

ONFAITH

ASKING THE CLERGY

Is it OK to pray for your team?

BY JIM MERRITT
Special to Newsday

Being a soccer fan can be like a religious experience, inspiring devotion (to your team or a favorite player), elation in victory and mourning in defeat. This week's commenters discuss whether it's proper to ask for divine intervention as the 2026 FIFA World Cup draws to a close today.



JEFFREY BASINGER

Dwight Lee Wolter

THE REV. DWIGHT LEE WOLTER
Pastor, Congregational Church of Patchogue

I bet that even atheists pray for their favorite sports team. Some people call sports a national religion! Religious gatherings and sports events have a lot in common, including rituals such as team huddles that are like calls to worship, chants that sound like prayers of invocation, and hymnlike fight songs. Religion also has prayers, psalms, songs and hymns that call for the defeat of enemies. Places of worship and people of faith can learn a lot from sports gatherings. Sports and religious gatherings are examples of community-formation, excitement, purpose and power. Sports gatherings are often more enjoyable than religious meetings. But sports teams and fans can learn a lot from prayer. I once served a church in Florida when an opponent in the form of a ferocious hurricane was approaching. My prayer that it would not strike us meant I was also praying it would strike another "team" somewhere else instead. So, I prayed for them as well. At the beginning of sporting events, I say a prayer for my team, and as I do in church, I pray that, above my desires, "Thy will be done."



NATHAN MCBRIDE

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This is the perfect question at this time in my life. I would answer without hesitation that it is not only appropriate but necessary to pray for your sports team. I'm from Argentina, where the World Cup is not only a soccer event but a religious and mystical experience. Since my childhood, memories of watching the games during school hours were filled with prayers, symbolic gestures for good luck and special food to ritualize and seal the victory. Personally, I am following the games of this World Cup and prayers (and curses) flow out of my mouth. In particular, during the last game of Argentina against Switzerland, the appearance of prayer was very spontaneous. On the morning of the game, I was contemplating a beautiful prayer called Ana Bekoach. It is a medieval Jewish liturgical poem that starts with a plea to God for strength. As I was watching the game, at the point of a tie between the two teams, my mouth started to recite the prayer's first line of the Ana Bekoach, which means, "We beg you! With the strength and greatness of your right arm, untie our bundle of wrongdoing." The energy of the Hebrew line started to grow in my heart, and I recited the line with the intention for the players to break free from the obstacles and give them freedom to play their best. A few minutes later, Argentina scored two more goals, and we were in the semifinals.



SANAA NADIM

Sanaa Nadim

SANAA NADIM
Chaplain and Director, Islamic Society, and Chair, Interfaith Center, Stony Brook University

I grew up in a soccer-loving family as the youngest of seven children. Four of my brothers influenced my life, especially through sports. Whether playing at the club or watching games at home, sports were central in our house. When Egyptian teams played, the house erupted with excitement and chaos. That tradition stayed with me into adulthood. I married a sports fan, and we enjoy hockey, basketball, football and soccer. We never miss tournaments such as the African Cup, the European Cup and the World Cup. During the 2026 World Cup, I found myself praying for the two teams closest to my heart: Egypt and the United States. Unfortunately, both were eliminated. Egypt, led by Mohamed Salah, suffered what many fans saw as unfair officiating in favor of Argentina. The U.S. team started well, but things did not go their way in the end. Asking Allah for a fair game, safety from injuries and enjoyment is permissible. However, scholars caution against allowing sports loyalty to lead to partisanship, neglect of religious duties or hostility toward others.

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