SI VAULT

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In My Tribe

Our sports have become more and more about money and marketing. But to most of us they're still about the stories we tell one another, the transcendent moments that lift us—the very way we define ourselves

TERRY MCDONELL

Play is where life lives, where the game is the game.
—GEORGE SHEEHAN

IN THE fall of 1980, when SI senior writer Lars Anderson was nine years old and living in Lincoln, his father took him to the Florida State--Nebraska game. With less than a minute left in the fourth quarter, the highly favored Cornhuskers had the ball on the Seminoles' three-yard line, trailing 18--14. That's when heartbreak visited Nebraska: Quarterback Jeff Quinn fumbled. Florida State recovered. Game over. Then, as Seminoles coach Bobby Bowden and his team walked off the field, the crowd rose to its feet in appreciation of the underdogs' hard-fought victory. At first it was just polite clapping, the kind you hear at a golf tournament, but then fans started cheering for Bowden and his players, building to one of the loudest roars of the day. Tears of disappointment ran down Lars's cheeks as his father put his arm around him, pointed to the red-clad fans in full throat and said, "Lars, this is as good as sports gets."

SPORTSMANSHIP can be a naive word, especially in the shadow of the failure and shame of Penn State. But if we are who we say we are, if we believe in courage and integrity and fair play, then we define ourselves in our sports. New ways of thinking about race, about media, about celebrity have always played out on our fields and courts. This is where we learned to tell each other who we are.

Along the way we also built businesses and refined what has come to be taught as Sports Marketing, using the excitement of our games to sell each other everything from fast food to estate planning. Our major leagues describe themselves with shrewd marketing nuance: *Where amazing happens* (NBA); *There are no words* (NHL); *This is what it's all about* (NFL); *This is beyond baseball* (MLB). All operate chains of stores. The cynical view is that our drive to commercialize even our play trumped our innocence long ago, and we sold ourselves out. That like a parody of that brilliant Nike campaign, we *just did it,* turned our media into a colossal *Breakfast of Champions.*

But I'm not buying it.

I believe our hard, beautiful games shaped us for the better. The marketing lifts because it feels good to *just do it* or to *protect this house,* and then the reality makes us feel even better. And sometimes that commercialization we complain about gets it just right.

Thanks, Mean Joe.

IT'S NOT ABOUT SCORES and stats, it's about the stories. The players' skill and athleticism can be mind-blowing, but without the backstories there is no connection. The excitement comes from knowing enough about the athletes to care who makes the shot and who misses. Would Jazz guard Derek Fisher's hitting a key three-pointer in the 2007 playoffs have mattered as much if you didn't know that he had just flown round-trip to New York from Salt Lake City to see to his ailing 10-

month-old daughter? This is why SI puts rooting interest (mostly) aside. There are no home teams for us. We root for the story.

But that's running out ahead.

As I write this, I have 325 colleagues at SI. Only a few have been the kind of athlete we cover, but they all have stories. I spend more time with these people than with anyone else in my life. Working with them has become tribal. We don't tell each other stories around campfires, but we might as well. *Who was the greatest athlete you ever saw? What was the greatest moment? The greatest comeback? Greatest rivalry? Which team had the most heart? Did you ever see something that wasn't fair?*

Why did it matter?

There are no wrong answers. Senior writer Richard Hoffer wrote in SI's 50th Anniversary Issue, in 2003, that sports "evolved from a local flavor to a national appetite ... and suddenly, all sorts of people could talk to one another, volatile debates defused by a shared passion for sports." Tribes within tribes.

Big-city teams like the Yankees became civic metaphors, and so did small-market teams like the Packers. Journeymen such as Bucky Dent and Steve Kerr created myths, and the superlative athletes—Ali, Aaron, Jordan—became transcendent brands. The games themselves (Super Bowl, Final Four, World Series) are now national imperatives. Almost everything of importance can be expressed in sports terms—sometimes in strange ways. Here's a headline from the NEW YORK POST on Oct. 21, after Muammar Gaddafi was killed: GUNMAN HAD MORE HITS THAN A-ROD.

Hoffer again: "Strange isn't it, that the very themes of achievement and disgrace that animate our history would be expressed in something so universal (and benign) as a box score, an improbable athletic feat, a magazine cover. Who could have guessed that, henceforth, anything worthwhile could be demonstrated on, say, a basketball court—racial harmony, affluence, cooperation, style, commerce? (High-five!) Who could have possibly known that?"

And if we break it down, what we are left with is the game or the team or the athlete as a bridge between generations, the adhesive that binds relationships, the spit that holds families together.

WHEN SI.COM SENIOR producer Andrew Perloff was a little boy in the 1970s, his father was not very available. He worked long hours running a small wholesale grocery company in South Philadelphia, and when he came home he was not much of a talker. The only thing that Andrew knew they could connect on was Philadelphia sports, and the only uninterrupted time they had to be close were eight Sundays every fall because his father had season tickets to the Eagles.

The Eagles were not good then and always got beaten up by the hated Cowboys. Andrew was so emotionally invested in the team that he wrote letters to NFL commissioner Pete Rozelle complaining about the officiating. Then suddenly, in the late '70s, the Eagles became very good. They reached the NFC Championship Game in 1980 against Dallas, and Perloff and his dad were there on a frigid Sunday afternoon at Veterans Stadium when the Eagles won 20--7 thanks to a 42-yard touchdown run by the shifty Wilbert Montgomery. You still see highlights of that game on TV because NFL Films loved capturing Eagles coach Dick Vermeil running the sidelines like a wild man. Vermeil was known for breaking down and crying at press conferences. That day everyone in the stadium cried. And fans back then didn't look anything like the corporate crowd today. Philly had hit a bad patch economically in the 1970s, and the Eagles' run carried a lot of symbolic weight. That was a hard place, and tough men were openly weeping.

