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Feeling Minnesota: The Art of Not Winning

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Feeling Minnesota: The Art of Not Winning

Abstract

There is an art to losing and understanding how it changes a person.

Keywords

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Comments

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MAY/JUNE 2014: AS WE SEE IT

Feeling Minnesota: The Art of Not Winning

by Jason Lief

"So who are you rooting for in the Super Bowl?" All week it was the same question. "I hope they both lose," is the response I gave. "Oh, but Peyton Manning—" Blah, blah, blah. Yes, great football player, even better Saturday Night Live host—his United Way skit is comedy gold. Still, I wanted him to lose. "But the Seahawks, come on, they've never won a Super Bowl. Surely you'll root for them?" Nope. I wanted them to lose too. Big. Why, do you ask, am I such a Super Bowl curmudgeon? Why this "bah humbug" Super Bowl spirit? Because I'm a Minnesota Vikings fan and that's what I'm reduced to—rooting for others to share my misery. When I was younger I would scoff at all of the jaded Vikings fans. I'd meet people from Minnesota, wise veterans of life who bore the battle scars of cold winters and giant mosquitoes. "I'm a Vikings fan," I'd say, to which I'd receive a sly smile and eye roll. "I gave up on them years ago." I never understood it. "Stay faithful!" I'd say. Now, years later, I understand.

I haven't given up; I still watch. I follow them in the newspaper and on the web. I talk with my football buddies on the sidewalk about coaching moves and quarterbacks. (I was hoping "Smokin" Jay Cutler would become a free agent.) I've even let my son get sucked in—even though my wife thought it best to steer him elsewhere. Why? I've come to embrace the ethos of losing. I know, I know—it's not cool to embrace losing. We live in a culture of "winning." Look at all of the money made in self-help leadership books all geared toward helping us become "winners." Good for them—I've found solace in losing. Not just losing, but really blowing it: missed-opportunities, rip-your-heart-out, lose-in-the-last-second "not winning." Gary Anderson hadn't missed a field goal all year long until the 1998 NFC championship game—wide right. Brett Favre just needed to run for five yards, kick the field goal and go to the Super Bowl—interception. Game over. Anyone can hold their head high when things are going well; anyone can have hope for the future in victory. Picking yourself off of the floor after a devastating loss? Having the courage to look failure straight in the eye without blinking? That, my friends, takes courage.

My family is from Minnesota, which is why I bleed purple. It's in my DNA, formed by hours of listening to my dad, grandpa and uncle argue about the pathetic excuse for a football team. Most of the time they would talk about the good ol' days of the Purple People Eaters and Fran Tarkenton. If you know your NFL history, the difference between the Vikings of the 1970s and the current squad is that back then they waited until the big game to blow it. Four Super Bowl appearances—four Super Bowl losses. Those were the good times. When I think about my family and their embrace of all things purple, I think about the pessimism—the glass was usually half empty. But I also think about their grace and compassion. They were never wealthy, never in positions of power, never "winners" according to current standards. But any one of them would give you the shirt off his or her back if you needed it. Losing has a way of fostering compassion, humility and grace. So here's to the Vikings, to lovable losers and being formed by our failure. I did make it through most of the Super Bowl. I endured Percy Harvin, a former Viking, running back the opening kickoff of the second half, but I couldn't make myself watch Tavaris Jackson, Seattle's backup quarterback and former Viking starter, take the field in the fourth quarter. That's just rubbing it in.

Jason Lief teaches theology at Dordt College, Sioux Center, Iowa, and is co-editor of Perspectives. This piece first appeared in Perspectives' blog, "The Twelve," on Jan. 30.

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