

In Harvard-Yale 2014, which was held at Harvard Stadium on Nov. 22, Crimson junior defensive back Scott Peters intercepted Bulldogs quarterback Morgan Roberts' pass with 10 seconds remaining to seal the win for Harvard. ROBERT F WORLEY

God of the Playing Field

For many of Harvard's athletes of faith, religion is a strong component of their identity both on and off the field. However, balancing that identity with

the demands of a varsity sport is anything but easy.

BY CALEB LEE, SAMUEL E. LIU, AND ALI M. MONFRE, CRIMSON STAFF WRITERS

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“Run the first mile with my brain. Run the second mile with my feet. Run the third mile with my soul, God let me fly.”

When freshman distance runner Elianna Shwayder lined up for each cross country race her senior year of high school, her ears listened for the gunshot, but her mind was in prayer.

“For the King, then the ring.”

Just before the football team storms onto the field for the opening kickoff, junior defensive back Scott Peters stands calmly, deep in thought. Jesus first, championship second.

“Blessed to be here.”

As one of her coaches tells members of the women’s basketball team they are all “lucky to be here,” sophomore forward Maggie Hartman silently replaces a word.

For many of Harvard’s religious athletes, who are the minority on Harvard’s secular campus, mantras like these have become a part of the practice and game routine. Just 22 percent of respondents surveyed in The Crimson’s survey of the Class of 2018 who identified as recruited athletes also indicated that they are either “religious” or “very religious.”

While faith comes in many forms at Harvard for all students, 60 percent of self-identified recruited athletes indicated that they were Protestant, Catholic,

or Jewish. Only 2 percent of respondents self-identified as Muslim, Buddhist, Mormon, or Hindu, though 12 percent did choose “other” as their descriptor.

The religious athletes interviewed for this story, most of whom identify as Christian, say they are lovers of God first, athletes second. The end of their artform is, in their own words, the glorification of God and the display of appreciation for the talents they have been given. But following that path is not always easy.

Some tell tales of the faithless stigma they say surrounds Harvard in their hometowns. Apprehensive of what they might find at an institution perceived by others as “godless,” they say that to their surprise, they found that faith is alive and well on campus, and many have found faith communities both within and beyond their teams.

However, some athletes struggle to maintain a balance between faith and the rigorous demands of collegiate athletics. As Harvard’s most famous Christian athlete—Los Angeles Lakers point guard Jeremy Lin ’10—says, on-campus temptations that might lead students away from their faith abound.

The struggle can also go beyond simple questions of faith; while some students are able to seamlessly integrate faith into athletics, others struggle with the practical and personal aspects of living up to the expectations for both their faith and their performance.



Junior defensive back Scott Peters considers religion a steadying force among the "chaos" of football.
ROBERT F WORLEY

Out There: Faith at Harvard

When he was a high school senior, Peters listened to warnings about the perceived perils of his new collegiate environment.

“I can’t even begin to count the amount of people that said, ‘I’m praying for you as you go into the spiritual wasteland,’” Peters says.

Growing up in a suburb in Atlanta, “smack dab in the Bible Belt,” Peters came from a home that was strong in Christian faith and spent summers at Christian sports camps.

He is not the only one to have had experience with the stigma of “godless Harvard.” For a number of student-athletes, going to Harvard also meant facing disapproval in the eyes of their communities.

“Harvard is looked at as...an evil,” junior women’s basketball forward AnnMarie Healy says, half-joking. There were some members of her largely-Christian community who discouraged her parents from letting her go to Cambridge, she says, warning them that attending Harvard would cause her faith to suffer.

For select student-athletes, choosing to go to Harvard came hand in hand with a fear that their commitments to faith would be negatively affected, and that they would come out changed individuals.

