The Washington Post

Back to previous page

Should American Catholics cheer for old Notre Dame?



By Michael Leahy, Published: January 4

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As a boy in Southern California during the late 1960s, I watched Notre Dame football games with a neighbor, a middle-aged rabbi named Joseph Elsant. He was many things to me: a profound moral influence, a happy raconteur and a fellow football fan fascinated by the Fighting Irish. "Kickoff!" he would announce and settle back in his big chair. He would have relished the thought of Notre Dame's presence in Monday night's national championship game against Alabama.

The late Rabbi Elsant regaled me with stories about key Notre Dame players from earlier in the 20th century. He loved to tick off their surnames, particularly those that signaled a family's immigrant background: Bertelli, Lujack, Patulski, Szymanski, Mastrangelo, Tripucka, Buoniconti.

He revered Notre Dame for its part in democratizing college football, in giving chances to kids for whom college might otherwise have been out of reach. The team's golden helmets were emblems to him of the shimmering American ideals of grit and social mobility. In the '60s, the presence on the Notre Dame squad of African American players such as the great defensive end Alan Page evoked for Rabbi Elsant the benefits of the racial progress absent at the time in the segregated Southeastern Conference, where all-white teams such as the University of Alabama's were commonly regarded as inferior imitations of the integrated northern powerhouses.

He appreciated, too, the preeminence of a religious university. To Rabbi Elsant, Notre Dame victories served as welcome blows on behalf of all faiths. Until the day might arrive when Yeshiva University (eventually his son's destination) fielded a notable squad, the Fighting Irish would be his team.

The rabbi liked that I had the same last name as legendary former Notre Dame coach Frank Leahy.

That coincidence made it all the more confounding to him that I regularly rooted against the Irish, especially when they faced my favorite team, the University of Southern California Trojans.

"How can you root against Notre Dame?" he groaned. "You're Irish. They're the Irish. They're the Catholic team. What's the problem?"

The question opened the door to my discomfort with Notre Dame. Part of it was coming of age in the late '60s and early '70s. It wasn't an era crazy about rules or orthodoxy, and many of my Catholic friends and I chafed against the expectation that we would cheer for Notre Dame out of slavish loyalty to our families' religious backgrounds. Catholic schools, catechism classes, no meat on Friday, Saturday morning detentions: We'd done our duty. Our football loyalties belonged to us.

But our coolness toward Notre Dame also reflected fissures within the Catholic Church, cracks widening to this day over birth control, abortion rights and the broader matter of whether any dissent — particularly tough questions of the Vatican — will be tolerated by the Catholic hierarchy.

And to this day, Notre Dame remains a political and social battleground for American Catholics. The university's invitation for President Obama to deliver the 2009 commencement address became a national controversy, with conservative Catholics opposing the president's positions on abortion rights and stem-cell research. And last year, the university filed suit against the federal government, seeking to overturn a requirement in Obama's health-care law that employers offer insurance plans including contraception coverage — a move that more politically moderate church members resented, concerned that Notre Dame would seek to deprive women, Catholic or not, of such coverage.

So it was perhaps inevitable that the school and the football team, two of the church's paramount American symbols, would come to be viewed with a mix of weariness and cynicism by a new generation. To some Catholics, Notre Dame is that righteous relative who arrives at the holiday dinner beating his chest over his fealty and good deeds — the one there to remind others at the table that they have not measured up.

But when the Fighting Irish football program veers off its moral course without incurring tough penalties, piety is a poor substitute for propriety. Notre Dame football has never suffered through crippling NCAA sanctions or a debilitating scandal. But that does not mean its reputation hasn't suffered black marks in recent years, suggesting a disconnect between Notre Dame's image and its actions.

In 2010, a student at St. Mary's College, the all-female school across the street from Notre Dame, committed suicide after she said she had been sexually assaulted by a Notre Dame football player (reportedly still on the team), leaving friends and observers to question whether the university abdicated its responsibility to truth and the young woman in moving on with little action or explanation.

And the same year, a Notre Dame undergraduate serving as a videographer for the football team lost his life when the high platform that held him collapsed in a bad wind. (The team had practiced indoors the day before because of the gusty weather.) His family never has filed suit. Talk about Irish luck. More like Teflon.

If there is a single reason for Notre Dame's enduring mystique, it is that — putting aside the perspectives of its alumni, students, professors and administrators — the place exists in the American psyche solely as a football team. The school has a top-notch faculty and notable graduates who never played a down, but who in Ann Arbor, Los Angeles or Tuscaloosa cares about that? To them, Notre Dame is the locker room where Knute Rockne exhorted his troops before they stampeded the opposition. It is the Four Horsemen. It is Ronald Reagan as George Gipp. It is a place where greatness, reality and fable mingle, and few know where one ends and the others begin.

