Introduction:

Modern sports culture has a profound influence on young people, fostering a culture that aims to propel the next generation of athletes to achieve a new level of excellence in their field. Yet it also created a culture that often embodies a performance-driven secular ethos, focusing merely on victory at all costs. This ethos has led to ethical distortions such as doping and academic dishonesty. For instance**,** Lance Armstrong's seven Tour de France titles were stripped due to systematic doping, while Ben Johnson**,** disqualified from the 1988 Olympics for steroid use, later promoted anti-doping education (Trothen, 2008). Similar issues have also appeared in collegiate sports: in 2025, Memphis Athletics was placed on NCAA probation after an academic counselor allegedly paid softball players to complete coursework for a basketball player (Associated Press, 2025). Scholars describe such trends as a "pathological" distortion of sport marked by commercialization and the idolization of records (Zowislo, 2009).

Even Christian universities are not exempt. Notre Dame's 2012–2013 football wins were forfeited after academic misconduct provided impermissible aid to players (Fortuna, 2016), and Baylor University**,** the largest Baptist institution in the U.S., faced sexual assault scandals ignored by the football coach and the university president (ESPN News Services). These incidents show that faith-based institutions, despite their moral ideals, often operate within the same competitive frameworks as secular ones, measuring success by performance rather than character.

This reality raises a critical theological and pastoral question: how can Christian higher education institutions reclaim the spiritual and moral purpose of sports? This conceptual theological reflection addresses that question by developing a hope-centered framework that integrates Thomistic theology**,** Pope Benedict XVI's *Spe Salvi* (2007**)**, and Snyder's psychological hope theory within the field of kinesiology. It argues that hope lies at the intersection of belief, cognition, and embodied action, where athletic discipline mirrors humanity's pilgrimage toward ultimate fulfillment in God. In this view, perseverance, teamwork, and resilience become signs of eschatological striving. By synthesizing theological depth with psychological insight, this reflection positions hope as both a spiritual and psychological resource for student-athletes and proposes a pastoral-educational model for Christian institutions to restore athletics as a genuine locus of virtue, resilience, and grace**.**

I. Psychological Perspectives on Hope in Sports

To ensure that the psychological literature cited in this study is comprehensive, a targeted review was conducted using multiple databases, including *PsycINFO, PubMed/MEDLINE, SPORTDiscus, Google Scholar,* and *ScienceDirect.* The search covered publications from 2002 to 2025 and utilized combinations of keywords, including *hope, sports psychology, motivation, resilience, athletic performance, student-athletes,* and their synonyms. Following guidance that no single database captures all relevant literature, we searched across several databases and used Boolean operators with thesaurus terms to capture alternate spellings and related concepts. By documenting these parameters, the authors aim to reassure readers that the psychological and sport-science sources informing our theological synthesis represent a comprehensive and up-to-date sample of current research.

A. Definition of Hope in Psychology

In secular psychology, hope is defined not as a theological virtue but as a cognitive-motivational construct centered on goals. C.R. Snyder's influential hope theory describes hope as goal-directed thinking that comprises two interrelated components: Pathways and Agency (Snyder, 2002). Pathways refer to the perceived strategies or routes to achieve one's goals-essentially the person's ability to generate workable plans to reach desired outcomes. Agency refers to an individual's willpower or belief in their capacity to initiate and sustain actions along the pathways toward a goal (Corn, 2020). Hope involves both the will and the ways to attain its objectives.

This psychological definition makes clear that hope, in secular terms, is a mental trait or state- part of one's motivational makeup rather than a spiritual grace. Snyder (2002) explicitly framed hope as a goal-oriented cognitive process with emotional and behavioral implications (Corn, 2020). It is about one's confidence and mental routes to accomplish earthly goals. In the sports psychology literature, hope is regarded as a positive psychological resource, similar to optimism and self-efficacy, but with a distinct emphasis on goal attainment. Notably, researchers differentiate hope from related constructs: Optimism is a generalized expectancy that good things will happen (often irrespective of one's actions), whereas hope explicitly involves expectancies that positive outcomes will occur through a person's pathways and agency (Snyder, 2002; Corn, 2020). In short, psychological hope in sports refers to an athlete's motivational mindset, energized determination, and mental roadmaps to pursue sport-related goals. It is a construct grounded in secular psychology and often measured by instruments like Snyder's Hope Scale, which quantifies an individual's agency and pathways of thinking (Snyder, 2002).

B. Role of Hope In Athletic Performance

A growing body of sports psychology research indicates that hope is a significant predictor of various positive outcomes in athletics. The study by Longakit et al. (2025) revealed that higher levels of hope (particularly its agency and pathways components) and grit, characterized by consistency of interest and perseverance of effort, were key predictors of both academic and athletic motivation. The student-athletes with stronger hope and grit were more actively and persistently engaged in their pursuits, demonstrating greater resilience in both training and academic studies. This confirms that hope enhances self-determination and fosters sustained motivation, which in turn supports improved performance in both academic and athletic settings. This underscores that cultivating a hopeful mindset, grounded in a sense of purpose and strategic pathways toward goals, provides student-athletes with a distinctive psychological advantage, motivating them to persevere, adapt, and continually strive for excellence in their holistic formation.

High-hope athletes approach their sport with a strong will-and-way mindset, characterized by clear goal-setting, purposeful action, and perseverance in the face of obstacles (Wang, 2023). They

transform external demands (such as coaching expectations or competitive pressure) into internal motivation and constructive focus. For example, a hopeful basketball player might rebound from a poor game by formulating new practice strategies (*pathways*) and feeling confident in executing them (*agency*) rather than succumbing to discouragement. A study by Wang (2023) on collegiate athletes revealed that athletes with higher hope scores exhibited significantly greater self-motivation, emotional regulation, and persistence under pressure, suggesting that hope operates as a performance-enhancing psychological resource. Similarly, Lai et al. (2023) found in their study that higher PsyCap correlated positively with both athletic performance and career development. Athletes with higher hope levels were more likely to persist under stress, adapt to setbacks, and demonstrate consistent motivation.

