

It's Not Just a Ballgame Anymore (Preview)

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Introduction

By the fall of 2006, I had already spent a year and a half of my life without the comforting words of Hunter S. Thompson, and I was obviously feeling the pain. We were two years deep into the despair that set in after George W. Bush was elected for the second (first) time, just a year out from Katrina, and more mired in the Middle Eastern conflicts than we'd ever been.

On the upside, the Buffalo Sabres were about to embark on one of the most exciting seasons in their history, the Mets were looking good, and the football season—well, the football season was sinking into unprecedented violence, but that was nothing new. I had a cushy corporate job in an air-conditioned office, my custody situation had settled to the point where I could enjoy my two young sons without worrying too much about being stalked by crazy ex-in-laws, and just that August my girlfriend and I were married in an intimate setting at a shady bed and breakfast in a little village near the Susquehanna River. Things were looking up. I had even started writing again.

And maybe that was my mistake.

You don't have to look any further for an all-American example of superstition and almost making it than Buffalo, NY, where I was born, went to college, and began my career. Straddling both sides of my college graduation were the Bills' four straight Super Bowl losses, which were memorable not just for how they affected by fan-personality, but for how they became a naggingly fatalistic companion for my late educational and early professional accomplishments.

Meanwhile, the hockey team was mired in mediocrity. I was too young to remember the 1975 Finals loss to the Flyers, but I rooted for the Sabres every season for just as long I could, and back then it wasn't a complete failure to make it to the second or third round of the playoffs. They certainly weren't teasing us like the Bills were, which made it a little more bearable.

Then came 1999. It was enough to make us forget about the half-assed best of times of the previous twenty years, even the ones that did make us proud. But 1999 was different—they were going far. They even opened the Finals series against the Dallas Stars with a road victory, which is supposed to be a good sign.

And after four games, the series was tied—great news for a scrappy blue-collar team with the best goalie in the world.

But then it happened, just like it happened when the Bills went wide right against the Giants, except this was worse.

Three overtimes into Game 6 on Buffalo ice, Stars forward Brett Hull placed his skate inside the goal crease and then shot the puck into the net, which was as categorically illegal a goal as the NHL had at the time. The two-word mantra that came next, "No Goal," is the only justice that remains from that night, but bumper stickers and whining don't put the Stanley Cup in your hands.

It had been a reckless ride as a Buffalo sports fan. I can't explain it, other than it's there, just like most of my family is still there, just like the next few years in American history are still there—they happened, and we have to live with them, and there's nothing we can do about it now.

On October 9, 2006, an earthquake was detected in southeast Asia that was actually North Korea's first nuclear test, and the Sabres were three games into a ten-game undefeated stretch to open a brand-new season that promised to be even more exciting than the year they lost the Cup without surrendering a series-winning goal. I watched nearly every minute of it, but I wrote about it less frequently because I afraid to jinx up the works. But as the season became the playoffs and the playoffs grew more tense and exciting, and as we almost started to taste it, I couldn't help myself. The thought that it could have

been my writing that finally caused them to lose again is the kind of superstition Buffalo fans don't unlearn easily, even well after we've thrown all our saints and crosses out in the trash.

I don't know when redemption will come for Buffalo fans. It's no consolation to remind naysayers that the Bills won the last two AFL titles, just before the merger. There was plenty of cheering in Western New York when Buffalo native Patrick Kane scored in OT to win the Cup for the Chicago Blackhawks in 2010, but that was no consolation, either—it merely confirmed that you had to leave town before you could make it.

This is a road diary of sorts—scribblings of scenes and ideas, and the ill-conceived but sometimes prescient revelations of a writer who happens to be a huge Sabres fan but who was so far from home that the only remaining connection was on the page, and whose mutually rewarding relationship with his homeland was also becoming more tenuous with every headline. Because amidst the sad and unnatural death of the Bush administration, the anguish after the Sabres' fall from grace came just as this country was preparing its one shot to grab control of the swirling wreckage. And we failed at that, too.

