



PRAY TO PLAY

Religious coercion pervades college sports:
how we got here, why it matters, and the
ways evangelists infiltrate programs

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Incorporated in Wisconsin in 1978, FFRF has two main purposes: (1) to promote the constitutional separation between state and church, and (2) to educate the public on matters relating to nontheism.

FFRF's legal staff spent more than 12 months investigating this report, which is a follow-up to its 2015 Pray to Play¹ publication.

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Introduction

The 2025 College Football Playoff national championship game featured battles of heavyweights: the brands of Ohio State and Notre Dame, star quarterbacks in Will Howard of the Buckeyes and Riley Leonard for the Fighting Irish, and ... Jesus against Jesus?

In the lead-up to the biggest game in the nation's biggest collegiate sport, religiosity featured prominently. Leonard said he believed both teams' faith is what got them to the championship game. "I truly think things happen for a reason. Not only us, but Ohio State as well. I think we're the two main teams to just publicly display our faith the most. I don't know if this is some divine teaching, you know, who put us here. I truly believe that Jesus was looking over both our shoulders throughout the whole season and put these two teams on a pedestal for a reason."²

In the wake of Ohio State's victory in that game, the Buckeyes received three different championship rings. On the inside of at least one of these rings? A cross, to represent the team's faith that they believed won them the championship.³

"It's going to be based on giving Jesus the glory. If people don't like that, don't come here."

The prominence of religion in sport does not rest solely with the players. Spencer Danielson, the head football coach at Boise State — a public university — once infamously said of his program: "It's going to be based on giving Jesus the glory. If people don't like that, don't come here."⁴ Oklahoma's softball team has become known for its Christian identity under head coach Patty Gasso. Clemson football coach Dabo Swinney once facilitated baptisms for his players at practice.⁵

Religious convictions in the world of sport are nothing new. However, a closer look at the relationship between religion and college sports reveals a pervasive history and culture of evangelism through athletics and the fostering of coercive environments where the message from the top is clear: get on board, or sit on the bench.

In FFRF's initial "Pray to Play" report, published in 2015, we focused on exposing what was then a widespread practice: public universities hiring chaplains for their sports teams and using athletic department funds to cover travel expenses, speaking fees and game tickets for chaplains to drive their religious message. Eleven years later, we submitted extensive records requests to public collegiate programs to look at what has changed. The funding problem has diminished, but coercive religious practices within college athletics persist, and not just in football.

Today, religious organizations like the Fellowship of Christian Athletes and Athletes In Action prey upon student-athletes on campuses across the country. In recent years, sport-specific groups like College Golf Fellowship and College Baseball Fellowship have taken hold. They have staff nationwide and host retreats sponsored by some of the biggest names in sports. Chaplains remain present, albeit in diminished capacities, and coaches around the country and across a spectrum of sports still push religion on their players and in their programs. This updated Pray to Play report aims to uncover the ongoing coercive practice of religion in college sports, including how we got here, why it matters and in what ways the indoctrination occurs.

Religious practices in college sports weigh heavily on student-athletes

Mickey Dollens remembers not wanting to pray.

When June Jones took over the football program at Southern Methodist University in 2008, Dollens — then a defensive lineman for the Mustangs — felt an infusion of religion throughout the team. The team chaplain invited players to a pregame chapel, and players were called on to give (or lead) a prayer for the team at the hotel the night and morning before games. While SMU is a private school with an official



religious affiliation, Dollens emphasized that the classroom experience was intentionally secular. “It was a striking difference between everyday class with secular professors and a very objective curriculum compared to the religiosity that permeated throughout the locker room culture.”

For student-athletes in collegiate sports, everything is about the opportunity. In a win-at-all-costs environment, nothing is guaranteed. That means that an athlete who has a scholarship one year could lose it the next, simply because the coach doesn’t view them as a critical piece to a winning puzzle. Athletes are well-aware of the pressure to perform — and to remain in the coach’s good graces.

Dollens, who now serves as FFRF’s Regional Governmental Affairs Manager, understands this pressure well. He was initially recruited to SMU by coach Phil Bennett, who was fired after the team posted a record of 1-11 in 2007, Dollens’ freshman season. When Jones took over, it was clear he wanted to bring in players he felt would help the team win right away, which meant having some difficult conversations with players still on the roster.

“I would have said or done anything to keep my football scholarship, and that’s what I did,” Dollens said.

This is not uncommon in college athletics, especially now that student-athletes can transfer schools without being penalized a year of eligibility. University of Colorado head football coach Deion Sanders famously oversaw the exit of 71 players to the transfer portal before his first season in Boulder.⁶

Athletes are acutely aware of the pressure this presents. Roster spots are limited, and coaches want players who contribute. If you can’t find your way onto the field, your spot on the team — scholarship and, nowadays, potential paycheck included — could be in jeopardy. Doing anything to hurt your standing in the eyes of the coach could mean a one-way ticket off-campus, and that includes voicing dissent against the coach’s religious views.

“[During the coaching transition], I would have said or done anything to keep my football scholarship, and that’s what I did,” Dollens said.

Chris Kluwe, a former punter at UCLA who went on to play 8 seasons in the NFL, agrees. “In high school and college, your coaches do have all the power,” Kluwe told FFRF. “They’re the ones who decide if you’re going to play or not, and in college, they may revoke your scholarship. Any potential conflict with your coach could lead to you not playing ... for a lot of guys, it’s easier to just stay quiet.”

And this coercive effect comes from more than just the coaches — among teammates, peer pressure is very real.

“In sports, unity is everything,” Dollens said. “If there’s a groupthink amongst the team, you want to be aligned with that. Otherwise, you’re not being a team player.”

This mentality is not unique to football, either. A professional golfer who played college golf in the South and spoke with FFRF on condition of anonymity recalls, “The older guys are going to know the courses you play better, they’re going to know the scheduling better, so you’re trying to fit in and be friends with all of them as soon as possible. If 10 or 11 of the guys are going to do something, then you’re probably just going to naturally want to go with them.”

