



## Top 10 Catholic Heroes of the Super Bowl

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Professional football was long considered a “Catholic” sport, drawing rugged players from the working class blue-collar immigrant families of which a good percentage were at least culturally Catholic. Times have changed in the intervening years, but the faith lives on, more quietly and imperfectly perhaps, among some of today’s greatest stars.

Days away from Super Bowl XLII, Catholic Online has taken the liberty of compiling our own list of the Top Ten Catholic Heroes of the Super Bowl. Our criteria was to limit the list to players rather than coaches (watch for our separate Super Bowl coaches list), and strike from eligibility any current player of the New York Giants or the New England Patriots so as to avoid any appearance of favoritism in this weekend’s championship game. We also sought to verify, at least anecdotally, that these players have since returned to or have remained active in their Catholic faith.

We’re sure we’ve missed several good candidates for this list, so we invite you to send us your own favorite Catholic stars of the Super Bowl. We’ll even publish some of your replies. Send your feedback by e-mail to [gmkorson@catholic.org](mailto:gmkorson@catholic.org).

With that, here is our list:

### **#10: Dave Casper**

Dave Casper, nicknamed “The Ghost,” is considered one of the greatest tight ends ever to play professional football. Captain of the 1973 national championship team at the University of Notre Dame, he was drafted by the Oakland Raiders in the second round and became one of their star receivers. In Super Bowl XI in 1977, he scored the first touchdown of the game on a short pass from quarterback Ken Stabler in the second quarter. Casper finished with four catches for 70 yards as the Raiders defeated the Vikings for their first-ever Super Bowl victory, 32-14.

His greatest Super Bowl highlight, however, might have been just helping the Raiders get there. In the divisional playoff against the Baltimore Colts, he caught a 42-yard post pattern in the waning moments that set up the Raiders for a game-tying field goal. Then, in the second overtime, Casper caught a touchdown that won it for Oakland.

Casper was selected to four straight Pro Bowls (1976-79). He was traded to the Houston Oilers in 1980 and later finished his career with the Raiders in 1984. He was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 2002.

### **#9: Chris Godfrey**

Chris Godfrey came out of the University of Michigan and broke in with the New York Jets in 1980. After a three-year hiatus, he was back in the NFL with the New York Giants from 1984-88 before ending his career in 1988 with the Seattle Seahawks. His Super Bowl glory came in Super Bowl XXI, where as an offensive lineman he helped protect quarterback Phil Simms in the 39-20 victory. When the game ended, it was Godfrey and fellow lineman Brad Benson who carried head coach Bill Parcells on their shoulders. "I was thinking, 'God, when am I going to be able to let this guy down,'" Godfrey said later. "But I was extremely happy to be with him, close to him at that moment. He's my coach, but he's also my friend." After his retirement from the NFL, Godfrey founded LifeAthletes ([www.lifeathletes.org](http://www.lifeathletes.org)), an organization that promotes virtue and sexual abstinence for teens.

### **#8: Ricky Nattiel**

The Denver Broncos and quarterback John Elway won two consecutive Super Bowl championships in 1998 and 1999, but in the preceding years they had experienced the agony of defeat in the big game four times. The third of those four consecutive losses was in Super Bowl XXII in 1978, in which Denver was thrashed by the Washington Redskins 42-10. If there was one bright spot in that game for the Broncos, however, it was the performance of rookie receiver Ricky Nattiel.

On the Broncos' first play from scrimmage, Nattiel used his blazing speed to streak down the field where quarterback John Elway lofted a perfect pass 55 yards in the air to Nattiel, who caught it in stride over his left shoulder at the Washington 10-yard-line and took it the final few steps into the end zone. That touchdown, just 1:57 into the first quarter, then stood as the earliest scoring play in Super Bowl history.

The joy was short-lived, however, as Redskins quarterback Doug Williams led the opposition to five second-quarter touchdowns en route to a lopsided Washington victory. Nattiel was still a Bronco when the team lost the big game again two years later, but he mostly watched that one from the sidelines, having been slowed by a knee injury that soon cut short his career.

Nattiel's record was broken by 49er receiver Jerry Rice in Super Bowl XXIX. In Super Bowl XLI in 2007, Devin Hester of the Chicago Bears took over the record when he returned the opening kickoff 92 yards for a touchdown. So Nattiel's mark now places third in Super Bowl history. But no one can take away his moment of Super Bowl glory.

### **#7: Mike Ditka**

Better known today as a television sports commentator and as head coach of the Chicago Bears when they won the 1986 Super Bowl, "Iron Mike" Ditka

also had an enviable career as a player. An All-American defensive end, linebacker, and tight end for the University of Pittsburgh, Ditka was a first-round draft pick of the Bears in 1961 and went on to earn honors as NFL Rookie of the Year.

