



NORMAN EINSTEIN'S SPORTS & ROCKET SCIENCE MONTHLY

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October 6th, 2000. The Seattle Mariners swept the Chicago White Sox in three games to advance past the Division Series playoff round for only the second time in franchise history. Carlos Guillen's bunt single in the bottom of the ninth drove in the winning run and the sellout crowd of 48,010 erupted. But, in the moments leading up to possibly the only exciting bunt in baseball history, the Safeco Field crowd was so silent a disinterested fan was heard talking on his cell phone about real estate.

Three years ago I moved to Boston, Massachusetts. Growing up a huge Seattle Mariners fan in the Pacific Northwest, I immediately embraced the baseball culture of Boston. The buzz on game days becomes visible. Red Sox hats and jerseys fill the city. Subway stations transform into red and blue mosh pits.

The Red Sox have everything I fear my Mariners lack: history, passion, and a deep connection to their city. In Boston, the Red Sox are bigger than sports.

Yet with every new season, I uncover new reserves of hope for a Seattle Mariners team that hasn't made the playoffs since 2001, has trouble selling tickets to a beautiful stadium, and

finds new ways to lose games. Though I don't particularly miss Seattle, year after year, I miss the Mariners.

The Major League Baseball season is almost a month old. Once again, I want little else than to hear the voice of the Mariners, Dave Niehaus, and his patented shouts of "[My oh my!](#)" And, once again, I wonder what tethers me to a team across the country with such a fine replacement right here in Boston.

According to the *Handbook of Industry Profiles*, which tracks a wide-range of consumer demographics, over 8.4 million American households move out of state every year. For fans, their team becomes a part of their city that can be packed up and taken along while leaving the city behind.

We don't get to choose these teams. Our teams are chosen for us by the city, by our friends, and by our families.

"I remember in 1987 when Grandpa passed away, we all piled into cars after the funeral, still dressed in our funeral attire, and went and cheered on the Brewers," says Theo Sery. Sery has lived in Wisconsin, Oregon, and now Alaska.

Sery admits, "Whenever I am asked where I am from, I am puzzled because I grew up in so many places. However, I always say that I am from Wisconsin. It is where my mind goes when I think of home." Supporting the Brewers embodies his loyalty to Milwaukee.

"Living in non-baseball cities makes it difficult to follow baseball because the game does not seem to help make up the collective ethos of the city," says Sery. "The team's colors become symbolic of the city. Green and gold are not inherently a part of Green Bay, Wisconsin, but because of the Packers, they are even more iconic than the autumn leaves. Think of the pinstripes in NYC. The people emotionally bond to these iconic combinations. In a non-sport city, the bond is strictly a bond with the media. You bond yourself to [a team's] actions and not the other way around."

Baseball is much more than a simple game. Too often it's reduced to the level of cliché, to *Field Of Dreams*, to simple nostalgia. We love watching athletes undertake superhuman feats. We get caught up in the drama of a well-played contest. But we also look up to our favorite athletes and, in doing so, grant these otherwise normal people their heroic personas.

"I remember seeing a giant photo of Robin Yount on a billboard and really feeling like he held the emotions of the city in his hand," says Sery. "The three titanic figures of the day - Yount, Molitor, and Gantner - really had the city wrapped around their fingers. If they played well, the city was happy. If not, the city was disappointed. That is why I root for the Brewers."

The uniforms and the stadium have changed. Robin Yount, Paul Molitor, and Jim Gantner are long gone. But the bond to these baseball heroes remains.

Walt McGough is a playwright based in Boston and co-founder of the [Sideshow Theatre Company](#). Originally from Pittsburgh, McGough is a Pirates fan. Like Sery, McGough's connection to his team can be traced to one iconic player.

"Two words: Doug Drabek," McGough says. "I went to a bunch of games with my dad growing up, and I had an airbrushed t-shirt with Doug Drabek's face on it. I remember both loving it and, even at the age of six, thinking he looked completely ridiculous."

I'll assume he was referring to the airbrushed shirt because there is absolutely nothing ridiculous about the magnificently mustachioed Drabek.

A team is a collection of larger-than-life characters, players who provide something for fans to hold on to even after moving away from their hometown.

For some, this connection to the team strengthens their bonds to the city. McGough, who described the Pirates as "the best minor league team in Major League Baseball," notes how following the Pirates "has made me realize just how much I love Pittsburgh, and how proud I am to be from there." Despite this pride, McGough doubts he'll ever move back.

"Sports are the easiest way to stay connected," says McGough.

Baseball, for him, also carries more weight than the Steelers or Penguins because the Pirates are flat out awful.

"Yes, I'm from Pittsburgh," McGough says, "and you can tell I really love it because I root for their terrible baseball team."

(Since I spoke to McGough, the Pirates lost 3 straight games to the Milwaukee Brewers by a combined score of 36-1 and called up a top pitching prospect Chris Jakubauskas only to see him hit in the head with a line drive in his first inning of work.)

McGough is not the only case where loving a terrible team bolsters the hometown claim.

"I have to deal with Red Sox fans telling me how bad the Giants have been in recent years, so it's up to me to defend my team," says Ryan Pfeiderer. Pfeiderer, a San Francisco Giants fan from Palo Alto, California, moved to Boston to attend Emerson College.

Pfeiderer hosts the sports talk radio show "[Overtime on ETIN](#)." He has been a San Francisco Giants fan since attending his first game at eight years old. He says he regularly stops people on Boston streets or subways if they're wearing Giants gear to talk about the team. He loves his team and his city and hopes to return for good some day.

"My dream is to have season tickets to the Giants, so I'll have to live there in order to make sure that works out," Pfeiderer says. "Nothing beats living there, you've got great sports, great weather, good food, and a vibrant community."

For all the fans who keep in touch with their teams and long to return home, there are others who move without their team in tow.

"I've always been on my way out of Houston," says Ted Walker, who moved to Seattle and "completely and unabashedly embraced the Mariners."

Walker dove headfirst into Mariners fandom, starting the blog [Every Day Ichiro](#) to chronicle his experience. He chose his team. Walker declares, with no hesitation, "I'm in. I'm on board. I'm a Mariners fan."

Walker grew up a fan of the Houston Astros. I wondered if he somehow escaped the gravity and personal baggage of the team chosen for him. Then he explained how he became a fan of the Astros "because they were the hometown team," and some of his best times there included going to the Astrodome or just talking about the team with his best friend.

Even after trading up his rooting interest, Walker voiced why we, as fans, will always be drawn to the team that chooses us.

"The Astros to me are a lot like Houston: it will always be there. If I want to go back, I'm always welcome because it's my hometown."

Everyone I interviewed about their baseball loves spoke of a deep connection with their family and friends, confirming what I suspected. Fans love their teams for reasons far beyond the game.

Even if it's only represented by a baseball team, comfort is found in being grounded in something, in knowing that there is somewhere called home. We might never go back, but the opportunity is always there. Walker hints at this while talking about the Astros. He has lived in New England, Chicago, and Seattle, but when it comes to the Houston, he says, "the Astros can't ever shake me if I ever choose to come back. I'm in too deep."

[Patrick is a Boston-based writer who grew up in Hawaii and Seattle. He once ate a raw chili pepper in exchange for Ken Griffey, Jr.'s rookie card. He writes for [There's No "I" In Blog](#). Follow him on [Twitter](#). To read more by Patrick, [check out his profile](#).]

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