So when Jones took the reins at SMU, the program’s newfound religious practices didn’t feel as optional as they were advertised. “There’s chemistry, there’s buy-in, and if you don’t go to chapel then you’re not bought in,” he says. The pressure to “buy in” came to fruition when one of Dollens’ teammates, who was a walk-on and a Muslim, was called on to give the prayer before a team meal. “Without hesitation or even second thought, he just gave up, stood up and gave a Christian prayer.”

The reasoning is simple and apparent: He wanted to play and earn a scholarship.

But while Dollens sometimes skipped the pregame chapel, the team prayer is what weighed on his mind. By the time he was called on to offer the prayer before the team meal, his role in Jones’ program had been solidified — the roster turnover had subsided, and the team had just won the Hawaii Bowl, its first postseason appearance in 25 years. Ultimately, he settled on a compromise.

“I didn’t mention Jesus, the bible, or God,” he said of his pregame speech. “I just gave an inspirational ‘prayer’ around unity, working together and taking all that we had worked hard for and using it for this moment.”

Dollens emphasizes that June Jones was a great coach and meant no harm. His beliefs were genuine and he truly wanted to equip his players for success both on and off the football field. Yet the religious practices within his program reflect college teams across the country, and stories of athletes across the spectrum from football to golf show how heavily those pressures weigh on student-athletes’ minds. Even more, these practices can have serious legal implications when used at public institutions.

History of religion in American sports

The close relationship between religion — particularly Christianity — and college athletics dates back roughly a century. At the time, sports culture in America was shifting

away from traditional amateurism into a greater focus on commercialism and professional athletes. There was a great level of concern from Christian communities, especially Protestants, that commercialized athletics were stealing the devotion of Americans away from religion. But not all Protestants viewed commercialized sport as a negative; many saw injecting religion into sports as an opportunity to build a moral compass that would endure for generations — this philosophy was dubbed “Muscular Christianity.”⁷

At the forefront of this movement was Amos Alonzo Stagg,⁸ the famed college football coach for the University of Chicago who still ranks in the top ten among college football coaches for all-time wins. Stagg saw religion as a means to build morality through football, a grueling sport, and imparted this belief upon his players. He believed that young people could learn “temperance, self-control, fair play, sportsmanship, courage, and the Golden Rule from athletes and athletic directors and coaches.”⁹ He encouraged young people to abstain from alcohol and smoking, and became one of the pioneers — along with Notre Dame and Centre College — of the pregame prayer.¹⁰ Outright conversion to Christianity was not the goal. Rather, Stagg sought to instill Christian values within his players and allow them to find their way toward religion.¹¹

While Stagg coached in the northern United States, a religious movement was happening in the South as well, ignited by Centre College’s “Praying Colonels.” In the immediate aftermath of World War I, some southern schools with religious affiliations banned football from their campuses. But in 1919, southern evangelicals’ mindset began to change, thanks largely to the small school in Danville, Kentucky. Following a shocking upset of West Virginia University, Centre’s football team garnered national attention as much for its play on the field as for its prayer practice before games. By the time the school upset Harvard — then a national powerhouse — in 1921, the “Praying Colonels” had captured the attention of the South and showed the path toward intersectionality between football and religion.¹² The marriage between the two spread robustly across southern states, building an identity that endures today.

By the 1940s, an evangelical sect had joined the movement through the National Association of Evangelicals. Organizations like Youth for Christ and Campus Crusade for Christ appealed to celebrities and athletes alike, building large and devoted followings through marketing, rallies and a focus on “soul winning.” One prominent member of Youth for Christ seized on this messaging, and used a connection to sports to buoy himself into the national conversation on behalf of evangelicals: Billy Graham.¹³

The use of sport as a tool for proselytizing and evangelizing continued to grow over the decades, buoyed by professionals such as Jackie Robinson¹⁴ and Bob Feller along with famed college basketball coach John Wooden.¹⁵

More and more figures sought ways to communicate a religious message to athletes as a part of their competitive journey. Soon, organizations like Athletes In Action and the Fellowship of Christian Athletes were born.

Third-party religious groups have infiltrated college athletics nationwide

Today, Christian athlete groups have evolved into a pervasive network spanning the country, covering revenue-generating football teams to the non-spectator sports like golf and swimming. Through partnerships with schools, coaching staffs, and student-athletes, these organizations foster a coercive environment by sending messages to players on team rosters: those who believe and participate will be looked upon favorably.

Athletes In Action

In 1966, Athletes In Action (AIA) was founded as a sports offshoot of Cru Ministries (then named Campus Crusade for Christ).¹⁶ Since then, AIA has established a home base in Xenia, Ohio, and branded itself as a go-to organization for evangelical ministry through sports. Its 250-acre Ohio campus touts over one million visitors annually. It features fields for football, soccer, baseball, and softball, an indoor weight training performance center, facilities for wrestling, volleyball and track, a fieldhouse with capabilities for most indoor court configurations, an athletic training room complete with staff, as well as a retreat center for overnight campers, conference center rooms and a chapel.¹⁷ The website says that its Team Retreats, designed for entire teams and coaches to attend at their facilities, have hosted Texas A&M, Ohio State, the University of Cincinnati, and 22 other collegiate teams. In 2024, AIA hosted the Total Athlete Tip Off — a series of men’s and women’s Division 1 basketball games featuring teams from Liberty, Valparaiso, Indiana State and Florida Atlantic.¹⁸

NOVEMBER 4TH, 2024
JOHN WOODEN FAMILY FIELDHOUSE
XENIA, OH

TOTAL ATHLETE TIP-OFF

SESSION 1 NCAA WOMEN	SESSION 2 NCAA MEN	SESSION 2 NCAA MEN
VALPO	VALPO	FAU
TOTAL ATHLETE TIP-OFF	TOTAL ATHLETE TIP-OFF	TOTAL ATHLETE TIP-OFF
Liberty	LU	SYCAMORES
1:00P / EST	5:00P / EST	7:30P / EST
REGULAR SEASON OPENING DAY AT THE ATHLETES IN ACTION JOHN WOODEN FAMILY FIELDHOUSE		