Complementing this, Lu and Hsu (2013) explored the impact of hope and social support on rehabilitation and well-being. Findings indicated that both hope and perceived social support significantly predicted rehabilitation beliefs and life satisfaction, although only the agency component of hope directly influenced rehabilitation behavior. The study also found that athletes with lower hope benefited most from strong social networks, highlighting that social support moderates the effect of hope on recovery outcomes. Together, these studies demonstrate that hope functions as both a motivational and adaptive mechanism in sports contexts. High-hope athletes not only perform better but also recover more effectively from injuries and stress. Moreover, across samples and measures, hope emerged as a stronger predictor of performance success than self-esteem or self-confidence (Lai et al., 2023). Cultivating hope (supported by community and faith) thus equips athletes with enduring resilience and purpose, linking psychological determination with holistic well-being.

Hope also correlates with other psychological qualities that benefit athletic performance. It is one of the components of psychological *capital* (PysCap) alongside self-efficacy, resilience, and optimism, all of which contribute to mental toughness. Athletes who have a higher hope as part of their PysCap tend to cope better with stress and maintain mental health under pressure (Lai et al., 2023). In a sample of competitive student-athletes, those with greater hope had superior stress-coping strategies compared to those with lower hope. (Lai et al., 2023). Moreover, interventions that build mental skills often raise hope in the process. For instance, coaching programs aimed at developing mental toughness have been shown to increase hopefulness in athletes (Perry et al., 2021. The book by Clough et al. (2021) cites the work of Green et al. (2007), which demonstrated that a structured coaching intervention for high school students led to gains in both cognitive hardiness (mental toughness) and hope. This suggests that by learning to set goals, manage thoughts, and remain resilient (all key elements of mental toughness), student-athletes also increase their hope levels.

Ultimately, some research suggests that hope is intertwined with more profound sources of motivation, including spiritual and moral dimensions. Studies on sports and spirituality have found

that athletes who connect their participation in sports with spiritual well-being can experience enhanced motivation and purpose. A recent study by Eryucel et al. (2024) revealed that spirituality positively correlated with the satisfaction of psychological needs, negatively with their frustration, and significantly mediated the relationship between psychological needs and motivation in sports. The results highlight the vital role of spirituality in enhancing athletes' motivation and well-being, suggesting that integrating spiritual care into athlete health programs may foster more holistic development. In other words, athletes who felt a sense of spiritual meaning and peace tended to have stronger intrinsic motivation to train and compete. This kind of finding, along with works like Saladas and Gayatao (2020), suggests that when student-athletes view their athletic goals within a broader context of meaning (such as personal growth, team spirit, or faith), their hope and drive may be even more robust. Indeed, hope in sports does not need to be purely secular; many athletes draw on faith-based hope (e.g., trusting in God for strength or finding inspiration through prayer) to stay motivated. Such integrative motivation can foster resilience, maintaining optimism for the future. The empirical literature is beginning to document these links between spirituality and athletic motivation, with spiritual well-being mediating the effect of need satisfaction on spirituality and athletic motivation, which is especially relevant in Christian higher education settings.

C. Limitations of Secular Hope

While psychological hope significantly enhances resilience and athletic performance, it has inherent limitations. Secular hope is conditional and reliant on achieving specific goals and personal capabilities, making it vulnerable to uncontrollable adversity, such as career-ending injuries (Corn, 2020). It places full responsibility on individuals, potentially leading to psychological exhaustion and despair if goals become unattainable. Moreover, purely secular hope struggles to address existential questions about meaning in the face of failure or loss. In contrast, theological hope, grounded in God's unconditional promise of love and salvation (as described in *Spe Salvi*), provides deeper stability. It assures athletes that their value and purpose transcend worldly successes, enabling them to reinterpret setbacks as part of a providential journey. Research indicates that religious faith offers unique coping resources, including community support, sacred narratives, and prayer, which enhance resilience beyond secular means (Pargament, 2010; Cook & White, 2021; Bounds, 2019). A holistic approach integrating psychological and theological hope is thus essential for student-athletes.

II. Theological Foundation of Hope

A. Aquinas on Hope: Orientation to Eternal Beatitude

St. Thomas of Aquinas offers a classic definition of the theological virtue of hope as *Spes* that is, a forward-looking desire for a future good, difficult but possible to obtain (Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II-II, Q17 a.1). It is not merely a natural optimism or emotion but an infused habit of the will ordered to a supernatural end (Elliot, 2017, p.7). Here, the object of the virtue of hope is two-fold: (1) the ultimate good of eternal beatitude- the soul's perfect happiness in union with God, and (2) the divine assistance needed to attain the aforementioned end (Elliot, 2017). In this sense,

the virtue of hope is not only longing for eternal life in God (our *finis* or final cause), but it also includes our trust in God's help (the medium or efficient cause) to reach it (Elliot, 2017). This dual orientation distinguishes the virtue of hope as a unique theological virtue, with God as both the goal hoped for and the source of strength by which we hope (Elliot, 2017). As Aquinas explains, whenever we hope for anything "as is possible to us employing divine assistance, our hope attains God Himself on whose hope it leans" (Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II-II, Q17 a. 1).

