



PHOTO: OAKLAND RAIDERS

Rich Gannon
QUARTERBACK, NATIONAL FOOTBALL LEAGUE

"I'm a family man, I have problems and worries like any parent"

Rich Gannon, 38, led the Oakland Raiders to the Super Bowl at the end of the 2002-3 season, which also brought him honors as the National Football League's Most Valuable Player and a slew of records in passing and completions. Few people among the football-hungry masses know that Gannon is an intensely devout Catholic. Father of two young girls (Alexis, 8, and Danielle, 5), he is involved in a variety of Catholic causes, and a member of Life Athletes, an association of 200 professional and Olympic athletes that promotes the pro-life cause and encourages youth to reserve sex for marriage. Gannon spoke by phone with Catholic Digest editor-in-chief Joop Koopman as the new football season got underway.

Often, at the end of the games, players from both teams kneel on the field and pray together. Do you join in sometimes, or is that kind of a Protestant, born-again thing to do?

Gannon: No, it's usually just a group of Christian players of all different denominations who get together and give thanks, praise the Lord for allowing them to play the game, express their talents, and get through the contest free of injury. It's not something I often participate in, though. There's just absolute mayhem after a game, with the media on the field and lots of people trying to get at you. It's probably not the safest place to be after a game. Plus I'm anxious to get to the locker room, as I usually get

worked on right after the game by our trainers. But we do say a team prayer in the locker room after each game.

Is the approach in the locker room also non-denominational?

Right. Ditto before the game. We have a team chaplain who leads the way. Those who want join the prayer in a corner of the locker room. Usually, after the game, we say an Our Father. That's pretty much the standard operating procedure around the National Football League.

Seeing the players pray certainly is refreshing. Here are those supposedly brutal machines showing their softer side. You obviously don't see a conflict between being a man of faith and playing in such a tough game.

No, not at all. I think that the Lord gave us talents and blessed us with abilities. In my particular situation, He allowed me to play a game, which I thoroughly love and enjoy. I have played it since I was in second grade. I've been in the National Football League 18 years now. So I don't have a problem with it. Of course, in every busi-

ness, in every type of endeavor, there can be excess.

For outsiders, in particular, though, it is the game's apparent violence that sets the tone.

It is a very physical game. It can be a violent game at times. It's not for everybody, which is something I always tell people. It's not for everybody, but there are a lot of wonderful people who play, and have played, our game.

A lot of times the public is led astray. Especially young people don't realize that the people they idolize are no different than you and me. I mean, I'm a family man. I have young daughters. I have problems and concerns and worries just like every other parent. You know, we get up in the morning and put our pants on the same way, you know. So I always tell young people that what I do for a living is way down on the bottom on the scale of what really matters in this world. The job that your parents, teachers, and coaches do has a huge impact on people. Never forget that football players are in the entertainment business. We play a game for a living.

And that is an enormous privilege.

It really is. So I want to make sure that young people know that. I always urge them to take advantage of the opportunities that they have in front of them. One key to success is to be a good listener. You have to be able to listen to your parents and your teachers, your coaches, your ministers, your preacher, priest, whomever. Those people have experienced a lot of things that you have not yet had a chance to experience as a youngster. And if you just listen and take advantage of their experience and take advantage of the opportunities you have in life, boy, you can really accomplish and do anything you really set your mind to.

Are Catholics relatively rare among players?

Ours is a business no different than probably IBM. There are all different types of denominations. There are lots of Catholics on our team, and also lots of Baptists, Methodists, Lutherans, and so on. There is a Mass at our hotel when we play away games. At home, there is a Mass at our facility on Saturday evening.

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For you, is there a spiritual side to football? It's almost like a gift of play or the gift of relaxing.

I think so, philosophically speaking, I mean. I remember as a kid what my Sundays were all about. When I was a child, our ritual on Sunday mornings was we got up early, and my dad used to make us breakfast. It was kind of a day off for my mom. Then we'd all go to church together, and afterwards we'd watch football all afternoon. And in between games, or at halftime, we'd run across and play some football, you know. That was really kind of the normal day. Then we'd have dinner and we'd sit around and talk about the games or watch one that was still on. That was kind of a family activity for us. It was part of growing up in a large Catholic family. Football on Sundays, the fall is an American tradition. People really look forward to it and root for their favorite teams. It's a good thing all around.

As a player, are you sometimes criticized for being too hard on fellow players and the coaches?

I don't know where you get that information. I've never been critical of any player or coach publicly. I don't do my laundry in public. In other words, I'm very much a team player and understand the dynamics of a team, the importance of preserving unity and keeping things in-house. So anytime there's a problem with either the play calling or a player's performance, I've always gone to that person directly and tried to work it out. When you're quarterbacking a National Football League team, there's a lot on the line each and every week. There's players' safety involved, their careers, and physical well-being. This is a very intense game. I always tell people it's a bus with young kids in it. When you get on my bus, and I'm the bus driver, I want to make sure you understand where the emergency exits are and I want to make sure you understand how to put your seat-belt on and how to take it off. I want to make sure that you're safe when you get in my bus. The same thing when you get in a huddle. When I'm the quarter-

back and you get in my huddle, I want to make sure you know what you're doing, that you're prepared, and that I do everything I can to help you be successful. If you get in a huddle and you don't know what you're doing, and you don't do it right, then there's a chance that I or somebody else could get hurt. It is a very serious thing. I take it very seriously and that's one of the reasons I'm still playing after 18 years.

Do fans and critics misread you?

I guess I'm a very intense player. I take it very seriously. And that is clear when you watch me play, or watch me prepare. I think that some people misconstrue that as me being a harsh kind of personality. This is an emotional game and if you can't be emotional and you can't get excited and you can't get upset about something, then you probably should be doing something else. Players who know me and who have been around me in this organization and other teams will tell you that. I'm a fiery competitor, but I'm one of the first guys to help a guy up, to work with the young players, to encourage the

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newcomers, to take them aside and share some of the tricks of the trade, some of the things that have helped me over the years to make it in this business. That's something a lot of the media and a lot of the general public don't see. In every place I've ever been I try to help young people, and teach them how to be a pro.

Pondering your retirement — which hopefully is at least a Super Bowl or two away — are you considering becoming more of an ambassador for your faith? You are already active on the lecture circuit, help raise money for Catholic schools, etc.

I definitely think so. I am already very active in my children's parish, St. Hubert's in Chanhassen, Minnesota. I am also involved with St. Joseph's Prep back in Philadelphia. Plus I have joined the capital campaign committee for Holy Family Catholic High School in Victoria, Minnesota. Catholic education is very important to me, as is being involved in the parish and the community. Giving back is vital for me.

Do you ever think that God pays attention to games?

For sure. I don't think God roots for a team obviously. It would be hypocritical to suggest that. But things happen for a reason and the Lord puts us in places, and in different situations for a reason. He has had his hand in just about everything I've ever done professionally in this business. You know there was a time in 1993 when I wasn't even in football. I had had shoulder surgery and was out of football. During that time I prayed a lot, not that I would get back to the NFL, but that I'd be given guidance and strength to make the best decision and go in the direction He wanted me to go. Fortunately for me, it was back to the NFL a year later.

Are you excited about the new season, your new coach Norv Turner?

I'm as excited as I've ever been about playing again since having shoulder surgery last fall. I think I have a renewed enthusiasm for the game and look forward to competing and getting back out there and playing at the same level as prior to the injury. *GD*



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