

Holy Gridiron, Batman

Let's discuss religion for a moment.

No, not that kind of religion. Too many pitfalls and roadblocks; too much fighting and gnashing of teeth; too many rules and arguments. That kind of religion is too much work.

I'm talking about the religion practiced by many sports fans during Saturdays in the fall. A religion divided into sects – ACC, SEC, Big 12 (or is it eight, or four) – and congregations named Auburn, Syracuse, Boise State and UCLA. I'm talking the religion that trumps leaf raking, political stumping, even – dare I say it – the church cider and donut sale.

I'm talking college football.

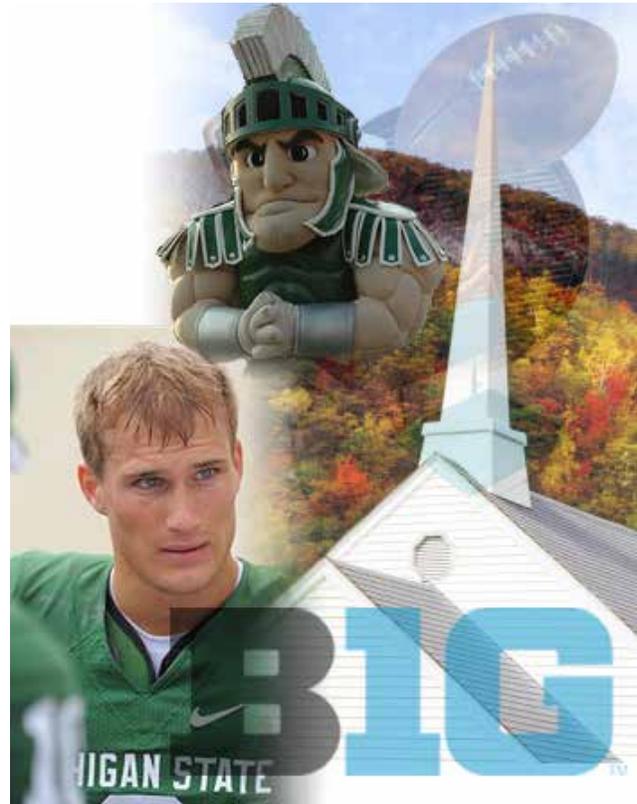
I belong. Yup, I have my own congregation and its icon is the Spartan. Well, okay, I'm a convert. Sure, Western Michigan is starting to put people in the pews, but when I was local to Kalamazoo the Broncos couldn't get crickets to chirp in their choir loft, let alone parishioners. So, thanks to my B1G brother, I was baptized in the green and white.

And this congregation is crazy. Perhaps, one might say, fanatically devout. Witness the green and white caravans of SUVs, the way the faithful break the fast with kielbasa and sloppy joes and beer. Listen to the proselytizing–Illinois? Really?–and the practicing of hymns about the Red Cedar River and rah, rah, rahing. Is this any place for a gay? You bet it is.

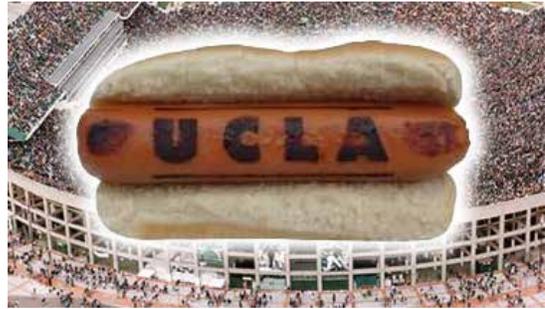
Now, I don't get to services in person that much. Fortunately, they're televised and, as with most years, Sparty has offered a mixed bag. Some weeks, it's a chorus of hallelujahs: the cupcake games, beating Central Michigan (I never mind seeing them lose), the Wolverines (sorry, Erin), Ohio State, and Wisconsin (all hail Mary). Other weeks, Sparty gets pummeled by Notre Dame (Jesus, another touchdown?) or cornhusked by Nebraska.

It was during the Nebraska game that I found myself wondering: what must they be thinking? The gays. No, not the fans . . . I mean the gay players.

Wait, we're talking football, right? Gay football players? Well, sure. There must be at least one on Michigan State's team. I mean, with an average of 75 players on the team, statistically speaking there should be three to five on the team (assuming the national average of 5–8% for gays in the general population). There should be 3–5 gay players on EVERY Division One college football team. Clemson. Alabama. Texas Tech. Every team. Washington had a gay player on their team back in 1961: David Kopay. Surely he wasn't the last one.



So what were the gay Spartans thinking after their miracle win against Wisconsin? Probably not about the locker room, or what action they would look for on Grindr that night. I'm guessing they were euphoric, fist pumping college kids—running around the stadium high-fiving their teammates and coaches.



What about at the Nebraska game? I bet they were thinking things like "we gotta stop that option play" or "we got another penalty?" Heck, I certainly was. I don't think "I can't wait until Kirk gets out of that jock?" was on their radar.

Were the gay players concerned about outing themselves, or looking weak, or hearing trash talk on the field? I doubt it. They were there to work and give everything they had for the team and for their teammates. They played to win one for the green and white faithful and to make their coaches proud. They were embraced by their congregation and by their religion for those sixty minutes on the field.

So I sat there and watched top-10-ranked Michigan State get pounded by Nebraska and thought "I can't tell the straight ones from the gay ones." They all played badly; and the week before, brilliantly. And then they all took their showers, scrubbed off the mud and sweat from the game and moved on with their lives.



And what then for those 3-5 gay players? Back to the dorm room or the apartment, back to their studies and workouts, back to . . . the closet. They stand there once again, alone, thinking about what they are and whether their teammates know; or if the coach would be accepting or not; or if the fans would reject them; or if there would ever be a time when they could hug their partner as they stepped off the team bus.

Religion is a powerful thing—even the religion of college football. 100,000 seat cathedrals. Fiery oratory from the coaches. For the players, the sermon must be intoxicating: the cheers, the adrenaline, and the opportunity to just play the game for which they've trained so hard. The religion of the gridiron is commitment to your team.

And what about off the gridiron—after the rah, rah, raving and high-fives and prayers. Are the gay players still part of the team? Or are there too many pitfalls and roadblocks; too much fighting and gnashing of teeth; too many rules and arguments against them? It depends on the coach, the players, the fans—it depends on how much of that commitment to team leaves the field and finds its way into life. Much like religion, right? Best practiced outside of church?

I do know this: someday—soon—a courageous athlete who doesn't give a s#!t will step off the team bus and will hug his partner. And maybe someone will notice. Or maybe they won't be able to tell the straight ones from the gay ones—and won't care. That will be the epiphany for which this recovering Catholic has been waiting a long time.