But there's always hope, as long as there's another game to play. And, even as the helicopters loom, and the poor become poorer and keep dying in our streets, and Congress keeps cashing its payroll checks from Wall Street, it's not over until you hear the whistles. I've seen enough Holocaust films to know that that's when you're really fucked, and we're not there yet. The evil empire may keep stepping over the line, slashing our ankles and humming high-velocity projectiles at our heads, but even the Red Sox won eventually, and so will we.

The NFL in the Super-Unknown

September 27, 2006

It had been a wild, smoky night, and there were rumors about a chicken-pig running loose through backyard porches, bathing in swimming pools, and engaging in cannibalism, and worse. I rolled out of bed around noon, with just enough time to have some cereal and orange juice before passing back out on the couch in front of the very start of the Redskins-Texans game.

When I woke, late in the afternoon, I couldn't remember which year it was. Despite finishing the bottom of the Bacardi bottle and sucking several hits from my pipe, things were not coming together. The television was still on, but it started to move, making it clear that it wanted to devour me—the chicken-pigs weren't the only cannibals in my midst.

This is a strange time for football. Still too warm. Simply not enough weather. By the time I woke up the Browns-Ravens game was on. Cleveland and Baltimore—that schizophrenic matchup. Everything is strange in Ohio. The field was rugged—patches of white dominated the scene, with memories of voting locations being bribed into submission. The toughness of the NFL has nothing to do with the NFC anymore, or with John Madden or the Dallas Cowboys or the New York Giants and those old late afternoon CBS games, with all that hitting and all those bloody faces, uniforms smeared with blood, helmets adorned with pieces of real grass and dirt, tape wrapped sloppily over crooked knuckles, eyes running sweaty through black paint.

These days, everything tough about football takes place in the AFC, like the Ravens and the Browns, both strange expansion teams themselves, linked to one another by history and the greedy confusion of these late days in the NFL.

I have to say, though, that I did see this coming. Ten years ago it was clear that the future of smash-mouth football was in the hands of the up and coming running backs on AFC rosters—Edgerrin James, Jamal Lewis, Curtis Martin, Terrell Davis, Jerome Bettis—and these guys weren't flashes, they were rugged and immovable, carrying tons of inertia with them all down the line. And it's from the bodies of the running backs that the toughness of professional football claws and groans its way onto the field.

But I'm still trying to figure out if the games are more exciting now than they used to be, or less. Parity is a fact, not a theory, unless you're a creationist and your spiritual comfort depends upon insisting things always have been the way they are now. But we've got no time for ideology around here (or idiology, for that matter). Games are certainly more up for grabs than they've ever been, increasingly so each year. Even Chicago almost lost yesterday, despite the fact that Rex Grossman tried to evolve into Joe Montana during the offseason.

There are more false scientists paying attention to football these days. We're only two games into a brand-new season, with the Steelers finally again defending a Super Bowl title—shades of old—and the geniuses have already written off every 0-2 team and branded every 2-0 team champions. Somehow in this age of supreme parity and the ultimate gambler's nightmare, we are even quicker to declare victory or defeat. Our analysts are so intent on gaining an audience that they make their predictions ever more firm, clinging to rhetoric with a confidence they seem to have wrestled free from its own history.

Football has often paralleled society at large. Now, with invented terror alerts framing real foreign and domestic threats, with life from today to tomorrow ever more fragile and slippery, our news organizations are increasingly bent on force-feeding us the arrogant nonsense of prettily combed morons garnished by little more than talking points and hyper-vigilant clips of graphic news bites.

But these aren't the good old days anymore. There is one truth coming from the otherwise useless media outlets: Things are different now. These are strange days.

The Cold War was unfair and frightening, but it was stable. Aside from a few mishaps, we as Americans were never really much in danger of anything. Our childhood fears were common, ordinary. Our adult fears were minimal, defined primarily by some vague economic worry. And our football was, despite being viewed in real time, straight from NFL Films. The hitting was square, the long passes sometimes wobbly but always on target, just over the shoulder and just over the heads of skilled defenders, the penalties were regular, and the referees' decisions were clean and unchallenged.

