“God turned my life upside down this semester. I moved out West with my fiancé for a job, and now I don’t have that job or the fiancé anymore and I’m back here in North Carolina. I had been trying to do it all alone, and eventually God was like, ‘No. You don’t get to do this anymore,’ and he took it all away from me.” Taylor, a former Athletes in Action (AIA) staff member and University of North Carolina gymnastics alum, was speaking to a group of about thirty Christian college athletes at the weekly AIA sports ministry meeting on the campus of UNC-Chapel Hill. Her tone was angry, but she became calmer as she told the group, “It was a humbling experience. I guess I just wanted to share that there will be times in your life when you will be angry, and that is okay.” The event was the final meeting of the fall semester, and the campus minister, Tom, had invited Christian athletes to share and reflect on stories of praise, lament, or thanksgiving, the major themes of the book of Psalms.

Even though Taylor’s story was not about sport, sport was not incidental—she was an athletes talking to athletes, and they shared the experiences of the effort, dedication, joy, and disappointments that accompany that identity. Dana, another female athlete at the AIA meeting, echoed Taylor’s sentiments, emphasizing her own difficulty in maintaining her relationship with God. Dana was a senior graduating that spring, one of only three or four seniors at the meeting that evening. She told the group:

At the beginning of this semester, I felt a great distance between me and God. I know that he doesn’t go anywhere, that he doesn’t change, so I knew it was my fault. But, I was real angry at him because I didn’t know how to get back to him. But then, when I actually started listening to what
he was telling me and doing what I knew he wanted me to do—read my Bible, pray, et cetera—then I got back to him. So, I guess this is a little bit of a lament and a little bit of thanksgiving.

Many evangelicals describe their relationship with God as “personal,” and in the cases of Taylor and Dana, this personal relationship entailed daily maintenance through activities like prayer, reading the Bible, and attending ministry sessions like AIA. Dana blamed herself for feeling distant from God, and Taylor interpreted her job loss and breakup as indications that God was disappointed in her failure to maintain her part of their relationship. Sports ministry opened a space for these athletes to reflect on their religious challenges.

Tom and his wife, Ann, began directing UNC’s AIA chapter in 1983. At the time, campus AIA chapters were a relatively new idea. Athletes in Action is a branch of Campus Crusade for Christ and describes its vision as “a Christ follower on every team, in every sport and in every nation.” The organization trains athletes and coaches to be evangelists. According to its website:

Athletes and coaches around the world who are experiencing this life-changing relationship are telling the story of Jesus—to their teammates and fellow coaches, to hurting and needy people through their words and acts of compassion and kindness, and to millions of people through the media. Over 650 staff members and 7,500 volunteers in 94 countries boldly proclaim Jesus Christ and deeply equip believers to lead and urgently mobilize ambassadors of Good News and Good Will in the fulfillment of the Great Commission.²

For many evangelicals, “Good News” refers to the message of salvation through Jesus Christ, and the “Great Commission” refers to a section of scripture wherein Jesus appears to his disciples and commands them to travel to all nations teaching his message of salvation.³ Evangelical organizations like AIA rely on the premise that the only way for humans to achieve salvation, and therefore assure their eternal happiness after death, is through a heartfelt belief in the reality and power of Jesus Christ.

Though AIA was not as prevalent when Tom and Ann began their work at UNC, by 2013, there were more than a hundred sports ministry
organizations in the United States that involved tens of thousands of athletes, coaches, and fans. There is now a sports ministry organization for nearly every imaginable sport, from basketball and soccer to surfing and rodeo. The two largest sports ministry organizations remain the multi-sport ministries of Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) and Athletes in Action, which have yearly operating budgets of $70 million and $20 million, respectively. Each year, AIA hosts around thirty national and international tours for athletic teams, involving nearly 800 athletes who play against hundreds of teams and compete in front of audiences totaling in the tens of thousands. In 2012, FCA reported that more than 52,000 athletes and coaches attended its 363 summer camps, showing an increase of about 10,000 attendees over five years. That same year, AIA had staff at nearly 200 college campuses and with thirty-five professional sports teams, and FCA had a campus presence at more than 9,000 middle schools, high schools, and colleges.

For these thousands of Christian athletes, sporting settings are rarely solely about sport; sport is one dimension of their lives that they balance with their religious obligations. Taylor’s and Dana’s stories illuminate how sports ministry can provide a space to reflect on religious beliefs and practices. This book argues that the effects and consequences of evangelical engagement with popular cultural forms like sport are not predictable in advance, and that, in the case of sports ministry, the opportunity to use sport as religious practice was also an opportunity to rethink and reframe evangelical orthodoxy. This dynamic is particularly revealing in studying female Christian athletes because these women have often turned to sports ministry to reflect on issues of gender and sexuality that affect their lives as evangelical women and as athletes. Sports ministry has opened a site for religious self-reflexivity, and particularly for evangelical women who play sports, this self-reflexivity has contributed to subtle, complex, and largely unintentional shifts in understandings of evangelical orthodoxy.

American Evangelicalism and the Emergence of Sports Ministry

Today’s evangelicals emerged from fundamentalist Protestantism as a distinct cultural group in the 1940s and 1950s. In 1942, a group of conservative Christian leaders gathered in St. Louis and formed the
National Association of Evangelicals based on a doctrine called “engaged orthodoxy.” Engaged orthodoxy called on evangelicals to interact with non-Christians politically and culturally. This approach differed dramatically from fundamentalist strategies of the previous generation that emphasized purity through isolation. Evangelicals established national organizations such as Youth for Christ in 1944 and Campus Crusade for Christ in 1951. The Fuller Theological Seminary, founded in 1947, was the first of many explicitly evangelical institutions of higher learning, contributing to a growing population of educated middle-class conservative Christians. The periodical *Christianity Today*, first published in 1956, targeted this emergent population of evangelical Christians. The success of these organizations evidenced an increasing number of Americans who engaged conservative Christianity and American culture simultaneously.

