

Christian faith unites opposing Super Bowl coaches

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MIAMI (ABP)—While much has been made about NFL head coaches Tony Dungy's and Lovie Smith's skin color, they've got a stronger bond than being the first African-American head coaches to lead their teams to the Super Bowl.

The bond of their common Christian faith is becoming increasingly evident as media scrutiny intensifies surrounding the nation's highest-profile sporting event.

"The Lord set this up in a way that no one would believe it," Dungy told reporters after his Indianapolis Colts beat the New England Patriots to qualify for Super Bowl XLI. "The Lord tested us a lot this year, but he set this up to get all the glory."

Smith has also long credited God with directing his life, even before his Chicago Bears enjoyed much success. Back in 2004, Smith said he had no complaints about his life, despite growing up in a small East Texas town with an alcoholic father.

“I don’t have a lot of complaints about what’s happened to me,” he told NFL.com. “I know I’ve been blessed. I’m a God-fearing man who knows that God has a plan for me. And every day getting a little closer to that ultimate plan.”

For Dungy, despite his athletic success as a player and a coach, the 51-year-old once considered leaving coaching to work in prison ministry. He is known—unlike most professional football coaches—for never swearing at players. He regularly attended Bible studies at Idlewild Baptist Church in Tampa, Fla., when he served as coach of the Tampa Bay Buccaneers.

Jeffrey Singletary, a pastor at Idlewild, prays on the phone with Dungy before every game. While the congregation is not planning any corporate event for watching Sunday’s game, Singletary said various families will hold parties of their own.

Singletary, who occasionally served as chaplain for the Bucs under Dungy, described the coach as “very intellectual, quiet, and strong.”

Singletary will be in Miami to watch the Feb. 4 Super Bowl. The Friday before, he plans to meet with Dungy to pray and prepare for the game.

“After the game with the Patriots, Tony said that God did it in such a way that he could get the glory,” Singletary said. “That’s our prayer—that God would be glorified. That God would be honored. That he would do it in such a way that only (God) can get the glory.”

Singletary added that he and Dungy always pray for protection for the players and “at the end of the game, that everybody walks away healthy and safe.”

This game has been a long time coming for both teams. The Colts, then located in Baltimore, last won the Super Bowl in 1971. The Bears last won it in 1986. Prior to the current season, neither had played in a conference

championship since then.

This year, the Bears finished the season with a 13-3 record. Smith led them to a 39-14 victory against the New Orleans Saints in the Jan. 21 NFC Championship game. That same day, the Colts defeated the Patriots 38-34 to become AFC champions. After trailing 21-3, the Colts won in the largest comeback in the history of NFL conference championships.

Since their move north, the Dungy family has attended Northside New Era Missionary Baptist Church in Indianapolis. While church leaders don't have any particular events planned for the big day, member Michelle Kirk said large groups of church members have planned to get together to watch the game.

"It feels great. We're all excited," she said. "We haven't done any special prayers for him in church, and we're just going to have a normal service on that Sunday, but we've been praying a lot on our own."

Born in Jackson, Mich., to parents who were educators, Dungy played football for the University of Minnesota, the Pittsburgh Steelers and San Francisco 49ers. He then coached as an assistant with the Steelers, Kansas City Chiefs and Minnesota Vikings. He became head coach at Tampa Bay in 1995 and the Colts' head coach in 2002.

Despite his commitment to football, Dungy continues to maintain strong family ties. He and his wife, Lauren, have two daughters and three sons. One of those sons, 18-year-old James, struggled with depression and committed suicide in 2005. Northside New Era handled funeral donations for James Dungy on behalf of the Colts. The memorial service was held at Idlewild.

Dungy spoke about God's love at an Athletes in Action meeting just weeks after his son's death. He also worked as a speaker for the Fellowship of Christian Athletes and supported charities like Brothers/Big Sisters, Boys

and Girls Club, the Prison Crusade Ministry, foster parenting organizations and Family First.

Smith, 48, grew up attending Brown's Chapel C.M.E. Church, a small Methodist congregation in Big Sandy. The tiny building Smith knew decades ago has since been replaced with a brick sanctuary—largely paid for by Smith's donations.

On Feb. 4, the local Church of God is planning a free chili feed, complete with a big projector screen, to celebrate the game. They'll have room for 1,000 people to watch —roughly the number of people who lived in Big Sandy during Smith's childhood. It isn't much bigger now.

Smith told the *New York Times* that much of his Christian upbringing came from his mother, who pushed the family to attend church and live with integrity.

"If I don't make it, it's going to be on me," Smith said his mom taught him. "It's not going to be about color or where I came from, how much money we had growing up. It's about what I wanted to do. There are no limits to what I can do."

Smith was the third of five children and was named after his great aunt Lavana. He attended the University of Tulsa where he was a two-time football All-American.

After college, Smith coached high school and then college football. He began his NFL career working as an assistant coach under Dungy and the Buccaneers. The Bears hired Smith as head coach in 2004.

Smith has said he focuses his coaching strategy on "being a teacher instead of screaming and yelling, all that stuff." Dungy taught him coaches don't have to belittle and intimidate players in order to win, he told the Associated Press.

“I could spend the rest of the day talking about Tony Dungy and what he means to me,” Smith said. “We have similar beliefs, and to see him through the storms and see he’s the same person is truly encouraging.”

As for some church members, the choice between two God-fearing coaches might be a tough one. Singletary said he’s sure some Idlewild members might secretly be rooting for the Bears. And Clarence Moore, senior pastor of Northside New Era, likened the decision to answering a question in elementary school.

“You want to raise your hand. Maybe somebody else has the answer, but you want to be the one,” he told the Indianapolis Star. “I think it is very appropriate. Let God decide who he wants to bless.”

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