

Super Bowl Religion

On football's biggest day, Christians used the matchup between the St. Louis Rams and the New England Patriots as an opportunity to spread the gospel.

When the St. Louis Rams and the New England Patriots squared off for Super Bowl XXXVI, their passionate fans encountered some people just as zealous about their own passion: Jesus Christ.

New Orleans turned into a major mission field in early February for Christians who reached out to thousands of visitors when the "Big Easy" concurrently hosted for the first time pro football's biggest event and the raucous annual Mardi Gras celebration.

"For a lot of football fans, the game is their religion," says Loy Seal, director of church growth for the Baptist Association of Greater New Orleans. "They treat it as a spiritual experience, and the high holy day is Super Bowl Sunday. These outreaches that we have aim to take the gospel to those in the stands."

From one-on-one witnessing ventures in the French Quarter to a prayer walk inside the Superdome—where the Super Bowl was played—area churches of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) sponsored more than 20 outreaches for the National Football League's (NFL) premier game. SBC officials said 35 people became Christians through the different ministries.

In addition, the charismatic church that Rams quarterback Kurt Warner attends bused a group from St. Louis to hand out football cards featuring the devoted Christian and other

players on the team. Warner's pastor declined to talk with Charisma about the church's tailgate ministry because of its low-key approach.

No Arm-Chair Christians

The day before the big game, the NFL also had its own outreach in one of the ballrooms at the Hyatt Regency New Orleans, located adjacent to the Superdome. The evangelistic event featured testimonies and Scripture quotations from Christian players and an invitation for fans to pray to receive Christ.

"It's amazing how much attention the Super Bowl gets," said Walt Day, 42, chaplain of the Patriots, who attended the 15th annual NFL-sanctioned Super Bowl Breakfast. "This [breakfast] is just a great opportunity to broadly sow the gospel. Some people will come closer to God, but this could also be the first step for a lot of people in terms of having a relationship with the Lord."

Televised on the PAX TV network, the invitation-only event drew 800 businessmen, youngsters, and NFL stars and coaches, including Darrell Green, Chris Carter and Dave Wannstedt.

Sponsored by Athletes in Action (AIA), a Xenia, Ohio-based sports ministry, the event featured the Bart Starr Award (BSA), which is given to a Christian NFL player who exemplifies outstanding character and leadership at home, on the field and in the community. Past winners include Steve Largent, Mike Singletary, Reggie White and Aeneas Williams.

"There was a time if you were a Christian in the NFL, not many people stood up," emcee and Super Bowl sportscaster Pat

Summerall, 71, told the audience. "People more and more are saying, 'I'm a Christian, and I'm proud of it.' An old song says, 'You can't be a beacon if your light don't shine.'"

Green, a 42-year-old defensive back for the Washington Redskins, told the audience that his "desire as a player is to impact the world."

"The true impact comes from presenting the gospel," said Green, a future NFL Hall of Fame inductee and previous BSA winner. "It's not just talking about it, but living the life of Jesus Christ."

An avid Dallas Cowboys fan, Paul Castaldo said the number of Christian players and coaches at the breakfast made an impression on him. "I was really surprised at how everything was about Jesus," said the 29-year-old Orlando, Florida-area resident who traveled to New Orleans with two friends.

Chan Gingras, a St. Petersburg, Florida, resident who attended the breakfast with Castaldo, said the various speakers encouraged his faith. "I thought it was interesting to see how little attention the secular press gave an event that had so many famous athletes and such a positive message," Gingras, 29, said.

Glen Henley, a New Orleans resident and another Christian, called the event "pretty amazing" for its Christ-centered theme. "It's almost a miracle that the NFL is this involved in proclaiming Christ," Henley, 53, said.

Doug Greengard, 40, a sportscaster who founded a sports ministry in the New Orleans area, was "very impressed" with

the outreach.

“This is awesome because it impacts the influential executive who can afford to go to the Super Bowl but perhaps has never darkened the doorway of a church,” said Greengard, who serves as the New Orleans Saints chaplain.

AIA national director Will Pugh said that since the event started in the late 1980s hundreds have come to Christ. In addition to being invited to say the sinner’s prayer, those who came to the breakfast were asked to fill out comment cards. Pugh said AIA follows up with those who make spiritual decisions and encourages them to connect with a church in their community.

“This, to me, represents why we do what we do,” said Pugh, noting that the breakfast is AIA’s largest outreach of the year. “The heart behind it is to boldly proclaim the love and truth of Christ and to develop and mobilize co-laborers—all the winners of the award—for a global harvest through the sports platform.”

