

Does God play favorites on the gridiron?

by [Paul Cloos](#)

January 31, 2011

(RNS) When the Auburn Tigers won the BCS college football championship against the Oregon Ducks, Auburn coach Gene Chizik thanked God. The team's star quarterback, Cam Newton, said he felt his performance showed what God can do.

Thanking God has now become almost commonplace among athletes. With the Pittsburgh Steelers and Green Bay Packers about to face off in Super Bowl XLV, does God play favorites in sports? These 12 are among the most notable God-thankers in sports.

12. Muhammad Ali

Any list has to include the boxing legend who both praises the Almighty and talks about himself with a self-aware knockout dose of hubris.

"Almighty God was with me. I want everyone to bear witness, I am the greatest! I'm the greatest thing that ever lived. ... I must be the greatest. I showed the world. I talk to God every day. I know the real God. I shook up the world, I'm the king of the world," Ali said after defeating Sonny Liston for the first time on Feb. 25, 1964.

11. Pat Day

A little man with big faith, Pat Day won many races as a jockey, but he only won the Kentucky Derby once, in 1992. And when he did, he didn't even dismount before praising God.

"Immediately after the Kentucky Derby, I lifted my hands up, and I was praising God for again allowing me the thrill of being in the winner's circle ... " Day recalled in an interview with the Christian Broadcasting Network. "It's a joyous occasion, and I couldn't help myself. I lifted my hands to the heavens and was praising God."

10. Diego "Nightmare" Sanchez

You wouldn't think religion and mixed martial arts -- a sport in which the combatants seem intent on killing each other -- would be a natural fit, but don't tell that to Diego "Nightmare" Sanchez, who before and after every fight, can be heard giving all the glory to God. "I give him the victory. I do not consider the victory as mine. It is his. I envision being one of his warriors and giving him the glory," Sanchez once told radio host Penny Buffington.

9. Michael Adams (and teammates)

Arizona Cardinals cornerback Adams kneeling down and praying with Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie before taking on the Steelers in 2009's Super Bowl XLIII has become an iconic image in the annals of sports faith.

Adams, who isn't the biggest of defensive backs, has had his share of troubles, but uses his faith as a guiding light. And he gets lots of help in that direction from his Cardinals' teammates. "I believed. I had faith," Adams said, recalling how he never gave up during a 2010 NFC wild card game. "It's easy when you have teammates like we've got around here, who believe in God and each other."

8. Jim Caldwell

The Indianapolis Colts coach took over from Tony Dungy, a man also known for his faith. "Obviously, it is no secret that I am a Christian and I don't hide from that fact at all," Caldwell said. "I do believe that because of faith, often times it will keep you a bit calmer in

certain situations. Overall, I think it has certainly taught me a lot about discipline, a lot about commitment in my life and it's helping me today as well."

7. Jay Barker

Jay Barker led the Alabama Crimson Tide to a perfect 13-0 season in 1992, beating Miami in the 1993 Sugar Bowl to win the national championship.

Barker, who played for fellow man of faith Gene Stallings, has never been afraid to share his Christian beliefs. After his college and pro careers, he's turned to talk radio as a medium to reach others.

"I just tried to use the God-given talents I had to help my team win," Barker said when asked about not being the flashiest player on the field. "After all, we had a great defensive team. Sometimes, the things that people said did hurt, but it also made me grow stronger in my faith."

6. Pedro Martinez

Phillies pitcher Pedro Martinez is one of the God Squad players whose ritual has become iconic. After an important throw, Martinez would do his patented chest-touch and double-index-finger-point to God.

"I started praying about it a little bit," he said of his early baseball aspirations. "At night I would never express it to anybody but I would say, 'Oh God, help me. If I can't be a doctor, let me be a baseball player.'"

5. Drew Brees

"God is great," Drew Brees said after being named MVP in last year's Super Bowl XLIV after leading the New Orleans Saints to an upset victory over the Indianapolis Colts and their faith-filled coach, Jim Caldwell. Saints fans became so enamored of Brees' seeming inability to do wrong

on the field that they even made T-shirts that said: WWBD? (What Would Breesus Do?), and doctored photos to show Brees walking on the Mississippi River.

4. Anthony Mason

The power forward for the Charlotte Hornets put the focus on God, not himself, after scoring 21 of his 29 points in the fourth quarter to eliminate the host Atlanta Hawks in the first round of playoffs at the end of the 1997/98 season. After thanking "God" for making all things possible, Mason said he had been "allowed" to perform well.

3. Tim Tebow

Heisman Trophy winner Tim Tebow doesn't just thank God after a big win; he wears Bible verses on his face (or at least he used to).

When Tebow led the University of Florida to beat Oklahoma to win the college football national championship in 2009, written in white on the black strip under Tebow's eyes was the Scripture reference to John 3:16. As the TV announcer congratulated him on being named the game's MVP, the first thing Tebow did was thank his Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

After Tebow graduated to the Denver Broncos, the NCAA banned the use of eye black to display messages, biblical or otherwise. Now in the NFL, Tebow writes the verses on a wrist band.

2. Herb Lusk

Some credit Herb Lusk as the man who started the whole athlete/God thing, though it no doubt started well before him. He started another signature move: kneeling in the end zone after a touchdown.

It was in 1977, following a 70-yard touchdown run, that Lusk, as a Philadelphia Eagles running back, first took a knee for God. Lusk became an evangelical Christian minister and now serves as the Eagles' team chaplain.

1. Reggie White

They called Reggie White the "Minister of Defense." White played 15 years in the NFL, retiring as the league's all-time sack leader. An ordained minister, he wrote three books that centered on his faith.

"I always believed, since I was a kid, that God was going to allow me to play professional football to use it as a platform to proclaim and to live out the name of Jesus, and that is the most exciting part about my life," White said.

White died in 2004 at age 43 of cardiac arrhythmia. He said in retirement that he had reinterpreted -- but never lost -- his faith.