AIA's reach extends far beyond the borders of its home facility. The organization claims to have a presence on over 200 college campuses nationwide, with a stated mission of seeing "Christ-followers on every team, in every sport, in every nation."¹⁹

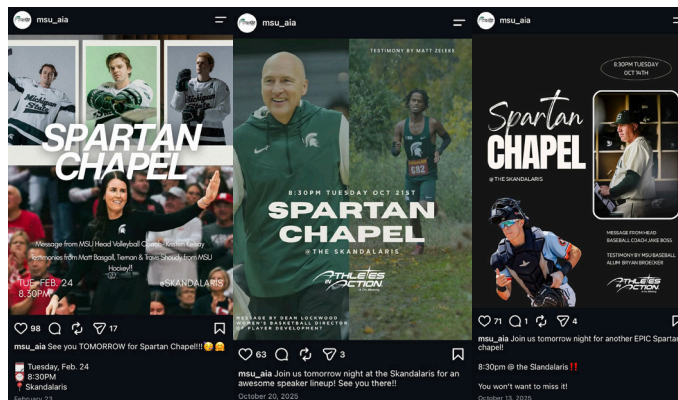
Perhaps no college athletic program in America has felt AIA's impact more than Georgia Southern University, where nine staff members — who vary among full-time, part-time and volunteer status — split up the athletic department's 15 total varsity sports to spread AIA's message and evangelize student-athletes.²⁰ Among these staff members, a common thread prevails: All are Georgia Southern athletics alum, and many share a story of conversion to evangelical Christianity like Izzy Ptacek's.²¹ Ptacek was a track and field and cross country athlete for Georgia Southern from 2020 – 2025.²² Her AIA biography states that she became involved with AIA during her junior year on campus, where the ministry's presence "planted seeds and drew her to Christ."²³ She quickly became a bible study student leader, which evolved into a paid staff position with AIA after graduation.²⁴ Through these staff members, AIA runs bible studies for student-athletes, encourages them to join "discipleship" groups, and hosts a variety of events throughout the year.²⁵

The operation is simple: hook young student-athletes on a religious message while they're a captive audience, recruit them to preach to the next generation behind them and watch the organization grow exponentially from campus to campus.

"Christ-followers on every team, in every sport, in every nation."

At Michigan State University, the Athletes in Action group has a history of having coaches at their group meetings. The group's Instagram reveals that Head Volleyball Coach Kristen Kelsay, Women's Basketball Director of Player Development Dean Lockwood and Head Baseball Coach Jake Boss all spoke at AIA meetings during the 2025-26 school year. An email exchange between Boss and the local AIA representative shows that AIA is involved in creating the coaches' messages. The email asks Coach Boss to reshape his speech about being empathetic to others to show athletes that "God doesn't just arbitrarily command us to be kind and empathetic, but He changes us inside (rescues us from being a slave to sin nature and gives us a brand new nature) so that we can see and treat others with love in an organic way. So taking it back to the Gospel allows us to hit a home run w[sic] the students. Because our theme is real transformation (as opposed to inspiration)."

The AIA influence extends elsewhere around the Big Ten, as well. Rutgers University football coach Greg Schiano hosts an annual golf outing to raise funds for AIA, among other charitable causes.²⁶ AIA's Twin Cities website promotes a vision



of "Disciples making disciples on every athletic department and every collegiate team in the Twin Cities," along with photos of numerous University of Minnesota athletes.²⁷ The University of Iowa chapter shares this goal and boasts thousands of followers on Instagram, where it promotes hosting frequent fellowship events for student-athletes.

AIA's pervasiveness within the college athletics sphere doesn't stop on specific campuses, either. AIA also funds and operates programs for athletes across 11 different sports to compete, travel and share their faith.²⁸ The organization even sponsors three summer league baseball teams composed of college players from across the country, with a stated goal of helping "team members grow in their faith and to challenge them to take the next step in their relationship with the Lord."²⁹ Players meet daily with a team chaplain, who encourages them to "apply a Biblical approach to their everyday lives."³⁰

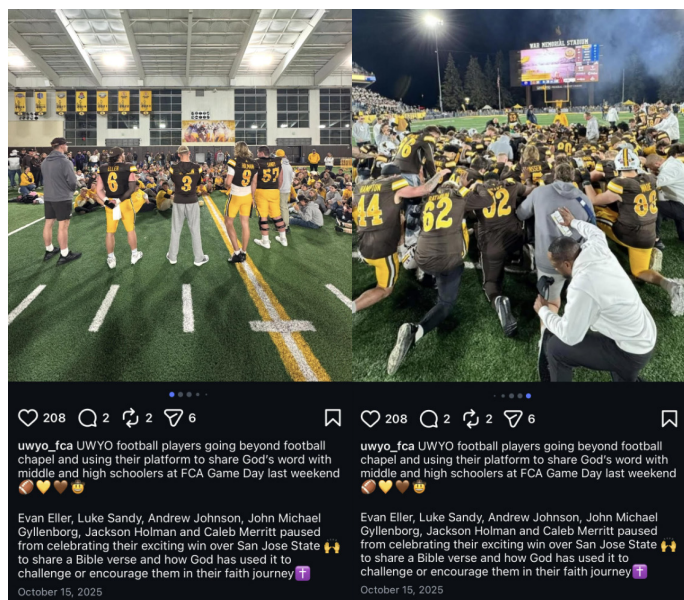
AIA's approach to infiltrate athletic programs across the country has created a network of coaches, representatives and athletes who buy into the AIA message. In turn, AIA has expanded its staff by recruiting the very student-athletes it proselytizes, creating a self-sustaining system of evangelism.

