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Does Jesus Wear Purple Pinstripes?

By Sean Gregory/Denver

There's only one baseball team with a full-time chaplain on the payroll. Only one whose team executives are known to hold prayer conferences over the phone. This season they even had a "Faith Day" for fans, featuring Christian bands and players professing their love of the Lord.

They're your Colorado Rockies: National League pennant winners, and World champs when it comes to mixing baseball and God.

A May 2006 story in USA Today first detailed the Christian imprint on the Rockies, whose 21-1 run on the way to the World Series brought a historic high to Colorado. "I don't want to offend anyone," Rockies chairman and CEC Charlie Monfort said at the time, "but I think character-wise we're stronger than anyone in baseball. Christians, and what they've endured, are some of the strongest people in baseball. I believe God sends signs, we're seeing those."

The Rockies insist that that story was somewhat overblown, and that not every player thumps the bible behind the clubhouse doors. It's true that men's magazines and rap music are just as prevalent in the team's locker room as around the rest of the big leagues, but Christianity plays a key role in the makeup of the National League pennant winners. (And the Rockies could sure use a miracle now; they enter tonight's Game 4 of the World Series against the Boston Red Sox trailing 3-0.) "It's a strong faith group," says relief pitcher LaTroy Hawkins, who admits he'd rather watch football than go to church on Sunday. "A bunch of the young guys have seen the light, and found their way. They haven't strayed."

"The Lord gives you everything you have," says center fielder Willy Taveras, who counts himself among the faithful, "and makes it possible to play this beautiful game."

Even though the post-game prayer group at the 50-yard line has become as common as the quarterback sack, and individual players routinely thank the God of their choice for helping with a game-winning hit/basket/touchdown

the Rockies stand out for openly touting Christian values — as they define it, strong character and a moral compass — as a guiding organizational philosophy off the field. Club president Keli McGregor has gone so far as to say that God is "using [The Rockies] in a powerful way."

Beyond the fact that some people want to root for a team without having to root for its savior, making religion an organizational conviction raises plenty of questions. The Rockies don't exclude non-Christians — pitcher Jason Hirsh is Jewish — but if "Christian values" seep too deeply into the team's thinking, isn't discrimination, even of the subconscious kind, a danger?

Few of the Rockies wanted to discuss the issue in the midst of the most important games of their lives, but George McHendry, the pastor at United Church of Christ in northern Denver who attended some 50 Rockies games this year, thinks the team is increasingly sensitive to its reputation. In 2005 and 2006, the Rockies had a "Christian Family Day" at Coors Field. This season the Rockies renamed the promotion "Faith Day," though there weren't many rabbis or imams at the park. "To do that to appease other religions is hypocritical to say the least," says McHendry, who helped organize the event. "It was truly a Christian day."

Joe Price, religious studies professor at Whittier College (Calif.) and author of *Rounding the Bases: Baseball and Religion in America*, also thinks the Rockies should make more of their beliefs. "Nobody seems to complain when Tiger Woods promotes economic sponsorship by wearing the Nike swoosh on this shirt," says Price. "What's the difference with promoting religious affiliation. Isn't that more wholesome?"

Perhaps, but most baseball fans aren't looking for squeaky-clean players. They're looking for wins. And if the Rockies don't get one tonight, it's the guys in purple pinstripes who'll find themselves short on believers.

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