In this sense, the virtue of hope has a role that is profoundly encouraging and dynamic, for it disposes the will to preserve its commitment to God despite obstacles and challenges and acts as a needy love and trustful resilience in God as the savior and friend who will help one successfully in their journey (Elliot, 2017, p.63). In short, Aquinas anchors the virtue of hope in an orientation toward eternal life with God, marked by dependence on divine grace. This supernatural character sets the theological view on hope apart from any natural desire or civic optimism. It is infused by God and not acquired by effort alone, elevating human longing toward a horizon far beyond any worldly good. Yet, hope remains a virtue in the full sense, for it is a virtue that perfects human acts by directing them to the proper divine end (Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II-II, Q17 art.1). No longer is the person "lost" without direction, but by the virtue of hope, one becomes a pilgrim journeying with purpose toward the enjoyment of God as the ultimate fulfillment (Elliot, 2017). This Thomistic framework on the virtue of hope emphasizes the virtue as distinct from faith and charity, yet inseparable from them, in its orientation toward eternal beatitude with God and active reliance on God's aid along the way.

B. Pope Benedict XVI's *Spe Salvi*: Hope as Transformative and Redemptive

Writing over seven centuries after Aquinas, Pope Benedict XVI renewed the classical understanding of hope in *Spe Salvi*, giving it a deeply existential and pastoral emphasis. Building on the Thomistic view that God is the ultimate object of hope, Benedict XVI echoes St. Paul's teaching that "without God, we are without hope in the world" (Eph. 2:12). Aware of the many "menus of hope" offered by modern culture (Corkey, 2007), he sought to distinguish authentic Christian hope from its secular imitations. In the encyclical's opening, Benedict XVI emphasized that Christian hope is not abstract optimism but a transformative reality, "the one who has hope lives differently; the one who hopes has been granted a new life" (Benedict XVI, 2007, para. 2). For him, the Gospel is not merely informative but performative, a message that changes lives (Doyle, 2010) and because Christ has already opened "the dark door of time" through the Resurrection (Benedict XVI, 2007, para. 2), believers can live even now in the light of a hope that both sustains and transforms present existence for the kingdom of God.

A key contribution of *Spe Salvi* is Benedict XVI's mediation of hope amid suffering and trials, in which he portrays hope as a "transformative and performative" virtue that enables the faithful to find meaning in suffering rather than be crushed by it. He acknowledges that modern culture often seeks to eliminate suffering at all costs, yet he argues this leads to a "hollow existence" devoid of higher meaning (Conlin, 2024). Authentic hope is rooted in Christ and does not sidestep suffering

but transfigures it: “It is not by sidestepping or fleeing from suffering that we are healed but rather our capacity for accepting it, maturing through it and finding meaning through union with Christ, who suffered with infinite love” (Benedict XVI, 2007, para. 37). Benedict XVI draws from St. Bernard of Clairvaux to explain this and reiterates Clairvaux’s famous expression: *Impassibilis est Deus, sed non incompassibilis* (God cannot, but he can suffer with) (Benedict XVI, 2007 para. 29), our own sufferings are no longer meaningless, and they become an occasion of communion with the loving God and, hence, an occasion of hope towards Him.

At the beginning of the encyclical, Benedict XVI quotes St. Paul in his letter to the Romans, “in hope we are saved” (Rom 8:24), to convey to the faithful that Christian life is fundamentally sustained by hope in God’s redemptive love (Benedict XVI, 2007). This kind of hope is experiential and is learned and deepened through prayer, scriptural reflection, and the example of others who hope in extreme trials. This is evident in the encyclical on the life of St. Josephine Bakhita, who endured slavery but found liberation in the hope of Christ. By drawing on such narratives, Benedict XVI adopts an almost narrative-existential approach to complement Aquinas’ abstract definition. Hope now becomes a “performative” virtue in that it performs work in us that changes how we live here and now to prepare us for God’s Kingdom. Hope here draws the future into the present and gives people a reason to endure life's trials, knowing their life “will not end in emptiness” (Conlin, 2024). Benedict XVI also contrasts Christian Hope with the secular understanding of hope. He critiques the Enlightenment and the Marxist idea that human reason and revolution alone can create a utopia on earth and notes that without God, such hopes often lead to new tyrannies or despair (Benedict XVI, 2007, par. 18-21).

Authentic hope directs our pursuit of justice toward God’s kingdom as a purifying gift rather than mistaking our efforts for the ultimate fulfillment. While Aquinas laid the theological foundation, Benedict XVI adds pastoral urgency by presenting hope as the antidote to modern nihilism and despair, an active virtue that shares God’s saving love in the present. *Spe Salvi* illustrates the performative power of hope, highlighting its practical implications and the view that only those full of hope can accept and even sing through suffering. A society whose members are incapable of accepting suffering will be incapable of solidarity with others’ suffering (Benedict XVI, 2007). In this way, Benedict XVI demonstrates that hope is not an other-worldly escapism, but a force of resilience and charity in the contemporary world, enabling individuals to endure trials and care for others precisely because they see a larger, God-guaranteed horizon of meaning.

C. Aquinas and Benedict: A Comparative Perspective

Comparing Aquinas and Benedict XVI on hope reveals essential continuity with nuanced differences. Aquinas’ treatment in the *Summa* is systematic, analytic, and scholastic, clearly defining hope as a supernatural virtue oriented toward eternal beatitude, distinct from natural optimism, and situated between faith and charity (Elliot, 2017). In contrast, Benedict XVI, in *Spe Salvi,* presents hope through a pastoral and existential lens, emphasizing lived experience, biblical

narratives, and cultural analysis, particularly in contexts of suffering and anxiety. Aquinas provides theological clarity, while Benedict XVI demonstrates its daily relevance and transformative power.

