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Three in 10 Americans say God has hand in sporting events

by Brian Roewe

If Sunday's Super Bowl XLVII comes down to a final Hail Mary pass, almost a third of Americans will believe divine intervention will play a role in who comes down with the football.

A January survey from the Public Religion Research Institute found that three of every 10 Americans (27 percent) believe God plays in a role in the outcome of sporting events, including Sunday's game between the Baltimore Ravens and San Francisco 49ers.

"In an era where professional sports are driven by dollars and statistics, significant numbers of Americans see a divine hand at play," said Robert P. Jones, the institute's CEO.

Catholics are slightly more likely (29 percent) to hold God as the ultimate referee than the overall population, but no denomination surveyed had half its membership affirming the belief. Minority Christians (40 percent) and white evangelicals (38 percent) led among religious communities, as did Americans in the South (36 percent) along regional lines.

The bigger picture is the real connection between sports and faith, said Bruce Wawrzyniak, director and co-founder of the Catholic Sports Association, a group that serves junior high and high school students in their athletic and faith lives.

"The question is not about [God] caring who wins Sunday's game," Wawrzyniak said in a statement released Wednesday. "The story is His real and true presence in recreational, amateur and pro sports, including the Super Bowl."

While God might not determine the final score, more than half of Americans agreed that God rewards

athletes of faith with good health and success. Once again, minority Christians (72 percent), white evangelicals (67 percent) and Americans from the South (61 percent) were most likely to hold this view. More than half of Catholics (56 percent) agreed with them, as did a third of religiously unaffiliated Americans.

The question of God and football gained national attention in the week leading up to the Super Bowl, with *Sports Illustrated* asking the question "Does God Care Who Wins the Super Bowl?" on its cover above an image of Baltimore Ravens linebacker Ray Lewis.

Lewis, who is set to retire after the game and is viewed as one of the greatest at his position in NFL history, is known for his passionate speeches to his team and his openness in discussing faith, including quoting scripture during media sessions. Under his jersey, he wears a T-shirt with the words "Psalms 91" across the chest. Part of Psalm 91 reads: "Because you have the Lord for your refuge and have made the Most High your stronghold, no evil shall befall you, no affliction come near your tent" (Psalms 91:9-10).

"My mom taught me to put my complete faith in God," Lewis said, according to the *Washington Post*. "I truly believe impact and success are two different things. Anybody can have success. Impact is totally different. You talk about the walk of Jesus, his whole walk was impact. So that's what my life is based on."

But for the respect Lewis earns for his open faith, he receives as much criticism for other pieces of his life, including conceiving six children with four women.

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In the aftermath of Super Bowl XXXIV in Atlanta, Lewis and others were charged with the murders of two men; the charges were later dropped, and Lewis, who pleaded guilty to obstruction of justice but has denied any involvement in the double homicide, ultimately settled several civil suits out of court.

More recently, the linebacker said it was "the trick of the devil" when reporters asked questions Wednesday after a separate *Sports Illustrated* story said he had used a banned substance -- deer antler spray -- to speed up his recovery from an injury earlier this season. Lewis has denied the allegations.

The PRRI survey, which polled 1,033 adults and had a margin of error of 3.5 percent, also found that on any given Sunday, more than a third of Americans are likely neither sitting on their couch watching football nor in the pews at church. That's twice the number of Americans who say they're more likely to be watching football than attending worship services (17 percent); a quarter of Americans say they're more likely in church, and about one in five are doing both.

But that's not to say Americans are pushing aside sports for religion. Rather, the survey suggests a balance over the span of a week. Roughly the same ratio (four in 10) of Americans watches a sporting event at least once a week as do attend a weekly service.

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