Now, we have multi-millionaires regularly dropping passes, simple blocks being called holds, and touchdowns, receptions and fumbles constantly being overturned by the replay booth.

And we have our most powerful politicians making regular, intentional mistakes or misleading statements about an insanely complex world, detailed and completely flawed and over-simplified—black and white, good and evil, in or out. As if nothing's on the line anymore.

It won't be long before we have to pay extra cash to the television providers for anything like a broad selection of news sources. As it stands, the corporate greed of the NFL means we're forced to watch only what they give us. We're lucky now to get two games on Sunday afternoon, in addition to the underwhelming selection of national night games. News broadcasts are bad, but not quite that bad, yet. When satellite television debuted, lucky owners of ugly front-yard dishes could get most of the football games each week just by aiming in the right skyward direction. But money got ahold of that, too. Now we have to pay the television companies serious cash before they'll flip the switch that delivers more than three games a week.

God help us once we have to pay extra for all the news channels to be on at the same time. It's already happening on the internet.

Thankfully we can all be fans of patriots, even now. We're rooting for the United States to beat Iraq as if it were a World Cup soccer game—fairly competitive, with the underdog pressing hard and dragging things out, much to our dismay, but we're only half interested in the game in the first place, and even less interested in the whole idea of the thing.

The signs are obvious. We're barely swinging in the breeze, hanging by less than a lace. There are no more heroes on either stage. On nearly any stage, anywhere, for that matter.

Not that we still don't worship them—just don't remind us that it costs money to put them on the field. Don't even suggest that our football players should be covered in anything but apparel logos—there shall be no extraneous advertising on our sacred jerseys, thank you very much, unlike those socialist soccer teams.

But our entire government could—for all the cash it gets, in fact, basically should—be wearing enormous logos of Exxon and BP and GM. From the soles of Italian leather shoes to the flagpole hoisting the ol' red white and blue, everything has been bought by corporations. But those corporations, not to mention the government itself, wants to keep those alliances as quiet as possible.

It's much more gauche, of course, to suggest that professional drug users and masochists in tight pants brag too hard about their cooperation with sneaker companies or the manufacturers of a sports drink drenched in food coloring.

And we want to avoid gauche.

We can't have any impropriety in such a fragile environment. Avoid rape, murder, drug use and reckless driving at all costs. People are watching, after all—watching and making judgments involving life and death, history and fate.

The only thing left worthy of debate is who became a parody of himself first: John Madden or George Bush?

The drug storm

October 2, 2006

The storm was on its way as I exited the car, and I felt that sudden hush in the air as if I was living in a country where everyone was ready to run.

We're always ready to run—we have to be. This is what it's like living in a nation that is not free. Get used to it. Soon, in order to survive, we're going to have to be able to run and jump as well as Terrell Owens and Shaun Alexander. What King George is preparing for, just as a heads up, are those open field hits on receivers over the middle. He's got his best men dressed from head to toe in executive order protection from investigations or even second-guessing, and those guys are ready and waiting for runners like you to dash into their zones, with your eyes set firmly on the ball. And, whether you catch it or not, they're going to take your fucking heads off. Talk about pain and depression.

From my car I crossed the parking lot to the pharmacy. Everyone has their drug dealer of choice. Mine is the CVS.

One of the most commonly prescribed drugs these days are SSRIs. Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors. These are for combating depression, angst, the pain of life. They prevent your brain from diverting some of its natural serotonin, so you are more likely to feel happy on a more regular basis. They are all basically the same, but they work in different ways, selectively this or selectively that, more this or that, with fewer or more side effects.

Even the FCC-approved television commercials will tell you that one of the most common side effects for most SSRIs has to do with sexual performance. You either don't want it, can't have it, or don't feel a damn thing when you do. There are plenty of drugs to deal with that, as well, unless you are lucky enough to be taking one of the few new anti-depressants with a markedly lower risk of libido-numbing side effects. There are commercials for sexual appetite and performance medications, too. You've seen them all. There are no more jokes we can make about them, though, unless your tolerance for repetition has been lowered by imbibing in what doctors and politicians like to call "illicit" drugs.

