

Prayer wise: More pigskin piety

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Christian football fans in Texas and elsewhere are getting back at the Supreme Court. Provoked by the ruling in June that outlawed school-sponsored prayer at high school football games, some fans in Texas and North Carolina have staged prayer rallies and protests. They have organized “spontaneous” prayer at the games, sometimes reciting the Lord’s Prayer after the playing of the national anthem. Leading this effort in Sante Fe, Texas, home of the school that was the focus of the high court’s ruling, is a group called “No Pray! No Play!” Meanwhile, Pat Robertson’s American Center for Law and Justice, which represented the Sante Fe school, has declared itself ready to defend any school district that is sued for allowing such prayers.

All this defensiveness is misplaced. While the “No Pray! No Play!” folk may think they are challenging the court, they are really engaging in just the kind of activity that the court’s ruling allows.

The court’s objection in the Sante Fe case was that the school system, by overseeing the election of students to lead the pregame prayers, was officially sponsoring the prayers and thereby violating the “no establishment of religion” clause in the First Amendment. As long as the school system is not endorsing or officially sponsoring the prayers, the praying fans are on solid legal ground.

In fact, this case—and the subsequent activism—illustrates well the classic role of the “no establishment” provision: by prohibiting state endorsement of religious practice, it opens the way for vigorous religious activity on the part of groups and individuals. We’re quite confident that Christian football fans can, without any help from the state, find creative—and perfectly legal—ways to witness to their faith on high school football night.

What actually constitutes appropriate and effective witness on such occasions is another question, of course. Steve Benen of Americans United for Separation of Church and State rightly points out that if the prayers serve “to remind religious minorities that they’re in the minority,” then they’re a form of bullying—“which

doesn't seem very Christian." Unfortunately, as in many other debates over religious expression in public life, the question of what's legally permitted tends to overshadow the question of what kinds of expression are wise and appropriate in light of the religious tradition itself.