He was later traded to Philadelphia, but it was with the Dallas Cowboys that he won his first Super Bowl ring. That was in 1972, in Super Bowl VI, when Ditka caught a seven-yard touchdown pass to seal the Cowboys' 24-3 victory over the Miami Dolphins.

His playing career over by the following year, Ditka became an assistant coach for eight years with the Cowboys and won his second Super Bowl ring in 1978. He went on to coach the Bears, whom he led to victory in Super Bowl XIX. Ditka is one of only two individuals ever to have won Super Bowls as a player, an assistant coach, and a head coach.

#### **#6: Joe Jurevicius**

Joe Jurevicius has the uncommon distinction of having played in three different Super Bowls with three different teams. In 2000, he was on the losing side with the New York Giants; in 2002, he won a Super Bowl ring with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. In his third game, as a receiver for the Seattle Seahawks, his team was defeated by the Pittsburgh Steelers 21-10 in 2006.

Jurevicius has been hobbled by injuries during his career, but he still managed to play with distinction in two of his Super Bowls, taking four passes for 78 yards in the Buccaneers' victory and five passes for 93 yards in the 2006 game, leading his team in yardage gained both times. His real heroism, however, has been off the field.

In 2003, just days before the Super Bowl, Jurevicius' wife, Meagan, gave birth one month prematurely to their son, whom they named Michael. Doctors quickly diagnosed Michael with sialidosis, a rare genetic disease that inhibits the body's ability to break down fats and carbohydrates. Two months after the Tampa Bay victory, little Michael died.

Today, Jurevicius, now with the Cleveland Browns, dedicates each game to Michael and scrawls a giant "M" in the end zone before each game. Michael provides him with a special motivation to excel, and he thinks of Michael with every touchdown he scores.

Jurevicius dedicated the 2003 Super Bowl to his son. He has told reporters that he looks forward to the day when he can present Michael with the ring himself.

#### **#5: Bob Griese**

Quarterback Bob Griese led the Miami Dolphins to nine winning seasons in the 1970s while running an balanced offense that did not require a lot of passing. He was the field general for the celebrated 1972 Dolphin team that

went 17-0 and played in three consecutive Super Bowl games. In Super Bowl VI, the Dolphins lost to Roger Staubach's Cowboys, 24-3. The next year, Miami's perfect season, Griese was eight for 11 with one touchdown as the Dolphins prevailed over the Washington Redskins, 14-7. The following January, Griese's arm was needed even less, as he completed six of his seven passes in a 24-7 victory over the Minnesota Vikings.

Miami's head coach of that era, Don Shula (a devout Catholic himself), called Griese "the most unselfish player I have ever been around." He was content to win, even if it was due largely to a strong running game.

Having lost his first wife to cancer in 1988, Griese has raised funds for Judi's House, an outreach for grieving children founded by his son, Brian, who presently is an NFL quarterback for the Chicago Bears. Reportedly both Bob and Brian are strong Catholics with devotions to praying the rosary.

#### **#4: Ed McCaffrey**

Ed McCaffrey played professional football for 13 years and was three-for-three in the Super Bowls. In Super Bowl XXIX, he caught only a single pass for five yards in the 49ers victory over the San Diego Chargers, 49-26. He was a major factor, however, in the Denver Broncos' back-to-back Super Bowl victories.

In 1998, he was Denver's leading receiver with 45 yards on two catches, including a 36-yard gainer, as the Broncos topped the Green Bay Packers 31-24. A year later, he caught five passes for 72 yards as Denver triumphed over the Atlanta Falcons 34-19.

Injuries forced an end to his career a few years later, but not before he set a team record for most receptions in a season (101).

Ed and his wife, Lisa, have been active in Catholic Charities in the Denver archdiocese. Citing the couple's charitable work, strong faith, and dedication to family life, Archbishop Charles Chaput of Denver presented the McCaffreys with the J. Francis Cardinal Stafford Award for Justice and Charity. "They give a marvelous witness to families," the archbishop said.

Today, McCaffrey is involved with the McCaffrey Family Foundation, which assists children with special educational and medical needs in Colorado.

#### **#3: Mark Bavaro**

Another Notre Dame graduate, Mark Bavaro was the perfect tight end, one who could catch a pass as well as he could throw a block. In his six NFL seasons with the New York Giants, he set many team records and won two Super Bowl rings.

