

Texans' Anderson and Al-Shaair built faith-based bond despite practicing different religions.

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HOUSTON (AP) — Houston Texans defensive end Will Anderson Jr. and linebacker Azeem Al-Shaair were brought together by football, but it is a relationship forged by faith.

Anderson, a Christian, and Al-Shaair, a Muslim, didn't let religious differences divide them. Instead, they leaned into their shared piety to build a bond through faith that has paid dividends both on and off the field.

"I'm a Christian through and through, but I also think it's very important to see how other people ... think and how they feel about certain things," Anderson said.

Added Al-Shaair: "I'm open about my faith and I use my faith and the things I've experienced in conversations with guys and the same for him. So, every time we talked we were always hitting on the same cylinder, like dang that's exactly how I feel ... so, I feel like it just worked out perfectly."

Before they lead the Texans' top-ranked defence into the postseason against the Steelers on Monday night, these captains will find a quiet place away from the game-day chaos for a private talk to centre themselves and discuss their faith. Anderson, who was named a first-team AP All-Pro on Saturday, and Al-Shaair, a first-time Pro Bowler who leads the team with 103 tackles, aim to help Houston get its first road playoff win.

Anderson said Al-Shaair has given him a boost from the moment he arrived in Houston before last season. Those pregame chats, though, might mean the most.

"I could truly say our talks before the game really help me," Anderson said. "We try not to miss that talk before the game and that really helps both of us just get in that mindset and both of us really just (knowing) what we're doing it for, why we're doing it, and everything like that."

Though there are fundamental differences in their religions, they both have values they feel are universal.

“Although Azeez is a Muslim and I’m Christian, we share a lot of the same similarities with our faith and our morals and beliefs,” Anderson said. “Talking to Azeez ... it’s kind of the comparison, but it also leads back to just being a moral person ... and having great values, and I think the biggest thing that we talk about is how we treat others.”

They also exchange stories of faith working in their lives and confide in each other with personal doubts and worries related to the physical game they play.

“Just (about) trusting God, believing in God and knowing it’s God’s timing and really just being there for each other,” Anderson said. “Whether it’s a story from the Quran or a story from the Bible, it really doesn’t matter because we’re both sharing our faith and we both know who we believe in, which is God.”

The pair have grown so close that Al-Shaair says it sometimes feels like they’re the same person. On the day both were selected to the Pro Bowl this season, in separate interviews both players noted that the honour meant more because they shared it and each mentioned their faith-based relationship.

“But that’s just how me and him have always been since we’ve met each other,” Al-Shaair said. “It’s like we’re literally just kind of in each other’s brains.”

As a Muslim, growing up mostly in Florida, Al-Shaair has had relationships with Christians his entire life. The opposite isn’t true for Anderson, who was raised Baptist in suburban Atlanta.

“Oh no, no, no, I didn’t know any Muslims growing up,” Anderson said with a laugh.

Anderson said he didn’t even meet a Muslim until he trained with current Titans linebacker Ali Gaye while preparing for the combine. He isn’t sure why some people are so reticent with those who don’t share their beliefs, but he has found it illuminating.

Al-Shaair appreciates that Anderson has worked to understand his religion, especially since he’s dealt with many throughout his life who have made no effort to do so.

“That’s just been the coolest thing,” he said. “When you talk about faith it’s almost funny because I tell people there’s a lot of Muslims that know a lot about Bible and not really a lot of Christians that know anything about Islam other than all the Islamophobic ... propaganda stuff and things like that. People don’t actually understand.”

Though he had plenty of relationships with Christians before building the one with Anderson, he believes their religious discussions have enriched his faith.

“In Islam, it’s actually encouraged to learn about other religions, other faiths, so it should reinforce your belief in your own, where I feel that’s just not always the case,” Al-Shaair said. “That’s been the cool part with me and him, is we’ve been able to kind of piggyback and bounce off the knowledge of both faiths. It’s been very transparent and open. We’ve both learned a lot from each other because of that.”

They’ve also been there for each other through difficult times, particularly last season when Al-Shaair was suspended three games for an illegal hit on Jacksonville quarterback Trevor Lawrence. In the wake of the hit, Al-Shaair dealt with racist and Islamophobic online abuse that coupled with the suspension put him in what he called a “really dark place.”

Anderson witnessed Al-Shaair leaning heavily on his faith during that time and revels at how much things have changed for his friend since that tough chapter.

“In religion and faith and everything like that, it always comes with pain and suffering,” Anderson said. “And that’s when I say God literally gets the final word because the world can persecute you, the world can say all this stuff about you and look where God has brought him this year.”

Along with being named to his first Pro Bowl and leading the team in tackles, Al-Shaair was named Houston’s Walter Payton Man of the Year award winner this season. He almost can’t believe how far he’s come from last season, when he wasn’t sure if he’d ever play football again. He credits his faith for the turnaround.

“It’s been the No. 1 thing to why I was able to get over the hump and go through all that adversity and still be able to come out on the other side,” he said. “Not just come out on

the other side but flourish. I'm better now than I was even before all that stuff even happened and I think that's the biggest blessing."

And at a time of increased divisiveness in this country, these 20-something-year-old football players wish more people would see things the way they do.

"If you just have compassion and are able to not be so stuck in your own head and your own mindset, and ... just open up your heart, you'll realize, like, wow OK, that makes sense, we're a lot more similar than we are different," Al-Shaair said. "And it just makes everything a lot better for everybody."

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