

Football players to bring their faith to Superbowl on Sunday

Philadelphia, Feb. 03, 2005 (CNA) - Football fans will have their eyes glued to the television this Sunday to watch their favorite team battle it out at this year's Superbowl. But what fans may not know is that an increasing number of these players profess a deep Christian faith.

A recent article in The Christian Science Monitor reports that as many as one-third of National Football League players are openly devout Christians.

"Praising the Lord in interviews with broadcasters only hint at the depth of belief off the field," says the report.

Rev. Herb Lusk played three seasons for the Eagles before leaving to start a church in Philadelphia. He told the Monitor that Bible studies and fellowship groups among players are three to four times as popular now as they were in the 1970s and 1980s.

He credited defensive great Reggie White, who died in December, for allowing other players to embrace religion openly. White was an ordained minister who played for the Philadelphia Eagles and later the Green Bay Packers.

Lusk estimated that the number of openly devout players has grown from a handful in the mid-1980s to at least 33 percent, mostly Protestants.

More players are also involved in the prayer services and Bible study that are offered by chaplaincy services, said Eagles chaplain Rev. J. David Hoke for the past 12 years. Fr. Thomas Barcellona hears confessions and says Sunday mass for Catholic coaches, referees and some players. Team chaplains, who are not part of the team's staff, also offer these pastoral services to the players' families.

According to the report, there are approximately 32 Protestant NFL chaplains, half of them supported by Athletes in Action, a Christian group with a ministry to professional athletes.

The NFL has its fair share of players who say they became faithful Christians thanks to the witness and invitation of their teammates. Eagles cornerback Ike Reese said he became a born-again Christian after two teammates invited him to attend a players' Bible-study group three years ago.

Eagles defensive tackle Corey Simon told the Monitor that his experience in sport helped him develop a meaningful relationship with God. He said should he point to the sky while on the field, it means, "that for me to be there, God should get the glory - that it's none of me, it's all of Him."

Players said game-related prayer is about thanksgiving. They pray "not for wins but for things like healthy competition and safe travel for visiting teams," reported the Monitor. "They tend to see football as a gift given to them by God and meant to be used to spread the word that faith counts, not materialism and celebrity."

No matter the outcome of the game, "God gets the glory," Simon said.