Years later, when Perloff started working at SI.com, he happened upon an old photo of Vermeil being carried off the field that afternoon, and a storm of emotions came back. To this day when he calls home, he and his dad start without much to say, but after a minute or two they fall easily into conversation about the Eagles or the Phillies or the 76ers. And they still talk about that 1980 NFC Championship Game.

ON THE OTHER SIDE of the country, senior writer Damon Hack was a consumed Lakers fan, and Magic Johnson was his

world. If the Lakers were on, Hack was in front of the TV with a notepad, charting Magic's points, rebounds and assists. On the schoolyard Hack was no-look passing his way through phys-ed class. In the NBA there was Magic and there was everybody else, and that's the way it was even when Hack was almost grown and starting as a 6'3" point guard at Van Nuys High.

By the autumn of 1991 Hack was a junior at UCLA, and he had brought his Lakers fandom with him to Westwood. One day, in art history class, he was surprised by the professor: "Is Damon Hack here?" Hack stood up. "I have a note for you," the professor said. Hack walked to the front of the lecture hall and was given a message from the office of the assistant dean: *Meet your father at the Bruin Bear.*

Hack walked downhill toward the student store, his mind racing. Was someone hurt? His grandfather had not been well. Hack clearly remembers seeing his father in the sunshine—white dress shirt, dark slacks, matching tie and suspenders—standing by the Bear. Hack gave him a hug and waited.

"Son," his father said, "Magic has HIV. He's retiring today."

The words had barely registered, and they were already walking toward UCLA's Parking Lot 6. Hack was dizzy. When they reached their car, he tried to swallow the lump in his throat but couldn't. He opened the passenger door, fell in and started to cry. His father drove the five minutes to Hack's apartment, where his roommates were already in front of the TV. They watched the reports in silence for an hour, then his father went back to work.

Magic would make memorable comebacks—in the 1992 All-Star Game, in the Olympics and even with the Lakers—and Hack would watch them all. But when he thought about charting Magic's stats he stopped short, and his memory of that day and all that Magic had meant to him became a memory of his father.

II

THE GRACE AND EVEN the imagination of great athletes are built on courage. Consider the comeback of Celtics point guard Rajon Rondo during the 2011 NBA playoffs. Trailing 0--2 in the second round against the favored Heat, the pestering Rondo chased a loose ball and became entangled with Miami guard Dwyane Wade, who flung Rondo off his back. As Rondo tried to break his fall, he appeared to break his left elbow instead. He was helped to the locker room in agony, but within minutes he was back with the dislocated elbow wrapped in a sleeve. When the horn sounded again, Rondo was the first Celtic out of his team's huddle, walking past midcourt alone, because he wanted the Heat players to see that they couldn't knock him out and he was going to make them pay. Which he did by leading the Celtics to a win playing with one arm. "I'm never searching for heroism in sports, but courage is a crucial part of the game," says SI senior writer Ian Thomsen, who covers the NBA, "especially in this big-money era when so many players appear to be coddled. When you see someone like Rondo push himself to return when he could very easily have gone to the hospital, it says something about why he plays, and money isn't the whole story."

There are many stories, and many are small and personal, but all are beckoning and sometimes looming at the same time because of what they tell us about the inevitable. Jill Costello, who learned she had stage IV lung cancer the summer before her senior year at Cal, continued to train with the rowing team and coxed the first varsity eight at the 2010 NCAA nationals, where the Bears placed second overall. A month later Costello was dead. Imagine steering a boat, guiding it in a straight line and demanding the best from your rowers, all while suffering the side effects of chemotherapy. Costello had feet so swollen that she could hardly walk, and constant nausea, yet there she was in the sun, rain and cold. "It wasn't a sports story," says senior writer Chris Ballard, who wrote it. "It was a story about the human spirit."

Bette Marston, an assistant producer at SI.com, was assigned to fact-check the piece because she had been a club-level rower at Northwestern. "As I made those tough phone calls to Costello's parents, coaches and teammates," she says, "it hit me that their values were exactly the same as mine, and that was—is—who I am."

I WAS IN THE WATER CUBE in Beijing for the 2008 men's 4 × 100-meter freestyle relay. Probably only swimming fans were aware of Jason Lezak of the U.S. before the final leg of that race. Leading up to it, France's Alain Bernard, 25, had boasted like a rooster that the French would "smash" the Americans, and being the reigning world-record holder in the 100 free, he was credible as well as annoying.

So it went that despite Michael Phelps's opening 47.51 split, France took the lead on the third leg and entrusted it to Bernard, 100 meters from gold. Going into the water behind him was Lezak, a 32-year-old competing in his third Olympics but destined to remain in Phelps's considerable shadow. With about 50 meters remaining, Bernard was a full body length ahead; even the announcers had conceded the race to the French. But Lezak found something inside himself and caught Bernard from behind, touching the wall just .08 of a second ahead of the Frenchman. He had just swum the fastest relay split in history to win a most unlikely gold medal, keep Phelps's quest for a record-setting eight golds at one Games alive and secure his own place in sports history. The joy on the faces of Lezak's U.S. teammates contrasted with the shock on the faces of the French. The Olympics were, yet again, the best reality show on television.

