

Brett Favre, exemplary American Catholic

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This "Sightings" essay finds spiritual heroism in the retiring quarterback of the Green Bay Packers:

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Brett Favre, Catholic Hero

-- Joseph Kip Kosek

Earlier this month, legendary Green Bay Packers quarterback Brett Favre announced his retirement after seventeen years in the NFL. He walked away holding most of the major records at his position, and as much as any athlete of his time he attracted not just admiration but veneration, inspiring even a "Packers Prayer" ("Our Favre . . . Hallowed be thine arm"). Favre has become a football deity, but he has also achieved the status of an exemplary American Catholic. Indeed, the website Catholic Online (www.catholic.org) names him second among the "Top 10 Catholic Heroes of the Super Bowl." For many Americans, "Our Favre" is less a divine figure than a fellow believer. Favre, though, is a peculiar Christian athlete whose career defies familiar evangelical optimism in favor of a darker, distinctly Catholic vision.

Brett Favre would never be mistaken for Kurt Warner, the born-again former St. Louis Rams quarterback who accepted the Super Bowl trophy in 2000 with a "Thank you, Jesus." Unlike his late Baptist teammate Reggie White, Favre did not convene on-field prayers or claim to receive personal communication from God. Green Bay's gunslinger was never that earnest or, frankly, that devout. The product of a small Mississippi town, his career brings to mind the fiction of Flannery O'Connor or Walker Percy, Southern Catholics for whom faith was often occluded and salvation often arduous.

More than any public proclamations of devotion, Brett Favre's well-publicized personal suffering marked him as a model Catholic for those who cared to look. Early in his career, he struggled with addictions to painkillers and alcohol. In December 2003, his father died unexpectedly. Ten months later, his wife Deanna was diagnosed with breast cancer, only a few days after her brother had been killed in an ATV accident. The next year, Brett's mother's home was destroyed by Hurricane Katrina. Most of these travails followed his lone Super Bowl victory, evoking not so much the generous God of prosperity theology as a more inscrutable Almighty, intent on humbling the exalted. In her bestselling 2007 memoir *Don't Bet Against Me!*, Deanna Favre compared the couple's ordeals to those of the biblical Job. Indeed, Brett increasingly exuded a Job-like equanimity, remarking after his wife's diagnosis that "if I asked why my father died or why Deanna has breast cancer, I would have to ask why I throw touchdown passes."

Contrast the Favres' litany of grief with the high living of New England Patriots quarterback Tom Brady, also raised Catholic. Brady had a child last year with actress Bridget Moynahan, and then took up with supermodel Gisele Bündchen. Wisconsin's Catholics, who include more recovering alcoholics and cancer survivors than actresses and supermodels, may respect Brady's skill on the football field, but they understand much more deeply a religion of pain and loss. Brady, a three-time Super Bowl winner, is

conspicuously absent from the "Top 10 Catholic Heroes of the Super Bowl."

Deanna Favre's memoir offers a Catholic rebuff to the secular celebrity culture exemplified by Brady and Bündchen. She and Brett were still in college and unmarried when she became pregnant with their first child. Friends pressured her to have an abortion, but she insists that "there was no way I could destroy an innocent life." She told her friends that having premarital sex was "a bad choice, and for every choice there's a consequence." When Brittany was born, Deanna writes, "I knew I'd made the right choice." Certainly this story holds appeal for Catholics and evangelical Protestants alike. Yet in narrating her struggles, Deanna - a self-described "quiet Christian" - never quite manages an evangelical level of effusiveness. *Don't Bet Against Me!* begins with an unsettling account of its author in a hospital bed, being prepared for breast cancer surgery; beneath its gaudy pink cover, the book brings readers into a world of guilt, responsibility, and suffering bodies.

The Favres' Catholicism became a somber counterpoint both to the joyous hedonism of sports stardom and to the exuberance of the evangelical athlete. When *Sports Illustrated* asked Brett to recount his favorite football memory, he seemed to channel Walker Percy, or Job: "If I were to make a list, I would include the interceptions, the sacks, the really painful losses. Those times when I've been down, when I've been kicked around, I hold on to those. In a way those are the best times I've ever had, because that's when I've found out who I am. And what I want to be." As it happened, the last pass of Brett Favre's career was an interception late in the conference championship game, a bad choice of throws that cost his team a trip to the Super Bowl. For every choice there's a consequence. Wisconsin's Catholics understand this, and weep.

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