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## God and Sports ... Since David and Goliath

Jerry Kavanagh · Wednesday, June 27th, 2012

Ever since King Saul successfully sent up David to pinch-hit for the Israelites against Goliath and the Philistines, players have been pointing skyward after an individual athletic accomplishment.

Nowadays, it's commonplace to see a player hit a home run, score a touchdown, or slam home a dunk, and then gesture to the heavens — or at least to the top of the dome or arena. But before David, who knew that God was such a sports fan?

I once asked the writer Frank Deford about that.

“Well, [God] is,” Deford said. “And we should all know that. He takes time out from his busy schedule to root for various teams. And those teams that pray the most, I think God favors. Now, it's always tricky when two teams that pray equally meet each other. This makes it very tough for God. And sometimes he just doesn't know what to do, and so as a consequence, he turns his back and lets the athletes decide without him getting involved.”

You mean God's indifferent at that point?

“He's neutral,” Deford said, “but most of the time, as any sensible person knows, God determines what happens on the field. And I think that's the way that it should be. It's foolish for us to think that we should play these games without spirituality mattering more than athleticism.”

You have to feel for God, what with all the demands on his attention in the sports-mad world he created. Someone's always giving a shout-out to him, and not necessarily at climactic moments.



“I can't imagine in this day and age that God actually cares when Barry Bonds hits his thirteenth home run of the year,” ESPN sports columnist Rick Reilly once told me. “I don't know...maybe he does. What I like are the guys that make a tackle and stop someone for a one-yard loss and point to God. And even God goes, ‘Come on. It's still second-and-11. So what!’ ”

It seems only sporting to allow God to kick back in his skybox, at least on his traditional day of rest, and take a timeout from worldwide strife, the foibles of Wall Street and the GOP, and the ineptitude of the Yankees with runners in scoring position. Still, who could blame him for pulling some strings and exerting his influence on some personal favorites? The Angels, for example,

whose ascension owes at least an assist to the grace of Mike Trout. And heaven apparently can wait for the Devils, eliminated in six games by the Kings.

Surely it's no coincidence that the fortunes of the Rays took a turn for the better once the Tampa Bay franchise dropped "Devil" from its nickname. Then, again, God seems to have turned his back on the Saints after the revelation of their ugly bounty program.

Late last September, after the Red Sox were eliminated from contention in the American League, first baseman Adrian Gonzalez said, "God has a plan. And it wasn't God's plan for us to be in the playoffs." Who knew that God had a sense of humor?

But to be fair, Gonzalez might have been thinking of Zeus, who in fickle moments would throw down a thunderbolt on the hapless mortals.



And just last month, in a conversation with Susan Slusser of the San Francisco Chronicle, Manny Ramirez reassured the fans of the Oakland A's, his newest team. "The thing people don't understand is that God didn't bring me to Oakland to fail," Manny said.

"No, God sent Manny to Los Angeles for that," said Slusser's colleague Scott Ostler.

Perhaps it's best to attribute everything in sports, as in life, to predestination. You know, the outcome of all the games having been ordained from the beginning of time. Takes everyone off the hook of individual responsibility and allows God to be a fan, just like the rest of us.

*Images (top to bottom): Tim Tebow, Vladimir Guerrero, and Ricky Kaká keep the faith.*

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