

Can there be too much 'Tebowing'?

by [Reid Cherner](#) in the [January 11, 2012](#) issue

Thanks to Denver Broncos quarterback Tim Tebow, sports and religion have become the topic du jour. Arguments over Tebow's path to the Hall of Fame can be waged, but it's clear that his name is a rarity: the proper noun (Tebow) can be used as a verb (Tebowing—or getting down on one knee to pray).

"Tim is who he is," said Brent High, the associate athletic director for spiritual formation at Lipscomb University, who saw an event sell out when Tebow was a guest speaker there. "If you are a Christian, he is your absolute flag-bearer in the sports world. You cheer for him and you hurt for him when he takes the beating that he takes."

But High added: "If I am putting myself in the shoes of someone who is offended . . . and Tebow is getting down on one knee with all cameras trained on him, that's in my face. . . . So I can see why it's like the fingernails on the chalkboard to those people."

Tebow's actions aren't new; athletes have been thanking God longer than they have been thanking mom, and many fans have pledged loyalty to a higher being in exchange for a touchdown, a first down or a fumble.

"We've had athletes being very vocal about their faith and using their status as athletes to promote their faith for a long time now," said Tom Krattenmaker, author of *Onward Christian Athletes: Turning Ballparks into Pulpits and Players into Preachers*. "But Tebow seems to have taken it to an extra level of intensity."

So

why is a quarterback who has started a dozen games in his professional

career the dividing line in the debate over religion and sports?

"People

have a sense that he is shoving religion down our throats," said Patton Dodd, managing editor at Patheos, a website that is dedicated to religion and spirituality, and author of *The Tebow Mystique*. Dodd, who believes that "it is a little bit unfair" to criticize Tebow, says there is now "a piety about his piety."

Not

all religion and sports connections are controversial. Brent High used to work for the Nashville Sounds, a minor league baseball team, and was a cocreator of Faith Nights at minor league baseball parks. Those at the ballpark who were not interested in faith, he said, probably didn't notice anything beyond "a memo on the video board in the fourth inning."

High

added an important note: God sells. A Faith Day event, which often features a postgame Christian concert, could mean between \$250,000 and \$500,000 to the bottom line, he said.

"Christians are a huge demographic," High said. "Eighty-eight percent of people in America will identify themselves as some type of Christian. If you are sitting in an executive seat for the Colorado Rockies or St. Louis Rams or a hockey team, you would be foolish not to pay attention to that demographic the same way you pay attention to real estate agents, schools and scouts."

But

it was not that 88 percent that former Broncos quarterback Jake Plummer had in mind when he said of Tebow: "When he accepts the fact that we know that he loves Jesus Christ, then I think I'll like him a little bit better."

Tebow had an answer for Plummer: "Is it good enough to only say to your wife I love her the day you get married? Or should you tell her every single day when you wake up and every opportunity?"

There

is no debate that Tebow, the son of evangelical missionaries, is

passionate about his beliefs. Krattenmaker and Dodd point to the "John 3:16" eye black that Tebow wore when he was the star quarterback at the University of Florida as the tipping point in his expression of faith.

"Athletes

had been wearing their faith on their sleeve, quote, unquote," Krattenmaker said, "but he's a guy who had it right on his face."

In the end perhaps it comes down less to whether Tebow is "the guy" and more to the fact that Tebow is "their guy."

"At

times, if you are an evangelical Christian, it feels like the faith is being beat up on and marginalized," said Krattenmaker. "To see someone like Tebow to come along—that boosts them all and makes them feel kind of proud. He is a real champion for the faith and makes them want to defend him." —*USA Today*