The problem with illicit drugs is that, because they rarely come in pill form, you've got to pass them in some raw state through a part of your body not necessarily meant to come into contact with things like that. Needles in arms, powder up noses, smoke into lungs, etc. If they did come in pill form, most of the seriously harmful side effects, other than what doctors like to call "euphoria," would be completely eliminated.

But they're really all the same, and it pays to figure out how to use the best of each. That can be dangerous, especially since the bag passed through your car window doesn't come with warning labels. Fortunately, in most cases, by using a little common sense along with the underused but still common sense of adventure, and some moderation in experimentation, a user can figure out how best to mix things. Soma, when combined with Vicodin, high doses of caffeine, and a few puffs of weed, for example, can really take you places, but I don't advise it, because that would be reckless.

The sky looked bad. Tornadoes south and east. Lightning flashing into thunder all around. People moved slowly through the parking lot, stuffing bags into their trunks. Aside from the thunder, there was no sound at all. Overhead, a helicopter I couldn't see, or two or three. You never know what you're going to catch out of the corner of your eye. Sometimes it's better to not turn your head. Sometimes tunnel vision is a blessing.

Aside from depression and sexual problems, the most commonly prescribed medications are painkillers. I've felt so good with my back sometimes, after I've dosed things up a bit, that it's easy to believe God sent an angel down to push me into the next big adventure, tackling it head on. Between

the dizziness of pain and the euphoria of hydrocodone, it's easy to want to go back into the bottle a bit too early. They type so many things on those fucking labels, it's impossible to fathom that they could have left anything out.

But if you take too much hydrocodone, it's not the opiates that get to you. It's not the nectar of God's sweet flower that will do you in, evil as the politicians make the poppy out to be. It's the overdose of acetaminophen. The same thing will happen if you dribble too many Exedrine into your mouth on a bad head day. And if you're ever feeling down, the happiness rendered strong as a side effect of God's happy gift can really make you want some more, so the occasional slip-up can be tempting.

This fucking war on drugs. This war on steroids. They want us to think that all the bad things that can happen to us can be legislated out by heavy-handed moralists with selfish interests and a fear of the exciting. They want us to think that everything they say is true. That between the doctors and the pharmacists, following the rule of law, things which are legal are also safe.

And that things that are not legal are not safe at all.

But with lies like that, is Terrell Owens really the one who is so hard to believe?

Did Shaun Alexander really not receive a message from God about his foot?

After all, when is the last time you saw your national politicians hitched to the truth wagon? All they have to do to prove you wrong is look surprised when you challenge them in public.

It's easy for your favorite athlete to act shocked when confronted with accusations that he tried to commit suicide, took steroids, or tried on women's underwear. Because if there is no proof, there will never be any. You can't go back ten years and administer a drug test, and unless someone was snapping pictures, or can go back in time to assess the state of mind at the point of overdose, we'll never know the truth.

This fighting over truth and justice and the trustworthiness of our favorite athletes, each of whom, at any time, might be stupid enough to step on the head of an opponent anyway, is sort of like insisting that none of us is human, that none of us can do any wrong, which is nonsense.

There had better be gambling and drugs in heaven, or I don't want any part of it.

The rain sent a flooding rush over the street from the shallow creek by the playground. I don't know who to trust on a night like this. The radio has bad weather reports and tragic news from overseas. We're melting into the bad parts of all the world, and all the world is melting into me, and I never felt so alive, and it feels a lot like a night to get really stoned and watch some football, in the privacy and safety of my own home.

Return to the scene of the crime

October 4, 2006

It's been another horrible week in the land of the no longer free and the home of the cautiously brave. We've been force-fed a steady diet of pain and suffering for the past several days. It's a never-ending stream of unbelievable nonsense coming through the airwaves and broadband connections.

