis but describes the experience in more depth in editorials (O'Neil, 2018). Readers are provided glimpses of O'Neil's view of disability but not the whole picture. Does O'Neil identify as disabled or does he view disabled people as those he offers ministry through chaplainship or those profiled in his book? This distinction seemed a missing piece if understanding of O'Neil's beliefs throughout this work is to be achieved.

From a practical stance, *Spirit and Sport* is not an easy read for those relatively new to these concepts. Topics are sometimes introduced with few examples and the writing style, and at times felt like it could benefit from greater fluidity. While the book presented intersections among disability, sport, and religion, it lacked intersections regarding race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexuality, etc. Diversity of disability type is also missing with no coverage of intellectual disability. Traumatic acquisition is also portrayed as the primary course of experiencing disability rather than the markedly different experience of congenital disability (Bogart, 2014). While intermittently, *Spirit and Sport* touches on some of these intersections, it could have used further explanation of how these additionally marginalized groups coincide with disability.

Parts of *Spirit and Sport* are quite dense. Given this, it is recommended as a supplement to academic texts, which will provide a foundational understanding of some of the concepts discussed in O'Neil's book. Students in various fields, including healthcare and

sports disciplines, welcome the addition of profiles shared through storytelling to enhance their learning and bring to life concepts like resilience and personal faith. This book excels at utilizing this approach while inviting new questions about what the future of these intersections may hold. While readers will undoubtedly bring their own beliefs, experiences, and convictions to these topics, everyone can find a connection to the triumphant human spirit in the face of adversity.

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