Fellowship of Christian Athletes

The Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) was created in 1954 by a student-manager for the Oklahoma A&M University (now Oklahoma State) basketball team as a culmination of his hopes to merge religion and sports. FCA's website declares that its mission is "to lead every coach and athlete into a growing relationship with Jesus Christ and His church."³¹ It emphasizes that FCA members are "called as disciples of Christ to make disciples," hoping that those new disciples will go make more disciples and so on. FCA held its first National Conference in 1956 with 256 high school and college athletes and coaches. From the beginning, college coaches were deeply involved in FCA's camps: coaches from Michigan State, Kansas, USC and Oklahoma were part of that first camp.³² In 1966, FCA established its Huddle Program,³³ which is ministry groups where coaches and athletes get together for fellowship and "where competitors become disciples who make disciples."³⁴

Over time, FCA's programming expanded to include camps, huddles, mentorship programs and even international trips,³⁵ as well as sport-specific ministries that field their own teams.³⁶

FCA is keeping up with its mission to “make disciples” by proselytizing to more and more athletes. FCA's ministry report boasts that in the 2025 fiscal year, it held 23,210 huddles worldwide, hosted 922 camps with 89,302 attendees, facilitated 190 sports leagues and 414 clubs, and distributed 244,650 bibles.³⁷ This growth shows how successfully FCA infiltrates teams through coaches or student leaders and exerts that influence to get new students involved with the organization and evangelized.



At the University of Wyoming, FCA has strong connections with multiple sports teams. Its website lists an FCA multi-sport huddle, as well as track and football-specific team bible studies.³⁸ Texts between a University of Wyoming football coach and a member of the campus FCA group show that the coach added FCA Chapel to the football team's weekly calendar as a “teamwork” event in hopes that more football players would attend. According to the calendar, this weekly chapel sometimes happens immediately after team dinners, no doubt creating peer pressure to follow FCA-affiliated teammates to chapel. The texts also show that FCA representatives received season credentials for football games and led chapels for the football team on game days; these are also apparently included on the football team's official calendar. Players from the Wyoming football team also participated in FCA Wyoming's Game Day event where high school athletes attended a University of Wyoming football game and afterward heard religious testimonies from current players.

The University of Wyoming is not the only state school with close ties to FCA or that uses college athletes and coaches to

proselytize high school athletes. In 2026, the Nebraska FCA chapter hosted its first “FCA Sports Camp” at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's campus. The four-day camp had 218 campers from grades 9-12 for baseball, basketball, football, golf, soccer, softball, tennis, track & field, volleyball and wrestling.³⁹ Husker athletes from the baseball, basketball, football, track & field, volleyball and wrestling teams were listed as Athlete Coaches at the camp.⁴⁰ Two former Husker assistant soccer coaches helped lead the soccer programming.⁴¹ Nebraska's Head Wrestling Coach Mark Manning was the primary coach for the wrestling camp and brought assistant Husker wrestling coaches with him.⁴² Promotional materials from the camp state that there were “26 first time decisions to follow Jesus” at the event.⁴³

The camp's bible teacher was Pastor Luke Gorsett,⁴⁴ a pastor at Emmaus Bible Church in Omaha, which declares its agreement with a statement from The Council on Biblical Manhood & Womanhood saying that LGBTQ+ identities are immoral and sinful.⁴⁵ This kind of rhetoric is not new to FCA. Some student leaders for FCA are required to agree to and sign its Statement of Faith and its “Sexual Purity Statement,” which says that the bible allows sex only within a heterosexual marriage and that anything else is an “impure” lifestyle.⁴⁶

The seemingly tight connections between University of Nebraska athletics and the FCA Sports Camp program are fundamentally coercive. For one, young high school athletes may believe that getting these coaches', former coaches', or current collegiate athletes' eyes on them could give them a leg up in recruiting, incentivizing their participation even if they do not share FCA's religious beliefs. College athletes who attend, especially those who attend with their head coach, may have been explicitly asked to attend or may implicitly understand that attending is a way to build goodwill with their coaches. This coercive pressure to attend then subjects these collegiate and high school athletes to the kind of extreme rhetoric that Emmaus Bible Church espouses and puts pressure on them to declare a “first time decision to follow Jesus.”