For most of the 20th century, the adoration of Notre Dame also reflected the relatively favored status of Catholicism in American culture. Despite unfounded fears over whether a Catholic president could escape the Vatican's influence, films from the era demonstrate a largely benign perception of Catholicism. The most memorable priests from the period's major movies possess the same saintly qualities ascribed to Notre Dame: rectitude, hearts of gold and the righteous power to knock out a foe.

In 1954's "On the Waterfront," Karl Malden played Father Barry, the film's moral compass, who fights the mob's corrupting presence on America's docks and, demonstrating impatience with the foul-mouthed miscreants he's trying to help, decks a confused Marlon Brando.

In retrospect, the '50s and early '60s were the zenith of Catholicism's charm over America, and South Bend was among its beneficiaries. Charisma begat power: The team and the religion each benefited from the other's allure. In 1956, Notre Dame became the only 2-8 team in history to see one of its players — glamorous quarterback Paul Hornung, nicknamed the "Golden Boy" — win the Heisman. By then, no other collegiate team could match the Irish's hold on the American consciousness.

But if popular culture serves as a mirror to society's changes, then by the early '80s, something had shifted. Major films such as "True Confessions" and "The Verdict" depicted America's Catholic hierarchy attempting to cover up looming scandals. The films evinced new worries about whether robed men might squelch uncomfortable truths in the interest of safeguarding the church's image and their lofty positions.

The fictional accounts presaged real-life scandals, none as horrific as the sexual abuse of children in major American archdioceses and the subsequent coverups by priests and church hierarchies. For many years now, the country has absorbed reports about the abuse, civil lawsuits and out-of-court settlements. Last June, criminal prosecutions netted Philadelphia Monsignor William Lynn, the first high-ranking American Catholic official convicted for his part in reassigning abusers to new parishes.

It was inevitable that skepticism would arise over whether solemnity had long masked venality in the church, just as it was inevitable that around Notre Dame, a new breed of Catholics and non-Catholics alike would raise questions about such matters as the suicide and alleged assault of Lizzy Seeberg, the St. Mary's student — especially when Notre Dame's administration seemed not to.

Add the consternation over the school's effort to impose its views of contraception on non-Catholics under the health-care law, and it is easier to understand the ambivalence today about Notre Dame, both the institution and its gilded team.

In such instances, Fighting Irish certitude looks like censorship, and the university becomes an apt symbol of the church that guides it — dogmatic, frustrating change and stifling dissent.

Of course, all this matters little to the typical non-Catholic football addict, who knows more about the post pattern than the pope. Even so, rabid football fans have long been divided over Notre Dame. Many remain convinced that the Irish are more myth than marvel, beneficiaries of the hagiography that comes with being reverentially portrayed in two motion pictures and by one major television network.

In 1988, the last time Notre Dame won a national championship, its midseason matchup against the top-ranked Miami Hurricanes — a team that included players fond of hip-hop, big chains and military fatigues — was billed as "Catholics vs. Convicts" in some Fighting Irish quarters. The moment, with more than a whiff of elitism to it, signaled the erosion of the old Notre Dame working-class ethos that Rabbi Elsant so admired.

That perception has solidified in the years since, with the realization that some gifted players never will attract Notre Dame's interest, beginning with academically underachieving high school stars whom other universities are only too happy to grab — the football giants in the Southeastern Conference, including Alabama, among them. In big-game trash-talking before Monday's championship contest, some Irish fans' T-shirts mock the perceived socioeconomic station of their Southern, state-school opponent. "Catholics vs. Convicts" has given way to "Golden Domers vs. Mobile Homers" and "Catholics vs. Cousins."

But nowadays it is the SEC that is seen as the conference where talented athletes of nearly any background can play ball and get an education. It enjoys the populist appeal long gone from Notre Dame, whose "smart" teams over the past two decades often have been dismissed as slow, less athletic, mediocre.

In its defense, the university can point to the graduation rate of its football players — it's the highest among the big teams in the nation, and this is the first time that the leader in graduation is also tops in the polls — as evidence that the school has its priorities in order. This seems to be Notre Dame's lasting, self-imposed role in sports: the earnest ethicist, the dogged standard-maker, the nag — much like the church felt to me in my youth.

It helps to win, of course. And this year, the Irish have won big. New stars such as Manti Te'o and Louis Nix are fitting additions to the list of 20th-century luminaries Rabbi Elsant loved. If anyone around him picked Alabama to win Monday night — they're at least seven-point favorites — he would smile, feign horror and declare: "No chance! It's the Irish. Don't you know they're supposed to win?"

He would be baffled to see me still rooting against the Irish. I think I would tell him that I am suspicious of tribal loyalties. That I want to be free to adopt my own team and ethos. And that, come to think of it, I never so much chose an ethnicity and religion as I was born into them.

And I'd tell him that I like Alabama by 14 points.

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