Their approaches complement each other: Aquinas provides the theological foundation (hope as divinely oriented and grace-dependent), while Benedict XVI emphasizes hope's practical implications. Aquinas, optimistic about nature and reason, highlights that grace builds upon and fulfills natural human aspirations. Benedict XVI, influenced by Augustine, cautions against misplaced earthly hopes, emphasizing continual dependence on grace. While Benedict XVI suggests integrating secular and eternal hopes, Aquinas offers the philosophical grounding for this synthesis: earthly desires naturally point to their ultimate fulfillment in God (Doyle, 2010; Mirus, 2007). Thus, Aquinas establishes the doctrinal framework of hope, and Benedict XVI illustrates its existential warmth and relevance. Together, they affirm hope as indispensable for authentic Christian living, a virtue foundational to human existence and flourishing.

D. Hope as a Moral and Spiritual Anchor

The virtue of hope serves as a profound moral and spiritual anchor for believers, empowering perseverance amid trials and directing their hearts toward God. As St. Paul emphasizes, hope arises from endurance and character, sustained by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 5:3-5; Benedict XVI, 2007, para. 35-36). Benedict XVI highlights hope's power to transform suffering into praise and purpose. Practically, hope keeps individuals focused on ultimate goods, fostering ethical resilience and prayerful patience (Rom. 12:12). Elliot (2017) notes that hope serves as a crucial bulwark against despair, providing a transcendent purpose and resilience amid adversity. Aquinas further emphasizes that hope counters despair and presumption, fostering humility and reliance on God's grace (*Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 20-21). Additionally, hope is intrinsically communal and missional. Benedict XVI asserts hope must include concern for others, becoming a foundation for solidarity and justice. Thus, hope integrates with faith and love, anchoring souls (Heb. 6:19) and directing moral energies toward God’s Kingdom. As Bochanski (2019) affirms, authentic hope deepens our relationship with God, manifesting as moral courage, endurance, and purposeful action in life's storms.

E. From Theology to Practice: Hope in Student-Athlete Formation

The theological foundations of hope profoundly shape character formation in sports, where perseverance and resilience are constantly tested. Student-athletes, through rigorous training and setbacks, can deeply benefit from viewing hope as both a divine gift and personal virtue. Although initially appearing distant from athletic goals, the virtue of hope mirrors the athlete’s journey: both are pilgrims striving toward challenging yet attainable goals, transforming present sacrifices into meaningful steps toward excellence in sport and virtue. Grounded in Aquinas and Benedict XVI’s *Spe Salvi*, hope teaches athletes to rely on God rather than solely on personal achievement, offering purpose beyond wins or losses. Setbacks like injuries become opportunities for spiritual growth and character building. Modern research supports that faith-driven hope fosters greater resilience and moral clarity among athletes (Bounds et al., 2023). In this sense, theological hope acts as a bridge connecting faith and athletic pursuit, forming athletes who persevere with integrity, accept defeat gracefully, and remain humble in victory. Thus, understanding hope as oriented toward eternal fulfillment and daily guidance provides a powerful framework for athlete development.

Sports become training grounds for hope, nurturing resilience, courage, and spiritual maturity, all anchored in God and driven towards eternal life.

III. Sports as a *Locus Theologicus*: Hope and Virtue in Athletic Formation

A. Biblical and Church Perspectives

From the earliest days of Christianity, athletics have been used as a metaphor for spiritual growth and discipline. St. Paul famously compared Christian life to athletic competition, urging believers to "run to win" (1 Cor 9:24-25) and to persevere faithfully, "finishing the race" (2 Tim 4:7). These passages legitimize sports as a meaningful analogy and training ground for holiness. Pope John Paul II reinforced this view, describing life as a striving for goodness and holiness, with virtues developed in sports shaping character beyond athletics (Lixey, 2012). The Catholic Church's 2018 document, *Giving the Best of Yourself*, further emphasizes sports as a "school of virtue," teaching communal responsibility, selflessness, and spiritual formation. Athletic competition becomes a context for evangelization, encouraging athletes to become "athletes of Christ" (Vanysacker, 2023).

Scripture and Church teaching affirm that sports are not merely leisure but a genuine *locus theologicus* (a space where Gospel virtues are lived) through discipline, teamwork, and graciousness in both victory and defeat. Still, several Church Fathers cautioned against excess. St. John Chrysostom stressed the primacy of spiritual life (*Homily 17 on Hebrews 8*), while St. Clement of Alexandria, with his ascetic focus, warned against pleasure for its own sake (Brattiston 2013). Dries Vanysacker (2015) notes that some early Church leaders worried sports could distract believers from worship, and Rebecca Alpert (2015) records instances where Christians sought to restrict Sunday sporting events for this reason. Nevertheless, the Church ultimately embraced play and sport as expressions of human flourishing directed toward God's glory (Kelly 2014), recognizing their potential as avenues of virtue and faith formation.