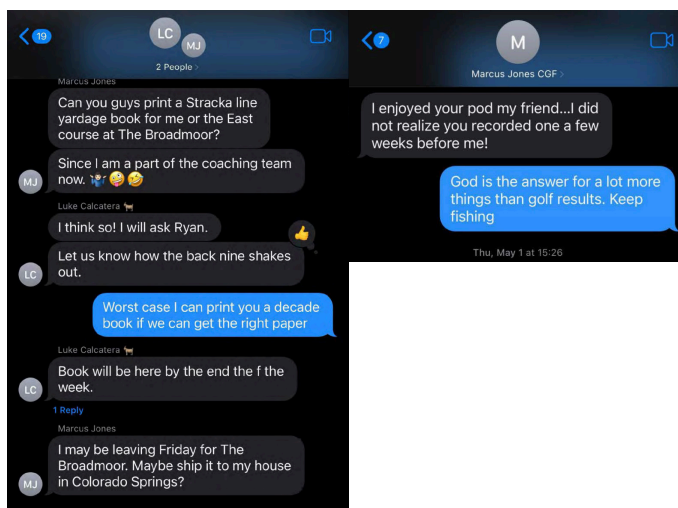
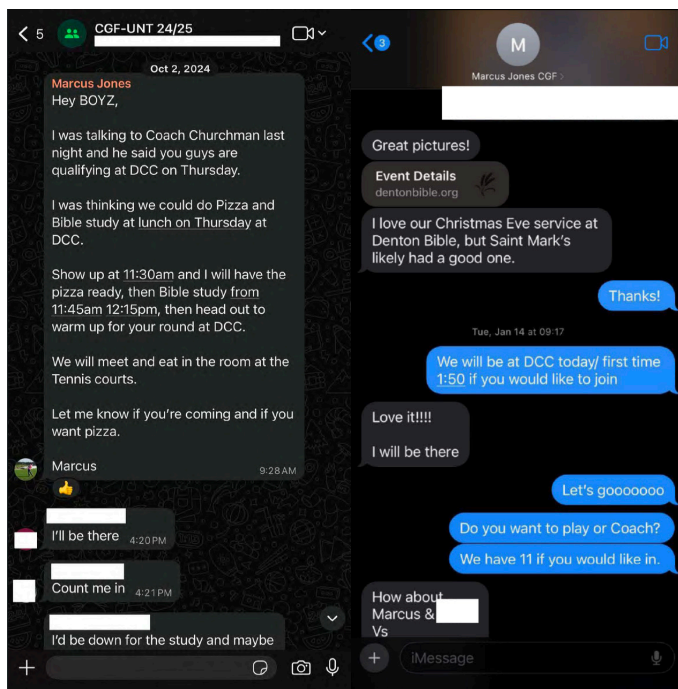
FCA then takes the connections it gains from this access to students one step further. It often uses these connections, especially with K-12 schools, to attack well-established laws and to attempt to enshrine its desire to discriminate in the law. In 2019, it brought a case against a California school district because the school revoked its recognition as an official school club because of FCA's discriminatory statement of faith and sexual purity statement.⁴⁷ Another case in D.C. is pending on the same issue.⁴⁸ In August 2026, an FCA group filed a lawsuit in New Jersey that essentially challenges the Equal Access Act's provisions that student religious groups must be student-led and student-initiated, and that outside adults cannot regularly attend group meetings.⁴⁹ FCA has also filed a brief on behalf of religious preschools that want to be able to discriminate in admissions against LGBTQ+ preschoolers and their families.⁵⁰ This pattern makes clear that FCA not only wants to discriminate, but wants to enshrine in law its right to discriminate.

Sport-specific ministries

Sport-specific entities have sprung from the roots of these national organizations, and perhaps no group exemplifies this approach better than College Golf Fellowship (CGF). Founded in 1980 and headquartered in Roseville, California,⁵¹ CGF has a coordinated national presence across college golf. The organization's president, Brad Payne, serves as a chaplain to players on the PGA Tour — the highest level of professional golf.⁵² In addition to its executive and administrative staff, the organization employs three regional directors who divide the country into West, Central and East regions.⁵³ Those regional directors oversee 21 other location-specific representatives who handle much of the on-the-ground ministry and outreach to college coaches and golfers.⁵⁴

A closer look at CGF's practices reveals an intimate relationship with college coaches and golfers alike. In a series of texts obtained by FFRF through an open records request from the University of North Texas, communication between UNT's men's golf coaching staff and CGF Central Director Marcus Jones was frequent. The group routinely discussed golfers' tournament scores, recruits in the area, and where and when UNT golfers would be playing or practicing. In one exchange, Jones was given an explicit invitation to attend a practice round for North Texas golfers and was allowed to either "play or coach." Jones also had a direct line to student-athletes via group text messages, where he circulated invitations for pre-round bible studies with the incentives of free pizza and CGF gear.

Additional text messages between Jones and the UNT coaching staff reveal a close relationship, making it no secret why the CGF representative was granted such exclusive access to student-athletes — the relationship went beyond allowing Jones to promote CGF and bible study to North Texas golfers. In one exchange, Jones — who played in the



2025 U.S. Senior Open Championship as an amateur — asked whether the staff could print him a yardage book for the event and ship it to Colorado Springs, where the event was held. In making the request, Jones joked that he was “part of the [North Texas] coaching team now.” In another message, head coach Luke Calcaterra told Jones, “God is the answer for a lot more things than golf results.”

This level of attachment to a golf program is unusual, and stood out to the former college golfer who spoke with FFRF on condition of anonymity.

“The access that College Golf Fellowship was granted [to our program] was kind of shocking to me,” he said. “They were at the tournaments, they were staying at our hotels, and in the practice rounds [CGF representatives] would have carts and come up and talk to us — I thought that was really, really strange...they had more access than people's families.”

When asked about his reaction to CGF's overtures, the answer was simple: "Just get away from it as fast as possible."

Area and region representatives across the country mirrored this invasive approach. During the 2023-24 and 2024-25 men's golf seasons at Valdosta State University, Jayce Barber, a representative for College Golf Fellowship, served as a Volunteer Assistant Coach for the team. Barber worked with both organizations during that time. In 2024-25, a new graduate assistant joined the coaching staff. Since then, text messages between the two show that Barber is still involved with the Valdosta Men's Golf program. In fact, messages show one coach naming a player he is "trusting to take over as VSU rep" after his time ends. In other regions, CGF representatives send frequent emails to coaches ahead of college golf tournaments, asking them to send their players to a bible study run by the organization during the competitions. Invitations are sent for "marriage retreats" designed solely for coaches and their spouses.

To that end, one hallmark of CGF's approach has been offering free retreats for college golfers, many of which are sponsored and headlined by some of the biggest names in professional golf.⁵⁵ In CGF's early days, longtime PGA Tour golfers like Ben Crane and U.S. Open Champion Webb Simpson hosted retreats. But in more recent years, the sponsors have gotten bigger — for instance, four-time major champion and the current number one player in the world, Scottie Scheffler. In 2025, CGF president Brad Payne served as a fill-in caddie for Scheffler during the PGA Tour's St. Jude Championship, the first tournament in the league's year-end playoff series.⁵⁶ The organization touts its partnership with Scheffler and prominent Tour pros across its media, with Scheffler and fellow

world top-10 golfer Sam Burns featured in a video on the organization's home page.⁵⁷ In the video, Scheffler indicated CGF events shaped his views on religion. "I learned about who Jesus really was as a freshman in college," he said.⁵⁸

"... they had more access than people's families."

