

Sports **By: Tim Schram**

My mother was a long time citizen of Pittsburgh. She was a Pirates fan, but, since she had lived in Chicago for over 20 years, she had also rooted for the Cubs. My father liked the Cubs because he doesn't really follow sports. My second oldest brother was a Cubs fan because my parents were Cubs fans. My oldest brother though, he was the rebel: a Chicago White Sox fan.

One day I walked into his room that had posters of a young Michael Jordan and the recently retired Walter Payton. I asked my oldest brother "Am I a White Sox fan or a Cubs fan?" I was three years old and I had no idea what a Cubs fan or a Sox fan was. His reply was simple: "You're a White Sox fan." "Why," I responded. "Because Cubs fans are the most despised people on Earth."

That was good enough for me. I didn't know what despised meant, but my brother let me know what I was and for the next 5 years I took what he said about sports as gospel. I became a Notre Dame fan and I was always a Bears and Bulls fan. I was lucky to be born in 1985, because the Bulls became one of the best dynasties in NBA history just 6 years later and I was at least alive when the Bears won a Super Bowl and one of the greatest running backs of all time was playing for the Bears.

Payton was my idol growing up. I don't even remember seeing him play in one game because I was so young, but that name still sends shivers down my spine. I cried everyday for a week when he died. I still remember when my mother came home and told me. It a bitter cold November day, Walter had been sick for a while, and my mother walked in with tears in her eyes. "Walter passed today," she said, barely uttering the words before sobbing uncontrollably.

This might not make sense to someone that doesn't pay attention to sports, but Walter is a legend in Chicago. By just recognizing him as "one of the greatest" earlier, that might be enough to get me killed in Chicago. When we lost Walter, we lost a piece of Chicago. When he was drafted, he made a quote that typified the Chicago work ethic and the pride he took in wearing a Bears jersey: "When I'm through with Chicago, they'll be loving me." How prophetic! There was only one man that will go down as a bigger legend in Chicago. He needs no introduction but, "At guard, 6' 6", out of North Carolina, MICHAEL JORDAN!"

I was six years old when the Chicago Bulls won their first of six championships. It was the day number 23 cemented his place in Chicago history and started his journey to being the greatest basketball player of all time.

I can still remember our neighborhood celebration like it was yesterday. It was a Wednesday. It was a warm summer night and the sun was almost completely down but there was still some light shining down. The streetlights were on and everybody ran out of their houses banging pots and pans. School was out for the summer, so we got to stay up way past our bed time. A guy down the street had recently gone to Indiana to buy fireworks for the upcoming Fourth of July, but he figured this occasion was important enough to make a second trip to Indiana. This was also the first time my mom let me play with fireworks. A little irresponsible to let a six year old play with fireworks? Definitely. But, hey, I still have all my fingers and appendages, so who cares!

We ended the night by watching the replay of the game on NBC. It came on around 1:00 am and I was passed out before the end of the first quarter.

That happened 5 more times in the next 7 years. I never thought about how spoiled Chicago fans were until recently. I got to witness the greatest player in NBA history, one of the greatest dynasties in NBA history, and, in Chicago fans minds, the greatest running back in NFL history. And, honestly, who didn't pretend to be number 23 for the Chicago Bulls when they were growing up? A few fist fights broke out in my neighborhood over who was going to be Jordan. Very ridiculous, yes, but that is what sports meant to the kids in my neighborhood. None of us were the best athletes, but we all were die hard fans.

I once got into a fight because a kid told me the Bulls got lucky after the 91 Finals. It started as a shouting match with name calling. Soon we were in each other's faces about the statement. He pushed me, I threw a punch, and for the next ten minutes we rolled around on the ground fighting. I'm not even sure you can call it a fight, seeing as how we were six years old and didn't know the first think about fighting. I guess the proper term for what we did was two six year olds rolling on the ground yelling.

It became a regular occurrence that the Bulls were one of the best teams in the league every year. They won the championship 6 times in 8 years, two times they won three championships in a row, and they also set the single season record for wins with 72 in 1996. They only lost 10 games that year.

