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Fans rely on God, rituals to boost favorite team

by Cathy Lynn Grossman by Religion News Service

Most Americans don't think God or the devil will be picking the NFL playoff winners this weekend or any other sports champions.

But some will pray nonetheless, and a few will "religiously" perform little game-day rituals just in case.

A survey by Public Religion Research Institute, released Thursday, probes the crossover between team spirit and spirituality.

Most Americans (60 percent) call themselves fans of a particular team. Among this group, several will do a little dance or say a little prayer to help the team along:

- 21 percent (including one in four football fans) will wear special clothes or do special rituals. Donning a team jersey leads the way (66 percent). But some admit they get a little funky with their underwear. One fan wears dirty undershorts on top of his jeans. (No word if these are boxers or briefs.)
- 25 percent (including 31 percent of football fans) have sometimes felt their team has been cursed. (No word on how many are Red Sox fans.)
- 26 percent (including one in three football fans) say they pray to God to help their team. White evangelicals are most likely to lean on the Lord on this: 38 percent will pray, more than any other religious group.
- Football fans are also more likely than other fans to admit praying for their team (33 percent to 21 percent), performing pre-game or game-time rituals (25 percent to 18 percent), or to believe that their team has been cursed (31 percent to 18 percent).

Although three-quarters of respondents said God plays no role in who wins, Americans are evenly divided on whether God rewards faith-filled athletes with good health and success, with 48 percent saying yes and

47 percent saying no.

Football is by far American's favorite sport (39 percent) with nearly four times the fan base of basketball (10 percent) or baseball (9 percent) or soccer (7 percent). And 72 percent of Americans say they are likely to watch the Super Bowl.

PRRI surveyed 1,011 people in English and Spanish between Jan. 8 and Jan. 12. The survey has a margin of error of plus or minus 3.1 percentage points.

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