

Preface

I grew up during the 1950s and 1960s in a home where my parents focused on religious activity in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. My father, Bertis L. Embry, explained in an oral history interview, “There has never been any question to us whether we went to church or not; we all went. The Church has meant everything in our lives. The Church is more than just a church; it is a way of life.”¹ Included in that “way of life” was the Protestant work ethic. My father taught at Utah State University, but he also farmed. When I was young, my mother, Anna Elizabeth Coulson Embry, worked at home. Later she updated her registered nurse training and worked in a nursing home and ended her career as a public health nurse. All the while she continued to do the things she had done when she was home full time, including raising a large garden and preserving the produce for the winter. One of my mother’s favorite sayings was, “A change is as good as a break.”

While my parents believed in work, they also encouraged play. My father tried to have a day, or at least half a day, for recreation a week. He also believed that learning came from traveling and meeting new people. We went on summer vacations to places like Yellowstone. My father attended institutes in the Midwest and New York State and accepted foreign contracts in the Middle East and Central America, and when we were young, the family traveled with him. We lived in Iran for two years and traveled around the world as we went to Iran and back home to Utah.

Of course, each family is unique. But my family exemplified some common Mormon elements. We went to all church activities, we worked, and we played. Church activities were not limited to Sunday worship services. I participated in roadshows (short dramatic presentations) that were performed in all the church buildings in our stake. I played church basketball, even though I am not at all athletic. In Primary, the children’s organization, I learned how to knit, crochet, and embroider. I talked in worship services. These sport and recreational activities were as much a part of my religion as attending worship services such as sacrament meeting or Sunday School.

My involvement in sport and recreation was minor compared to those with natural abilities. During my growing up years, the LDS Church sponsored extensive programs in sports, drama, music, dance, and speech. These included all-church tournaments in basketball, softball, volleyball, tennis, golf, and even horseshoes. Teams played on a stake level; winners advanced to regional competitions and then to a large tournament in Salt Lake City. In addition to sports, teenage Mormons participated in plays, concerts, speech programs, and dance festivals on a local level and at June Conference, a churchwide training program for Young Men and Young Women Mutual Improvement Association leaders.

How do these play activities fit into the Mormon view of the Protestant work ethic? Are Mormons working when they play? In some respects, the answer is yes. In *The Influence of the Protestant Ethic on Sport and Recreation*, Professor Steven J. Overman wrote, “Modern sport (and I would add recreation) disseminates, reaffirms, and reinforces values which have their origins in religion.”²

My research supports Overman’s conclusion by looking at the role of sport and recreation in the LDS Church during much of the twentieth century. While some Mormon historians correctly argue that Joseph Smith and Brigham Young encouraged athletic skills and cultural awareness, the LDS Church, along with other religions during the American Progressive Era at the turn of the twentieth century, embraced games as spiritual curriculum. The LDS Church’s activities mirrored general American religious recreation for nearly seventy years.

In 1971, the focus on sports and recreation shifted in the LDS Church when leaders eliminated the all-church athletic contests. A few years later the leaders also eliminated June Conference along with all other auxiliary conferences. Regional athletics continued for awhile but eventually general and local leaders phased these out as well. The most obvious reason for this shift was that the LDS Church grew internationally and focused on more than just American recreational activities. There may be other reasons as well. Church basketball, for example, lost the reputation of putting gospel teachings into action. A t-shirt with a picture of an Angel Moroni (looking very

much like a National Basketball Association logo of Jerry West) declares, “Church Ball: The brawl that begins with a prayer.”

The tide may be turning again. In 2004 the First Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints encouraged “local leaders to hold stake and multistake events and activities to provide a sense of unity and opportunities to develop friendships.” Suggested programs were sports, dance, drama, music, speech, and art.³ These sound like the activities I experienced in the 1960s. Maybe they will not be on the same scale and perhaps they will focus on different activities. Members in Brazil may play soccer instead of softball. But these are programs that church leaders did not stress as much in the 1980s and 1990s.

If LDS General Authorities are suggesting a return to past activities, maybe it is time for a history of sports and recreation in Mormon culture. When I advertised that I was researching church basketball, I received an e-mail from a man looking for programs for the single adults in his stake. He wanted to know what worked in the past and how he could adapt that to the present program. This study may do that, but it may do even more. I hope it will provide a frame work for the LDS Church sport and recreation program, explaining the history, the successes, and the failures. And it will discuss possible reasons why the Church leaders shifted the focus away from and then back to religious recreation.

In some ways, this is a history of the recreational aspects of the Mutual Improvement Associations (MIA) for Mormon teenagers. It will include some of the history of these organizations, but it will not cover everything because the topic is too large and some sources are not available. When researcher Scott Kenney wrote “The Mutual Improvement Associations: A Preliminary History, 1900-1950,” the minutes for the MIA General Board as well as for the various MIA committees were open to researchers but they are now closed.⁴ Available sources include church publications, and some yearly handbooks, programs, and guides. The church-owned *Deseret News* and *Church News* along with other regional and local newspapers also reported the all-church activities.

