

In Boston, some see hand of Higher Power: Red Sox overcome Curse of the Bambino

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Ecstatic with their first World Series title in 86 years, fans of the Boston Red Sox are preparing to enshrine this team's players as bigger-than-life legends who overcame the famous Curse of the Bambino. But as the Fenway faithful gear up to pay them homage, the heroes of this Cinderella story have another idea, one that's giving pause for thought to famously reticent New Englanders. For this achievement, say many Sox players, give God the glory.

"I don't believe in curses," said Red Sox pitcher Pedro Martinez in an oft-repeated clubhouse sentiment after a four-game sweep of the St. Louis Cardinals. "I just believe in God, and he was the one who helped us today."

Such religious testimonies from high-profile athletes are not new in sports, but in Boston they're as rare as Yankee fans. Never before has a professional team shared its faith so openly with this region where religion is largely regarded as a personal, private matter.

This year players recruited from the Bible Belt and Latin America described themselves frequently in interviews as players blessed by God—not cursed by a trade many years ago involving Babe Ruth. Fans couldn't help hearing what Manny Ramirez, Tim Wakefield, Jason Varitek, Bill Mueller and others said about the divine source of their strength.

"You can't say God's on one team and not another. That's pretty parochial," said Ralph Nesson, a Massachusetts native and a Reform Jew who now displays a Fenway Park sticker on his pickup truck in Fayetteville, Arkansas. "Yet here's a story of a team and all the people who have forever been disappointed. . . . This shows if you pray and hope and try hard, things can go your way."

In the rocky land first settled by stoic Puritans, if anything can stir up New Englanders' passions, it's their beloved Red Sox. "If people ever tell me New Englanders aren't emotional people, I tell them that's a lie," said David Midwood, president of Vision New England, the region's largest evangelistic organization.

His evidence? He was there when the Sox beat the Anaheim Angels in the playoffs this year. After the ninth inning, the crowd exploded with cheers and tears of joy. "We have a powerful opportunity now to engage our culture in conversation," he said.

For Boston's news media, where the Sox' faith in God has been a story unexplored, Curt Schilling's bloody ankle from a stitched-up tendon injury has emerged as the quintessential emblem of grit mustered this year to overcome every adversary. "I've got to say, I became a Christian seven years ago, and I've never in my life been touched by God as I was tonight," Schilling said after dominating the Yankees in game six of the storied American League Championship Series. "Tonight was God's work on the mound."

Some New Englanders say one thing is certain: Preachers can hardly continue to use the Red Sox as the ultimate example of grit despite repeated failures. "No more can we use the Red Sox as an example of sheer perseverance," said Patrick Gray, assistant priest at the Church of the Advent, an Episcopal church on Beacon Hill. "So how do we use the Red Sox now that they've reached the Promised Land? Well, to say perseverance pays off." -G. Jeffrey MacDonald, *Religion News Service*