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Adult Division

Sportsmanship Essay Contest Winner

March 6, 2001
From: Muns, Raleigh C.
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As a national television audience watched on Saturday, August 29th, 1998, "the Best Baseball Fans in America" nearly rioted as St. Louis Cardinals homerun god Mark McGwire was ejected for arguing a called strike during an eventual loss to the Atlanta Braves. Debris rained on the field and the game was nearly forfeited to the Braves.

Those same umpires received a two minute standing ovation from the St. Louis faithful before the next day's game.

As a self-described "evolving midwesterner" I'm constantly amused at my adopted home town's desire to become New York or Los Angeles or Chicago. There is nothing inherently wrong with those flagship american cities, but why become something you are not? St. Louis is a city that is myopic about that which is unique and wonderful about itself. For instance, rush hour is still only 3 hours in duration. It's also a city where a collective guilt over poor sportsmanship leads to standing ovations for the same umpires who had just the previous day rained on the collective parade of the city's baseball fans. Understand that McGwire was in the middle of his epic pursuit of Roger Maris unbreakable single season homerun record, and that a negative reaction by the hometown fans to McGwire's ejection was predictable. It was late in the season and the out-of-contention Cardinals were drawing record crowds in large part because of McGwire's exploits. Ejecting McGwire in his first at bat in this context was a broadsword through the civic breadbasket.

The astonishing act of good sportsmanship at the next day's game was noted only in passing in the newspapers. Such behavior was not news for St. Louis. There was absolutely no realization by the locals that there was anything unusual about their actions. It was appropriate to feel bad about poor civic behavior, and then to apologize for it by a public display. I may have been the only one at the baseball game who got goosebumps as I watched the amazed umpires doff their caps to the ovation during a full two minutes of thunderous appreciation. Good job, umps. You were just doing your jobs honestly. Sorry we yelled at you. We'll try to not let it happen again. Play ball!

I grew up in Los Angeles. I'm an alumnus of UCLA where my personal traditions derive out of a rivalry with the hated University of Southern California Trojans. I've waved my share of credit cards and currency at the cross-town rich kids of SC, and have had teddy bears (Bruins) on crucifixes waved in my direction. I've yelled creative obscenities with the best, have saluted with the one fingered peace sign on occasion, and taunted weeping Trojans with gusto (and been taunted as I wept as well). Losers. There is a large constituency in many sports markets that revels in raising poor sportsmanship literally to an art form.

But. After 10 years as an evolving midwesterner I've found St. Louis' good sportsmanship sensibility rubbing off on me. Sports fans in St. Louis want to win as much as any, take losses as hard as many, and criticize the management, players, and teams with the best (or worst). Because I've been growing up here for 10 years now, I'm learning. I've even found it in my heart to admire a previously hated USC Trojan. Thank you, Mark McGwire, USC class of 1984.

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