In 1998, Jordan, Pippen and Phil Jackson all left the Bulls after winning their sixth championship. The next 7 years were the worst time to be a Chicago sports fan. The bulls were terrible. Every year they were in the bottom three of the league. The Bears weren't much better. The White Sox were second place, every year, not good enough to make the playoffs. Then the team I could care less about, the Chicago Cubs, were, well, the Chicago Cubs. "There's always next year," crosses the lips of these fans every year.

"Next year" came in 2003.

I remember the Cubs making their march through the playoffs. I was convinced they were going to win the World Series. They were stacked. It pained me to watch as a Sox fan. My buddy and I went to a pool hall one night to watch THE game. Everyone knows the game I speak of. The Bartman game. I didn't know beforehand, but this is the night my wish would be granted. The Cubs would lose both the game and all their momentum. Up 3-2 in the series and the Cubs 5 outs from the World Series, there is a routine fly ball in foul territory to left. My buddy and I, being the only 2 Sox fans in the place, cringe. The Cubs are about to be 4 outs from the Series. Moises Alou gets under the ball. What a terrible time to be a Sox fan. It's coming down. I know the Cubs are going to do it. Here it comes. They will get the next 4 outs after this and go on to beat the Yankees. Almost here. Damn it, I can only imagine the harassment I will face after they win it all. Wait. Who is that guy? What is he doing?! It's a foul ball!

That's when Steve Bartman became the most hated man on the North side of Chicago. He interfered with a ball that Alou was going to catch. At this same instant, Bartman became a hero on the Southside. Statues will one day be erected in his honor. He will be buried at Comiskey Park. With that one play he ended the Cubs run to the World Series.

Luis Castillo, the batter, would end up drawing a walk. The shortstop, Alex Gonzalez, would botch a routine groundball that would be an inning ending double play only a few plays later. The Marlins would take the lead on an 8 run inning and win the game. The Cubs stood no chance after that game. The wind had been taken out of their sails.

Some may call me an asshole for wishing ill upon the Cubs, but honestly, what Cubs fan wasn't hoping for a miraculous come from behind win for the Astros when the Sox won the series in '05?

That's how sports work. You hate your enemies almost as much as you love your heroes. Ask any White Sox fan how much they hate the Cubs and vice versa. Ask any Yankees fan how much they hate the Red Sox and vice versa. The rivalries exist and they're intense. Does it serve a purpose? Not really.

Sports are the only things in the world that can contain every emotion imaginable. Sports can take songs that have been around for decades and completely change the meaning. Remember Journey's "Don't Stop Believin'"? Well, love it or hate it, it's the White Sox song now.

Sports make complete strangers best friends. During the '05 White Sox riot and after the Bears won the NFC in '07 I had similar exchanges with 2 completely different people and if you saw both of these conversations you would think we were best friends since birth. At the '05 White Sox riot on the Illinois State University campus, everyone was screaming at the top of their lungs. I got bumped into a total stranger. He turned around, gave me a look, saw my Sox jersey and screamed, "We're the world champs!" I yelled backed with an emphatic "I KNOW!" Then we engaged in a quick, manly embrace.

With sports, the new kid can feel like one of the group. A new family had moved into our neighborhood shortly before the second Bulls championship. No one had really talked to him until he came out of his house and went buck wild with the rest of us.

Sports have the power to bring people together, make them forget about their problems or the petty squabbles, and have people stand united. A whole nation can be united by sports.

After 911, all sporting events were cancelled. A few days later, the New York Yankees, a team I hate ... I mean, it's the Yankees, if you live outside of the Bronx, you likely hate them, but anyway ... The Yankees take the field. The whole country is watching. No one wants to hear about the country under attack. No one has slept very well; we need something to take our minds off of this. Love or hate the Yankees, they helped a country move along.

That's the power of sports. That's why I remember all these moments so clearly. Watching a baseball game can make me feel better anytime. Does the competition serve some sort of purpose? I guess it doesn't hold great meaning. Do athletes make too much money? I guess that could be argued, but if someone is willing to pay them that much, that's not my problem.

I am not a sports expert. I know a fraction of what some experts know. All I know is that on the Southside of Chicago, Ozzie Guillen's picture is slightly higher than the pictures of Jesus Christ. And slightly higher than Ozzie, is Steve Bartman.