When the Saints Go Marching In

February 7, 2010 By Regan Hofmann

Today is National Black HIV/AIDS Awareness Day...and it is Superbowl XLIV in Miami.

Sadly, the fanfare of the second is overshadowing awareness of the first.

There's a big hubbub among feminists, pro-choicers, pro-lifers and the Christian Right about the Pam and Tim Tebow pro-life "I'll never have an abortion" ad scheduled to run during the 'bowl.

There is talk about how having the Saints in the 'bowl is breaking down racial barriers, uniting people of all colors in The Big Easy.

There was heated discussion on "Face the Nation" this morning with the NFL commissioner about the issue of concussions and what the NFL was doing to study the short- and long- term impacts (pardon the pun) of having a line backer knock your lights out. (The answer: they're still "studying the issue and examining equipment and rule changes" ((like no "high hits" to wide receivers)). I'm gonna say it doesn't require a massive scientific study to prove that being repeatedly knocked unconscious isn't good for brain function. Do we always need empirical evidence of the obvious?)

There is a lot of chatter about the throngs of men in dresses. Last week, thousands of men in drag wiggled and preened through the streets of New Orleans in homage to former sportscaster Buddy Diliberto who once vowed to parade through the French Quarter in a dress if the Saints ever made it to the 'bowl. Check out former New Orleans Saints' quarterback Bobby Hebert...

And so on and so on.

Some pictures, from post-Katrina NOLA:



Is it just me, or is this year's Superbowl full of unusually great stories and spin? It is the networks' job to hype the sucker as much as possible so even people like me who typically avoid watching grown men in spandex tights body slam each other in a sport that is such a thinly veiled, modern-day version of Gladiatorhood that I normally can't watch, watch.

They got me. I am going to the local tavern and watching the whole spectacle unfurl in full color glory on their flat-screen plasma TV (because my TV at home is still 3-D. As in, the shape of the unit, not the effect of the image). I suppose by watching, I am only feeding the machine that manufactures things I don't like (like an irrepressible urge to have a cheeseburger despite its gastrointestinal perils…hey, but don't worry. You don't have to listen to your body's cries or adhere to common sense and the tenets of good health, you can just choke down a Pepcid AC and do what's bad for you anyway…and you won't feel any pain! No wonder the rest of the world wonders about American culture…we make pills to let us do comfortably what we know we shouldn't. How's that for self-indulgent, self-serving Capitalism?)

ANYWAY. While I am falling prey to Superbowl Sunday hype, I am lamenting the fact that we can't raise a similar level of hoopla around the issue of HIV/AIDS in America in general and in black America in particular.

Why can’t we have some really thought provoking ads about HIV/AIDS in the Superbowl? (Attention network heads: The media is a critical component of public health. Please run some AIDS awareness ads in remnant space all year long...and consider giving us a 30 second slot during next year’s ’bowl to save people’s lives. Yes, yes, there are a million valid health concerns we need to discuss with our nation, but none so widespread, deadly, hidden and misunderstood as AIDS. You like to hype underdogs? Hype HIV/AIDS awareness!)

Why can’t we openly discuss the racial disparities in our nation’s health care system that make it more difficult for people of certain colors to access the basic human right of access to lifesaving medication and care?

Why can’t we also discuss how football - and the leadership and idolatry it creates - could be leveraged to help educate America’s youth about sexual health? Give us one cool player from each team mentioning the need for safe sex...and maybe a cheerleader or ten...

And how about those men in dresses! There has to something we can do with thousands of straight men in feather boas and Joan Crawford-esque silk turbans!

I guess my point is, we have a way to get the nation’s attention. If only we could use that power to save lives and prevent people from getting HIV, to demolish the stigma around the disease and to encourage people to get tested and into care if they are positive...

So, please don’t tell me that we can’t do it. We can. We just need to employ the help of the mass media and perhaps professional sports. Winning the Superbowl would be an incredible coup for The Saints. A bigger one would be to win, and use their notoreity to save their brothers and sisters in need. And earn that name...the Saints...

I wanted to also share some pictures I took in New Orleans, one year after Katrina. I haven’t been back since because I was so disturbed at the lack of national attention to the problem. It has gotten better, I hear. But it will be a long time before the city is fully healed, even if the Saints win tonight and the burst of cash that must be coming into the city is well-appropriated. So, I post them as reminders that in the midst of celebration, we still have some very critical work to do to protect the people of our country, especially African-Americans who have been hardest hit by the economy--and AIDS.

It’s always a good time for the Saints to go marching in.

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