Evangelicals see themselves as in but not of the world. This means that they understand the world as temporary and corrupted, and take it as their mission to reach as many people as possible with the message of salvation through Jesus Christ. They tend to adhere to an ideological unity through core religious beliefs. In the simplest possible terms, these beliefs include the inherent sinfulness of humans, the power of God to intercede in human affairs, salvation through Jesus Christ, and the urgent obligation to share this information with others. They understand the Bible as the infallible word of God that can exercise power over people’s hearts and minds.

Evangelical denominations in the United States experienced notable growth in the 1970s and 1980s in contrast with a concurrent decline in mainline Protestant church membership. Robert Putnam and David Campbell’s recent research on religions in the United States found that while 23 percent of Americans could be categorized as evangelical in 1973, this number grew to 28 percent in 1993, but fell to 24 percent in 2008. They wrote, “Despite the mountains of books and newspaper articles about the rise of evangelicalism, in absolute terms the change was hardly massive, except by comparison to the collapsing mainline Protestant denominations.” Putnam and Campbell’s research offers an important insight on the role of evangelical Christianity in American culture. Though evangelicalism did not expand greatly in terms of real numbers, evangelicals increasingly influenced American politics and
popular understandings of American religiosity. Sociologists Michael Hout and Claude Fischer have gone so far as to argue that popular associations with the term “Christian” reflect primarily evangelical ideas on salvation and moral behavior. In the 1970s and 1980s, sex and family became central political issues, and the Republican Party emerged as the party opposed to both abortion and gay rights. According to Putnam and Campbell, over the course of the late twentieth century, the Republican Party became culturally associated with religion, particularly conservative Christianity. Their survey data show that Americans see the Republican Party as “religion-friendly” and the Democratic Party as “religion-neutral.” Though evangelicals experienced very little change in real numbers of adherents, they were instrumental in aligning conservative Christianity with conservative politics.

Some evangelicals dislike the term “evangelical.” For some, this word implies a zealous believer focused entirely on proselytizing to others. Rejecting this word does not mean that the salvation of others is less important to these evangelicals, but it does mean that methods of high-pressure witnessing have fallen out of favor. Sociologist Christian Smith’s data, collected in the 1990s, show a tendency among evangelicals to refer to themselves as simply “Christian.” Contemporary evangelicals may push this a step further. For example, Angie, a Christian athlete and professional soccer player, told me, “When people ask me what religion I am, I say I am a believer in Christ. I am a Christ follower. For a lot of people, the term ‘Christian’ can be overwhelming or negative.” Angie’s language reflects a trend that Smith and others have identified—some evangelical Christians are uncomfortable with the label “evangelical,” and for evangelicals like Angie, even the label “Christian” carried negative connotations. In this book, I use the term “evangelical” to refer to Christians who prioritize outreach to non-believers and adhere to a narrow definition of salvation. I use the term “conservative Christianity” to refer to those who share theological qualities and a conservative political outlook with evangelicals but may prioritize different practices.

Very quickly after their emergence as a coherent group in the 1940s and 1950s, evangelicals established a compatible relationship with popular culture, turning to popular cultural forms like television, film, music, fiction, and sports to promote their idea of salvation to a larger American audience. This engagement demonstrates a double impulse.
Evangelicals were interested in using popular culture to communicate with those outside evangelicalism and increase interest in conversion. Media engagement like the development of Christian television shows and networks helped to shape evangelical self-understandings by positioning evangelical spokespeople as broadcasting to an audience of non-believers. Later, in the 1990s, popular novels like the *Left Behind* series explained evangelical salvation through a thrilling end-of-the-world adventure. Authors Tim LeHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins intended these books to reach an audience outside their tradition and included introductory descriptions of evangelical beliefs.¹⁵

At the same time that evangelicals engaged popular culture with the intention of reaching a nonbelieving audience, they carved out a separate wedge of popular culture for an explicitly Christian audience. This occurred, for example, in the development of Contemporary Christian Music, now its own category of production and consumption within the music industry. Contemporary Christian Music sounds very much like its secular counterpart; the primary difference is lyrical content that includes Christian themes. Likewise, the Christian video game industry produces games modeled after successful secular games but infuses them with Christian themes. Christian bookstores provide shopping experiences based on the American mall, yet the products and decor assure shoppers that they are in a religious environment. Evangelicals have been producing and consuming popular culture products like these for more than sixty years and are adept at integrating new media forms into their production and consumption patterns.

Sports ministry emerged from this dual impulse to use popular culture to reach a nonevangelical audience and to create specifically evangelical popular culture spaces free of worldly influence. Before the formation of the first sports ministry organizations in the 1950s and 1960s, Youth for Christ (YFC) featured athletes at its stadium-style rallies. Most famously, at YFC rallies in the 1940s, Jack Wyrtzen included the spectacle of world record–holding track star Gil Dodds sprinting for the audience. These rallies boasted attendance of 20,000 to 30,000 people. After his athletic performance, Dodds would deliver his story of becoming a Christian, saying things like, “Running is only a hobby. My mission is teaching the gospel of Jesus Christ.”¹⁶ Youth for Christ used this narrative to call for others to convert to evangelical Christianity.
According to YFC spokesperson Billy Graham, “We used every modern means to catch the attention of the unconverted, and then we punched them right between the eyes with the Gospel.” Clearly, Gil Dodds's presence was an attempt to use sport for evangelical outreach.

