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# God and the Gridiron

The alliance of sport and religion is nowhere more evident than in the South, where football and evangelical, born-again theology are soul mates.

By William J. Baker

**IF ANYONE EVER NEEDED DIVINE ASSISTANCE TO WIN A FOOTBALL GAME, WE FURMAN BOYS OF THE LATE-1950s MOST CERTAINLY DID.**

In that era, before Furman wisely joined the ranks of Division I-AA, we regularly sweetened the won-lost records of Alabama, Auburn, South Carolina, Clemson, Florida State, Penn State and West Virginia.

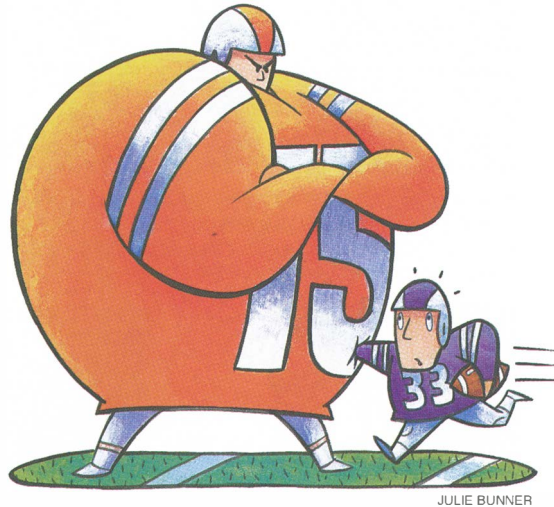
Our official nickname, the Purple Hurricane, was a grand misnomer. After tackling the Goliaths, we were so beaten up and our confidence so ground down that once we got to Wofford, The Citadel and other schools our size, the Hurricane amounted to a light breeze. Even Newberry and Presbyterian beat us. Only against Davidson could we be certain of a victory each year.

After one of those rare victories, post-game interviewers would have been hard put to find an athlete praising God or thanking Jesus for the win. Nor did we point a finger skyward after a touchdown. These gestures, presumably giving God the glory, were not in vogue for our generation.

**Gods and games of old**

Yet for all these differences between the 1950s and the present, we Purple Pounders stood in a historic stream that flows right onto today's Furman campus: an age-old tendency of sport and religion to be closely allied.

Throughout the ancient world, competitive games began as measures to please the gods. At first, fertile crops and fruitful wombs were believed to be at stake. Later, a happy



afterlife dangled, trophy-like, at the end of "the road all runners come." Ancient mythologies depicted the origins of the sun, moon and stars in terms of celestial wrestling matches and ball games, events re-enacted in highly ritualized community festivals.

Saturated with religious meaning, sport first became organized in Greece. Hundreds of local religious/athletic gatherings flourished around the Greek-dominated rim of the Mediterranean, each in honor of some Greek god. For more than a thousand years, the Greek Olympics honored the great god Zeus in a quadrennial festival that included prayers, processions, animal sacrifices and hymns alongside athletic displays of speed and strength.

Far from rejecting these "pagan" practices, Christians adapted them to Christian use. Athletic allusions frequently appear in the New Testament. Only writers familiar with Greek games could refer to running "the race that is set before us," futilely "beating the air" like an incompetent

boxer, and receiving a "crown of glory" for one's efforts.

The medieval "age of faith" was also a great age of playful spectacles. The castle crowd frequently turned out to enjoy colorful tournaments, and plebeians periodically took to open fields for chaotic, uncodified games of "futbol" that normally involved the entire community. For these popular activities, the medieval church provided the time (Sunday afternoon and seasonal church holidays), space (cloisters and church-owned land), and permission (priestly presence and prayers) for sport. Off monastery walls, monks devised a crude game of handball, a distant forerunner of tennis.

This intimate connection of sport with pre-Reformation religion rubbed against the Puritan grain of John Calvin and his followers. Calvinists abhorred Sunday sport, gambling and the raucous behavior that often accompanied sport. As a result, our Puritan forebears attempted to ban most sporting activities. Though largely unsuccessful, they launched a suspicion of sport as an agent of moral evil.

That suspicion survived for almost three centuries, especially in North America. Not until the mid-19th century did sport and religion once again become allies. Finally, the rapid growth of cities provoked concerns for physical and moral health, giving rise to a "muscular Christian" movement that adapted theologically to the idea of sport as an acceptable activity.