How much are we supposed to believe? The head stomper is sorry. Condi Rice forgot a meeting telling her that the U.S. was about to be attacked. It's just the milk man knocking, let him in. We could learn a lesson or two from the Amish we're so quick to ridicule. The same day they were asking mental health professionals at nearby Lancaster County fire departments about what to do if their kids are scared to go back to school in the morning, amidst the blood-stained floors and memories, they were also asking what they could do to help the family of the murdering shit who killed the rest of their children.

Everyone who is truly guilty gets off by saying they're sorry and the rest of them are forgiven by a bunch of backward, buggy-driving horse huggers who don't believe in evolution or electricity. If this doesn't prove to you that things are upside down, then you're out of luck. Go bury yourself in the gossip pages.

Terrell Owens is going back to Philadelphia. Mark Foley will someday have to sneak back into Florida. But don't be frightened of that—all his neighbors will be informed. Condi Rice didn't seem to have a problem returning to New York City. George Bush still hasn't left the scene of the crime. Not yet, anyway.

But it's not all fun and games. If you're not careful, they could come for you in the middle of the night and send you to a place like Texas, where teaching high schoolers about censorship with books using words like "damn" and "hell" will get your prof sent to Gitmo for an eternity of watching fixed professional basketball games without any medication whatsoever. And at Gitmo, they don't have floaties in the pools.

Now is the time to enjoy the fun and games. There is no turning back. The undefeated teams are now for real. The teams who still don't have a quarterback are officially in the tank. Grooves have been dug, the scripts have all been started. The gun in Scene One is history now, just something to keep in the back of your mind for future revelations that you should have been expecting. The early-season jitters are over, and it's time for things to settle down and settle in.

It's time for the U.S. to become a rogue nation

October 9, 2006

Things haven't been working out lately. My lawn mower completely crapped out, and after sinking about fifty bucks of parts into it over the past few weeks, I'm left with a rusty piece of shit sitting in my back yard and a quarter acre of knee-high grass soaking up the sun. Crickets and ticks unite!

Some of my football picks didn't work out yesterday, but a slim majority pulled through, keeping me in the black. It's still early enough to come out ahead.

But if you were betting on diplomatic solutions to mentally disturbed dictators, you're not doing well. It might be time to make another run to the ATM.

For 40 years, we were able to hold our own and even outlive the daily worries of having hundreds of ICBMs aimed at our factories, schools and houses of government. Today, everyone is all in a tither about how to handle a medium earthquake, simply because it was caused by a crazy person with designs on global dominance.

Conveniently, we ignore the manmade climate disasters slowly descending on the citizens of the world, not to mention the panicking penguins and sexually frustrated polar bears at either end.

The Bush administration doesn't know what to do with North Korea because, finally, they have an enemy not of their making. We trained Osama Bin Laden, we herded Saddam Hussein, and the Israelis know more than W wants you to believe about the Palestinians. Things have been lining up nicely for corporate America. We follow the rules as they apply to us, and quietly abandon them when things need a little tweaking.

If corporate America really had the best interests of humanity somewhere even in the backs of their minds, and if they were adult enough to admit they are running our country, we'd be able to find a quick solution to our problems. That we don't have a fix yet for Mr. Shorty Pants is simply because we haven't found one that will turn a profit.

So, we might as well line up our bombers and stealth aircraft, get the Pentagon working on super-secret methods of payload dispersal, and hold nothing back.

It's time to teach the world a lesson.

It's time to use the endless resources of America to defend our country against insane individuals for the long-term good and short-term survival of the human race.

Faced with this quick onslaught, devised as a sneak attack on the northern Korean peninsula, Mr. Shorty Pants will be rendered useless, and the nations of the world will come together, in line with America and freedom and snacks, where they should be.

That's right, ladies and gentlemen, the airborne payload of the world's mightiest superpower must be, in no uncertain terms, food and water.

Military rations, rice and water purification tablets, dropped en masse to the starving people of North Korea, is the only proper way to respond to the threat of a new nuclear nation. If you like, we can even acknowledge having learned an Amish lesson. If not, simply pump up the press releases. Whoever wants to take credit is fine with me. Let big business donate granola bars and fruit roll-ups, should they be so kind. Uncle Ben can get involved if he thinks it will improve domestic sales.

