



**WORK**

**HARD**

**PRAY**

**HARD**



Turning to their **holy texts** instead of their **playbooks**, some athletes at University of Miami look to their faith for strength on the field. No matter the amount of **practice and drills**, athletes can still feel worried about their performance in the big game. Encouragement from **teammates and coaches** might be reassuring, but for some that's not enough. Religion takes an **undeniably large role** in some athletes' lives, whether it be on the field or off.



words\_ wyatt kopelman, brandi troupe & communitywire.miami. design\_ matt jimenez. photo\_ wyatt kopelman & brandi troupe.

The Miami Hurricanes arguably have been associated with an irreverent, not-so-saintly image on and off the field — long heralded as the “bad boys” of college football — the famed “convicts” of the 1988 “Catholics vs. Convicts” game with Notre Dame.

Not so easily discerned, however, are the spiritual vibe and faithful presence that bring many Hurricane quarterbacks, tight-ends and receivers to their knees at every game. From pre-game prayer huddles in the end zone to silent group prayers on the 50-yard line and impromptu post-game prayers on the sidelines, the powerful realms of religion and sports merge for many players and coaching staff.

“I pray before every game,” said defensive back Gilbert Frierson. “I pray when I’m on the field; I pray that I make it off the field and pray for others around.”

Frierson is among many other UM student-athletes, from football to track & field, who avow religion as an important component of why and how they play.

23-year-old sprinter Adam Khriiss said he reads the Quran, the Muslim holy book, to prepare his mind and body for his track meets.

“I became more calm, more focused about my races,” said Khriiss after he began connecting more with his religion when he was 19. As instructed by the Quran, he has given up non-secular music, alcohol, drugs, and sexual intimacy.

“I’ve come to a point in my life where I don’t care what people think,” said Khriiss. “I should be more worried about what God thinks than what others think,” he said.

While there are no typical prayer rituals for Muslim athletes prior to a game or during the athletic season, Khriiss prays five times a day, reciting verses from the Quran. The five daily prayers include Fajr (sunrise prayer), Dhuhr or Zuhr (noon prayer), Asr (afternoon prayer), Maghrib (sunset

prayer) and Isha (night prayer).

“Prayers are more important than anything in life,” Khriiss said.

Prayer is also a foundation of UM’s Fellowship of Christian Athletes, an active group of student-athletes who meet weekly for Bible study, counseling, and socializing.

With a membership of about 50 students, the FCA includes Christian athletes of all denominations, said Mike Blanc, the group’s director and football team chaplain. Members from several UM teams, including baseball, women’s basketball, track and field, swim and dive, and soccer are represented this year. The group also attracts a variety of students who are not athletes, Blanc said.

Senior Melissa Dagenais, goalkeeper on the women’s soccer team, joined FCA her junior year. She grew up Catholic in her hometown of Saint-Hubert, Quebec, Canada, and found it easy to connect with Blanc.

“He’s helped me so much throughout my Christian journey,” she said of Blanc. “We connect well, and he’s given me very good advice and even in soccer.”

She said it’s her faith sustaining her wellbeing and relationship, even when the team loses.

“For me, it just gives much comfort knowing that not everything is in my hands,” Dagenais said. “So as long as I do what I can, as long as I give my best on the field, the outcome is going to be what it is.”

Tight-end Will Mallory, also an FCA member, said he appreciates that faith and religion can be celebrated together at UM.

“We’re around a place that welcomes that,” said Mallory, a fifth-year senior who knew the presence and power of prayer even as a high school athlete.

“We would always pray before games and after games,” said Mallory, who attended Providence High School in Jacksonville, Florida. “No matter

what it was, win or lose, we would always come together to give thanks.”

Mallory praises Blanc for bringing fulfillment to the student-athletes’ lives.

“He does a great job with us in giving us opportunities to come together, to be a part of that brotherhood,” Mallory said.

Blanc’s influence extends beyond the dimensions of a field or film room. The former four-year defensive tackle at Auburn said he grew up in Pompano Beach, Florida, in a family fraught with disorder and conflict and a community marred by crime. Blanc watched his oldest brother, Dave, go to jail. However, despite the harrowing experience, Dave helped steer Blanc in a better direction.

Then the two attended church while Blanc was in the seventh grade.

“I was like the worst kid in the whole family,” Blanc said. “Dave, looking at his younger brother, was like, ‘Man, Mike, would you try this church with me?’”

Hearing a pastor’s confident words in Jesus’ affection for him, as Blanc remembered, was mind-blowing.