Sportsmen, in turn, cleaned up their events to make them more

respectable. Following the Civil War, some liberal churches began condoning sport so long as Sunday games, gambling and alcohol were forbidden.

### Football, Southern style

Of all the newly organized games struggling for acceptance, college football encountered the most vocal opposition.

In England, university soccer and rugby originated as club sports, but in the United States football became something altogether different. As a distinctive style of football emerged in the 1880s, the administration of the game shifted from the players to college faculties and presidents. Enthusiastic endorsement by Harvard, Yale and Princeton encouraged other colleges and universities to yoke football to their institutional missions.

In the 1890s, however, the gridiron game almost died in its infancy. Prior to the innovation of the forward pass, inadequately protected teams (no helmets, minimal pads) clashed violently at the line of scrimmage, causing severe injuries and several deaths each year. Worse still, from the moralists' point of view, students partied before and after games, and teams desecrated the Christian Sabbath by traveling home from distant games on Sunday. Deemed by religious folks as both physically and morally dangerous, football was momentarily banned from many campuses throughout the United States.

No church-related institution of higher learning could afford to ignore the apparent dangers of an emergent football party culture that featured dancing, drinking and untoward sexual indulgence. The great majority of the 80 denominational colleges in the South, fully half of them Baptist, responded by banning football.

Baptist Furman and Methodist Wofford led the way in South Carolina. In 1889, the two schools played the first game of intercollegiate football

within the state, but from 1897 to 1914 Wofford officials prohibited their boys from playing the game. For 10 years (1903-13), Furman followed suit.

Longest of all was a trustees' ban at a little Methodist school in North Carolina. For a quarter of a century (1895-1920), Trinity College — later renamed Duke University — abolished intercollegiate football. The prolonged absence of football on campus allowed the new game of basketball to become a prominent student spectacle, a tradition that continues to flourish at today's Duke.

But prohibitions against football were not confined to denominational colleges. Under pressure from evangelical opinion, several Southern state universities also debated the prospect of campus life without the sport.

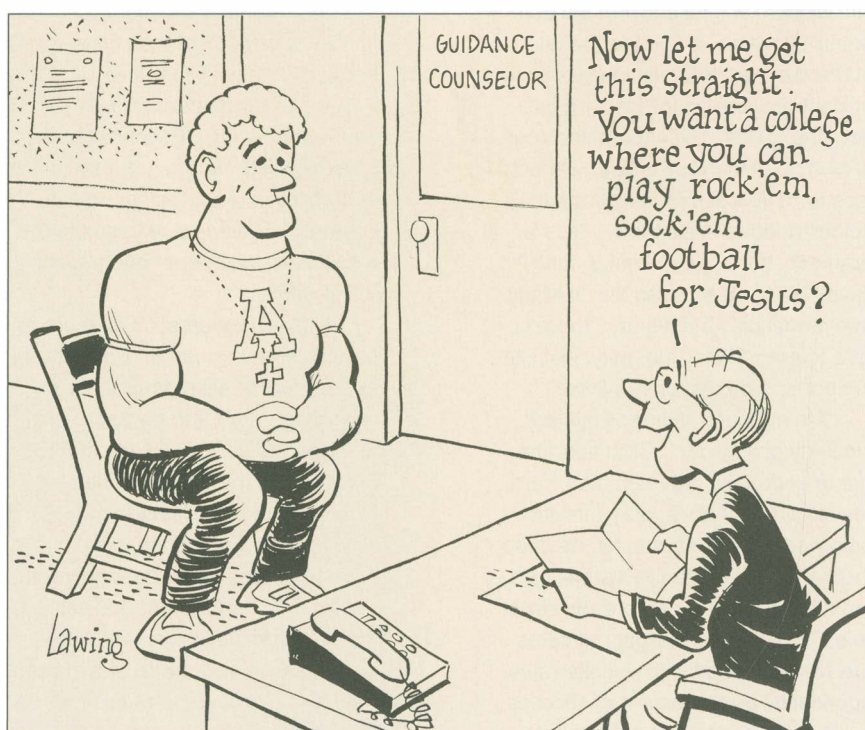
Practical factors as well as principles weighed heavily against football in the South. In addition to sectarian, moralistic opposition, early-autumn heat made the South one of the most unlikely regions to encourage the heavily padded

gridiron game. Moreover, until recently the South's under-developed economy would have made it reasonable for high schools and colleges to resist sponsoring such an expensive game.

