



## Box Score Theology

*By Reni Dupertuis*

I teach religion at a liberal arts college in the buckle of the Bible Belt and am often asked what my religion is. As of a couple years ago, I respond as honestly as I can and admit that I'm a baseball fan. If pressed, I usually confess my denominational affiliation: I'm a Cub's fan.

People have long noted the similarities between religion and sports. Both typically draw large crowds of devoted followers. Both typically require of their members single-minded devotion. Both follow calendars that dictate when certain rituals and festivities take place and invest a great deal of intellectual and emotional energy explaining the significance of these activities.

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Baseball, for example, comes to life in the spring and goes underground in the fall. For what it's worth, this is a pattern that, like many Ancient Near Eastern religious traditions, coincides with the agricultural cycle. Ancients believed that if they didn't sacrifice to the fertility gods, their crops just wouldn't grow. The connection? Well, I know it's not rational, but deep down I believe that if I don't go to spring training or watch my college team's first or second batting practice summer won't happen.

Some of the parallels between baseball and religion are humorous. Think of thousands of fans congregating on a given day (often on the weekend) to participate in the ritual of cheering on their team. All gather at the temple stadium and watch a ritual drama between the forces of evil (the other

nerve because we live in Kentucky where University of Kentucky basketball is the local religion and everybody knows it. Sarah simply pointed out the obvious; David then showed it to the rest of us.

**T**he real reason I talk about baseball in language others reserve for religion is not for some lofty pedagogical goal. Baseball is much more than an academic exercise for me; it always has been. My dad and I discovered baseball at the same time. I was eight, I think. The kids at school were starting to play baseball during recess and surreptitiously trading Dave Kingman for Willie Stargell cards under desks during class.

I came home one day and asked that we learn

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team) and the forces of good (the fans' team) acted out before their eyes, stopping at the appointed times for certain scheduled rituals: responding in chorus to the prompt of an organ, a ritual meal (hot dogs anyone?), and singing time-honored hymns such as "Take Me Out to the Ball Game."

Recent baseball celebrations tend to be "seeker sensitive" in hopes of attracting the unbaseballed or those who have been lured away by the high flying and bone crushing options offered by the other sports churches of basketball and football. Baseball has reacted by playing hipper songs and leading us in cooler dances (not that the Macarena or the wave are cool now, but admit it, you once thought they were). And, dare I say, going to a baseball game is really about fellowship—you can watch the game at home but it's not the same.

When I go on about baseball using religious language to friends I usually get a smile. Some of the superficial similarities are there, but is there anything more? What about sports as religion? Academics are increasingly taking sports as religion seriously. My friend David Hall recently taught a course called Basketball as Religion at the suggestion of his wife, Sarah. The idea was to apply theories of religion to sports to determine whether the similarities are simply coincidental or if sports can have a religious or at least quasi-religious function.

David hit the jackpot with the class: students came in droves, then came the local press, the regional press, followed finally by the national press. The class hit a

something about this sport, knowing well that my Argentine dad would be a better guide into the mysteries of kicking a soccer ball than catching a small ball with pieces of sewn leather. That afternoon we went to Peanut Sports and bought a glove, a bat, and a ball. After an hour or so of clumsy attempts, we figured out how they worked and went back to Peanut Sports to buy another glove. At the time my dad was finishing his doctorate and working two jobs, but somehow he found time to play catch with me every day for the next few years. It was our time, our little protected bubble of time no one could take away.

A year after picking up a glove for the first time, I started to play in Little League. I volunteered to be the catcher because that's where the action was—even if you stunk, you could still be a part of every play. We went out and bought a Thurman Munson autographed catcher's mitt and got to work, and, thanks to Dad, I turned out to be a passable catcher. He loved to pitch and I liked to pretend I was Barry Foote of the Cubs (I secretly wanted to be Johnny Bench—alas, he was not a Cub).