Other sources are participants' memories. For example, some people wrote autobiographies that include useful information. Also, the Charles Redd Center for Western Studies collected 106 oral histories on the topic of Mormon sports and recreation. However, memories have unique problems. Some people remember only the good; some remember only the unusual or negative. Over time memories blend together, so while some can give a play-by-play account of a church basketball game, others remember only generalizations. Even if everyone remembered the details, it would be impossible to include all of those accounts. For some, like myself, memories are limited. I can remember one roadshow and one basketball game quite clearly. But I know I took part in others.

The selection of interviewees for the oral histories also created unique concerns. Most responded to a newspaper article asking for information for this project. Many who responded had won all-church tournaments. Initially, I had planned to research the history of basketball in Utah. As I read past newspapers looking for information on the Utah Stars, the Utah Jazz, and high school and college teams, the *Deseret News* and *Salt Lake Tribune* articles frequently referred to Mormon basketball, so that became my topic. Newspapers published my press release asking for information on church basketball, but I received responses for softball and volleyball as well as basketball. So I expanded my topic.

Because the LDS Church sponsored all-church tournaments for the men, the only women who responded were a few who served as "sponsors" or cheerleaders for visiting teams. I wanted to include the women's activities, so I sent out another press release asking for information on all types of Mormon sport and recreation. I received only a few responses. It is possible that most participants, like me, had limited memories. For most activities, the payoff was not an all-church tournament with its memorable hoopla. The exception was the June Conference Dance Festival. I have included it because it shows the involvement of both men and women.

The result is that while the book discusses various aspects of LDS sport and recreation, it does not cover all of them equally. There is more information on men's games than dance. The stories from the oral histories focus on the all-church tournament, so that is the discussion in this

book. MIA also included speech, music, and drama on the local, stake, regional, and June Conference levels, but because I have very few stories these activities are not included in this study of all-church tournaments.⁵

Spiritualized Recreation is not an attempt to duplicate Richard Ian Kimball's excellent study *Sports in Zion: Mormon Recreation, 1900-1940*, which explores the Progressive movement's effect on Mormon recreation, the building of the Deseret Gym, sports as a way to teach a health code (the Word of Wisdom), and the development of camping in the Church.⁶ But his book stopped in 1940 and mentioned only in passing the all-church tournaments that started in the 1920s and reached their zenith in the 1950s and 1960s.

Spiritualized Recreation starts with a chapter on the relationship between sports, recreation, and religion. But churches are not the only organizations that sponsor these activities. When I presented a paper on the Mormon programs at an academic conference, the other panelist talked about the role of sports in communist East Germany. The reasons for participation in sports were strikingly similar. But because the LDS Church has a religious dimension, the chapter focuses only on religion.

The second chapter summarizes the role of sports and recreation in the LDS Church and in the MIA organization. It includes some of the reasons why the LDS Church sponsored the tournaments and festivals. The third chapter discusses basketball, the largest all-church program. The fourth chapter is on softball, the second largest tournament. The fifth chapter looks at volleyball, tennis, golf, relays, other sports, and dance. The sixth and final chapter discusses the reasons why the all-church programs ended, the programs that followed, and possible arguments for an increased interest in sports and recreation.

This book could take a variety of approaches. I chose to write it as a celebration of the all-church tournaments. It uses the oral histories to discuss the experiences of boys and men at the tournaments. I reference church magazines and manuals to support their stories. As a result, the study is mainly written for a Mormon audience. However, the interviewees talk about the strengths

and weaknesses of the programs, so this book will too. The oral histories are available at the L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University so future researchers can study other aspects. My goal with this study is to highlight the interviews. I also hope Mormon readers will reflect on the advantages and disadvantages of the athletic programs.

1. Bertis L. Embry Oral History, interviewed by Jessie Embry, 1984, 105, copy in author's possession. A copy has been donated to Special Collections at Utah State University Merrill-Cazier Library.
2. Steven J. Overman, *The Influence of the Protestant Ethic on Sport and Recreation* (Brookfield, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 1997), 8.
3. Adam C. Olson, "Celebrating the Gospel Around the World," *Ensign* (May 2004):128.
4. Scott Kenney, "The Mutual Improvement Associations: A Preliminary History, 1900-1950," *Task Papers in LDS History, Number 6* (Salt Lake City: History Division, LDS Church Historical Department, 1976), 41.
5. For those interested in speech, music, and drama, a good starting point would be the annual manuals and supplements distributed by the YMMIA and YWMIA.
6. Richard Ian Kimball, *Sports in Zion: Mormon Recreation, 1900-1940* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003).