"It was a morality play," says SI.com producer Ted Keith, who had the best take on what we all saw that day. "In just 46.06 seconds Lezak taught the sports world a lesson about age versus youth, about not speaking too soon and about why we should always keep watching."

Sport as a microcosm of or a metaphor for life is most complicated during an Olympics, especially when the competition gets swallowed by nationalism. After winning the 400 meters at the 2000 Games in Sydney, Cathy Freeman, an Aboriginal Australian, simply sat down on the sideline, and the surprised crowd—and the home TV audience of tens of millions—waited to see what she would do. Freeman's anger about the Australian government's treatment of Aborigines was well-known. Would she make a speech? Would she refuse the medal? Not sing the anthem?

What Freeman did was to get up and run the course again, this time holding aloft both Australia's flag and the Aboriginal flag, a great mixture of politics and sport and one of the most moving things Olympic fans had ever seen. I was thinking about the great U.S. sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos standing on the medal podium with heads bowed and fists raised at the Mexico City Games in 1968. Freeman made a lot of people happy. Smith and Carlos had made a lot of people mad. They were all on the same side, patriots in their own time in their own way.

"Every Olympics looks like it's all about nationalism, but there's always more to it," says SI.com senior editor Richard Deitsch, who has covered five Olympics. "And that 'more to it' trumps race, gender, economic class. Or maybe it pulls them all into something bigger." In Athens, in a taverna lost on a tiny street in the Plaka district, Deitsch watched the Greek basketball team take to the limit a U.S. squad that amounted to the 2004 NBA All-Stars. Standing five deep in front of an old, wall-mounted television screen, the Greeks were cheering with such force that Deitsch thought the ceiling might collapse. To his surprise, he began rooting internally for Greece. Suddenly he did not want the millionaires representing his own nation to win. "That's the only time I've felt that, a pull against my own country," he says. "I was troubled by it until I realized that's what the Olympics were really about."

III

So loud

—CHRISTOPHER LOGUE

WAR MUSIC: AN ACCOUNT OF BOOKS 16 TO 19 OF HOMER'S ILIAD

PATRIOTISM IS A DEEP VEIN in sports, and in the aftermath of the Sept. 11 attacks we draped stadiums and turned our games into patriotic ritual. There were no major-college football games or pro sports the weekend after 9/11. It was as if the country was taking a breath to come back stronger. Everyone who lived through it knew that life could never go back to Sept. 10. Informed by that new reality, the 2001 World Series became one of the most memorable in history, featuring two extra-inning games and three late-inning comebacks and ending on a Game 7 walk-off hit in the form of a bases-loaded

bloop single by the Diamondbacks' Luis Gonzalez.

For SI senior writer Tom Verducci the sharpest memories were of covering Games 3, 4 and 5. Fires still smoldered at ground zero, and there was an eeriness about Yankee Stadium those nights that went beyond the metal detectors, the bomb-sniffing dogs, the Secret Service agent dressed as an umpire and the snipers on the roof. It was suddenly baseball in wartime, and you weren't sure if you were in the most dangerous place in the world or the most secure.

Those games were the first large-scale public gatherings after the attacks, and Yankee Stadium was, as Verducci wrote, "exactly the right place to symbolically begin American recovery." President George W. Bush marched to the pitcher's mound with his chin up and chest out (protected by a bulletproof vest) and threw a strike. The crowd belted out *God Bless America* with their hearts in it. And the baseball that evening and the next two was sublime: a gem by Roger Clemens followed by two games in which the Yankees got last-at-bat hits to avoid defeat. After Game 4, Yankees were "gathering in the players' parking lot like kids at Dairy Queen after a Little League game," Verducci recalls. "They wanted to hold on to the moment." That was the night of this sign at Yankee Stadium: MYSTIQUE & AURA APPEARING NIGHTLY.
THE ARMY-NAVY FOOTBALL GAME that December was, even more than other years, a game of ultimate emotional importance and disposability at the same time. It was everything, and as soon as it was over (Army won 26--17) it was meaningless, put into perspective by what would happen next to the players: They would win Purple Hearts and Silver Stars alongside other young men they had played against. Two of the Midshipmen would be killed in action. The idea of playing to exhaustion, giving your all against a rival you've been taught to disdain for four years—and then setting aside all that intensity and fighting together with that rival against a common enemy, for something larger than yourself—is so powerful, so deeply ... us. It's the North and South becoming one nation again after the Civil War. It's the Marshall Plan rebuilding Germany, MacArthur in Japan. It's *e pluribus unum* and all that: Meuse-Argonne, Omaha Beach, Guadalcanal, Inchon, Khe Sanh.
9/11.
THINK MONTAGE, MUSIC OVER. Bach and Levitical choirs punched up by loyal sons *marching onward to vic-tor-y.* Pageantry ... team colors and regalia ... the ritual of pregame introductions ... responsive cheering ... even the cathartic grieving on talk radio after a tough loss. I remember a scolding aunt disparaging my interest in the 49ers by suggesting that sports were "the new religion." New? Over the last half century sports became sacred, serving up the faith, emotion and solace once received in places of worship. "Old stadiums and ballparks are our cathedrals," says Jimmy Buffett, who has played in all the classic old yards, starting with Fenway and Wrigley. To be at Wrigley in the summer of 2005 listening to Buffett and the Coral Reefers cover Steve Goodman's *City of New Orleans* just days after Hurricane Katrina came ashore at Tammany Parish is to understand exactly what he is talking about.
Now kill the music.