And it must be a sneak attack in order to avoid having the North Korean army steal everything for their own kids.

Sure, we might lose a few good men. It shouldn't be unexpected that some of our aircraft will be shot down, but that is the price of war.

Not just a ball game anymore

October 11, 2006

The only thing worse than listening to Frank deFord deliver sports commentary is eating two Klono pins and still having to deal with the demon tap-dancing on my chest in the middle of the night.

It's not about sports. The Sabres are 3-0 and peering high over the mighty Ottawa Senators in the standings. The Bills can't be the worst team in football as long as the San Andreas doesn't drop the left end of California into the ocean. We're in the juicy heart of the football season, where there are more hopes than dreams, and more contenders than failures, and even the failures have backup quarterbacks for the second half. Even the Mets are playing well, and if the team of destiny this year is the Detroit Tigers, the Mets might be in good shape come Halloween.

Sure, corporate conglomerates are eating their prey, chased only by the occasional speedy red ghost of Google. The last time I was in a courtroom, I actually came out on top, and my wife still looks great at 3 a.m. when one of the boys vomits up his ice cream and we need to change the sheets.

Speaking of the boys, we're finally starting to score goals in the U6 league, and we're playing it clean, unlike the bastards on the Green Team throwing elbows and tackling.

It's no wonder the demon hasn't broken camp yet. Everyone's getting marginalized now. Even the bad boys are beginning to smell the real dangers out there. Even the fat republicans and the evil cohorts of superpower mega-corporations are crying for justice.

That's when you know it's bad. That's when the demon brings out the iron stakes and steel-toed boots.

It was only a matter of time before we got to this point. You can't push everyone out the door who walks in your office without eventually pushing everyone out of your life. You can seek to marginalize your enemies, like we've marginalized the poor, the dark and the strange, but it's a heavily guarded road that takes you in that direction. There is no entrance. There are no new partners in crime, and eventually everyone is marginalized, and then what happens? There is a point when the quantity of people you oppose necessarily outnumbers the digits of your own horde, and while it's not a one-to-one comparison (you can fight a billion people with a million bucks), eventually the lives will weigh you down. Because people fuck each other at a much higher rate than the Fed can deal with, and interest is slow to catch up to the maternity wards.

Actually, if the San Andreas fault doesn't give out due to the Earth's mechanical fussiness, it will inevitably happen anyway, due simply to the weight of humanity. Global warming is a real threat now. We might actually blow this shit up from the inside instead of waiting for the sun to burn us off. Even the morons are starting to realize that you can't contain a maniac, you can't fix crazy, you can't save all the children, and even Jesse James got shot in the back.

It's time for us to be led by someone with brains bigger than his wife tells him his balls are. It's time for regime change. It's time to recoup our losses, so to speak. And I think you know what I mean.

In the meantime, I'm not making anymore football predictions. I'm too close, emotionally, to the situation. In football, I'm sticking to fandom.

In life, however, I'm going to play. And use my elbows. And tackle and gouge.

It's now or never.

Force of grace

October 16, 2006

It may be time for me to fiddle with the rankings of my favorite sports. I don't go into this proposition lightly.

After the most recent baseball strike, I abandoned the game. It didn't mean anything to me anymore. Overpaid athletes arguing with monopolistic owners about the kind of money no real fan will probably ever see. I turned off the news when the baseball coverage came on. I didn't follow any teams, any players, any games.

Then I got sucked into the steroid wars of Mark McGuire and Sammy Sosa. That was a fun summer, and by the end of it I was a baseball fan again. Leave it to a couple of monstrous addicts to tear down my personal boycott of the MLB.