For young student-athletes, it's easy to understand why these retreats are so attractive. Not only do they get a free trip, but they also have access to some of the best golfers in the world in a personal setting. In an ultra-competitive landscape where many of these players have professional dreams, these are rare opportunities to get advice from golfers at the pinnacle of the global game. But it's an opportunity from CGF's perspective, too, to exert a large amount of influence on young men who are under a great deal of pressure. The offer of free food and a chance to chat with the game's greats lures them into the real pitch: Christianity.

Other sports are following CGF's lead

CGF may be the most prominent sport-specific ministry in the game right now, but others are trying to follow the same model. In 2025, former Major League Baseball slugger Chris Davis founded College Baseball Fellowship — and in the organization's 2025 Launch Plan documents, it explicitly calls out CGF and Brad Payne as the model for the organization's success.⁵⁹ The documents outline designs for baseball retreats that are eerily similar to those put on by CGF: they aim to accommodate 50-75 college baseball players, recruit one or more current or former MLB players to host each retreat, provide baseball instruction along with free food and gear, and include plenty of time for players to hear the Gospel from a "dynamic pastor" and religious testimonies from their hosts.⁶⁰ Davis has since recruited three other current or former professional baseball players as his co-founders: Cody Bradford, David Murphy and Cody Allen. Between them, they have a combined 34 years of Major League Baseball playing experience.⁶¹

Since late 2025, College Baseball Fellowship's staff has begun hitting the road, bringing the ministry to college baseball programs across the South and into the Midwest. Images posted to the organization's Instagram page show representatives speaking to many different college baseball teams, often at public universities. This captive environment forces players to choose: either attend and listen to a religion they may not believe in, or miss the session and risk being ostracized by their teammates.

These organizations are not limited to "warm weather" sports, either. Hockey Ministries International is a global

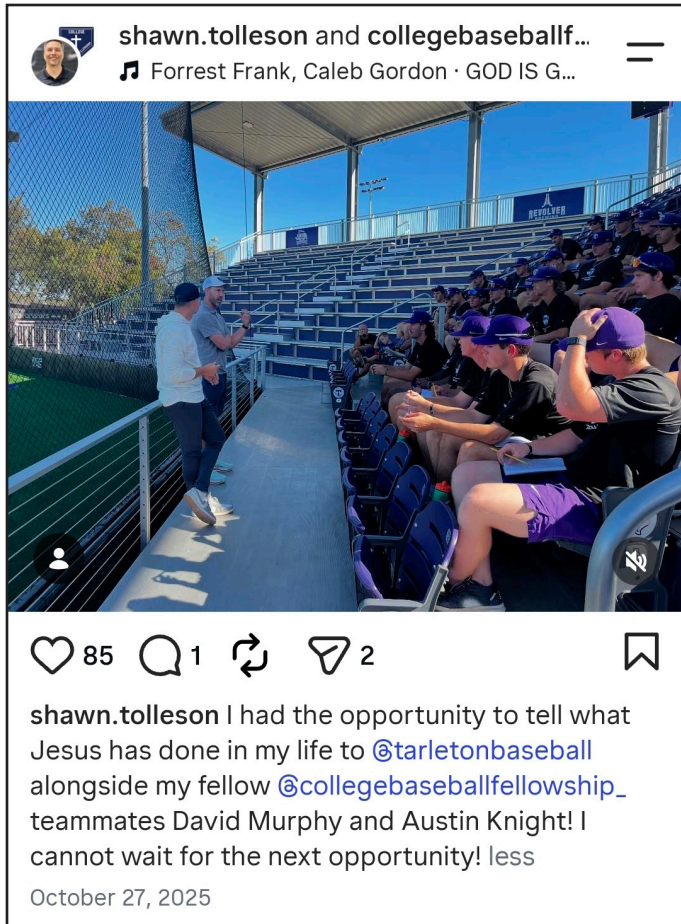
Scottie Scheffler and Sam Stevens Retreat

Thu, Dec 18 | Athletic Performance Ranch

Join us for the Scottie Scheffler and Sam Stevens Retreat at AP Ranch in Fort Worth! This is by far one of the most fun retreats that CGF offers. make sure you are stretched and ready to go for the club throw competition! There are 40 spots available. Anyone after that will be added to a wait list!

Registration is closed
[See other events](#)





Christian organization that claims to “serve every level of hockey” and hosts “chapel programs on over 300 teams from youth to the NHL.”⁶² HMI follows the regional representative model, with designated staff in six states, five Canadian provinces and four European countries.⁶³

The sport-specific model lets missionaries build closer relationships with student-athletes than generalized organizations like FCA or AIA can do. By offering unique opportunities for college athletes to engage with top players in their respective sports, these organizations are more likely to gain captive audiences to which they can spread their religious agenda.

Schools and their employees push religion directly

Make no mistake, third-party organizations are not the only sources of evangelism within college athletic programs. Often, religious practices originate from the coaches and staff at the helm of the teams themselves.

Chaplains

While FFRF’s open records requests to public colleges and universities reveal that the use of athletic department funds

to compensate team chaplains is no longer widespread, volunteer chaplains are still common across college sports.

The Auburn University baseball team made headlines in 2026 when FFRF received a complaint about religious practices pervading the program. In publicly posted photos, players were shown praying on the field under the direction of an Auburn staff member, as well as wearing warm-up jerseys during batting practice marked with crosses and the text “Jesus Won.”⁶⁴ A closer look into the Tigers’ practices revealed team chaplain Mason Maners at the center of the religious activity. Maners, a former Auburn baseball player himself, organized the purchase and distribution of the warm-up hoodies as “something that reminds [the team] of who we play for.”⁶⁵ Maners even organized a GoFundMe to raise money to buy the apparel, telling donors “I want every player, coach, and staff member to have one — not just as gear, but as a reminder of the victory we already have in Christ.”⁶⁶

FFRF wrote a letter to Auburn asking the program to cease coercive religious practices.⁶⁷ While the school did not respond, Alabama Attorney General Steve Marshall said the team’s practices were not unconstitutional and asked FFRF to retract its letter.⁶⁸ FFRF denied this request.⁶⁹



Paige Makin, a former swimmer at Auburn, told FFRF that these religious practices are common within the Tigers’ athletic department. “There was a culture of religion kind of everywhere down there,” Makin said. “It makes me uncomfortable. It’s cool if you want to have a relationship with a god ... when it’s being forced on other people I think that’s really not cool — especially when it’s coming from a public institution like Auburn.”