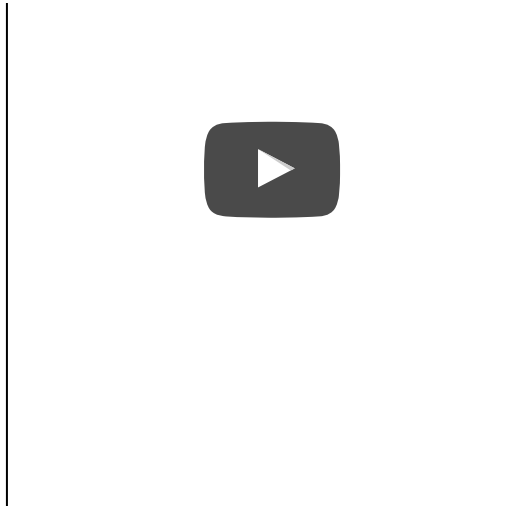
But those fears turned out to be unfounded, they say. To the contrary, they have found religious life on the campus to be vibrant and strong.

“There are so many people who are are living radical lives for Christ, and that’s the reality,” Healy says.

Reverend Jonathan Walton, the Pusey Minister in the Memorial Church, echoes Healy’s sentiment.

“I’ve never understood this whole ‘godless Harvard’ thing,” he says. “As long as there [are] individuals here that come from strong communities of faith and carry that in their heart[s], this is a university that will be strong in and with its relationship to faith communities.”

Strength of Faith



Reverend Jonathan Walton serves as a faculty adviser for the men's basketball team.

Beyond his work with students in his academic and religious positions, Walton also serves as the faculty adviser for the men's basketball team. His duties and self-proclaimed love of basketball have kept him particularly close with the team; his travel activities with faith-based campus organizations like Christian Impact and Athletes In Action have put him in close contact with other Crimson athletes as well.

According to Walton, the discipline, routine, and reliance on teammates he sees in many Harvard athletes is strongly correlated with the character, commitment, and trust in a higher power that comes along with leading a spiritual life.

“I can tell you one thing—when I watch the women's basketball team, women's water polo team, football, men's basketball team, you can tell that there's something spiritual, there's something religious about their relationship,” he says. “You can see the ways that they rely on each other and depend on each other, and they're working towards a common good.”

Peters was pleased to discover spiritual elements of his team that are not only perhaps subtle and inherent, as Walton describes, but also much more clearly tied to his own religion. Having arrived at Harvard afraid that he would be the only Christian on the team—perhaps even at the school—he was pleasantly surprised to find the opposite scenario. In fact, he estimates half of the football team is Christian.

“It was such an answer to prayer, the people that got put on the team,” he says. “Football was like my way into finding a faith community at Harvard.... [The] avenue was paved by football guys ahead of me.”

God in the Locker Room and Off the Field

Peters found community through faith and football. In addition to spending time with his teammates on the field, he and his teammates also bond during the football team’s Ironmen Bible study. Named after Proverbs 27:17, “As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another,” the group, of which Peters is a regular attendee, meets each week on Wednesdays to check in with one another and delve into scripture.

“It fosters relationships outside of class lines,” he says. “It creates cool relationships between guys that aren’t in the same grade, [and] that’s a big part of faith on the team.”

Peters is not the only one who has discovered a strong faith community within the Athletic Department; the Ironmen Bible study is only one of many such gatherings around campus.

Healy hosts a women’s athlete Bible study in her fourth-floor Kirkland room. There, she talks with fellow attendees, close together in conversation and then

prayer. Recently, the group discussed what it meant to be a leader, modeling the conversation around Mother Teresa, whom Healy jokingly referred to as “the bomb dot com.”



Junior AnnMarie Healy hosts a weekly bible study for female student-athletes in her fourth-floor Kirkland common room. MARK KELSEY

These community-oriented elements of faith can extend beyond the Harvard athlete community and trickle into the team-specific community as well. According to Healy, the women’s basketball team is heavily Christian, and faith is a fundamental part of the team dynamic. Players hold prayers before each game, and many teammates attend weekly services together on Sundays. During J-Term, Healy held a teamwide Bible study.