B. Character and Virtue Development Through Sports

Participation in sports naturally cultivates a range of moral virtues through lived experiences. Jim Parry observes that virtues (such as courage and justice) in sport are internal goods of the practice, learned through habituation and community example rather than abstract teaching (Parry, 2007). In the athletic arena, character formation happens organically: the repetitive disciplines of training instill self-control, the challenges of competition teach perseverance, and the team setting demands cooperation and humility. Other key virtues honed by sports include the performance virtues of Discipline, Perseverance, and teamwork, and the moral virtue of humility (Kristjánsson & Arthur, 2025) :

a. **Discipline-** Athletes develop self-discipline by adhering to training regimens and rules. Regular practice and delayed gratification (such as maintaining a strict diet or waking early to exercise) strengthen their ability to govern desires and make sacrifices for a higher goal. This echoes the classical ideal that virtue is built

through habituation, doing the right thing consistently until it becomes second nature (Watson, 2007).

b. **Perseverance (Endurance) -** Sports frequently involve overcoming obstacles, whether it's a losing streak or a personal injury. Athletes learn to press on despite difficulties, cultivating fortitude in the face of setbacks. The slow progress of improvements in sports teaches patience and resilience. In fact, empirical studies suggest that athletic participation can foster certain virtues; for example, college athletes have been found to report higher levels of hope (forward-looking perseverance) than non-athletes (Bounds et al., 2023). Such findings underscore that sticking with challenges in sports can translate into a hopeful attitude in life.
c. **Teamwork and Solidarity-** Especially in team sports, players must cooperate and trust one another. This view fosters the virtues of generosity and fraternity, where one learns to prioritize the team's success over personal glory. Pope Francis notes that athletes exemplify virtues such as generosity, humility, sacrifice, constancy, and cheerfulness in the context of teamwork (Pope Francis, 2018). By working together, athletes cultivate respect for one another and develop empathy, recognizing each member's dignity and unique role. These habits reflect justice and charity in a microcosm.
d. **Humility**- Athletics also provide many humbling moments: a loss, a mistake that costs the game, or encountering an opponent of superior skill. Good sports programs emphasize learning to win with honor and lose with grace. Athletes thus learn to handle success without arrogance and to accept defeat without despair, and cultivate humility where one acknowledges one's limits and appreciation of others' talents. William Baker proposed that true sporting greatness is measured not just by trophies but by the virtues exhibited, such as fairness and humility, which align with a broader ethical framework for virtue (Baker, 2016). Such virtues formed on the playing field contribute to one's overall character off the field, which is the strength of character that enables excellence in life (Nesti, 2007).

Crucially, these performative and moral virtues acquired through sport can dispose athletes to be receptive to theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity. As some scholars have noted, the virtues of a sportsperson are character strengths that enable excellence, and when elevated by grace, they can lead to spiritual excellence (Watson & White, 2007).

C. Hope in Faith Formation for Athletes

Beyond moral virtues, sports uniquely nurture the theological virtue of hope. Athletes naturally embody hope by striving toward uncertain future victories (a fitting analogy for Christian trust in God's promises). Yet theological hope extends deeper, anchoring trust in God's providence and eternal reward, especially amid adversity. Benedict XVI's *Spe Salvi* emphasizes hope as a transformative response to suffering: "not by fleeing suffering, but by accepting and maturing through it in union with Christ" (Benedict XVI, 2007). Athletes exemplify this virtue when facing

setbacks like injuries or defeat. Rather than succumbing to despair, the athlete who entrusts struggles to God transforms these trials into spiritual growth, gaining patience, compassion, and identity beyond competition. Such experiences often rekindle or deepen faith and teach athletes to find hope beyond earthly victories. Thus, sports provide practical training for hope, developing athletes not just as strong competitors, but as spiritually resilient individuals. Through disciplined effort and reliance on divine providence, athletes come to seek a greater prize, that is, the "crown of righteousness" (2 Tim. 4:8).

D. Community and Evangelization

Sports as a *locus theologicus* uniquely build community and open paths for evangelization. Teams naturally foster camaraderie and shared identity, and mirror the Church's communal nature. Historically, sports like basketball were linked to evangelization, designed to shape character and lead young people to Christ (Putz, 2024). Modern expressions like team prayers, Bible studies, and sports ministries continue this legacy. This communal dimension of sports reflects ecclesial solidarity and mutual support, driven powerfully by hope. Athletes and coaches who display hope uplift and inspire their teams, witnessing faith to teammates and spectators alike. Such Christian witness through resilience and joy often reaches those unfamiliar with traditional church settings, shaping athletes into leaders committed to serving others (Vanysacker, 2023). In summary, sports serve as a true theological site where virtue and hope flourish, forming student-athletes spiritually, morally, and communally. Their athletic discipline and trials become opportunities to encounter God's grace, preparing them for lifelong faith and service. Thus, the virtues learned on the field contribute to the greater journey toward the imperishable crown of eternal life (1 Cor 9:25; 1 Pet 5:4), shaping their character in imitation of Christ, our true champion.

IV. Integrating Theological and Psychological Hope

A. Key Distinctions

To integrate theological and psychological hope, we must first clarify each concept to avoid confusion. Theological hope is, in Christian understanding, one of the three infused theological virtues (along with faith and charity). It is granted by divine grace and oriented toward God's promised future. For Aquinas, hope's origin is supernatural- a gift from God- and its object is union with God (eternal beatitude). By contrast, psychological hope (as studied in positive psychology) is a natural human trait or mindset. Snyder (2002) describes hope as a goal-oriented cognitive disposition involving one's agency (willpower) and pathways (planning) to achieve desired outcomes (Snyder, 2002). Its origins lie in mental and emotional processes, and it typically aims at concrete goals, such as athletic performance or recovery from injury, rather than eternal life. The table below summarizes the key distinctions between these two forms of hope.

Table 1
Comparison of Theological and Psychological Hope in Athletic Formation

ASPECT	THEOLOGICAL HOPE (VIRTUE)	PYSCHOLOGICAL HOPE (TRAIT)

Origin	Infused by divine grace; a gift from God	Emerges from mental traits and development (cognitive-emotional skills)
Orientation	Oriented to ultimate ends- e.g. eternal life, union with God and growth in virtue	Oriented to specific goals- e.g. performance success, achievement or personal objectives
Scope	Unconditional trust in God's promises; endures regardless of worldly outcomes (God is the principal object of the virtue of hope)	Conditional expectation of goal attainment; contingent on circumstances (Confidence lasts if goals seem attainable)

Note: The table summarizes key distinctions between the theological virtue of hope (from Aquinas and Spe Salvi) and psychological hope (Snyder, 2002).