It was the magnetism of athletic celebrity that inspired Don McClanen to form Fellowship of Christian Athletes and Dave Hannah to form Athletes in Action. Both of these men were struck by Americans’ admiration of sports stars and saw a potential to use that admiration to convert others. Both organizations recruited professional athletes who were Christian and helped those athletes become comfortable talking about their faith in public settings. Additionally, these organizations began forming separate spaces for evangelical athletes that mirrored secular sporting spaces, with FCA offering athletic training camps, and AIA forming traveling sports teams. Both of these settings included athletic activities like drills, training, and games, but evangelical Christianity was present throughout in the form of group prayer, Christian symbols on uniforms, and spiritual guidance from experienced evangelical athletes and coaches.

This dual trend of encouraging Christian athletes to use the secular spaces of sport for witnessing and of forming separate evangelical spaces for training and competing continued and expanded over the course of the late twentieth century. More sports ministry organizations emerged in the 1970s that targeted specific athletic populations. Baseball Chapel formed in 1973 and placed chaplains with all Major League teams within its first two years. Pro Athletes Outreach formed in 1974 and targeted professional football players. Both of these organizations have grown significantly since their formation. By 2013, Baseball Chapel was hosting chapel services in every Major League, Minor League, and Independent League city in the United States, as well as boasting a significant international presence in Latin America and Japan. Pro Athletes Outreach continued to provide ministry services for professional football players (and their wives) and organized opportunities for professional football players to speak to high school and junior high coaches and players. Over the course of the 1980s and 1990s, sports ministry organizations formed that targeted female athletes or youth sports, such as FCA's branch for professional women's golf that held weekly meetings for touring golfers. Upward Sports, the largest Christian sports league
for youth athletics in the world, officially formed in 1995 after ten years of offering a local basketball camp in Spartanburg, South Carolina, that integrated athletic and religious lessons. In many parts of the United States, Christian sports camps offer the best (sometimes the only) youth athletic training available.

The extent of these national organizations is striking, but these numbers only hint at the growth of sports ministry at a local level. As more and more athletes grew up affiliating their athletic and religious experiences, careers in sports ministry seemed increasingly viable options. Athletes who are unable or unwilling to pursue careers as professionals are able to coach or play for Christian teams at multiple levels—from youth club teams to Christian high schools and colleges to semiprofessional and professional Christian teams. Coaching positions at explicitly Christian colleges and universities are especially appealing career options for Christian athletes. In 2011, there were more than 500 coaching positions and more than 100 sports administrative positions at just thirty-three Christian colleges. Additionally, many contemporary megachurches (churches with weekly attendance rates of more than 2,000) have an athletic staff. In 2011, more than half of the twenty largest megachurches in the United States featured sports programming prominently on their websites and employed full- and part-time athletic staff. Five of these churches also had on-site fitness centers, employing personal trainers and fitness class instructors. Full- and part-time staffs ranged from one director overseeing a volunteer staff to a full-time directorial staff of ten with six part-time employees and twelve or more seasonal part-time staff.

Fifteen Christian colleges offer degrees in sports ministry, and many more offer courses or extracurricular training in the field. Colleges have reported varying numbers of participants; for example, in 2008, Belhaven College in Jackson, Mississippi, had three or four students who were majoring in sports ministry, whereas Malone College in Canton, Ohio had twenty-five to thirty. These numbers have remained steady over the past few years. Several Christian colleges require a primary degree in Bible but allow students to pursue a secondary major or emphasis in sports ministry. For example, Moody Bible Institute offers a sports ministry major that includes classes such as History and Philosophy of Sports Ministry, Organization and Administration of Sports Min-
istry, and Issues and Trends in Sports Ministry. Many of these students were high school or college athletes who, upon graduating from these programs, pursue advanced degrees in ministry, careers in sports ministry organizations, or church athletic staff positions.

As these numbers show, there are multiple opportunities for careers in sports ministry. This book focuses on participation in sports ministry organizations, but it is important to note that what Christian athletes learn in sports ministry, they take with them to careers as coaches, administrators, and church staff members.

**Becoming Athletes of God**

When sports ministry originated in the 1950s and 1960s, Christian athletes’ primary mission was to showcase evangelical Christianity to their audience. With the formation of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes in 1954, sports ministers began to conscientiously recruit celebrity athletes and market these men as paragons of masculinity and Christian devotion. FCA founder Don McClanen and AIA founder Dave Hannah both explicitly intended their organizations to promote manliness, strength, and the evangelical message of salvation. They wanted to use Americans’ cultural admiration of athletic mastery to create a platform for Christian athletes to talk about their faith.

In the 1970s, however, when sports ministers began to explore athletic pleasure and pain as indications of God’s involvement in sport, they came to understand their bodies as God’s forum for demonstrating satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the believer. Christian athletes developed two key terms for describing their embodied sensations: “Christlikeness” and “spiritual warfare.” These ways of talking about sport made physical sensations of pain, fatigue, mastery, and muscle memory, as well as emotions like frustration, vengeance, pride, and joy, signs of God and Satan struggling in and through the believer’s body. Christian athletes identified the body as the primary site of interplay between good and evil, and this emphasis on the body shifted sports ministry’s emphasis away from recruiting celebrity athletes. Though sports ministry originally focused on men and masculinity, the emergent emphasis on individual embodied sensation allowed athletes with limited celebrity potential, like women and youth athletes, to actively participate. By the
1990s, women and youth athletes constituted the largest participant populations within sports ministry organizations.