A favorite receiver of quarterback Phil Simms, Bavaro caught four passes for 51 yards in the 1987 Super Bowl against Denver, including a 13-yard touchdown that put the Giants on top for good. The Giants went on to win

that game, 39-20.

Four years later, in Super Bowl XXV, Bavaro caught five passes for 50 yards from quarterback Jeff Hostetler, including two key third-down catches to keep drives alive. The Giants defeated the Buffalo Bills that day, 20-19.

Bavaro was known for his Catholic faith and for his support of the pro-life position. Among the pictures on the cover of Sports Illustrated's NFL preview issue for the 1987 season was a photo of Bavaro doing his trademark touchdown celebration: Genuflecting in the end zone and making the sign of the cross.

During and after his NFL career, Bavaro has been very active as a member of Life Athletes, a pro-life, pro-abstinence group founded by teammate Chris Godfrey (see #9 above).

## **#2: Brett Favre**

After a spectacular comeback year that saw the Green Bay Packers turn their poor 2006 season into a division-winning 13-3 record in 2007, Brett Favre seemed poised to lead his team to another Super Bowl appearance. A loss to the New York Giants, the eventual NFC champion, ended that dream season. Green Bay no doubt wants him back next fall to try again.

The durable quarterback led the Packers to a Super Bowl victory in 1997 as they defeated the New England Patriots 35-21. In that game, Favre completed 14 of 27 passes for 246 yard and two touchdowns, including a 54-yard bomb to Andre Rison and an 81-yard catch-and-run to Antonio Freeman. He also ran for a third touchdown.

The following year, the Pack was back. This time, however, it was the year for John Elway to shake the "can't-win-the-big-one" monkey from his back and rouse the Denver Broncos to victory, 31-24, in Super Bowl XXXII. Despite the loss, Favre's stats were even more stellar than they were the previous year. He was 25-for-42 passing for 256 yards and three touchdowns against only one interception.

Favre's Catholicism has been well publicized in recent years. His practice was not so strong in college, when he and his future wife, Deanna, had a child out of wedlock, but before long the Catholic faith began to become a significant part of their lives again.

His faith was renewed and strengthened particularly when Deanna was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2004 and had to undergo four months of chemotherapy and radiation treatment. She was later declared cancer-free, and the whole experience brought the Favres closer to one another and to their Catholic faith. Family tragedies were perennially arriving at that time: Prior to the cancer diagnosis, Favre lost his father and Deanna lost a brother. When Hurricane Katrina swept over the Gulf Coast in 2005, the Favres' family home was destroyed.

Since overcoming breast cancer, Deanna has become a spokeswoman for breast cancer prevention. She founded the Deanna Favre HOPE Foundation in 2005, which provides grants for uninsured and underinsured women battling breast cancer.

Brett established the Brett Favre Fourward Foundation in 1996. Since that time, through an annual golf tournament, celebrity softball games, and fundraising dinners, the foundation has donated more than \$2 million to charities for disadvantaged and underprivileged children in his home state of Mississippi as well as to those in his adopted state of Wisconsin.

The Favres are members of St. Agnes Parish in Green Bay during football season and St. Thomas Aquinas Parish in Hattiesburg, Miss., during the off-season. Brett and Deanna both grew up in Kiln, Miss.

### **#1: Roger Staubach**

Roger Staubach took over as quarterback of the Dallas Cowboys in 1971 and rattled off 10 consecutive victories including a 24-3 rout of the Miami Dolphins in Super Bowl VI. The former U.S. Naval Academy star was named the game's Most Valuable Player as he completed 12 of 19 passes for 119 yards and two touchdowns.

He stayed with the Cowboys through the 1979 season and was a six-time Pro Bowl selection. During those years, he would lead Dallas for three more Super Bowl appearances. In 1978, he guided the Cowboys over the Denver Broncos, 27-10, in Super Bowl XII; but he would also be on the losing side the big game twice, both times to the Pittsburgh Steelers. Dallas lost 35-31 in Super Bowl XIII, despite Staubach's three touchdown passes, and 21-17 in Super Bowl XI, where he threw for two scores but three interceptions.

Staubach's Catholic faith was evident in one of the best highlight-reel plays in NFL history. In a 1975 playoff game against the Minnesota Vikings, he threw a 50-yard bomb to receiver Drew Pearson in the final seconds to win the game, 17-14. Interviewed after the game, Staubach joked that he had said a Hail Mary just before he threw the ball.

From that point onward, any long desperation pass in an attempt to score in a game's final seconds would commonly be referred to as a "Hail Mary pass."

A Hail Mary pass? Perhaps professional football is still a Catholic sport after all.