In sum, theological hope fundamentally trusts in God for salvation, making it resilient and unlimited in scope, whereas psychological hope is a positive mindset that focuses on particular outcomes in this life. Clarifying these terms prevents conceptual conflation as we proceed. As Benedict XVI notes in *Spe Salvi*, the hope given by the Christian faith is a "trustworthy hope" that allows us to face even arduous trials for the sake of a greater goal, a very different horizon than the optimism of self-confident athletes. Likewise, Aquinas distinguishes the passion of hope (a natural emotion desiring a difficult but possible good) from the virtue of hope, which "uniquely attains God… in whose help it leans" (*Summa Theologiae* II-II, Q17). Thus, theological hope, founded in God, sets it apart from the self-reliant striving of psychological hope.

B. Common ground- Perseverance and Resilience

Despite distinct origins, theological and psychological hope converge practically in fostering perseverance and resilience. Both inspire individuals, such as student-athletes, to endure hardships rather than succumb to despair. St. Paul's insight (Rom. 5:3-4) "*suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope*" aligns with sports psychology research. Studies show that hopeful athletes exhibit greater mental toughness, resilience, and persistence in the face of adversity (Yu et al., 2025; Corn et al., 2020). Theological hope encourages endurance motivated by spiritual value and salvation, whereas psychological hope motivates through personal achievement. Yet both forms produce similar character strengths (patience, determination, fortitude) and affirm that struggle is meaningful rather than final. Ultimately, whether grounded in faith or personal goals, hope significantly enhances resilience, reduces burnout, and sustains perseverance amid challenges (Yu et al., 2025).

C. Theological Hope Enriching Athletic Experience

While psychological hope motivates athletes, it can falter amidst repeated defeat or injury. Theological hope, however, provides deeper meaning beyond performance outcomes. As *Spe Salvi* emphasizes, authentic hope finds purpose in suffering by uniting setbacks with Christ's redemptive love (Benedict XVI, 2007, para. 37, 40). Thus, a faithful athlete transforms disappointments into opportunities for growth in virtue, humility, and trust in God's providence, knowing that God's love for him is unconditional and that every situation is God guiding him towards Him. This

theological perspective infuses athletics with joy and purpose that extends beyond victory or defeat, alleviating existential pressures. Athletes anchored in Christ can endure setbacks without despair, confident that their worth extends far beyond wins and losses. As Benedict XVI notes, even suffering becomes "a hymn of praise," because hope transforms trials into spiritual maturity and character development. Ultimately, theological hope sustains athletes when psychological hope fades, enriching their journey by rooting their identity in God's unconditional love, rather than in transient athletic success.

D. Psychological Insights in the Service of Virtue

Integrating psychological and theological perspectives enriches athletic formation by situating psychological insights (such as goal-setting, visualization, and positive self-talk) within a robust theological framework. Techniques from sports psychology, such as Snyder's hope theory, can serve Christian formation by linking athletic goals with deeper vocational and spiritual purposes. As Bochanski (2019) suggests, true hope deepens our relationship with God and empowers us with courage beyond natural resilience. Practical applications include blending prayer and virtue-based reflection with psychological training. For example, visualization exercises can emphasize responding virtuously while maintaining an athlete's identity in God's unconditional love, not performance outcomes alone.

A study by Bounds et al. (2024) showed that religiosity did not affect trait courage or patience but did significantly moderate goal-related courage and self-worth outcomes. Specifically, more religious athletes relied less on others' approval and demonstrated stronger goal courage, highlighting the nuanced role of religion in shaping the moral and motivational aspects of athletic involvement. This confirms that integrating spirituality enhances athletes' motivation, well-being, and ethical clarity. Thus, merging psychological and theological hope produces student-athletes who embody both mental toughness and spiritual depth. They pursue excellence wholeheartedly, yet their ultimate hope and identity remain firmly anchored in God's promises, rather than in transient achievements, resulting in authentic resilience and enduring character formation.

E. Integrating Theological and Kinesiology Frameworks of Hope

Aquinas's Thomistic framework defines hope (*spes*) as a theological virtue that directs us toward union with God. This hope represents an eschatological striving that is fueled by God's grace. In *Spe Salvi*, Pope Benedict XVI presents hope as an extension of this concept within the context of a communal and redemptive perspective. Here, endurance in suffering and perseverance in moral actions become expressions of faith-driven aspiration. Snyder's psychological theory of hope conceptualizes it as a cognitive and motivational construct comprised of agency, which is goal-directed determination, and pathways, which involve strategic planning toward achieving goals.

When explored together, these frameworks illustrate a continuum between transcendent and immanent forms of hope, balancing faith's focus on ultimate fulfillment with psychology's emphasis on achievable human goals. In the field of kinesiology, various theories illustrate the concept of a motivational continuum. Self-Determination Theory (SDT) emphasizes the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness as fundamental elements of intrinsic motivation. Achievement Goal Theory (AGT) distinguishes between mastery-oriented motivation

and performance-oriented motivation. Additionally, resilience frameworks emphasize adaptive coping strategies and recovery following failure.

The study suggests a connection between athletic striving and theological hope, proposing that engaging in sports reflects a spiritual understanding of humanity. In this view, physical exertion is seen as a way to participate in our deep desire for transcendence. An athlete's disciplined pursuit of excellence parallels the soul's journey toward divine happiness. This perspective transforms the concept of sport, viewing it not just as physical training but also as a means of moral and spiritual development. In this context, Thomistic virtues, Benedictine eschatology, and psychological motivation come together to highlight our innate capacity for enduring hope.