Pugh said the NFL’s stamp of approval on the event is a “big time” blessing. “I think the sovereignty and favor of God is with the event,” said Pugh, noting that there has never been a controversy over the event’s direct gospel presentation. “There’s a lot of credibility and respect with the winners of this award. That is a message that resonates regardless of religious or spiritual background.”

NFL hall of famer and past BSA recipient Anthony Muñoz, 43, agreed. “I really believe it’s a God-thing that He has given us this platform,” Muñoz, co-chairman of the breakfast, told

Charisma. "It's become a great vehicle to touch the hearts of people with the gospel."

Evangelism: A Team Effort

Besides the breakfast, other similar outreaches featuring testimonies of Christian NFL players also were held the day before the Super Bowl at area churches.

Greengard's ministry presented a free event at Victory Fellowship with Kansas City Chiefs place-kicker Todd Peterson and Patriots wide receiver Torrance Small. Held at Greengard's home church in Metairie, a New Orleans suburb, the event attracted 300 people.

"In the midst of Super Bowl events that cost something to attend, I thought it's important to offer something that's free because the greatest gift is salvation, and it cost nothing," said Greengard, who wants to hold a similar free outreach in every Super Bowl city. "This was a great opportunity to reach young people and the middle-class football fan who may have no idea about having a personal relationship with Jesus."

A desire to present the gospel sometime during the Rams and Patriots contest motivated 14 area SBC churches to hold free Super Bowl "watch parties." Typically, these featured the game on a big-screen television, as well as food, entertainment for children and NFL-related giveaways.

Seal, the church-growth director of the city's Baptist association, said tailgate outreaches attracted more than 1,600 people. Nine people prayed to receive Christ, and seven

recommitted their lives to the Lord during the casual gatherings.

Area Baptists also worked behind the scenes to convey the gospel message discreetly. Tim Knopps, an Oklahoma City evangelist, said the SBC provided 700, or 10 percent, of the 7,000 volunteers who assisted putting together Super Bowl-related events.

Among them were 350 Baptist-seminary students who placed complementary seat cushions and souvenirs on the 70,000-plus seats of the Superdome. The task turned into a prayer walk when the students started to pray for each person who would be sitting in the stands.

"It's subtle, but a very powerful gospel tool to impact the Super Bowl," said Knopps, 42, who has served as an outreach consultant to the SBC for five Super Bowls. "We prayed an SOS prayer for each seat. S stands for salvation so that every person would know Jesus. O is for obedience so that Christians and non-Christians would obey God. And S stands for safety so that every person would be protected by the hand of God."

While unprecedented security measures garnered plenty of media attention, the little-known prayer effort helped ensure that "the Superdome was the safest place in America on Super Bowl Sunday," Knopps said.

"The NFL was very appreciative of the prayers. One lady from the NFL told us: 'You mean every seat has a blessing on it? That is so cool,'" Knopps recalled her saying.

One of the leaders of the Baptist volunteer staff, Knopps and

some of the seminary students took the gospel to the NFL Experience, an interactive theme park that drew thousands to the convention center in downtown New Orleans.

“We didn’t get to witness to the mass of visitors, but the goal was to possibly share Jesus with the other volunteers who live in the community,” he said. “When volunteers work together, inevitably one will ask another, ‘How did you become a volunteer?’

“We encouraged our volunteers to say, ‘Our church got a group together to come down here,’” Knopps added. “If you can’t turn that conversation towards Jesus by talking about your church, then you’re going to the wrong church.”

Matchup on Bourbon Street

Talking about Jesus to football fans and Mardi Gras revelers was the method of operation for about 12 street evangelists who distributed tracts and witnessed to strangers on the city’s notoriously raucous Bourbon Street. SBC officials said they prayed with 26 people to receive Jesus during their street-witnessing excursions.

“Most of us here don’t care about the game or the party atmosphere,” said Ed Human, 74, who along with his teammates came from different parts of the country to evangelize New Orleans during Super Bowl week. “We’re here because we care about the souls of these people.”

Seal, who plans to coordinate an evangelistic outreach next month for a Professional Golfers Association event in New Orleans, echoed Human’s comments. “People come to New Orleans

to sin,” Seal, 51, said. “Our job is to show them there is forgiveness for sin in Jesus Christ.”