Why, then, has football achieved such prominence on Southern campuses in the 20th century?

Historians have come up with two hypotheses. First, football in the South, as elsewhere in the United States, provided male participants a test of manhood. By 1900 or so, the gridiron required physical feats of courage and fortitude no longer demanded by frontier dangers, rural labor or military conflict. For players and spectators alike, football honored manly prowess — all the more important for Southerners whose forefathers had tasted bitter defeat in the Civil War.

Another hypothesis suggests that in the 1920s football in the South became a regional badge of distinction, an assertion of a modernizing, competitive South eager to prove its strength. In 1926, fans from the Carolina Piedmont to the





Texas Panhandle joined in a regional hallelujah chorus when the University of Alabama beat the University of Washington, 20-19, in the Rose Bowl. Southern journalists employed the language of Zion in extolling 'Bama's victory as "a blessed event," and a "miracle" at that.

In explaining the lofty status of football in the South, however, historians usually fail to note the importance of the religious element. Is it a mere coincidence that the nation's most ardent football fans populate the most zealously religious section of the country? I think not.

### **Pigskin piety**

Southern football and evangelical, born-again religion are more than good neighbors who live in close proximity to each other. They are soul mates. Structurally similar, they feed off each other's strengths and provide mutual reinforcement. Metaphorically, they share liturgies, sing similar hymns to a common cadence, and drink from the same Communion cup.

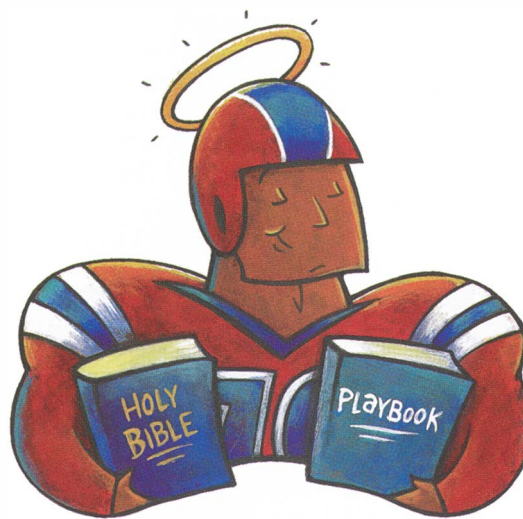
Both hold a simple, clear-cut vision of reality that divides the world into winners and losers. For the born-again Christian, one either believes in Christ or rejects Christ; one is saved or damned, bound for Heaven or doomed to Hell. Evangelical theology allows no place for Purgatory, much less for a liberal middle ground that acknowledges uncertainty. "It is a dramatic, stark, even simple faith," says Chicago theologian Martin Marty. In evangelical Christianity, "there is little tolerance for ambiguity, just like in sports. You win or you lose."

Athletes and evangelicals are similarly disciplined. Both take the game seriously. Athletes train hard, resist ruinous habits, play through pain and avoid distractions, as does the serious Christian. Evangelicals look to the Bible for an orderly set of rules for living; born-again athletes are twice blessed with definite rules, boundaries and measures of success.

Little wonder that evangelical

faith and athleticism continue to play prominent roles in the emergence of the newly affluent, cosmopolitan South. They share a clarity of perspective — a rare commodity amid the complexities of modern life.

As sportswriter Leonard Koppett explains, sport lives on the assumption that the outcome of an athletic contest actually matters. Athletes, coaches, spectators and the media



all contribute to the belief that competitive sport is more than mere vanity or big business. From their perspective, it can fundamentally enlarge the human spirit. "Psychologically," says Koppett, "sports offer an island of stability in a confusing, shifting cosmos." Likewise, religious faith affords the believer a safe haven in the storm.

Piety and football also share a tendency toward ritual. Protestants and Catholics alike ceremoniously repeat gestures and phrases unique to each tradition. Similarly, the Big Saturday Game thrives on rituals that involve both players and spectators. Pre-game prayers in the locker room, tailgate parties in the parking lot, the national anthem before the kick-off, the "wave" in the stands, and the post-game milling about with players on the field all amount to rituals focused on The Game.