On Sept. 17, 1993, the Expos were hosting the Phillies in the first game of a crucial late-season series. Philly was leading 7--4 late in the game when Montreal manager Felipe Alou sent up Curtis Pride to pinch-hit. Though born 95% deaf, Pride had played on the U.S. men's under-18 national soccer team and been the point guard for William & Mary before spending eight seasons in the minors. In the second at bat of his major league career, he hit a two-run double, which was enough to make anyone's throat catch. The jet-engine roar of the crowd was juxtaposed with the image of Pride stoically standing on second—deaf, literally, to the cacophony. Only after the third base coach called timeout and walked the 90 feet down to Pride and asked him to tip his helmet did he understand that the stadium shook, shook for him.

Game 1 of the 1988 World Series between the Dodgers and the A's was the night that Kirk Gibson hobbled out of the dugout and hit a game-winning pinch-hit home run off Dennis Eckersley. Then came Vin Scully's "laydown." Nothing stamps a moment as history quite like an announcer—in this case, the greatest who ever lived—going silent. "To this day," Scully once told SI's Hoffer, "what I've always tried to do is call the play as quickly as I can and then shut up, not only for the benefit

of the listener but for my own joy of hearing the crowd roar."

That roar is echoed quietly in the buzz of an arena just before a heavyweight championship fight and in the ticking silence of an 80,000-seat Olympic stadium before the gun goes off for the men's 100 meters. The connection SI senior writer Michael Farber builds between these two events is that they are the most primal in all of sport. They have the fewest constructs (no power plays, no free throws, no first downs), and they date to our standing upright for the first time on the savanna.

Very fast-forward to the Olympic 100 meters, Seoul, 1988, Ben Johnson versus Carl Lewis. The rivalry had been festering for more than a year, ever since Johnson had won the world championship in Rome. Sprinters are the prima ballerinas of sport, of course, and there was a lot of *Black Swan* going on between the Canadian and the American.

Farber's seat in the press box could not hold him, and he made his way trackside, to the 85-meter mark, where he could see Johnson turn his head slightly to look for Lewis. Farber noticed the smugness and satisfaction that creased Johnson's face when his rival was not in sight. A second later Johnson was past the line. The scoreboard clock read 9.79. No one had ever run that fast.

We all know what happened in the coming days, but on that sunny Saturday it wouldn't have mattered to Farber if Johnson had been gulping rocket fuel: "It was a signal moment not merely for sports," he remembers thinking, "but of evolution." But then Johnson tested positive for the banned steroid stanozolol and made the cover with one of the rare gotcha headlines in the history of SI: BUSTED. The essence of sport for Farber had always been man's exceeding himself, testing the limits of the body and, sometimes, the imagination. "We lost our sporting innocence that day," he says now, after covering 16 Olympics. "But shining a light is never a bad thing, no matter what is illuminated. In fact, that's our job, especially when everything about sports keeps evolving."

The record now stands at 9.58, set by Usain Bolt of Jamaica in 2009.

A RECORD IS BROKEN; it becomes a moment. Patrick Ewing's finger roll doesn't drop at the end of Game 7 of the 1995 NBA Eastern Conference semifinals at the Garden; another moment. Sports milestones become personal epiphanies. The moments come and go. Something else remains.

Senior editor Kostya Kennedy was in the house on Sept. 5, 1995, when Orioles shortstop Cal Ripken Jr. tied Lou Gehrig's record for consecutive games. Kennedy was there the next night as well, when Ripken broke Gehrig's record, but it is the tying night that resonates with him. Although he was covering the game for SI, he left the press box to stand among the jam-packed crowd at Camden Yards. A few moments after the top of the fifth inning ended, making the game official, everyone turned to look out beyond the right centerfield fence. Throughout that season the Orioles had displayed Ripken's consecutive-game total on spotlighted long banners hung from the face of the old brick B&O warehouse. When the fifth inning began, the banners read 2,129. When the new sheets were unfurled, the last two numbers changed: 2,130.

It was a ridiculous number, one that had stuck in record books and fans' imaginations for nearly 60 years. And it wasn't just that Ripken, in the lineup every day for more than 13 years, had achieved something outlandish from a statistical standpoint. (Before Ripken, no player had gotten within 800 games of Gehrig's total.) Ripken's feat harked back to an old, true hero. Images of Gehrig, whose streak ended only when he was debilitated by the ravages of ALS, the motor neuron disease that would kill him, appeared on the screens at Camden Yards. The record number, like few others, drew a line to a distant but distinct time in the continuum of baseball.

That is what Kennedy suddenly understood he was responding to: "The recollection and power of another era was a reminder that our sports, as a part of and a companion to history, are a way to give context to our lives and to our collective past, present and future."

Something else remains.