Indeed, former Auburn football coach Hugh Freeze is known for his constant references to Christianity, even after his resignation from the [University of Mississippi](#).⁷⁰ Former Tigers men’s basketball coach Bruce Pearl once urged students at Auburn’s “Camp War Eagle” freshman pep rally to “call on God” during their time at the university.

Makin says these practices extended to the swim program in the form of pre-meet prayer, and she felt ostracized from the team when she did not engage. “I definitely felt really uncomfortable not attending [the prayers], but I also felt very uncomfortable attending them,” she said.



However, Auburn is far from an outlier. At the University of Tennessee, women’s basketball coach Kim Caldwell praised the work of the team’s chaplain, Jess Brewster, who attends team practices and travels for some games.⁷¹ Caldwell was effusive in her praise of the religious practices within the team, claiming “the best thing we have done this year is that we have had four players get baptized.”⁷² She said that making a commitment to God is “the best thing you will ever, ever do in your life.”⁷³ On the men’s side, chaplain Chris Walker — a former defensive end for the Volunteers — enjoys sideline and locker room access to the football team on game days and even takes the court for warm-ups with the men’s basketball team. Walker serves as the Collegiate Area Director of FCA’s Knoxville section.⁷⁴

At Texas A&M, Director of Character Development Darius Dunaway also serves as the Aggies’ football team chaplain.

TEXAS A&M FOOTBALL CULTURE GUIDE

WHO WE ARE

At Texas A&M, we don't just build football players – we build men. Men who compete with heart, lead with integrity, and live with purpose.

G.R.I.N.D. is more than a slogan – it's how we live, work, and win.

- GRIT** — “Let us not lose heart in doing good...” – Galatians 6:9
Grit is finishing when you're tired, staying locked in when life gets tough, and pushing through when others quit. It's toughness in every rep and perseverance in every moment.
- RELENTLESS EFFORT** — “Whatever you do, do it heartily...” – Colossians 3:23
Relentless Effort is a choice – and it defines you. Go full speed every snap, every class, every day. Be consistent when it's hard, and chase your goals with everything you've got.
- INTEGRITY** — “The integrity of the upright will guide them.” – Proverbs 11:3
Integrity is the foundation of your name. It's what people remember long after the game ends – how you treated people, honored your word, and stayed true to who you are.
- NOW** — “Do not worry about tomorrow...” – Matthew 6:34
Be where your feet are. Win the moment in front of you – one play, one rep, one decision at a time. Tomorrow isn't promised – lead right now.
- DEPENDABILITY** — “It is required of stewards that one be found trustworthy.” – 1 Cor. 4:2
Be the guy others can depend on. Show up early, know your job, and deliver every time. Greatness comes from consistency – trust is earned daily.

OUR MISSION

What we are trying to do: TO LEAD WITH INTEGRITY, COMPETE WITH PURPOSE, & LIVE THE STANDARD OF EXCELLENCE.

OUR CORE VALUES

What matters most to us: CHARACTER, TOUGHNESS, ACCOUNTABILITY

OUR PRINCIPLES

How we apply these values to our actions, decisions, & behavior

CHARACTER	TOUGHNESS	ACCOUNTABILITY
Who you are when no one's watching.	Physical, mental, & spiritual strength through adversity.	Do your job. Earn trust. Live the standard.
1. Integrity Do right, always.	1. Resilience Respond, don't react.	1. Ownership No excuses. Own the outcome.
2. Discipline Choose consistency over comfort.	2. Grit Stay in the fight when it's hard.	2. Dependability Be early. Be ready. Be reliable.
3. Faith Let your values guide your vision.	3. Conviction Stand firm in your purpose & belief.	3. Consistency Be the same guy every day.

Through records obtained by FFRF via a public records request, it’s clear Dunaway’s religious influence is prominent within the program. Texas A&M’s football “Culture Guide” highlights the program’s G.R.I.N.D. mentality, where a bible verse supports each letter of the acronym. Other program materials highlight bible studies hosted by Dunaway in the football facility as well as “Player Services Reports” that detail how many players attended each religious service that week, along with summaries of each service’s content.

To be clear, chaplains are not a practice confined to the South. At the University of Nevada, head baseball coach TJ Bruce invites FCA chaplains to speak to his players and offer a bible study program. At the University of California-Irvine, FCA employee Ali Malaekhe serves as the baseball chaplain and is granted access to the dugout during games. Chaplains have found their way into college programs across the country, from the southwest to the northeast and beyond.

Granting chaplains such close access to athletic programs puts religion front-and-center before the eyes of student-athletes and turns a competitive environment into a coercive one. These volunteers (and sometimes, full-time employees) use their influence to bring religion to the playing field, whether the players want it or not.



