

Highs and lows of Rider Pride a reflection of how sports and faith are linked

There's a simple reason that lifelong Saskatchewan Roughriders' fan Fr. John Weckend won't equate sport with religion.

"In religion we believe in life after death," said the pastor of Regina's St. Cecilia Parish, where the game-day roar of the crowd from Mosaic Stadium a few blocks away can be heard like it was right next door. "But if we lose the game on Sunday, there's no life here."

It was a tongue-in-cheek response, but probably close to the truth in Regina and across Saskatchewan on the Monday morning following the Riders' loss to the Winnipeg Blue Bombers Nov. 17 in the Canadian Football League Western Final, dashing the hopes of Canada's most rabid football fans as their team's pursuit of the Grey Cup came to an end.

In Canada, the Riders are one of two teams that have a mythical mystique surrounding them that borders on a religious fanaticism, along with hockey's Montreal Canadiens. They stand out even in a sporting country where the teams in every game in the pro arena – basketball, baseball, hockey, soccer ... you name it – can lay claim to having a zealous, faithful fan base that inspire religious analogies.

However, the passion of Montreal and Saskatchewan fans is unlike any other in the country, where the mood of the faithful can be reflected in how well – or how poorly – the team is faring.

"People coming together, in this case to support an athletic team, a football team, it kind of shows the power of something to unite people," said Weckend, who was one of the 33,000 disappointed fans in the stands whose hearts stopped when quarterback Cody Fajardo's last-second pass ricocheted off the upright to end the Riders' quest for the Cup. "In that sense, there's kind of an analogy with faith and religion that can attract people of all kinds of different backgrounds to a common cause."

Chris Hrynkow was drawn to the religion-as-sport analogy through the sports pages, first growing up in Montreal at a time when the Canadiens were still winning Stanley Cups almost as if by God-given right. He sees it again in Saskatchewan, where since 2011 he has been an associate professor and now department head in the Department of Religion and Culture at St. Thomas More College, the Catholic college at the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon.

"If you look at sports writing, it's the most use of religious and theological

language in the whole newspaper,” said Hrynkow. “They’ll talk about redemption, sacrifice, all these words. I think the reason that happens is because sport borders on the transcendent for both fans and athletics.”

Hrynkow has turned this fascination into a “Religion and Sport” course he teaches at St. Thomas More. Students look at the involvement of formal religion in sport, how sport can be understood in religious terms and at claims of sport as religion. In Edmonton, Dr. Matthew Hoven, a professor at St. Joseph’s College, also specializes in teaching religion and sports.

You don’t have to look far for the religious metaphors in sport. There’s the Hail Mary pass, perfected by Green Bay Packers’ quarterback Aaron Rodgers, Diego Maradona’s “Hand of God” goal that helped defeat England and send Argentina on its way to the 1986 soccer World Cup, the “(place any sport) gods” who balance things out when one team is wronged by some irreverence to the sport and “The Immaculate Reception” by Pittsburgh Steelers’ Franco Harris, perhaps the greatest play in National Football League history that paved the path for the Steelers to the Super Bowl.

“I really see how that transfers through religious language,” said Hrynkow. “People feel moments of ecstasy when their team does well. ... The involvement, participation of fans is really interesting. It’s a ritual-based perspective – like Catholicism.”

Canadiens’ legends of the past can attest to the team being likened to religion. On the walls of Serge Savard’s 1950s childhood home in Landrienne, more than 600 kilometres north of Montreal, were three pictures. Two of them were Pope Pius XII and Maurice (Rocket) Richard, with the third being then Quebec Premier Maurice Duplessis.

When Richard died in 2000, the entire province of Quebec went into mourning and the team offered to hold his funeral at the Molson Centre (now the Bell Centre). The family chose to hold it at Notre-Dame Basilica. It was a similar story when the great Jean Beliveau died in 2014.

It can even be seen in the stadiums these teams play in. Hrynkow sees people from all over Saskatchewan making almost a pilgrimage to Mosaic Stadium. And there was no feeling in any rink like that of the old Montreal Forum, home to the Canadiens for 22 of their 24 Stanley Cup victories.

Bobby Clarke of the Philadelphia Flyers once said you are already down 1-0 before the game even starts at the Forum because of the spirits in the rink. The Forum last hosted the Canadiens in 1996, and ever since the fans have been trying to recapture the spirit from hockey’s greatest “shrine.” It’s even been commercialized, said Hrynkow, noting a television commercial by the Sport Experts chain that shows paranormal experts trying to resurrect the ghosts of the Forum and move them to the Bell Centre, which the Canadiens now call home.

"It's awfully funny, but serious at the same time," he said.

The Archdiocese of Montreal has been known to link the faithful with their hockey team. In 2014 it launched a campaign encouraging Catholics to light digital prayer candles as the Canadiens prepared for the first round of the playoffs.

"We go to where everybody is right now and everybody is with the Habs, and cheering for their team," archdiocesan spokesperson Jean-Nicolas Desjeunes told *The Catholic Register* at the time. "So, as Pope Francis said, we are going outside to the people and putting the message where it needs to go."

This blending of sport and religion can be seen in the culture, and you need not look any further than French-Canadian author Roch Carrier's beloved short story *The Hockey Sweater*, based on the real experience of his mother having ordered from Eaton's a new hockey sweater to replace his cherished Richard sweater.

It arrives, only instead of a Canadiens' sweater emblazoned with The Rocket's Number 9, it is the jersey of the hated Toronto Maple Leafs. His new look gets him a seat on the bench until another player is injured in the third period, giving him his chance to play, only to be whistled for a penalty by the referee/parish priest when he steps on the ice. He smashes his stick in protest and is ordered by the priest to go to church to pray for forgiveness. Instead, Carrier asks God to send "a hundred million moths" to eat his Leafs' sweater.

It's a blend that has made its way to the real world. In Saskatoon, the worship community at St. Thomas More sponsored a Syrian family escaping that nation's civil war. It was a Muslim family, and "no one would have said we want to make you Catholic," said Hrynkow.

There was another way though, a safe way, to share their values, said Hrynkow. "Many, many people tried to explain to him why he should be a Riders' fan."

This translates into the stands at Mosaic, and on the streets in Regina and Saskatoon, cities where there has been an influx of recent immigrants.

"It certainly does have a unifying factor," said Weckend.

Weckend's own priestly life is tied to the Riders, he says proudly. Born in Broadview, Sask. along the rail corridor between Winnipeg and Regina and raised in the provincial capital from his earliest school days, Weckend said the bishop of Victoria tried to recruit him for the diocese when visiting his parents (who had moved to the west coast) while he was at Toronto's St. Augustine's Seminary.

"I said no way. I wouldn't be able to get any to the Rider games from Victoria," he laughed.