SENIOR WRITER GRANT WAHL was at the sold-out Rose Bowl in 1999 for the Women's World Cup final, when the U.S.

national team beat China in a penalty-kick shootout and made the covers of SI, TIME and *Newsweek* in the same week: Here was a team of pioneering women who personified the goals of Title IX. A national audience of 18 million actually watched a women's soccer game. Men started wearing Mia Hamm jerseys. "Watching that winning moment, you had the sense that something transcendent had happened," says Wahl. "Not only would women's sports never be the same, but that '99 team was about changing the American culture at large."
To staff writer Melissa Segura, soccer in the U.S. had always been the sport of the suburban upper crust, with its pricey youth travel teams, shiny Umbros and halftime orange slices cut by mothers who didn't have to work to make ends meet (or by their help). But a month before the 2010 World Cup, Segura toured the predominantly Hispanic trailer parks of Nacogdoches, Texas, where Clint Dempsey, the most inventive playmaker in U.S. soccer history, grew up learning his moves from Latin American players who lived in those double-wides. It is not lost on Segura that in the same week she reported Dempsey's story, she also wrote about professional sports leagues' response to Arizona's controversial immigration bill, which targeted the same people Dempsey credited as his soccer influences.

Two weeks later, the issue subtly spilled over onto the pitch in South Africa, where the U.S. national team played a win-or-go-home match against Algeria. Segura flipped on the game and saw her country reflected like never before in the faces of its team: Jewish Mexican-American Jonathan Bornstein, Jersey boy Michael Bradley and Nigerian-American Oguchi Onyewu placing their hands over their hearts during *The Star-Spangled Banner* even as the Obama Administration announced plans to use drones along the southern border that the relatives of U.S. players José Torres and Herculez Gomez had crossed. Just as the Americans looked doomed, goalie Tim Howard, who had overcome Tourette's syndrome, launched the ball midfield to California kid Landon Donovan, who passed to Jozy Altidore, born of Haitian parents, to Dempsey, back to Donovan... . *Goal!*
While politicians argued in Washington, 23 men from backgrounds as diverse as the country they represented showed what an inclusive America could be. "It was sports prefiguring politics," Segura says. "The team never addressed issues of immigration or inclusion; it simply played the game—together—with regard not to origins but to abilities, the way Jesse Owens and Jackie Robinson demonstrated decades earlier how much better we can be when we see America's differences as a bounty instead of a burden."

IV

GARY SMITH, WHO HAS chronicled the diversity of sports experiences like no one else, will tell you that the two most striking things he has ever seen were the most fundamental and solitary—Carl Lewis running and Mike Tyson punching a heavy bag. Fluidity and power, both stripped to raw essence, without a competitor or fan or camera in sight. "Two very complicated men, but neither conscious that in that moment he's living what he's seeking: purity," Smith says. "Sports as a private reckoning place for psychic energy and tumult—those with no eyes or ears for that will experience only half of sports' wonder."

Then, if you widen the lens, as Smith always does, "if you bring in the teammates, the arena, the audience, the noise, that's where you encounter sports' other sacred power, its primal ability to connect, to merge, to create community."

For Smith, that encounter came in the leftfield bleachers of Busch Stadium in St. Louis in 1998, shoulder to shoulder with 50,000 people standing on their seats and roaring every time Mark McGwire came to the plate to try to break Roger Maris's home run record, an entire city—oblivious to McGwire's steroid use and deceit—melted into one. Then there was Smith's encounter with a bus full of refugees, lost children from war-ravaged countries and shattered families, forged into a soccer team and made to feel that they mattered by a Muslim woman on the outskirts of Atlanta. And on a Friday night in a South Carolina town, his encounter with *a mentally retarded black man doing everything a human being could possibly do at a high school football game—greeting the crowd, providing radio commentary, delivering the pregame pep talk, running water bottles to the players, cheering with the cheerleaders, leading the halftime marching band and racing across the field with the school flag after touchdowns—everything except actually playing, and basking in his town's love every mad minute of it.*

That was Smith reporting.

For SI's July 26, 1999 issue, managing editor Bill Colson asked Smith to choose and then write about his favorite sports photograph of the 20th century. Smith spent days looking at the thousands of pictures in books and portfolios the magazine sent him, finally deciding on one taken by the brilliant shooter Marvin E. Newman *(opening spread, page 68).*
There is no sports action in this photo of the TCU locker room before the Cotton Bowl against Syracuse in 1957, but Newman captured what SI's editors described as "the essence of sports" in a roomful of young men about to go up against the best football player in history, Jim Brown, in his last college game. *You can walk around inside this picture... . [The players'] boxer shorts are hanging right there, on the hooks behind their heads, but their faces are showing something even more personal than that. Almost reminds you of a painting by Norman Rockwell.*
More reporting.

"The older you get," Smith wrote, "the more you realize that this is what sports are most about: the moments before ... when a person takes a flashlight to his soul and inspects himself for will and courage and spirit... . Who am I? And, Is that going to be enough?"

TCU, 28--27.
IN 2000, AS A YOUNG STAFF WRITER, Jon Wertheim covered the U.S. Olympic boxing trials, which were held, oddly enough, at Foxwoods Resort Casino in Connecticut. ("Nothing says amateurism like *pai-gow,* free drinks and an upcoming Eddie Money concert," Wertheim says.) Intrepid as always, Wertheim discovered a back staircase leading from the ring to the makeshift locker rooms, and this secret passage spared him dealing with an imperious security guard. Sneaking down the steps after a heavyweight elimination fight, he got a spike of adrenaline when he heard a keening cry. He looked over the rail to see the losing heavyweight fighter (his name now long forgotten, which is ultimately the point) sobbing inconsolably, his chiseled body heaving. Still leaking blood and sweat, he was curled in a ball, mourning a dream that had just been administered its last rites. The other guy would be going for the gold in Sydney. The scene of this hard block of a man reduced to a blubbering baby, all by himself in a dingy back stairwell of a casino, was almost unendurably poignant for Wertheim. "We write about the winners and put them on TV and lavish them with money and fame and even put their faces on our cereal boxes," he says. "But here was a searing reminder that competition is a zero-sum game. Much as we all love winners, sports necessarily creates losers too. And that is the greatest life lesson, no?"
On March 27, 1971, Villanova made its first appearance in an NCAA basketball tournament title game. The Wildcats faced 28--1 UCLA, the four-time defending champions, featuring Sidney Wicks, Curtis Rowe, Henry Bibby and Steve Patterson. Villanova was led by Howard Porter. The Wildcats were behind most of the game, twice cutting the lead to three in the final minutes. When they lost 68--62, a lot of people cried, including Richard Demak, now SI's chief of reporters, who was not from Philadelphia, had never heard of Villanova and was watching on television in Michigan. He was nine. Maybe it was because everyone loves an underdog, even a nine-year-old (especially a nine-year-old).