Before tough conditioning days in the fall, Hartman says, her basketball teammates write “AO1” on their wrists. The phrase means “audience of one,” to indicate that “no matter what you’re doing, it’s for Christ, and [only he’s] going to judge you for that.”

“And as long as you’re giving everything that you have, that’s enough,” she says.

Although for some teams, faith is an explicit part of team culture, in others, a team-oriented faith community is built unintentionally.

Some players, like men’s basketball sophomore shooting guard Corbin Miller, who is a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, have applied some of the coaches’ and players’ inspirational words in a religious context.

“[Harvard men’s basketball coach Tommy Amaker]’s got quotes and saying[s] that he gives us every day,” he says. “There’s one...to the effect of, ‘Don’t mistake routine for commitment.’ And so when I hear things like that, there’s a lot I can tie into not only sports but [also] in life and my beliefs.”

“In the Mormon religion, there’s a lot of commandments, there’s rules that we follow, and it’s easy to routinely get into things but miss the mark of why you do it,” he adds.

A Spiritual Component of Sports



Reverend Jonathan Walton serves as a faculty adviser for the men's basketball team.

Not all religious athletes have found a faith community on their team, however. Senior lightweight rower Josh Shih says that save for a few exceptions, he does not really talk about his faith with other members of the team. His experiences with faith have been primarily individual.

“I guess I’m looking for opportunities for where it can happen,” he says. “Now that I’m a senior, I’m also thinking about ways to possibly have those types of conversations.”

“My hope is that... at some point [faith] would become a part of our team culture,” he adds.

On The Field

The experiences of sophomore golfer Kendrick Vinar have been largely similar to Shih’s. Outside of attending weekly church services with a teammate, his religious experience has largely been independent of the golf team.



Co-captain AnnMarie Healy put up a team-high 13 points in the team's loss to URI MATTHEW W DESHAW

However, the lack of a religious community on the team has not stopped his faith from influencing the way he competes. For Vinar, God always comes before golf. Whether he plays and how well he plays has “little external consequence.”

“When I play, my identity and self-worth isn’t wrapped up in my performance,” he says. “Everything is kind of secondary [to faith], and for me I find that super liberating. It helps me play better when I can frame things in a different perspective.”

Vinar is not the only one who finds faith a calming force amid the turmoil and pressure of collegiate competition. From silent prayers during TV breaks to locker room meditation, many of Harvard's religious student-athletes grasp for a moment of quietude in the midst of the intensity—this, they say, helps both their faith and their game.

Athletes express their faith on the field in a myriad of ways. Lin's pre-game handshake with former Knicks teammate Landry Fields: read a page of the "Bible"—mimicked by Fields' hands—and point up. Tim Tebow's kneel in the endzone: a pause to give silent thanks to God for his success. Healy's free throw routine: As she will tell you, it is all about a simple rhythm.

Dribble, father, dribble, son, dribble, the Holy Spirit. In her head: "Father, Son, Holy Ghost. You are the one I love the most."

Swish.

It happens in her head, each of the 100 times she has gone to the free throw line in her Crimson career.

Amidst the colliding bodies over the grassy expanse of the football field, Peters too has found that God is a way to take a step back in order to find calm and poise. For the junior, chaos defines the game of football. From the locker room right before the game "when guys are losing their minds because they are just trying to pump themselves up," to the final few seconds—"it's chaos until the last whistle," he says.

Religion is his tool to navigate the intensity. A reprieve, he calls it.

"I can't allow football to be an idol...I can't allow it to become more important than my faith, because once I do, then that's when my emotions—my physical,

my mental well-being—can be affected by a game,” he says.





Harvard's most prominent professional athlete admits to feeling alone at times in Harvard's secular community his freshman year. THE CRIMSON SPORTS STAFF

Against the Current

While Lin, who is widely regarded as the greatest basketball player to come out of Harvard, has enjoyed considerable success on the court both in Cambridge and beyond, he encountered personal difficulty when he first joined the team as then a rare outwardly practicing Christian.