Meanwhile, football was falling through the sky. After a decade of relative success in Buffalo, the Bills were sinking fast. They still haven't come out of the dive they began back in the late 90s on the day Jim Kelly retired. I cried that day. Everyone stopped working to watch the press conference, everyone in the city and the 30-mile radius or 35-year memory that constitutes Bills Country. A lot of people cried that day, and we felt a little silly about it. Although if we had we known where the team would be in 2006, giving the Lions their first win of the season, we would have cried a little harder, and not felt silly at all.

It hasn't been easy being a Syracuse football fan, either. At least the Orange roundballers have done us well. They came through on the NCAA Championship in fine fashion, they gave Carmelo Anthony to the NBA, and they gave northern Pennsylvania something to cheer about for four straight years in Gerry McNamara, which is a very big deal. People in northern Pennsylvania don't usually have much to cheer about.

I spent much of my early adult life at Rich Stadium, getting completely blasted in the parking lot, going nuts in the stands, watching the K-gun offense shred disoriented defenses, in the heat, in the snow, in the rain. I saw the Bills beat Joe Montana, Dan Marino and John Elway. Football reigned while baseball waned.

Of course, hockey has always been there for me. The Sabres played some great games and, through the 80s and 90s, I followed their rivalries with the Bruins, Canadiens and Capitols. The rivalries have changed. Now I get more riled up for games against Dallas and New Jersey and Ottawa, but that's a good sign—those are better teams. The Sabres, and hockey in general, have increased in value tenfold in the past 10 years, despite the lockout. And hockey—Sabres and lockouts and favorite teams aside—has one thing baseball and football will never have—the Stanley Cup: the most coveted trophy in American sports. The Cup speaks of tradition, honor, dedication and endurance.

On Saturday night, in the afterglow of the first comfortable victory in the Sabres' so-far perfect season, football fell crashing to the ground. You can't spell "thugs" without da "U." Florida International and the University of Miami took idiocy to a level not seen on the national news since Abu Ghraib. In the middle of the game, a fight broke out. Players were swinging crutches, helmets, possibly toddlers. They were stomping on one another, and the color commentator for the game, a U grad, was singing the praises of the fight like a drunken George Bush must have been howling about the humiliations of his prisoners captured on film.

And then, on Sunday, the Bills lost to the Lions.

On my way home from picking up a package Sunday night, I listened on the car radio to the Bob Costas radio show, which I didn't even know existed, and a repeat interview with the writer of a recent

Roberto Clemente biography. It had to have been a repeat—Bob Costas wouldn't be doing a live radio broadcast during the first hour of Game 3 of the National League Championship Series.

Roberto Clemente was baseball's last hero, according to the author. I agreed easily. He's one of my personal heroes as well. His grace on the field and his stature off the field are not seen anymore, not much.

After I got home, I watched the Mets-Cards game. Before I knew it, the sports world according to me completed its topple. Jose Reyes of the New York Mets simply blew my mind. With Scott Spiezio on first base, Reyes intentionally dropped a ball he caught at the dirt in the infield in order to keep Spiezio stuck, trying to trick him into being thrown out. Spiezio didn't fall for it, but was obviously confused. Reyes tossed the ball back to the pitcher and gave Spiezio a playground smirk and nod—I almost got ya, kid.

Other than the infield fly rule, what I've always admired about baseball is its perfect physics. Its playing surface is inspired by a higher power. Ninety feet between bases, 125 from home to second. No matter how the home run totals have changed, it's still tough to beat the throw on an infield grounder, and stealing second is still always a close play. And Roberto Clemente owned what remains perhaps the best right field arm in the game. Football is different. It's about brute force. But that can be attractive, too. That's why we loved Jim Kelly, who was a rare kind of QB. Kelly dove headfirst into tackles. He blocked. He even caught downfield passes. It was something to admire, that kind of energy, because his brute force respected the game.

But now football and baseball seem to be going in different directions. Football's brute force is resulting in more face-mask tackles, and the foot stomping we saw in Saturday's brawl, unfortunately, wasn't the first case of foot stomping we saw this year.

Baseball, meanwhile, is reeling from the inflated heads of steroids and, interestingly, is redefining itself with the welcome antics of Jose Reyes and Willie Randolph-style coaching.