Institutions

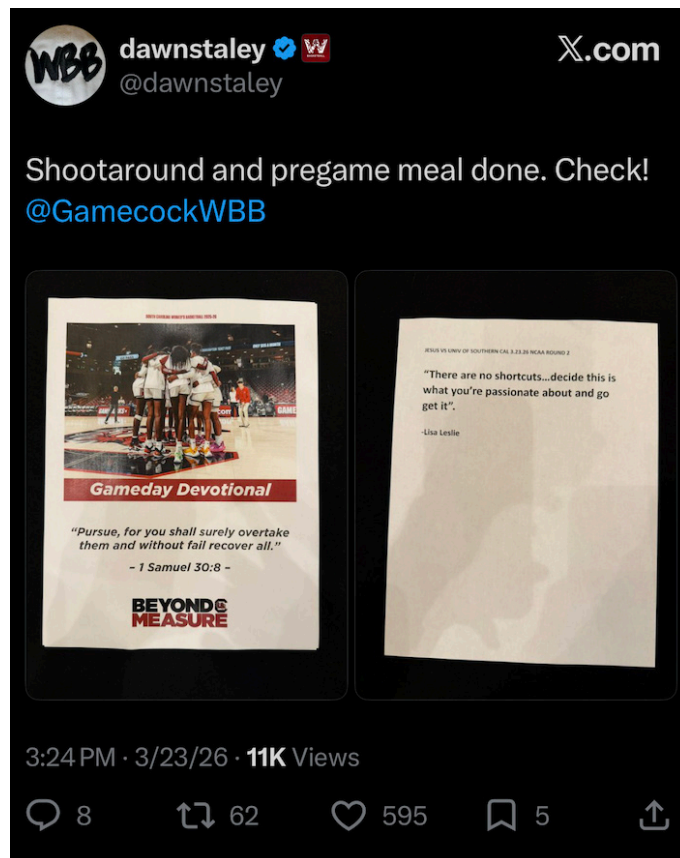
Spencer Danielson, the Boise State football coach, is not shy about sharing his religion and including religion in his season and game preparation materials. A slide deck provided to FFRF via open records request titled “2023 Seniors” includes as its first listed “Focus” item “Love Jesus.” Later slides titled “Finish,” “Legacy” and “Keep Swinging” include only bible verses as substance. For example, the “Keep Swinging” slide says only “1 Samuel 17:36: I have killed Bears & Lions protecting my father’s sheep; and this enemy will be like one of them.” Nearly half the slides reference the bible or Jesus.

NFL Hall of Famer and Colorado head football coach Deion Sanders prowls the sidelines wearing a sparkling cross around his neck and invites pastors into the locker room to pray with the team. After one game early in Sanders’ tenure at Colorado, Pastor Dewey E. Smith delivered a prayer in the locker room that included explicitly religious references:

Lord, some people call it Hail Mary, some people call it karma, some people call it luck, but in my faith tradition, we call it Jesus.

All of this comes after FFRF wrote a letter to the University of Colorado requesting the school inform Sanders of his obligation to remain religiously neutral, and the university responding that it had issued Sanders “guidance on the nondiscrimination policies, including guidance on the boundaries in which players and coaches may or may not engage in religious expression.”⁷⁵

Dawn Staley, head coach of the South Carolina women’s basketball team, also famously shares her faith by posting pre-game meal “devotionals” she creates for athletes and staff on her social media. Her devotionals have included, most



recently, Psalm 18:39 on March 30, 2026 (“You equipped me with strength for the battle.”), Romans 8:37 on April 3 (“In all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.”), and Matthew 28:6 on April 5 (“He is not here: for He is risen.”), among others. Her devotionals also typically refer to the game being “Jesus” versus the other team.

Schools are even turning to religious organizations to capitalize on the new era of college sports, where players can earn money and sponsors can purchase advertising patches on team jerseys. In February, the University of Louisiana-Monroe announced a partnership with Samaritan’s Purse — backed by a private donor — that will see the organization’s logo stitched on the Warhawks’ football jerseys for the 2026 season. Samaritan’s Purse describes itself as “a Christian relief and evangelism organization that responds to the physical and spiritual needs of individuals in crisis situations,” and is led by Franklin Graham, the son of famous evangelist Billy Graham.⁷⁶

While third-party organizations exert significant influence across collegiate athletics, the coercive effect of religious practices rises to a different level when the coaches themselves push the message. As Mickey Dollens’ story illustrates, college coaches hold immense power over the student-athletes they coach. So when someone with the stature of Deion Sanders tells them to believe something, odds are they’re going to listen — earnestly or not — for fear of being ostracized from the team and losing playing time.



Conclusion

The evolution of religious influence through third-party organizations and direct school-to-student-athlete proselytizing has only intensified in recent years. All too often, college coaches are turning this pressure-cooker into a pulpit.

Student-athletes need to know their rights. At public universities, student-athletes have the right to participate in athletics free of religious proselytizing, promotion, or bias from school employees. Public employees, including coaches, may not coerce student-athletes into religious practices or beliefs. This means they may not initiate or lead athletes in prayer, nor coerce student-athletes into wearing religious symbols.

Freedom to disagree is inherent in the United States Constitution. This means student-athletes are entitled to their own religious beliefs regardless of whether they represent the majority view. Nationally, more than half of Generation Z (those born after 1996) is non-Christian, including 43 percent who are nonreligious.⁷⁷

At public universities, student-athletes have the right to participate in athletics free of religious proselytizing, promotion, or bias from school employees.

Furthermore, student-athletes do not have to accept excuses for the violation of their rights. Any claims that school-sponsored religious activities are merely “voluntary” or are not “forced” on players do not trump the Constitution. Given the authority that coaches have over student-athletes, there is coercive pressure to participate in religious activities that coaches encourage or support even if the activities are allegedly “voluntary.”

Finally, student-athletes have the right to complain to their university about constitutional violations. If students believe that coaches or other staff are violating their constitutional rights, they may direct complaints to appropriate university officials, including the athletic

director and the university president. Additionally, FFRF welcomes student-athletes who feel their rights have been violated to reach out to FFRF at studenthelp@ffrf.org. **All complaints are handled confidentially.**

While the prevalence of religion in college sports has grown over many decades, knowing one's rights and abilities to challenge abuses of power can provide a channel to combat these coercive practices and ensure all beliefs are respected, both on and off the field of play.

Report Methodology

FFRF consulted a wide range of resources to put together this report. The organization filed open records requests with more than 40 colleges and universities across the country to unearth communications, financial data and employment histories. In addition, members of FFRF's legal team interviewed former college athletes to hear their personal experiences with religion in their athletic programs. Finally, third-party sources were consulted, including but not limited to books, news articles, social media pages and profiles and organization websites. A full bibliography follows this report.

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