Despite the loss, Porter was named the tournament's Most Outstanding Player. But the story doesn't end there. He was stripped of the award and Villanova's tournament victories were vacated after Porter was found to have signed a contract with the ABA's Pittsburgh Condors in the middle of his senior year.

Then, 36 years after that title game, a man was admitted to a Minneapolis hospital as John Doe. He had been beaten, his face swollen and disfigured. At the hospital a nurse identified him as the person who had put her husband's life back on track—his former probation officer, Howard Porter. A week later Porter, 58, was dead. He had gone from a segregated high school in Sarasota, Fla., to Villanova to the NBA. He became a cocaine addict, rehabilitated himself, became a counselor and then a probation officer. "We did a story, and it turned out that Porter had hurt mostly himself in his life and helped many more people than that," Demak says. "That's what we reported, anyway, but I guess you never know. Still, when I found out how Porter's saga of success and failure and redemption ended, dying the way he did, he moved me again, almost 40 years

later."

V

HERE'S ANOTHER WAY to say it: A fan's attachment to a team or a player might be one of the most intense, enduring relationships of his or her life.

SI.com hockey producer John Rolfe grew up close enough to walk to Nassau Coliseum ("I practically lived there"), and with the rise of the Islanders between 1980 and '83, he watched what he now calls "the most underrated and underappreciated champions in any sport, ever." The excellence of those Islanders (eight Hall of Famers if you include coach Al Arbour and G.M. Bill Torrey, four successive Stanley Cups, a possibly unbreakable record of 19 consecutive playoff series won, countless heart-stopping comebacks, a furious rivalry with the Rangers), mixed with the passion Rolfe shared with fellow fans, made him a very serious student of the game (Columbia Journalism thesis on how the NHL was helping Soviet-bloc players defect) and ultimately a sportswriter.

What was so magical about those Islanders was what Rolfe calls their combination of "talent, heart and class." They won and lost with dignity, and being perennial underdogs by virtue of the team's location on Long Island and in the shadow of the high-if-not-so-mighty Rangers, made the championships even sweeter. But on the night the Isles would win their fourth Cup (May 17, 1983), completing an improbable sweep of Wayne Gretzky's favored Oilers, Rolfe couldn't get a ticket to the game. He watched with friends at a watering hole on the docks in Freeport and then drove down the Hempstead Turnpike past the Coliseum hours later to find the road still jammed with revelers. "I'll never forget tooting my car horn (Let's! Go! Is-land-ers!) and high-fiving fellow fans out my window," Rolfe says. "What I know now is I wouldn't be here without them."

WHEN SENIOR WRITER Michael Bamberger and his older brother, David, were kids, they would take the Long Island Railroad to Woodside, Queens, and then the number 7 subway train to Willets Point, the stop for Shea Stadium. This was all through the '70s. The subways were hot and dirty and crowded, and everywhere you looked there were Mets fans carrying baseball gloves and banners, wearing team hats. They weren't strangers. Bamberger would listen to David, three years older, talk to some random guy about Gary Gentry or some other now-yellowed name and how many innings he might go in the second game of a Sunday doubleheader. Maybe this time he'll go, I don't know, four? David's dismissive tone made him sound to his little brother like a knowing teenager, one who had figured out that life offers more disappointment than anything else, but they both knew it was an act. They went to Shea, like everybody else on the train, with hope. Maybe they'd be able to sneak down into the loge seats. Maybe Willie Mays, nearing his end, would get a start. Maybe Tom Seaver would retire 27 straight. Maybe the boys would meet Ralph Kiner (broadcaster) or Shag Crawford (umpire) or Cleon Jones (middle-of-the-order hitter, Southern black man, Bamberger's hero).

When Bamberger would get off the train and glimpse the stadium for the first time, he would think it was a marvel. Maybe he didn't know better. He was awed by the perfect grass, the bleached uniforms, the watered infield dirt, the men who traveled the country playing the game he and David played on the bumpy field behind the elementary school on Medford Avenue in Patchogue. They were connected, and they were in turn connected to the 30 people in their train car, the scalper who sold them their tickets at below face value, the whole paid attendance of 21,343. There were no sellouts in those days. It was the Mets, in the '70s. Bamberger didn't care. He was watching baseball. Anything could happen. "It was my life," Bamberger says. "Without those memories, part of me would be dead."