Rituals frequently veer toward superstition, especially when sport is involved. Athletes, grasping at whatever advantage they can find, say their prayers and ritualistically stick to the same mantras and pre-game behavior — wearing the same game-day clothes, eating the same pre-game food, putting on their uniform in the same sequence — that brought good luck the last time around.

Athletic superstition is nothing new, of course. Three thousand years ago, athletes in Homer's *Iliad* implored the gods to help them win their events. Eager to take the prize in a foot race, Odysseus charged down the stretch praying to Athena, "O goddess, hear me, and come put more speed in my feet." More than a century ago, social scientist Thorstein Veblen observed that both religious zeal and "the sporting element" derived from the urge to believe in "good luck" or divine intervention in human affairs.

Just a decade ago a national television audience witnessed a prime example of pigskin piety. In mid-January 1991, New York Giants' placekicker Matt Bahr lined up a 42-yard field goal attempt with four seconds left against the San Francisco 49ers. An accurate kick would propel the Giants into the Super Bowl, and seven members of the team knelt on the sidelines praying for success. Bahr came through on a leg and a prayer.

Two weeks later, however, the Giants had to reverse the intent of their prayer. As time was running out in the fourth quarter of Super Bowl XXV against the Buffalo Bills, Buffalo kicker Scott Norwood came on the field to attempt a game-winning 47-yard kick. Again the Giants' prayer squad knelt on the sidelines, held hands and prayed — this time for the kick to go awry.

The kick failed, inspiring numerous religious comments in an effort to explain Buffalo's loss. Bills' defensive back Mark Kelso observed



JULIE BUNNER

that if God had been a Bills' fan, the kick would have gone through the uprights. "But for some reason, He didn't want us to win," said Kelso.

On the other side of the field, delighted Giants' coach Bill Parcells informed a journalist that for this game, at least, God was virtually the Giants' twelfth man. "I realized a long time ago that God is playing some of these games," insisted Parcells, "and he was on our side today."

We Purple Pounders of the late 1950s could have found some comfort in Parcells' logic. We might have assured ourselves that we regularly endured losing seasons and closed out the decade with a 56-3 loss to Clemson because God was not on our side. The simple truth was that we were too small and too slow for the Goliaths of the world.

The miracle was that little David's slingshot sometimes hit the mark — stopping a runner here, scoring a touchdown there, occasionally even winning a game. We beat George Washington University twice, both times at soggy old Serrine Stadium. No doubt that embarrassment was the determining factor that prompted GWU officials, shortly thereafter, to abolish their intercollegiate football program.

Perhaps they decided that God was not on their side. ●



BOB DeLONG, BANGOR DAILY NEWS

*Baker is the Bird and Bird Professor of History at the University of Maine.*

## Study of sports no game for Baker

**William J. Baker '60** was known as the "Passing Parson" during his four years as Furman's starting quarterback.

A Southern Baptist youth evangelist during his college days, Billy Baker earned All-Southern Conference honors for the Hurricane in 1957, when he finished fifth in the nation in passing. A student leader, he received the Algernon Sydney Sullivan Award at graduation. Baker went on to earn a Bachelor of Divinity degree from Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary and a Ph.D. in history from Cambridge University, where he studied early Victorian attitudes toward the Reformation.

For the last 31 years he has taught at the University of Maine in Orono. A specialist in modern British history, Baker also maintains a serious academic interest in the history and development of sports. Indeed, most of his books — he has written or edited nine — focus on sports and their place in society. They include *Sports in the Western World*, published in 1982; *Jesse*

*Owens: An American Life* (1986); and his most recent work, *If Christ Came to the Olympics*, which is based on a series of talks he delivered at the University of New South Wales in Australia on the eve of the 2000 Sydney Games.

He is completing a manuscript tentatively titled *Playing With God: How Religious Folks Learned to Embrace Modern Sport*, which will be published next year by the Free Press of New York City. Baker says, "My working principle is that all literary scholarship is autobiographical. You write out of your own wishes and your own dreams. This project has brought together the two most important elements of my youth — sports and religion."

Baker lives in Bangor with his wife, Christina Looper Baker '61. The author of two books, she is Trustees Professor of English at the University of Maine-Augusta and is serving her third term in the Maine House of Representatives.

— Jim Stewart