Sport remains a realm of masculinity, and women who play sports, particularly at an elite level, confront gender expectations and gender contradictions in ways that may never arise with other kinds of activities. For women in sports ministry, attention to the body has forced a reckoning with evangelical mainstays on gender and sexuality. This book offers a case study of how evangelical engagement with popular culture created the possibility for reevaluating orthodoxy from inside the tradition. Engagement with sport provided another toolbox for evangelical female athletes; when they actively sought to combine their athletic and evangelical identities, sport allowed them to develop a new kind of religious self-reflexivity that opened up a range of sometimes complementary, sometimes contradictory understandings of what it could mean to be an evangelical woman in contemporary America. Women in sports ministry bridge and negotiate a complicated set of identities: evangelical woman, elite sports competitor, and Christian athlete. They live out their gender and sexuality in athletic and religious contexts and have thought about, discussed, and often modified evangelical mainstays in ways that have significantly enlarged their range of potential behaviors and practices while still maintaining their sense of belonging to a tradition that they find meaningful. They do not do this alone, but in dialogue with secular athletes, male athletes, and lesbian athletes.

The evangelical mainstay on homosexuality maintains that same-sex attraction is contrary to God’s will and that same-sex intimacy is sinful. Evangelical orthodoxy on marriage presents hierarchical gender roles—male headship and female submission—as part of God’s plan for human happiness. As the female Christian athletes who now dominate sports ministry reflected on these theological claims from the point of view of athletes, they developed a more complex understanding of them. By redefining femininity as a conglomeration of both traditionally feminine and traditionally masculine traits, they became able to imagine that God intends women to be strong leaders as well as supportive nurturers. Partly through this redefinition and partly through their frequent and intimate interactions with a variety of athletic women, female Christian athletes are unlikely to outright condemn lesbianism, and they demonstrate a willingness to question dominant evangelical stances on its
sinfulness. Within heterosexual relationships, female Christian athletes use their redefinition of femininity to build dating relationships and marriages based on gender equality, while at the same time upholding marriage as a central part of evangelical life.

Sports ministry participants have reassessed and modified evangelical stances on gender and sexuality in subtle and unpredictable ways. This has not created heterodoxy, but the opportunity for religious self-reflexivity has expanded and complicated orthodoxy. Evangelical mainstays that designate differences between men and women, God’s expectation of heterosexual love, and marriage as God’s plan for enacting those differences and that love do not disappear from the worldviews of female Christian athletes, but through sports ministry, they are able to discuss and modify these positions, maintaining them in altered forms. This book explores how Christian athletes do the ongoing work of maintaining religious belief while also engaging the shifting terrain of American popular culture. The encounter between evangelicalism and sports has led to a flexible evangelicalism that allows for a far wider range of beliefs and practices than the founders of sports ministry imagined.

Two facets of evangelical theology that come to the fore in sports ministry are attention to the supernatural (the enduring belief that God’s will pervades the entire human realm and that all events or experiences are part of a divine order) and attention to differences between men and women (the idea that men and women are fundamentally distinct and that each sex has its own temptations and its own obligations toward the opposite sex, family, and community). As the following story illustrates, sports ministry provides an opportunity for Christian athletes to reflect on and engage these evangelical tenets with sometimes surprising results.

In April, with final exams right around the corner, UNC’s AIA chapter met for the last few times. For Dana, graduation would follow finals, and she used the meeting to express concerns about her future. The college years would mark the end of her career as an elite athlete, so she was embarking on an identity shift. A second shift in her life was a breakup with her long-term boyfriend. She told the group, “I’ve been in a relationship with this guy for a year and a half, but I knew he wasn’t a strong Christian. He was a believer, but he wasn’t walking.” Some evangelicals use movement metaphors like “walking” or “path” to describe maintain-
ing an active and personal relationship with God. “For months now,” Dana continued, “I’ve been wrestling with the dilemma of whether to break up or not, and finally I just asked God to do it. I just said, God, take this relationship out of my life. And He did.”

In sports ministry meetings, as in the locker room and on the field, athletes who have a prominent position on their team command an audience, and younger or second-string athletes often asked for, rather than delivered, advice. Sporting prestige and talent have a strong influence on sports ministry social dynamics. Because Dana was a senior, she spoke with authority on her struggles, and the younger athletes listened. Tom, the AIA campus minister, returned to Dana’s story throughout the night. He used it to encourage the other athletes to believe that God has a plan for each of them. “God has a plan for Dana,” he told everyone, “and once you submit to God’s will, you will become peaceful and happy.”

This theme reemerged at the following week’s meeting. The final meeting of the semester was senior night, and Dana, one of the few seniors, was the first to share. Her story followed a common pattern within evangelical Christianity. She described herself as “raised in a Christian home,” but then told of a struggle that she felt caused a distance between herself and God. “I came to college, and I really wanted to fit in on my team. I ended up having a really wild freshman year—lots of drinking and partying. That year, I really hit rock bottom.” At this point, Dana sounded close to tears. “I knew that I had to turn to God about it,” she continued. “I talked last week about the relationship that I was in and how I prayed that God would take it away. My ears had been closed. I needed to listen closer to God. And now, now that I’ve been listening, a feeling of great peace is over me.” In this statement, Dana reiterated Tom’s thoughts from the week before. She continued, “I’ve been searching for a job, but I’m not stressed about the future. I thought I wanted to move away, but it’s clear to me that God intended I take a job in Research Triangle Park [about twenty miles away]. I bought a car—I never thought I would be able to do that. I’m happily single. God really does have a plan.” She then shared her favorite Bible verse, Jeremiah 29:11 (NIV), “‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.’”

Dana’s story is interesting for a number of reasons. It followed a format familiar to many evangelicals: a worldly or secular influence drew
the believer away from God (in Dana’s case, the partying with her team during freshman year); the believer made a conscious decision to realign with God (given the setting, the implication in Dana’s story is that attending AIA meetings was an important part of that realignment); and following this reconnection to God, the believer experienced mental and material well-being (a feeling of peace, a job, a car). This story also emphasized a key tenet of evangelical faith—divine providence, the idea that God has a plan for humans. In Dana’s story, God appears as both all-knowing and all-loving. God had clear intentions, and following God’s intentions resulted in happiness and well-being. However, God was unable to force this plan upon Dana and depended on her actions to put it into effect. Stories like this emphasize that the decision to submit to God’s plan is an essential aspect of a believer’s religious life.