Many of us knew four years ago that pushing people around isn't the way to go. But not all of us. Some donned military costumes and said things like "Bring em on," and "Mission accomplished." But look where brute force has gotten us. Every disagreement results in another car bomb. At some point, we can only hope, the clever and articulate voices of grace and reason will prevail, like we saw in Roberto Clemente, as typified by Jose Reyes. And by Carlos Delgado, who, while in Toronto, refused to take the field in the 7th-inning stretch to listen to "God Bless America." He took a stand. Clemente died taking a stand—a peaceful and thoughtful one. McGuire and Sosa were admired as gods while they hit home runs with the brute force of their steroid-enhanced bodies. But their status melted when the truth came out, when the fans recovered from the power of their brute force and saw the truth of it.

You can hit someone hard enough to make them cry, but when they stop crying, you'll still be a bully. Because while the bullies are hitting, the little guys are reading, and learning, and fine-tuning the best approach to the constructs and confines of the game. Just as the baseball diamond's physics, in the end, favor the few guys who can run down an infield hit and read the smallest movement of the pitcher's motion to first, the world stage favors knowledge and nuance, not brute force.

So I think I'm leaning toward baseball, away from football. And I think the world is heading in that direction, too. We can only hope.

Why the Sabres may never lose

October 17, 2006

The Mets will be the Yankees of the 21st century, even if it doesn't seem that way yet. In 1919, the White Sox were still the Yankees of the 20th century. You can have your steroid-head-havin Roger Clemens and I'll keep my 40-year-old skinny tough guy Tommy Glavine, whose name is suddenly one hundred percent Queens New York.

Not that I can pay attention. The Sabres have scored six goals in the second period against the chippy Philadelphia Flyers. "Chippy" is an inside joke between me and all the Flyers fans who are reading this.

The Sabres are past the Flyers by now. They are in the upper echelon of the National Hockey League, in their new flashback sweaters. I'm watching the game and holding tight to the view of the fans in the stands at the new Aud as we cheer our team. Their faces are tired and content, only days after over a third of a million Buffaloneans lost their electricity if not their car or half of their home to the snow and the trees.

My man Reyes and his Mets are dancing in the dugout, studying the game, preparing their antics. Their innate knowledge of the game is no match for, nor reason to stop, the pranksters in the clubhouse. It's sort of a throwback bunch. Willie Randolph will be remembered as being a Met, not a Yankee. His playing career will be an incredible Ruthian answer to a trivia question from a game played by a bunch of 9-year-old geeks in 2081. "Ruthean" will be long-forgotten, something spoken in off-Broadway plays and curious Bush-era holograph movies.

I can't tell you how I know these things will happen, but I can be trusted.

The Sabres just got back the goal the Flyers snuck in there to start the third. 7-1 about 1:40 into the final period. That's another inside joke, and it has nothing to do with a pun.

Someone may have put something in my drink tonight. And since there's no one else here with me, I know it must be a covert operation.

And my eyes are stuck on the hockey game, watching this blowout, simply sitting in the stands in a land which seems far, far away, instead of paying attention to what I should be paying attention to, which is the must-win game for the New York Mets.

Which brings me to my next point—must-win games. There is only one must-win game in any given series. One cannot, logically, be faced with more than one must-win game in any given series, unless it's the final game, which of course can be played more than once.

But, logically—oh, man, Novotny just scored and it's 8-1—but, logically, the Buffalo Sabres shouldn't be buried in a curse, either, and yet they are.

And so I wonder what kind of situation we're in right now. I mean to say: Is this real or is this all a dream? Only a dream could render a curse, so a miracle is inevitably the only available antidote. So perhaps there exists more than one must-win game for the Sabres this season. It's quite possible that they need to avoid all losses in order to stave off the mighty teeth of the curse in wolves' clothing.

Vanek just scored again. I think that's his second of the night. And I'm not even paying attention to the 21st century version of the New York Yankees. Long live the Mets! Long live the Sabres! Long live dreams!

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