

My family didn't take trips to historic landmarks or for picnics in a park. Our idea of an excursion was a two-hour drive from our home on Long Island to otherwise unknown New Britain, Connecticut, to watch the town's beloved Rock Cats take on the Fisher Cats of New Hampshire in a double-A minor-league baseball battle for feline supremacy. It was there, in the stadium concessionary, over a pre-game feast of ballpark franks and soda, that my father and his two sons communed as men.

In 1999, when I was four years old and long before I even knew what a Harvard was, I could tell you anything you could possibly want to know (and much more *long* after you'd stopped listening) about Penn State University and its storied football program. There was no logic behind this passion -- no past or present family connection ... nothing more than a friend of a friend who had a pair of extra tickets to the school's home games and an open spot at his pregame tailgate. ****LONG PAUSE**** Yet, a remarkable thing happened as my father and I continued to journey across the better part of three states six or seven times each fall to cheer on our Lions. This friend's friend -- and all of *his* friends -- became *our* friends. Together, in 2001, we high-fived when our quarterback ran his way out of obscurity and into the record books, erasing a 27-9 deficit against Ohio State in a game no one thought we'd win. Together, three years later, we excoriated our team's anemic offense when the team couldn't muster anything more than two safeties in a 6-4 loss to Iowa. We competed together for the most creative insult for the weekly foe and its misguided fan base. And when Penn State won the 2005 Big Ten Conference championship after years of national irrelevance, the man who had once only been a ticket source scooped me, and my brother, and my dad into a huge embrace, and shouted through tears "YOU GUYS ARE MY BEST FRIENDS." Even this was an understatement.

What is it about sports that creates this kind of unity? Is it the intense drama? After all, sports has provided us with, in my opinion, the best reality TV we can get. Is it its ability to allow us to escape? Sports can help us forget about our own problems and focus on something else. Could it be the immense emotional range it puts us through? Sports can make our lives far more exciting, putting us on an emotional roller coaster that we all get to experience together and letting us feel the triumph of an entire city when our team finally wins that long-awaited championship.

Now, my friends often make fun of me for how involved I get into games, often interpreting my involvement as putting unnecessary stress on my own life. I'll be watching a hockey game on a random Sunday night, and I'll yell "Shoot the puck!" at the TV, only to have my roommate look up and say "You know they can't hear you, right?" And talk about extra stress; why would you want to make an entire city of people, most of whom are complete strangers, hate you and everything you stand for just because of a logo on your shirt? Take it from me: I'm from New York, so I've lived behind enemy lines for three and a half years now, and have taken my fair share of ridicule for wearing a Yankees or a Rangers jersey out in public. What's the point of going through all of that?

People who mock sports and sports fans often fail to realize just how powerful sports can be to connect. To unify. No matter who you root for, be it the New York Yankees, the New York Rangers, the New York Giants, or one of those...other teams, there can be great value in pouring your heart into a team and wanting to see them win.

But why does it need to hurt? Why does it need to feel like a dagger through your heart when your team loses on the last play of the game? Sure, there is great emotional risk in living

and dying with every run, every goal, every touchdown, but the emotional reward is worth even more. Without the investment of all our energy and spirit into the game, and without leaving ourselves vulnerable to heartbreak, we can never fully know the connection that brings families, complete strangers, and even entire cities together in one huge swell of passion, of pride, of triumph.

So on I'll go: cheering, and shouting, and hoping, and mourning and doing all that makes sports fandom so real...Now maybe you'll understand what could possibly motivate me to stand here before you, less than three miles from Fenway Park, knowing full-well the outcry it will likely elicit from many of you here, and unabashedly proclaim "GO YANKEES!"

Thank you.