Further, Dana’s story is interesting because it is very rare for believers to describe singleness as part of God’s plan. In every evangelical setting that I investigated, heterosexual marriage was an assumed part of a full religious life. I generally heard Christian athletes refer to singleness as a temporary state that would ultimately be resolved through submission to God’s plan, implying that God planned a heterosexual marriage for every believer. Dana’s assertion that she was happily single and in line with God’s plan subtly challenges the normativity of heterosexual marriage.

One reason that being happily single challenges evangelical theological mainstays is that evangelicals often use marriage as a metaphor for the correct relationship between a believer and God. The next senior who spoke at the AIA meeting was Dave, a curly-haired rower on the crew team who was hoping to attend seminary in the fall. “I want to talk to you about my relationship with God,” he began. “I really believe that God comes for us not because of anything we do, but because God somehow must. It’s part of God’s nature to desire a relationship with us. I’ve been thinking about a metaphor I see throughout the Bible of God’s people being like a bride with God or Jesus as the groom.”

Dave was holding a Bible in his hands and would gesture with it while he was speaking. “God wants that kind of relationship, a relationship of marriage importance, with his people,” he continued. “But what I see in the Bible is that God’s people are like an adulterous wife, unfaithful and whore-like. Yet, despite these serious faults, God always comes to you and reconciles you to him. For example, in Hosea, God commands
Hosea to take an adulterous wife so that Hosea can better understand God’s relationship with humans.” Dave paused and looked up at the group of Christian athletes. “I think this shows God’s relationship with all humans. It’s not because of anything we do that God comes for us, but because he is a good husband, basically. All I can offer God is the sins of my life. And he comes for me anyway.”

For Dave, the metaphor that best encapsulated God’s relationship with humans was that of an unfaithful marriage. It is important to explicate several facets of this metaphor. First of all, the believer is the female half of this heterosexual marriage. This metaphor would likely have had far different connotations if the believer were the husband, with God as the bride. Dave’s metaphor relies on deeply held gender beliefs that privilege men as powerful actors and associate women with weakness, failure, and sexual infidelity. In Dave’s story, Dave himself was the woman, and this kind of gender-bending is worth noting. Dave identified himself as an unfaithful wife, with God as his good husband. However, if Dave is like many evangelical men, he also intended to become a good husband himself one day. This means that Dave had access to both of the characters in his analogy: the whorish woman and the loving husband. For evangelical women, however, the character of the good husband would be more difficult to access, and the whorish wife would be the resonant identity. This may help to clarify why Dana’s claim of being happily single as part of God’s plan is revolutionary. It challenges this central gendered marriage relationship that many evangelicals see as the most apt analogy for the correct relationship between God and humans. Singleness as part of God’s plan undermines both characters in Dave’s analogy and specifically deprives God/men of the power to forgive/accept the unfaithful believer/wife.

After Dave shared his story, Tom, Ann, and an AIA student leader rose to pray for Dana and Dave. Tom presented them both with Bibles and delivered a prayer that affirmed marriage as part of God’s plan for evangelicals. He said, “I pray that when God gives you a spouse that it be a godly marriage, and that when you have kids that you raise them to know the Lord so that, at the end of your lives, you can look back with no regrets.” In this short prayer, Tom undermined both Dana’s and Dave’s challenges to evangelical mainstays. A “godly marriage” did not include unfaithfulness, and singleness was not part of God’s plan. To not
be married and to not have children was regrettable and out of alignment with God’s intentions.

Athletes in Action’s senior night demonstrates two major preoccupations within evangelical culture: maintaining a correct relationship with God, and gender as an organizing principle for the world. Female Christian athletes have negotiated these preoccupations through the masculine domain of sports. Using sport as a tool for divine connection has allowed female Christian athletes to rethink their gender understandings. Like Dana’s subtle challenge of declaring herself happily single, other female Christian athletes have used the practices, embodied experiences, and central narratives of sports ministry to reassess femininity, sexual desire, and marriage. Through reevaluating theological mainstays from within their tradition, women in sports ministry have expanded their understandings of orthodoxy, and their ability to do so demonstrates that the outcomes of religious engagement with popular culture are not predictable ahead of time.

Studying Faith in the Field

When I began studying sports ministry in 2006, I visited the headquarters of both FCA and AIA. Fellowship of Christian Athletes’ institutional home is in Kansas City, Missouri. In an imposing building near enough to the highway that the FCA logo can be seen by passing motorists, the headquarters includes the production team for FCA’s member magazine, *Sharing the Victory* (previously titled *Christian Athlete*), the upper levels of the organization’s administration, and a team of workers that produce summer camp curricula and resources for local FCA chapters. When FCA established its headquarters in Kansas City in 1979, the city was home to the national offices of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). Though the NCAA relocated to Indianapolis in 1999, FCA remained in Kansas City. Over the course of my visits to FCA’s headquarters, I amassed a collection of photocopied publications and had conversations with a number of FCA employees. It was during my first visit that I learned that FCA was perhaps most proud of its summer camps and treated summer as the beginning of the year, launching a theme and a key Bible verse each summer that served as the foundation for all other materials developed for use in the following school year.
Clearly, attending an FCA summer camp would be essential for my study of sports ministry. I identified two camps on the West Coast to visit the following summer. As a preliminary investigation, I attended one day of an FCA summer camp in Watsonville, California, in June 2007. This gave me an idea of the daily structure of camp as well as its social organization. Each day of camp was packed with workouts (both as a full camp and in smaller teams), small-group Bible studies in sport-specific “huddles,” and full-camp worship sessions both at midday and in the evening. Later that summer, I attended a weeklong camp in Forest Grove, Oregon. This FCA camp brought together around eighty high school athletes of multiple sports for five days of athletic and religious training. Campers would rise early for fifteen minutes of contemplative Bible study before morning exercises, and throughout the day they continued to align and combine evangelical Christianity and sport. The majority of sports ministry participants are women, and most FCA summer camps reflect this demographic. However, the camp that I attended in Oregon offered a football program that greatly increased male attendance, resulting in nearly equal numbers of male and female participants. The 2007 summer camp curriculum, “Game Ready,” presented sport as part of spiritual warfare. In the fall of 2007, I returned to FCA’s headquarters in Kansas City to talk with the curriculum developers about their choices in putting together the “Game Ready” programming.