THE SAINTS OPENED THE 2005 season at Carolina, and senior writer Lee Jenkins watched from Houston, on a small television in Hall C of the Reliant Center, with about 200 Hurricane Katrina evacuees. Most had lost their homes. Some were missing family members. One guy got a call during the game from the VA saying an apartment had been found where he could move. He was holding a suitcase, but he wasn't going anywhere. "I can't wait to see the place," he said, "but I really don't want to leave the game."

The Saints won, on a field goal by John Carney with three seconds left, and the evacuees erupted, hugging each other,

racing around the shelter, shouting their "Who Dat" chant. "All we're missing now is some crawfish, corn bread, crab and smoked sausage!" one of them yelled.

The Saints were terrible that year, 3--13, and the NFL made them play their home opener in New Jersey's Meadowlands. They practiced at a high school in San Antonio, lifting weights in the parking lot. But that one game on opening day showed why sports matter, and it didn't have so much to do with saving a ravaged city or distracting a beaten populace. "Our teams are a manifestation of our hometowns," Jenkins remembers thinking. "They connect us to family and friends and provide a sense of place even when we're far away."

Less than five years later the Saints were 15--3 and Bourbon Street was packed by 10 a.m. on Feb. 7, 2010, the collective exhaustion from everyone's Saturday night giving way to the buzz of Super Bowl morning. On that sunny Sunday the Saints were to play in their first Super Bowl, and the entire Gulf Coast seemingly took to the French Quarter to turn a three-hour game into a marathon event; win or lose, they were proud to see their beloved, long-fledgling franchise in the NFL's marquee game. SI.com NFL producer Tom Mantzouranis stood in the same spot in front of the Cats Meow bar's big screen from noon on. Rubber legs were a hazard he was willing to risk. And when Tracy Porter picked off Peyton Manning, putting the Saints two touchdowns up on the Colts with 3:12 to play, and everyone in the bar fell over one another in joy, Mantzouranis knew it had been worth it. He told his legs to be ready for a few more hours. "It felt like coming home," says Mantzouranis, who is from New Jersey, "to the greatest party of all time."

SENIOR WRITER JOE POSNANSKI was born in Cleveland, a fact that many of his colleagues think explains his theory that our games can transcend being just games only when we suspend disbelief, as Samuel Taylor Coleridge argued 200 years ago, and accept events that we ordinarily find incredible. *Cleveland.*
Hold that thought.

Sports has transcended many times, of course. We all have our own list, like Posnanski's: when Jimmy Connors, long past his youth, won match after match at the 1991 U.S. Open; when Brandi Chastain made her penalty kick and then ripped off her shirt in celebration. He could go on.

"But even events like those are transcendent only for people who are willing to open up their hearts to it," Posnanski continues. He also sometimes thinks ("in a strange way") of December 1986 as his last month of sports innocence. That was the month when the Indians looked promising; when the Cavaliers had rookies Brad Daugherty, Ron Harper, Hot Rod Williams and Mark Price and were looking like a team rising; when the Browns... .

Some great things did happen—just not for Cleveland. "Eleven days into 1987," Posnanski says, "John Elway led the Broncos 98 yards through the wind, the Browns' defense and the collective hope of a million Cleveland fans. The Browns did not win the Super Bowl, not then, not ever." And Posnanski learned the lesson that childhood cannot teach: "Sometimes those moments that you spend hoping and believing and waiting for something good to happen are the best moments of your life."

Hold that thought.
THOMAS LAKE, SI'S YOUNGEST senior writer, was nine in 1989 when he began following the Braves, then an awful team. He listened to their games on a radio in the dark of his Atlanta bedroom when he was supposed to be asleep. He lived through that radio, and he's sure that part of his character was formed through Ernie Johnson and Skip Caray's deadpan narratives of errors, strikeouts and hanging curves. Through the Braves' constant failure he learned a sort of longing, a desperate hope, a state of mind that would have been impossible if they'd won every night. Then, two years later, they did start winning. They were 91/2 games out of first at the All-Star break, but afterward they caught fire. John Smoltz woke up, Steve Avery emerged, Terry Pendleton hit five homers in July. Lake's heart pounded every night as Atlanta chased the Dodgers and, in the last week of the season, overtook them for good. The Lakes didn't have a television back then, so they borrowed one from Tom's grandfather to watch the Braves' comeback win in the NLCS over Barry Bonds and the Pirates. It

was all a vicarious experience. When Greg Olson doubled home Ron Gant to score the only run in all of Game 6, it was as if Lake had done it himself. When Smoltz shut out Pittsburgh in Game 7, Lake could see himself on that mound.

Then it happened. You could put the blame on Bobby Cox, for his failure to pull Charlie Leibrandt in Game 6 of the 1991 World Series, before Leibrandt gave up that epic home run to Kirby Puckett; or you could put it on Lonnie Smith, who screeched to a halt on the base paths when second baseman Chuck Knoblauch pantomimed a throw to second even though the ball was already in the outfield. For Lake, though, the loss was a clear and simple case of injustice. In the third inning of Game 2, the Braves were rallying when his favorite player, Gant, hit a single to left. He thought about going for a double but then hustled back to first ahead of the throw. Twins first baseman Kent Hrbek wrestled him off the base and applied the tag, and umpire Drew Coble called Gant out. Lake's family screamed at the television. "The Braves lost the game 3--2 and the Series 4--3," Lake says. "And I've never stopped wondering what might have been if Kent Hrbek had been called to account for his trespass."

Hear the echo?

