Sports are the transcendent moments that bring us together

By Terry McDonell, Sports Illustrated

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?

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.

Read the whole story