About a month after my first visit to the FCA headquarters, I traveled to Xenia, Ohio, to visit the headquarters of Athletes in Action. The AIA World Training and Resource Center is far more expansive than FCA’s office building. Athletes in Action’s headquarters also includes an expansive sports complex of two softball fields, two soccer fields, a baseball field, a football field with a track, and a ropes course. The property, which was first used for the Ohio Soldiers’ and Sailors’ Orphans’ Home during and after the Civil War, also includes housing for nearly 300. Whereas FCA’s headquarters overlooked a major highway near a major urban center, AIA’s Xenia facilities were set in a rural environment, surrounded by the cornfields and rolling hills of central Ohio. During my visit to AIA’s headquarters, I was able to meet and talk to many administrators, including former AIA president Wendel Deyo, the man responsible for relocating AIA away from the headquarters of its parent organization (Campus Crusade for Christ, then in California).
to the independent facility in Ohio, where Deyo had been serving as an
AIA minister with the Cincinnati Bengals.

AIA gave me full access to its archives. Though it was not published
as consistently as FCA’s member magazine, AIA did produce a publica-
tion entitled *Athletes in Action Magazine*, much of which chronicled the
adventures of the organization’s traveling teams. Though AIA had a sig-
nificant presence on many college campuses, it was clear to me that its
administrators were most proud of these traveling teams. I had been reg-
ularly attending AIA’s weekly meetings on the campus of UNC–Chapel
Hill but knew that in order to explore AIA more fully, I would need to
travel with one of its touring teams. Soon after its founding in 1966, AIA
made a name for itself with its traveling men’s basketball team, so a bas-
ketball tour seemed a logical choice.

I arranged to join the AIA women’s basketball team in fall of 2007
for their tour of games against college teams in the northeastern United
States. The team was made up of ten women who had played basketball
at the college level and were pursuing basketball careers either as pro-
fessional players or as coaches. The women ranged in age from twenty-
two to thirty; four of them were African American, four were white and
native-born, and two were white and from foreign countries. The ten
players were accompanied by six other women: two coaches, a trainer,
two spiritual advisers, and an AIA blogger who documented their tour
for the AIA website. These women also demonstrated a range of racial
and ethnic backgrounds. The head spiritual adviser was African Ameri-
can; the assistant coach, a Canadian, was white; and the trainer, head
day coach, assistant spiritual adviser, and blogger all were white and native-
born. Former AIA basketball players and other AIA staff members
joined the group for parts of the tour. All in all, the team played nine
games in fifteen days with only a week together to train before hitting
the road. During this tour, I was present for practices, games, Bible stud-
ies, hotel breakfasts, and hours upon hours of riding in vans—in short,
the grueling schedule of a competitive traveling team.

Because AIA and FCA are the two oldest and largest sports minis-
try organizations and have had a presence in the sports world for more
than fifty years, they have dramatically influenced the larger field of
sports ministry. Inspired by the initial success of these organizations
in recruiting athletes as evangelical witnesses, sport-specific ministry
organizations formed and proliferated. To represent this phenomenon, I identified a women’s Christian soccer team in Charlotte, North Carolina, the Charlotte Lady Eagles, as my final field site. The Charlotte Lady Eagles are a subsidiary of Ministry Athletes International (MAI), a sports ministry organization that focuses solely on soccer. According to its website, “Missionary Athletes International was founded on the simple premise that, through the common enjoyment of this worldwide sport, we would be able to build relationships that allow us to share the Good News.”

As mentioned earlier, “Good News” is a common evangelical phrase that refers to the message of salvation through Jesus Christ. MAI owns four professional and semiprofessional soccer teams: the Chicago Eagles, the Southern California Seahorses, the Charlotte Eagles, and the Charlotte Lady Eagles. These teams compete in secular leagues against secular teams, they travel abroad to work with international soccer teams, and they run training camps for youth athletes.

I spent a competitive season with the Charlotte Lady Eagles in the summer of 2008. Some of the women who played that season had been with the team since its inception in 1998, and some were still in college and spent the summer with the team in order to improve their skills for their college season. The Lady Eagles drew women from across the country and from abroad. It was the only women’s team of its kind in the United States: an explicitly Christian team in an elite secular league.

In 2009, the year after I conducted my fieldwork, Women’s Professional Soccer (WPS) formed, filling a gap in professional women’s soccer made when the Women’s United Soccer Association (W-USA) suspended its operation in 2003, and many of the women from the Charlotte Lady Eagles went on to play for WPS teams. During my fieldwork, semiprofessional soccer was the highest level of competitive soccer available to women in the United States, with the exception of Olympic-level competition. The season I spent with the Charlotte Lady Eagles was my longest field visit, and I achieved a higher level of rapport with the women on that team than in my other field studies. Women on the Charlotte Lady Eagles were comfortable sharing struggles that went to the heart of evangelical identity, namely, issues of gender and sexuality. After completing my fieldwork, I maintained contact with many of the athletes I encountered and have followed up with them in phone calls and Facebook conversations over the ensuing years.
These three field sites represent a significant cross section of sports ministry in America—FCA camps for high school athletes on the West Coast, the AIA women's basketball team competing in the Northeast, and a semiprofessional Christian soccer team in the South—and focus on the largest population within sports ministry: women.

