

Tim Tebow brings a little goodness to Gotham

by [Kevin Manahan](#)

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NEWARK, N.J. (RNS) Tim Tebow is Howdy Doody in a helmet. No, he is Opie Taylor running for touchdowns -- while reciting Bible verses, stopping to find a lost dog, visiting sick children in a hospital and helping a little old lady across the street, all before he reaches the end zone.

Now that Tebow has been traded to the Jets, New Jersey is about to experience a dose of wholesomeness it hasn't seen since milk trucks stopped delivering to your door.

Tebow is the God-fearing, All-American evangelical hero -- born to missionaries and delivered during a miraculous birth -- who pledged his life to Jesus at 6 years old.

His priorities? "Faith, family, football." He has overcome obstacle after obstacle to become the most popular athlete in the nation's most popular sport, all while waging a personal battle against sin, temptation and the American way.

But you don't have to know the "Our Father" to love him or admire him. He's a dyslexic who can read complicated football defenses. He's a home-schooled kid who could whup most prep-school prodigies in a battle of the SATs. Predicted to die at birth or before, he won two national championships as the "aw-shucks" quarterback at the University of Florida, and he is the only sophomore to win the Heisman Trophy.

He is the left-handed NFL quarterback with the weak arm that was ridiculed by scouts -- until the Denver Broncos inserted him as quarterback last season and won seven of the next eight games (three in overtime), en route to making the playoffs.

And the first thing Tebow did, while his teammates celebrated? He knelt and prayed. Or, as it's now known: He "Tebowed."

But he makes enemies, too. Because for every fan (or teammate) who loves that Tebow begins every interview by praising "my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ," there's another fan (or teammate) who wants a constitutional amendment imposing a separation of church and sports.

"He's a polarizing figure," said Tim Lucas, lead pastor of Liquid Church in Morristown, N.J. "But whether you're a fan or a critic, everyone agrees that his faith is authentic."

"Some players are flashy and invoke God when things go good. Tim Tebow seems to be the real deal. It's been baked into him from early on."

In one of those storybook victories last season, Tebow beat the brash-talking Jets by leading the Broncos on a last-minute 95-yard drive that some believed had given Jets coach Rex Ryan a heart attack.

Paramedics were called to the Jets' team bus as it headed for a Denver airport after the stunning 17-13 loss, capped by Tebow's 20-yard touchdown run with 58 seconds remaining.

As the charter flight idled, Ryan thought his life was ending. Turned out, it was only indigestion. But when paramedics asked how he was feeling, Tebow's future coach responded, "I was doing fine until (bleep-bleep) Tebow had that (bleeping) 95-yard drive."

How will Tebow's new teammates receive his godliness?

"That'll be very curious," Lucas, the pastor, said. "New Jersey is the land of 'The Sopranos' and Snooki. A lot of people say New Jersey is a graveyard for the Christian faith, but the graveyard is where resurrections take place."

Tebow might not find the local streets paved with rose petals. A recent poll of readers by the Daily News indicates fans are torn: 44 percent hated the trade (30 percent loved it), but 53 percent said Tebow should be the starter.

Yet those who know Tebow insist he will fight to be the starter.

"His work ethic is off the charts," said Nathan Whitaker, the co-author of Tebow's memoir, "Through My Eyes." "I walked away from each encounter with Tim thinking, 'Man I really should apply myself harder. This guy's really something.'"

Tebow's a self-professed virgin. He doesn't lie, cheat, drink or use drugs. He's handsome, goes to church regularly, has a foundation that builds hospitals, and he makes several million dollars a year. When he doesn't come right home after work, it's because he's doing charity work.

Every woman with a daughter knows that's code for: He'd make a great son-in-law. Ronn Torossian, CEO of 5W Public Relations in New York, has represented Sean "Diddy" Combs, Snoop Dogg, pro basketball players and a host of evangelical organizations, and he knows that when Tebow so much as hugs a woman, it's going to make front-page tabloid news.

"He has always been someone who's talked about being a private person," Torossian said. "Well, the concept of being private doesn't exactly exist in New York."

Until now, encounters with women have been, well, cute. In Denver, women -- single and married -- wore his jersey and held proposal signs. At a recent Q-and-A session in Butte, Mont., 17-year-old Ciera Schwartz came to pop her question: "Will you marry me?" Tebow blushed. Then moved on.

In January, Tebow told USA Today that he was "too busy with football and life" for a girlfriend. Within days of the December announcement that pop star Katy Perry was divorcing, her parents -- preachers Keith and Mary Hudson -- were trying to fix her up with the squeakiest guy on Earth.

Perry's mom told a friend: "The best cure for a heartache is to fall in love again," and why not Tebow? "He's handsome, charming, intelligent and, above all, a Christian."

The meeting hasn't happened yet, and Perry reportedly has a new beau.

"I'm blessed to have a close-knit (group) around me," Tebow told USA Today. "I love meeting and talking with people, socializing and hanging out. But people

can read it the wrong way."

No matter how big Tebow gets in the biggest sports and media market in the world, his co-author doesn't believe it will affect him, because only a few people have his ear -- starting with God.

"People already watch everything he does and tweet about it," Whitaker said. "He's already so scrutinized and it doesn't affect him. I'm not sure how much more intense it can get."