

# SPORTS AND RELIGION INTERSECT AT THE SUPREME COURT

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Image of prayer in front of the United States Supreme Court building in Washington, D.C.

**Despite a number of** other important cases being decided, a controversial case about prayer on a high school football field took center stage for part of the 2022 Supreme Court term.

In [Kennedy v. Bremerton School District](#), the Supreme Court ruled by a 6-3 majority that Joseph Kennedy, a former high school football coach, had been unjustly suspended by a local school board in Washington state. The Bremerton school board had asked Kennedy to stop praying on the 50-yard line of his football field following games.

In a decision that significantly expands the role of religion in public life, the Supreme Court advances what scholars have called the “theistnormative” reign in United States culture. The ruling promotes Christianity as the “norm” while discrediting or concealing other religious beliefs and atheism. The case received widespread attention across political and [sports media](#), and the ruling demonstrates that sports continue to be a way for many Americans to make sense of larger social issues, such as discussions about free speech and the place of religion in public life.

[Beginning in 2008](#), Coach Joseph Kennedy of Bremerton High School regularly knelt to pray on the 50-yard line following football games. In what had started as a private practice, Kennedy soon found himself joined on the field by members of his team, and eventually the practice grew to include players from the opposing team, other coaches, and even spectators. One student [reported](#) feeling “compelled to participate” in the spectacle, as dozens of students knelt around Kennedy while he held a football helmet high and prayed after each game. Finally, the school board asked Kennedy to hold his prayers after students had left or in an alternate location.

In response, Kennedy went on a media blitz, including an appearance on [“Good Morning America”](#) where he declared he had made a “commitment with God.” Many in the media, particularly conservative and [Christian publications](#), painted Kennedy as a man being persecuted for his faith. The Bremerton School District argued that because Kennedy was acting in his capacity as a public high school coach, leading Christian prayers opened the school district to potential lawsuits regarding the “Establishment Clause” of the First

Amendment of the Constitution, which enshrines the separation of church and state. Eventually, his contract was not renewed, and Kennedy left his position. He sued the department for violating his freedom of speech and religion. The lower courts affirmed the school district's choice and ruled that the district was justified. The Supreme Court disagreed, with Justice Neil Gorsuch [writing for the majority](#) that the district's practices demonstrated "hostility to religion" and that they had been wrong to suspend the practice.

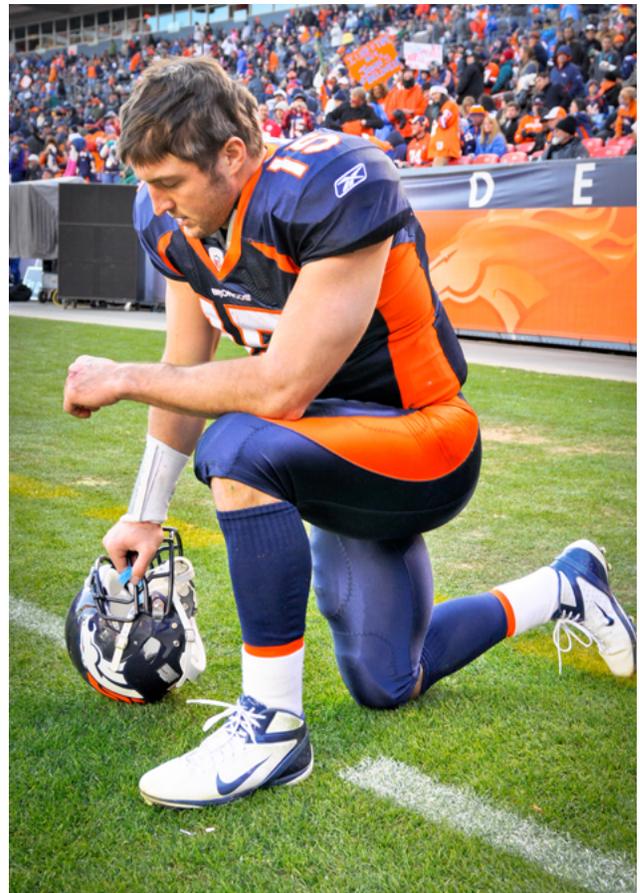
The world of sports is no stranger to overt religious displays, from individual athletes giving the sign of the cross or pointing heavenward after a big play, to the famous "[Tebowing](#)" gesture, and even church-sanctioned [faith nights](#) at various sporting events. While these are individual choices or privately sponsored events, the act of prayer by a public high school teacher with strong influence over his young players raises a distinct issue.

By deciding in Kennedy's favor, the Supreme Court advances the notion of theistnormativist legislation, which scholar Kristina Lee [defines as](#) "government-endorsed policies, rituals, and symbols that encourage people to view themselves as a theistic collective." Justice Gorsuch's consistent characterization of Kennedy's prayers as "private," despite the public spectacle, advances theistnormative legislation through the Court. As Lee suggests, "when strategically employed, [theistnormative legislation] can simultaneously be framed as inclusive of most theistic religions while also being presented as specifically Christian." Indeed, many celebrated Kennedy's prayers and viewed the decision as advancing religious freedom. But we can easily imagine that if a Muslim coach had set up a prayer mat, faced Mecca, and offered the Salah from the football field, the response would not have been as positive.

As [critical scholars of sports](#) have long suggested, sports are constitutive of value systems and serve as "ritual performances of identity." Sports tell us who we are and affirm that identity over and over. The specific



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Ed Clemente Photography/Wikimedia Commons

Tim Tebow "Tebowing" at an NFL game in 2012

attention paid to Kennedy v. Bremerton School District shows us that one of those values is a collective Christian identity, one that not all Americans actually belong to but which continues to be endorsed and reinforced as the norm. American sports at all levels exhibit theistnormativity, the subtly but persistently coercive push toward Christianity.

Finally, sports help us make sense of the world. Complex debates about freedom of speech or the place of religion in public life are common; in fact, the Supreme Court decided cases involving the right to [religious practice on death row](#) and [funding for religious schools](#) in the same term. However, the case involving the high school football coach warrants attention because the complexities are presented in a familiar setting with characters we can picture in small towns across the United States. Regardless of how one feels about the decision in Kennedy v. Bremerton School District, it shows us the continued and intimate relationship between sports and religion and reemphasizes the role of sports in public life as a way of seeing and understanding broader social issues. ■

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