It was a matter of isolation. Lin had come from a Christian family, 3,000 miles away in Palo Alto, Calif. Not being surrounded by Christian friends was unusual for him. He had grown up in the backyard of his dream school, but that school—Stanford—rejected him. He recalls not feeling terribly excited to go to Harvard.

"I don't play for other people. I play for God, and that gives me a certain type of freedom," says Jeremy Lin '10, a former Crimson point guard who now plays for the Los Angeles Lakers.

Not every team at Harvard has a strong core of religious members like the women's basketball team or the football team. Some of Harvard's Christian athletes find themselves to be among the few religious players on the team.

Such was the case for Lin. Over the phone, he recalls struggling spiritually at Harvard for his first year and a half. Being a rare Christian on the men's basketball team was, as he says, "very difficult." He says joining a faith community outside of the team helped a lot.

"Push and pull" is how he describes his relationship with the team.

"For me I was like the only Christian, pretty much," he says. "[My teammates] would make fun of me or make fun of Christianity or make fun of God.... I would get in these theological debates on the back of the bus."

On the Forefront of Faith, Athletics, and Academics



Reverend Jonathan Walton serves as a faculty adviser for the men's basketball team.

Lin says his mentality ultimately came down to trying to influence others more than they influenced him.

“Do I end up talking like they talk, or do they end up talking like I talk? Do I end up living a lifestyle like they live, or do they end up living a lifestyle like I live?” he says.

When it comes to cursing, which Lin avoids, he says his teammates gradually began to curse less around him.

“[It was] not because I ever said anything or judged them,” he recalls. “It happened naturally, [and] we never talked about it.” Over time, he grew closer to his fellow hoops players, and by his senior year he had invited them to a Bible study he held in his room in Leverett House.

For Lin, each and every action is one of worship. He avoids letting basketball define him—for him, basketball is a tool, a means, a platform through which he aims to glorify God.

“I don’t play for my personal glory, or money, or fame, or the fans,” he says. “I don’t play for other people. I play for God, and that gives me a certain type of freedom.”

Lin is not the only one to place his faith before his sport. Miller took two years off from shooting a basketball to pursue a mission trip in Mexico. Miller went through the college basketball recruitment process already knowing he would take off for his mission after his freshman year.

Like Lin, Miller echoed the sentiment that faith called him to go against the current at times. While it may be commonplace for athletes to take time off to

preserve a year of eligibility or take a gap year before college, Miller's choice to drop everything and go on the trip ran counter to expectations.

"There's a lot of this kind of culture in sports...that you have to act a certain way, maybe listen to a certain type of music, or do certain things, and kind of fit in with the athletes," he says.



Sophomore men's basketball shooting guard Corbin Miller takes his father's words to heart: "You don't [always] fit in in sports, and you don't have to fit in with everybody else in life." ROBERT F WORLEY

Miller says he is able to resist this temptation to fit in largely because of a time his father pulled him aside after what Miller thought was a good performance at a basketball camp. He remembers his father expressing disappointment because Miller was "fitting in."

“You don’t [always] fit in in sports, and you don’t have to fit in with everybody else in life,” he recalls his father telling him. “If you have strong beliefs that make you happy, you stick to it.”

The words have stuck with him ever since.

Competition Compromise

Playing for God is not easy and freeing for everyone, however. For Jewish distance runner Shwayder, who recites the Shema before particularly daunting races, the demands of the sport itself are frequently in conflict with her religious practices. With demanding training and competition schedules as well as religious holidays to observe, conflicts inevitably come up.



Freshman distance runner Elianna Shwayder prays before the start of every race. MATTHEW W DESHAW

In October 2014, one of Shwayder's races fell on Yom Kippur, the most spiritual day of her year. She was faced with a choice: run, and sacrifice being able to fully commit to the holy day, or participate fully in Yom Kippur and sacrifice being fully committed to her sport.

After much deliberation with her family and her coach, Shwayder chose to compete.

"I decided that these are four very special years to commit myself as much as I can to be the best athlete that I can be," she says. "And while faith is a huge