When I conducted research at a field site, I always had a pen and notebook in my hands. I jotted down details and phrases intended to later jog my memory of what was going on. I reserved several hours every evening for typing up thorough accounts of the day's proceedings, using my notebook jottings to guide my recollections. I found my notebook strategy to be much less intrusive than a tape recorder and so made handwritten notes during conversations and informal interviews. These, too, I typed later in a more thoroughly fleshed-out way. There are pros and cons to this approach. The main drawback was that I was forced to paraphrase much of what I heard, with a few short, direct quotations to anchor the tone of what was said. The benefit to my approach, however, was that I had greatly increased access to my subjects' interactions. In previous fieldwork for a different project, I had observed how my subjects would edit themselves when they were aware of a tape recorder, and I would often hear the most interesting information in the minutes after I stopped recording. In my sports ministry field sites, Christian athletes often carried Bibles with them everywhere. In the locker room and on the sidelines, it was common to see team members with open books, underlining or scratching marginalia in their Bibles or devotional texts. Therefore, my notebook and pen were not out of place, and I was easily able to blend in. Of course, my subjects knew that I wasn't scrawling in a Bible, but my notebook fit in more easily than a tape recorder could have. At times I was unable to take notes on a conversation, particularly during meals. Whenever this happened, I would, if possible, withdraw for an hour to type notes on that conversation from memory. The end result was several inordinately large computer files containing as much detail as I could muster.

Field notes, and the later use of field notes in a project such as this, are always filtered through the point of view of the author. The anthropologist has a certain kind of credibility (“I know because I was there”) that is different from the credibility of historians or archaeologists. At the same time, my perspective as a young, white, female nonathlete and an
atheist scholar certainly impacted my records of events, conversations, and social interactions. In an attempt to be as transparent as possible about my social location and perspective, I have chosen to include first-person narratives in this book. This approach is intended to invite the reader to see what I saw and to be honest that my eyes provide only one perspective. I have prioritized the words of my subjects whenever possible, and I hope that the many athletes, coaches, and sports ministers who opened their lives to my scrutiny can see themselves in this work.

This book is a study of what scholars have called “popular religion,” “lived religion,” or “everyday religion”: the ideas and practices that constitute religion in the lives of ordinary believers. When I use the term “Christian athlete,” I am referring to an evangelical athlete involved in a sports ministry organization, which is an organization that actively promotes combining sport and evangelicalism. I use the term “elite athlete” or “elite sports” to distinguish between the recreational athlete and the athlete pursuing sport as a primary career. In this book, I consider Division I college, semiprofessional, and professional levels to be elite sports. Participation in elite sports is limited, and those who compete at this level are expected to consistently prove that they are qualified to do so. This book is not about church softball leagues, though participants at that level could also be called Christian athletes. The athletes and coaches featured in this book perceived their athletic activity as a religious obligation, an understanding that intertwines evangelical Christianity and sport. For them, sports were a way to connect with the divine, and therefore they understood their athletic experiences as religiously meaningful.

Knowing God through Sports

When anthropologist Susan Harding studied fundamentalist Baptists in the 1980s, she came to the conclusion that “speaking is believing.” By this, she meant that her subjects used linguistic practices like witnessing to experience their faith and strengthen their beliefs. She argued that the act of speaking one’s beliefs out loud to an outsider was not merely about convincing the nonbeliever; the practice of witnessing also solidified beliefs for the speaker. In this way, the ideas that the believer put into words (the sinfulness of humanity, God’s love for humans, and heartfelt belief in Jesus Christ as a means to experience that love and salvation)
became more than beliefs; they became knowledge. This insight is helpful because this book addresses the development and implications of religious knowledge within sports ministry.35

One significant difference between Harding’s subjects and mine is that the conservative Christians in this book are athletes, and they see their athletic life as compatible with—even essential to—their religious life. Starting with Harding’s argument that speaking gives a believer confidence in the validity of his or her beliefs, the question for this book becomes: How do Christian athletes, whose primary activity is not speaking but playing, experience what Harding calls “belief that indisputably transfigures you and your reality, belief that becomes you”?36 How do they experience the sort of belief that they find indisputable, belief that they can use as their linchpin for making sense of the world?

I argue that Christian athletes experience transfiguring belief through sport itself. The embodied actions of training, practicing, and competing serve to anchor and strengthen Christian athletes’ certainty of the distinctiveness of their religious tradition, the existence of an all-loving God with a perfect plan and an evil counterpart that desires human failure, and their ability to experience a connection with the divine. Part I of this book presents a thorough exploration of how using sport in this way had the unintended consequences of undermining traditional witnessing strategies and elevating individual religious experience as the most important aspect of sport.