Now, Blanc shares his wisdom with UM’s student-athletes.

“They come to me and say, ‘Pastor Mike, could you pray for me?’ I have this really unique opportunity of just pouring into them; helping them, talking to them,” Blanc said. “Many of our talks with guys are honestly not even just about faith, but just about life, helping them

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Defensive Back**

them to get through difficult situations, whether it's a mom or dad, or relative that's sick."

Blanc said the FCA, a national organization that formed in 1954 for coaches and athletes on the professional, college, high school, junior high and youth level, began at UM sometime in the early 2000s and was in place in 2001, when the Hurricanes won a national football title. Even before the group formalized, players were able to pursue their faith and athletics under coach Howard Schnellenberger, credited for putting the Hurricanes in the national spotlight, Blanc said. For a while, FCA was not as active back then as it is now, but the organization was revived when Blanc joined UM in 2016.

Beyond its communal gatherings, counseling and prayer huddles, FCA routinely ends each semester with a baptism, Blanc said. Fourteen student-athletes were baptized in the spring.

"When I first got to the University of Miami, I got baptized by the team pastor, Pastor Mike, and that helped change me a lot," Frierson said.

Long before playing his first snap as a Hurricane, Frierson grew up loving football in Coconut Grove. He graduated from Coral Gables High School in 2018 and still competes for the Hurricanes in his fifth year as he pursues a graduate degree.

And he won't see those snaps without praying about five times per game, he said.

Frierson successfully majored in sociology, walking across the stage in May 2021. He completed his degree in seven semesters, attending additional classes in the summer alongside teammates who elect an expedited academic plan.

Football, he said, can be challenging. "And sometimes, it can be stressful, and things cannot be going right on the field, so you have to keep praying and praying and believing in God," Frierson said. 🕊

► The Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) has campus ministries all over the United States. For more information on joining, check out their profile on Engage.



WILL MALLORY

## NON-CHRISTIAN FAITH IN SPORTS

Although the NCAA reports that the majority, about 75 percent, of student-athletes identify with a Christian religion, it's not just Christian athletes who thanks God for the big win at the end of game or race.

Tolerance in the United States for non-Christian faiths increasingly has gained a foothold in American society, but athletes say they have had to fight some battles when religious beliefs and practices sometimes conflict with religious holidays, days of worship and even clothing restrictions.

There have been some victories.

At the 2021 Olympic Games in Tokyo, it was reported that Muslims finally had access to prayer rooms in the athletic village and to a mobile mosque, which includes Arabic signage and outdoor water taps for pre-worship cleaning.

Ibtihaj Muhammad, a member of the U.S. fencing team, is the first Muslim

American woman to wear a headscarf (hijab) while competing for the United States in the Olympics. She and her teammates won bronze in the women's team Sabre competition in fencing at the 2016 Summer Olympics in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

Several renowned Muslim professional athletes, including Mike Tyson, Shaquille O'Neal, and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, helped pave the way for acceptance.

Muhammad Ali, a former three-time heavyweight title winner, converted to Islam upon receiving the Nation of Islam's disciplines in 1964. Ali's conversion to Islam was viewed to be controversial and led to several issues, including public scrutiny, refusal of serving in the Vietnam War, and a stripping of his heavyweight title.

But Ali did not stand alone in drawing attention to his non-Christian religious beliefs.

Sandy Koufax, a standout Jewish pitcher for the Los Angeles Dodgers, chose religion over sport in Game One of the 1965 World Series against the Minnesota Twins.

With Yom Kippur — the "holiest" day of the Jewish year — falling on the game's scheduling, Koufax decided not to play, instead in observance at a Minneapolis synagogue.

"A man is entitled his own belief and I believe I should not work on Yom Kippur," Koufax said.

Koufax became the youngest player inducted into the Hall of Fame in 1976 and is praised as one of the greatest pitchers in baseball history.

"Faith can help raise the score on game day and in life's outcomes," said Imam Abdul Hamid Samra, chaplain of UM's Muslim ministry.

"Faith gives you more strength, gives you more confidence in yourself and because you trust in a big power, so this is something to always help you be successful in anything including sport," Samra said. "No matter what, all religion should add something good, something positive, including students playing a sport."

Originally from Damascus, Syria, Samra migrated to the United States in 1986, and has been a UM professor in Electrical Engineering for 11 years. He became UM's first Muslim chaplain in 1988 after Muslim students lobbied for the position.

"Our Islamic faith encourage sports a lot and it had been said in our faith that when you have a sound body, you have a sound mind," Samra said.



GILBERT FRIERSON