Nine years later, Lake took that same desperate hope to basketball tryouts at Division III Gordon College in Wenham, Mass. He'd spent the summer running up hills and doing ridiculous exercises with special training shoes that were guaranteed to increase his vertical. He was half an inch away from a clean dunk, and there were days when his jump shot felt automatic. But the school had a new coach, and he'd resolved to rebuild the team in one year, which meant bringing in 11 freshman recruits from across the country. And so, after tryouts, after an excruciating talk with the coach in his office, Lake found himself locked in a bathroom stall across the hall from the gym, sobbing as quietly as possible. "There's no feeling in life like the one you get after giving everything you have, doing all you can do, and still coming up short," says Lake. "So it was with the '91 Braves and with me at the tryouts, and if a certain empathy comes through in my writing on topics like this, well, there's a reason for it."

Hear it now?

EVEN WHEN THEY ARE VERY YOUNG, children think about courage and failure all the time, and sports help them with both. Sometimes the things that are hardest are the most intimate—a first-grader's secret fear of going on the sports overnight because he still wets his bed, a freshman just looking at himself in the gym mirror that first day of high school wrestling tryouts, or years later lying awake and breathing in for hours before rolling out of bed to get on a flight to Helmand province. The Greek historian Thucydides shrewdly wrote that when a nation makes too great a distinction between its scholars and its warriors it winds up having its thinking done by cowards and its fighting done by fools. What if a nation makes too great a distinction between its heroes and its fans? Are you more profoundly moved by that thrill of victory or agony of defeat if you have played the game for real? Fans cannot all be athletes. What if our children just want to wear the jersey and watch?

Should that worry us?

Athletes run in the dreams of children, and their parents want for them the bonding with teammates, the lesson of comebacks and especially the thrill of victory the way ABC's *Wide World of Sports* delivered it on Saturdays for 37 years. At the same time, it's astonishing how far parents' hopes can outrun their children's experience. Put another way, we tend to outkick our coverage as the level of competition rises.

Small-town high school football losses on Friday night are especially devastating, often tearful. The scene after NFL games is usually a jovial meet-and-greet. Weeping on the hardwood after NCAA March Madness games is not something you see in the NBA, where players from opposing teams openly flaunt their friendships as more important than traditional rivalries among their teams. Professional maturity is one thing, but if you're a little boy you might wonder how hard LeBron was really trying.

It does not help when preening sports analysts brag about their playing days. The now-ubiquitous sports media seems not

only self-referential but also bloated, having stuffed itself with experts. In fact, a culture of disdain for journalism has been evolving among these ex-players, who find traditional reporting mean-spirited and its skills remedial. After all, it's so easy; they just stepped right into it after their playing days. Plus, they make a lot more money than that schmo at the paper. And why are journalists always so negative? This is only a slight caricature.

And when it comes to caricatures, what about those spoiled millionaire NBA players and greedy owners, now in their 21st week of negotiation? As Mickey Mantle once put it: "I don't care who you are, you hear those boos."

VI

WHAT COULD be less important than a football game, what could be more... .

Senior writer Kelli Anderson was a 20-year-old junior and on the field with the Stanford band for "the Play" at the 1982 Big Game at Cal. It wasn't the Play itself but its aftermath that stays with Anderson, particularly the extreme emotions sports can stir in otherwise rational people.

From her vantage point in the end zone, the Play unfolded like this: After a Stanford kickoff with four seconds left, time ran out with the Cardinal ahead 20--19. Anderson followed other musicians onto the field in celebration. ("Woohoo! Road trip to a bowl in Birmingham!") Suddenly people were turning around and running back, Cal football players at their heels. After Stanford trombone player Gary Tyrrell was flattened by Cal's Kevin Moen in the end zone, giving Cal a still-controversial 25--20 win, Anderson was among the many wandering around the field asking, "What the hell just happened?" John Elway stalked by, his face like stormy weather, his Heisman campaign and final college game ruined. Anderson remembers looking at a row of Stanford fans (you can practically touch fans from the field at Memorial Stadium) and seeing not confusion and disappointment but anger—hatred, even—directed at her and her bandmates. One fan hissed obscenities at a tiny blonde piccolo player: "You just f------ lost the game for us!"

Across the field Cal fans, the beneficiaries of the band's alleged screwup, "flipped us off," Anderson says. "Once we slunk back to the Stanford campus more than a little afraid—most of us pulled off identifying hats and jackets on the bus ride home—we got more of the same. A 10-year-old boy waited for us in the parking lot just to loudly berate us. This was not a fan base noted for its passion, and this was not a game with all that much on the line aside from rivalry bragging rights and a second-tier bowl bid. Still, the vitriol was thick."

As ugly as some emotions were immediately after the game, better ones emerged with time. Moen and Tyrrell were thrown together in so many Play anniversary events that they became good friends. "Even John Elway got over his bitterness and finally was able to laugh about it," Anderson says.

"It just took him 25 years."

THE REARVIEW MIRROR has always been the best oracle when it comes to sports. More than 30 years after Lars Anderson saw that Florida State--Nebraska game with his father, he was reporting a story about the history of spring football and had lunch with Coach Bowden in Birmingham. Near the end of the conversation, Anderson mentioned that he was from Lincoln. The coach's eyes lit up. Without prompting, he recalled that day three decades earlier when the fans of Nebraska cheered him off the field.

"What a moment," Bowden said, a grin spreading over his face. "Wow."

And then these two men, two generations apart, just looked at each other until Bowden spoke again.

"The classiest thing I ever experienced."

Us.

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