V. Pastoral and Educational Strategies

In light of the theology and psychology of hope outlined so far, this section proposes concrete pastoral and educational strategies to cultivate hope, resilience, and Christian character in student-athletes. Each strategy views sports as a mission field for Christian formation and virtue education, integrating faith into athletic life. The following subsections detail five key approaches.

A. Coach and Mentor Formation

Coaches in Christian higher education institutions are more than trainers; they are formators of souls on the playing field. Hence, coach formation is vital, integrating both theological hope (trust in God's promises) and psychological hope (goal-directed determination). Such integration enables coaches to create environments where striving for victory coexists with a deeper optimism in God's plan and ultimately leads to salvation. Research indicates that hope is correlated with higher athletic and academic achievement (Bounds et al., 2023), underscoring the importance of coaches who prioritize encouragement, resilience, and moral growth over a win-at-all-costs mentality.

Institutions can institutionalize this through structured Coach Formation Programs or certification tracks in *Faith and Coaching Leadership*. The Fellowship of Christian Athletes' (FCA) chaplaincy-coaching partnership, for instance, demonstrated that spiritually trained coaches enhance athletes' faith, character, and team unity (Ramsey, 2015). Programs might include modules such as *Theology of the Body and Sport*, *Virtue Ethics and Team Culture*, *Psychology of Motivation and Hope,* and *Pastoral Care for Athletes,* collaboratively designed by theology and athletics departments. Assessments through reflective journals, mentorship, and outreach ensure holistic formation, mind, body, and spirit.

Crucially, coaches must integrate virtue language into practice, celebrating patience, courage, and perseverance rather than only performance metrics (Bounds et al., 2023). Athletes should be reminded of their inherent dignity, grounding worth in God rather than the scoreboard. As Bounds et al. (2023) caution, virtue formation must not fuel perfectionism but cultivate humility and faith. Benedict XVI emphasized that qualified coaches and mentors are "true educators and teachers of the young," fostering both human and spiritual growth (Lixey, 2012). Thus, forming coaches in virtue pedagogy and spirituality transforms the court or field into a school of hope and character**,** aligning athletic excellence with the Church's mission of education and evangelization (Lixey, 2012).

B. Team Practices and Rituals

Christian higher education institutions can strengthen a team's spiritual life by establishing deliberate faith practices that nurture hope**,** such as team prayer. Just as athletes train their bodies, they must also train their spirits through consistent spiritual routines. Many teams, from youth leagues to professionals, pray before or after competitions (Hoffmann, 1992). When done sincerely, prayer recenters the team on God, easing anxiety, fostering focus, and reminding athletes that their worth rests in divine love, not results. Brief Scripture reflections or praying a decade of the rosary before practice can connect athletic effort with a higher purpose. Meditating on St. Paul's call to "run for an imperishable crown" (1 Cor 9:24–25) transforms drills into training for virtue and heaven.

Beyond prayer, teams can cultivate rituals of hope by sharing "glory stories" of perseverance and honoring patron saints like St. Sebastian or Bl. Pier Giorgio Frassati, or receiving the sacraments together. Such practices weave faith into competition, turning locker rooms into spaces of grace. The FCA Chaplaincy Ministry Program shows that structured spiritual routines, chaplain-led reflections, and peer mentoring deepen athletes' spiritual identity, mutual care, and sense of purpose (Ramsey, 2015). This communal spirituality builds trust and unity, teaching athletes to play for God's glory and one another. Ultimately, these shared devotions make the team a small faith community where hope in God and one another anchors every performance. The playing field thus becomes, in Benedict XVI's words, "a suitable environment for…human and spiritual growth" (Benedict XVI, 2009; Lixey, 2012), fulfilling the Church's vision of sport as a *locus* of encounter with Christ**.**

C. Curriculum Integration

Another effective approach for forming student-athletes in hope and virtue is to bridge theology classrooms and athletic fields through curriculum integration**.** Christian education can intentionally connect sports with faith so that lessons on virtue and character formation in class are reinforced by athletic experiences. For instance, teachers may integrate sport-themed content in religious education, drawing on St. Paul's metaphors of "running the race" or "fighting the good fight" to help students interpret athletic struggles in light of Scripture. Lessons on the virtue of hope can invite reflection on real games, how players respond when odds are against them, and whether they persevere or give in to despair, making moral learning concrete and relatable.

Retreats or workshops likewise nurture this integration, using themes like "Our Identity in Christ vs. in Sports" to remind student-athletes that their worth lies in being children of God rather than performers on a scoreboard. A concrete example is the Faith and Sports Institute (FSI) at Baylor University's George W. Truett Theological Seminary, which conducts retreats and courses that merge athletic practice with theological reflection. Through sessions on "training and discipline," "suffering and hope," and "identity and vocation," FSI enables athletes to internalize the Gospel's transformative message in both body and spirit, turning sports into lived catechesis that shapes moral character and deepens faith (White et al., 2023).

Within theology curricula, educators should explicitly teach the theological virtue of hope alongside natural fortitude**,** clarifying how divine hope complements the striving for earthly goals. As St. Thomas explains, ordinary hopes aim at finite goods, while infused hope directs the believer

toward eternal life (Cobb & Green, 2017). Classroom discussions can help students recognize that hoping to win a title points to a deeper desire for lasting fulfillment in God. Pope Pius XII similarly affirmed that "sport, properly directed, develops character, makes a person courageous…a generous loser, and a gracious victor" (Pius XII, 1945; Lixey, 2012, p. 362). By embedding such insights into theological and moral reflection, faith-based schools affirm athletic experience as a locus of grace and moral growth. Curriculum integration ensures that the gym and the theology class speak with one voice, forming students who embody hope, resilience, and virtue across every dimension of their Christian education.