For a guy who had never held a baseball before the age of forty, Dad developed a nasty slider and curveball. After catching those for an hour or two a day, the fluffy stuff nine-year-old pitchers were throwing looked like it was coming at me in slow motion.

When Dad and I found baseball, the Cubs found us. Though not that long ago, this was still a time when

just about every game was on local TV and Wrigley Field—only two hours away—had no lights. Every afternoon held the possibility, if I played it rightly, to catch a glimpse of my beloved Cubs. I couldn't always work it out but they were there to be watched, and more often than my mom and dad know, I did.

In 1980, Dad took me to my first Cubs' game—I can still remember the way the light hit the green grass as we walked into the stadium. The first live Cub I saw was Jesus Figueroa, a reserve outfielder, who was effortlessly running wind sprints along the left field ivy. I can still name the 1980 starting roster for the Cubs, and for reasons I cannot explain that is very important to me.

We moved to Mexico soon after that. I stopped playing organized baseball and following the Cubs as closely, but Dad and I continued to play catch. By the time I was in high school playing baseball gave way to obsessing about the Cubs. Since that time we have not missed the pithos of a single season.

Some time during my last years of college and the beginning of graduate school baseball box scores became important to me. A day could not start without a careful analysis of every hit, walk, and strikeout of the previous game. The other team was easy to do; the Cubs' side took time. There was something in those numbers, something hidden, some secret the universe had encoded for me to discover if only I worked hard enough. I'm not sure what I expected to find in the box scores, but I knew it was there. Maybe I was looking for signs that the present state of Cubs mediocrity was coming to an end. I never found that one line, that sequence of numbers that was to be my flashing neon sign saying This is it; It's finally here.

I must confess that I still look at box scores every morning, only now I've added to my routine the Triple-A Iowa Cubs and the Centre College Colonels. However, box scores are no longer about the one great day when my favorite player went 4 for 5 with 2 home runs, a double, a single, a walk and 7 runs batted in. Now it's about the patterns that emerge when you put lots of box scores together, about knowing enough about the past to hazard a good guess as to what will happen in the present and near future. Baseball, like life, requires that you play the odds based on the pattern of the past—lefty vs. righty, for example. You may still get burned on a given play, but it would be foolish not to assume the pattern will play itself out in the long run.

Besides the tantalizing potential of figuring out all the mysteries of the universe in a day, box scores offered something else. I studied them every morning through graduate school like assigned readings because they allowed me to be conversant with my dad. This, I think, is the real reason baseball matters to me. On days when Dad and I had a hard time communicating about most things that matter, we always had baseball. There were a few times when that's all we talked about. But we kept talking and eventually added the other things back in. Baseball is not a sport I do or a team I follow, it is something that is part of the fabric of the relationship my dad and I have had, currently have, and will have.

I don't think it's a coincidence that we're Cubs fans. There is something very Adventist about it. At the core of Adventism is the notion that we're living on the brink of something special—the reality of the kingdom may explode into our lives any day, any moment. This reality dances ahead of us, just out of reach. It is always present, it is always coming, it is always still ahead, so we wait. Since Dad and I have followed them, the Cubs have not put together back to back winning seasons, much less win the World Series, something they haven't won since 1908.

Last year there were signs the delay was finally over. The Cubs were five outs away from clinching a spot in the biggest dance of all when the universe blinked and their march to glory faltered. When they lost game six of the division series to the Marlins the baseball prophets all said they'd still pull it out, but I knew better. After game six I knew with a confidence I rarely have about anything that they would not go to the World Series and that the wait would continue. Why was I so sure? The Cubs' loss made sense within the pattern of history: the best things are ahead us, playfully dancing out of arm's reach.

As painful as this last season was, it wasn't all bad. Every year members of Cubdom fall back on the familiar refrain, "There's always next year." And there is, only this time we didn't have to wait as long for the bats to come out, the gloves to be oiled, and the box scores to show up at my doorstep. I view that as a kind of gift, a little one, but still a gift.

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