Chapter 1 examines conversion and witnessing as primary evangelical practices. I briefly turn to the history of sports ministry to illustrate how these practices have changed over time, and I use my fieldwork to show how contemporary sports ministry has expanded the work of witnessing and the practice of conversion. Contemporary sports ministry relies on “witnessing without words” (demonstrating one’s salvation through good sportsmanship rather than testimony) and recommitment (confirming one’s decision to convert by reenacting a conversion moment), and these elements destabilize the membrane between evangelical insiders and outsiders. After all, the unsaved can be sportsmanlike, and recommitment seems to undermine the once-and-for-all rhetoric of evangelical salvation. I describe how Christian athletes struggle to redefine witnessing and recommitment in ways that maintain their understandings of evangelical distinction and moral superiority.
While witnessing remains a primary goal for the leadership of sports ministry organizations, sports ministry participants have become much more likely to frame their goals as experiential. Innovations in sports ministry in the 1970s allowed Christian athletes to elevate individual religious experiences over numerical witnessing goals. While sports ministers originally privileged athletes’ witnessing because athletes had access to large audiences, contemporary Christian athletes are more likely to think of their circumstances as special because of the intimate physical pleasure they experience through sport. Focusing on athletic activity as pleasing to God in itself paved the way for some Christian athletes to reexamine evangelical orthodoxy on witnessing and to use their embodied sensations to rethink what kinds of behaviors and mindsets constitute serving God. Chapter 2 turns to athletic intimacy to investigate the embodied knowledge that Christian athletes can develop through sport.

As individual religious experiences became a normative element of sports ministry training, the language of Christlikeness and spiritual warfare became central. Many evangelicals describe the devil as a real force for evil, and chapter 3 turns to Christian athletic understandings of the world as a never-ending battle between God and Satan enacted through athletes on the playing field. Christian athletes strive for Christlikeness as a way to defend themselves against the temptations of Satan; they see fatigue, frustration, and soreness as Satan’s tools to weaken the athlete, who in turn uses the Christlike qualities of determination and meaningful suffering to avoid unsportsmanlike behavior or other wrongdoing. Though pain and injury would seem to undermine God’s care for the athlete, Christian athletes narrate these as evidence of God’s involvement in athletic life and present athletic setbacks as instances of God trying to tell them something. The ubiquity of this language shows that these narrative tools constitute important methods that Christian athletes use to make sense of their lives.

The Christian athletes in this book very rarely used the phrase “I believe” unless they were talking to nonbelievers. To each other, they would say, “I know.” Take, for example, Dana’s narrative that opened this chapter. She said, “I felt a great distance between me and God. I know that he doesn’t go anywhere, that he doesn’t change, so I knew it was my fault.” This is a statement not of belief but of knowledge, of shared
knowledge. When Dana said, “I know that he doesn't go anywhere,” she implied, “I know that we all know that he doesn’t go anywhere.” This statement referred to the shared knowledge base that Dana used to draw her conclusion, “so I knew it was my fault.” To be a believer means to enter into this shared knowledge community and to use that established knowledge to draw conclusions about how one should conduct oneself in the world. Part II of this book is about that process, the process of living out the implications of one’s religious knowledge. As such, this book responds to two epistemological questions. Part I explores the question, how do Christian athletes know what they know? And part II asks, what are the effects of that knowledge?

In addition to being a stronger noun than “belief,” “knowledge” carries another set of connotations that are applicable to this study. The verb “to know” is used in some biblical translations to signify sexual relations, hence the colloquialism “to know in the biblical sense.” This set of connotations is valuable to keep in mind. The athletes in this book used their bodies, not their words, as the primary element of their Christian identity. As part I of this book shows, sports ministry’s focus on the body created a sense of intimacy with God, what my subjects referred to as “oneness,” “connection,” or “Christlikeness.” They gained knowledge of God through their bodies, and because the body was the site of this knowledge, the implications explored in part II are implications that directly relate to bodies: gender and sexuality.

Evangelical female athletes are enmeshed in a theological worldview that emphasizes inherent gender differences between men and women. But at the same time, they are aware that playing sports is in itself a challenge to long-standing gendered descriptions of women as passive, weak, or delicate. Within sports ministry, evangelical women have, over the course of the past generation, expanded godly femininity to include strength, action, and leadership, while maintaining a sense of the importance of traditional feminine nurturing. As chapter 4 shows, these athletes employ different self-display choices in different contexts, revealing femininity as a social construct requiring ongoing performance. They also work very hard to maintain a sense of essential gender difference, and this contradiction has opened a space for evangelical female athletes to reflect on their religious tradition’s expectations regarding women’s bodies.
Chapter 5 investigates the tension between homosocial sporting environments and evangelical orthodoxy regarding homosexuality. Evangelicals have long been proponents of sex-segregated environments for religious education, and sport mirrors this separation. However, combining religious and athletic homosocial spaces brings attention to the body while condemning sexual attention in general and homosexuality in particular. Evangelical condemnation of homosexuality stems from the idea that God intends heterosexual love and marriage for every believer and that God has the power to alter a person’s sexual desires to bring believers into alignment with this plan. For women in sports ministry, many of whom have had positive interactions with out lesbians or have known evangelical women who experience same-sex attraction, the issue of human sexuality is complicated and has fostered feelings of extreme ambivalence as they attempt to reconcile evangelical orthodoxy on God's power and plan with their own athletic lives.

Chapter 6 explores marriage as an unstated evangelical requirement. Evangelical Christians have developed a substantial literature on marriage roles and gendered behavior in the household. Much of this literature promotes traditional gender hierarchy as God’s intention for a Christian marriage. I explore how Christian athletes negotiate evangelical marriage practices while maintaining an athletic career and how they use their experiences as athletes to reflect on, reinterpret, and ultimately expand orthodoxy regarding marriage roles. This chapter returns to a major theme of the book: Christian athletes use the forms of knowledge they develop through sports ministry to redefine and renegotiate other aspects of their lives.

Sports ministry’s focus on witnessing, individual religious experience, and the discourses of spiritual warfare and Christlikeness can produce an intimate knowledge of what it means to be a Christian athlete. This intimate embodied knowledge has allowed female Christian athletes to engage and modify orthodoxy by redefining godly femininity, increasingly accepting lesbianism, and renegotiating marriage expectations. These unintended consequences show that religious engagement with popular culture can produce new religious tools that do the very real work of maintaining religious belief, but not always in predictable ways.