D. Recognition of Virtue

Shifting the ethos of school sports redefines success by valuing **v**irtue alongside performance. Rather than honoring only MVPs or top scorers, faith-based programs should celebrate perseverance, humility, and hope through awards such as "Most Resilient Player," "Heart of the Team," or "Christian Sportsmanship." These recognitions affirm that formation matters more than the final score, teaching athletes that true achievement lies in virtue. As Pope Pius XII emphasized, when sport is properly directed, it "develops character…and steels the will to endurance," engaging the whole person toward excellence (Pius XII, 1945; Lixey, 2012, p. 362). For example, the Fellowship of Christian Athletes' (FCA's) national awards program (such as the Bobby Bowden Award) publicly celebrates collegiate athletes not primarily for statistical dominance, but for how they demonstrate Christian character, serve their communities, maintain academic integrity, and model virtues on and off the field.

Implementing virtue recognition can happen in small daily ways as well. Coaches and captains might make it a habit to praise moral courage or selflessness in team meetings. For instance, a coach could note that a defender who honestly admits a foul, even when the referee missed it, demonstrates integrity, which is a win. This reinforces that character is noticed and valued. When athletes see that perseverance through a tough season or supporting a struggling teammate earns respect, they are encouraged to develop virtues that become habits. Recognition should inspire, not pressure; virtue should never turn into a source of pride or perfectionism. Coaches should frame awards in terms of personal growth and God's grace rather than as merit badges. This shifts the team's mindset from winning trophies to fostering the growth of each member as an ethical and resilient individual. Such a culture aligns with Christian education, demonstrating that in faith-based sports programs, greatness is measured by goodness.

E. Community and Witness

The final program expands a team's mission by using sports as a means of service and evangelization. In the Christian view, every gift is meant to express love and share the Gospel, and athletics is no exception. With their visibility and influence, student-athletes can serve as ambassadors of hope**,** particularly to those who are marginalized. Schools should provide opportunities for teams to engage in charitable service, such as hosting clinics for underprivileged youth or volunteering with the Special Olympics to embody inclusion and joyful hope. These initiatives exemplify the Vatican's *Giving the Best of Yourself*, which highlights sport as "a great opportunity for inclusion and a sign of hope for those on the peripheries." When athletes serve

others, they discover that their sport is part of a larger Christian mission**,** one that touches lives rather than merely winning games.

Christian higher education institutions can further unite athletics and campus ministry by having teams "adopt" causes, such as cancer awareness or charity fundraisers, so that competition and compassion go hand in hand, living out the truth that "faith without works is dead" (James 2:26). Sports also offer a public stage for witnessing Christ. Coaches and chaplains can encourage simple acts of faith, praying with opponents, making the sign of the cross, or acknowledging God in interviews, that powerfully inspire others. The Church's "Church and Sport" document explicitly calls for such evangelization through authentic Christian witness (Lixey, 2012). Drawing on the examples of figures like St. John Paul II**,** Pope Francis, and Don Bosco's youth clubs and schools, it can be seen how faith and athletics converge in joyful discipleship.

When athletic programs integrate service and testimony**,** sports become a genuine field of apostolate**,** where perseverance in training mirrors perseverance in faith and works of justice. The hope nurtured in prayer is shared with those in despair. In this way, sports are transformed from extracurricular activity into missionary outreach, forming athletes as servant-leaders and witnesses to the Gospel. As Jesus calls his followers to be "the salt of the earth and the light of the world" (Matt. 5:13–16), student-athletes in Christian schools fulfill this mandate giving the best of themselves in the image of Christ and evangelizing both the playing field and the public square through the virtue of hope (Benedict XVI, 2009; Lixey, 2012).

VI. CONCLUSION

In this conceptual theological reflection, we argue that synthesizing Aquinas' definition of hope as an infused virtue directed toward a "future good, difficult but possible," and Pope Benedict XVI's claim that the hopeful "live differently," with Snyder's goal-based hope theory, yields a hope-centered integrative model for student-athletes. Theoretical rather than empirical, this study contends that theological and psychological hope are complementary**:** psychological hope equips athletes with agency and pathways for goal pursuit, yet it remains contingent and can falter when goals are unattainable; theological hope, by contrast, anchors identity in God's promises, transforms setbacks into occasions for growth, and offers a horizon that transcends win–lose outcomes. By integrating Thomistic, theological, and psychological conceptions of hope**,** this paper presents a novel framework for faith-inspired kinesiology, positioning hope as both a theological virtue and a dynamic motivational construct. This synthesis demonstrates that instilling hope in student-athletes extends beyond cognitive goal-setting, fostering a transformative engagement with divine and eschatological purpose. By drawing on Self-Determination Theory, Achievement Goal Theory, and the Resilience Framework**,** the study establishes a conceptual bridge between sport psychology and Christian anthropology**,** providing not only a descriptive but also a constructive perspective on "embodied hope." Practically, this integrative model entails forming coaches and mentors who unite faith and mental resilience, cultivating team rituals of prayer and reflection, embedding virtue-based discussions into curricula, and celebrating humility and perseverance alongside academic success. Ultimately, this research moves beyond critique toward a constructive model of embodied hope**,** reorienting performance-driven sports culture in faith-based institutions and inspiring athletes to play not merely for victory but as a witness to faith, virtue, and human flourishing.

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