The evangelists’ outpost was at Vieux Carre Baptist Church, the only SBC church in the French Quarter. On the eve of the Super Bowl, Human’s group “blitzed” Bourbon Street, as they sought to pass out Super Bowl-theme tracts and Christian magazines.

“We’re going to invade Bourbon Street with these T-shirts that say: ‘Jesus is coming. Are you ready?’” noted Human, a Colleyville, Texas, resident who has proselytized in 17 Super Bowls and 34 Mardi Gras. “You go out there expecting God to save everyone you come in contact with.”

After praying in a circle at Vieux Carre Baptist, the evangelists left the church located in a storefront building on Dauphine Street and headed toward Bourbon Street, where they were met with a loud roar from what appeared to be an ocean of partygoers.

Not surprisingly, they encountered a few hecklers who mockingly welcomed their presence by shouting, “Jesus!” Because of the large crowd and chaotic atmosphere, the evangelists became separated, but they kept their focus.

“Their mind is on partying right now,” explained Lance Engst, who along with his wife, Katie, were evangelizing their first Super Bowl and Mardi Gras. “But one of the things we believe is that they will take a tract, and when they’re feeling sober, they’ll be able to get to this information.”

One out of three revelers willingly accepted the tracts and

magazines, but some of the literature also was discarded later.

“We’re called to scatter the seeds,” said Sandy Nelson, 54, who traveled to New Orleans from Nevis, Minnesota, with her husband and the Engsts. “The rest is up to the Lord. We’re not responsible for the conversions.”

The evangelists’ passion for lost souls also motivated Gingras, who earlier had attended the NFL breakfast, to distribute some Christian literature in the French Quarter.

“I had no intention of handing out gospel tracts on Bourbon Street, but yet God decided that I would,” said Gingras, who used to party on Bourbon Street before he was a Christian. “I even got the opportunity to witness to a guy who might not have felt as comfortable talking to some of the other evangelists.”

Wade Caldwell, a 69-year-old Asheville, North Carolina, resident who witnessed in New Orleans for the first time, said he didn’t expect instant spiritual fruit from the excursions. “Only heaven will reveal the results of the gospel that was shared in this place,” he said.

Sharing Jesus one-on-one with strangers was the ultimate goal of the evangelists, who had to weather lots of rejection with patience and perseverance.

“This is tough going, but sometimes you find a hurting person—one who will talk to you,” said Engst, 39, a former Foursquare minister.

The Engsts had brief conversations with a few partyers, including Jason Harmon, who said he was a tight end with the Chicago Bears. "I'm Catholic, but I don't believe in the Immaculate Conception," Harmon told the couple, who tried to shift the discussion toward Christ and the Bible.

After about a minute, Harmon, who had a drink in his hand, politely accepted a magazine from Katie Engst, then walked away from the duo—seemingly not swayed by the evangelists. "People are going to believe what they want to believe," Harmon told Charisma. "I don't think they're going to change the minds of people here."

The Engsts also encountered other detractors, including Julie, who was offended by the message of their T-shirts and tracts. "It's vulgar and totally unnecessary," said the Mendota, Illinois, resident who claimed to be a Christian. "What [the evangelists] are doing isn't about the coming of Jesus. I don't see anything wrong with these people [partying on Bourbon Street]."

Another reveler lashed out at Engst after he offered him a tract. "Here's something you're going to need for tomorrow," Engst told the young man. "I don't need it for tomorrow," he shot back. "I've got all I need tonight."

Despite the harsh response, Katie Engst, 54, wasn't discouraged. "Throughout the midst of all this, God is at work," she said. "I know that God is going to speak to these people afterwards because God's Word doesn't return void."

Knopps concurred, noting that the SBC outreaches presented the gospel more than 100,000 times, including distributing more

than 20,000 pieces of Christian literature during Super Bowl week.

“During the Super Bowl in Miami three years ago, we estimated 3,000 first-time decisions for Christ,” Knopps said. “We got response cards from 15 different countries. We tried to connect them to a local church. So we believe this is a worthwhile ministry.”

Knopps cited a biblical example to support a Christian presence at America’s most hyped athletic event and the wild environment of Mardi Gras.

“The Feast of Passover was a party,” said the founder of the Timothy Institute of Evangelism. “They brought their goats so they could celebrate. They had all the trinkets and gadgets. I can look at the Scripture, and it says, ‘And Jesus went up to the festival.’

“So would Jesus be here? Absolutely.”

Eric Tiansay, an associate editor with Charisma, traveled to New Orleans during Super Bowl week.