



Reflections of a River Rat:

Going to the Dark Side

By Jim Holleran

Sports have the power to turn any grown man or woman into a sort of Luke Skywalker. Sports are Darth Vader staring you down as his voice rumbles: "If you only knew the power of the Dark Side."

The Dark Side of sports is fandom.

It's safe when you're on the Light Side of the Force. Sports editors are on the Light Side. They can watch Super Bowl XXV and decide the top story and sidebars (the Scott Norwood kick, the Giants play keep away with their running game) and what catch phrase will make the best headline (Wide Right).

Reffing is on the Light Side. Coaches try to referee from their perspective on the floor, begging for calls and planting seeds ("she didn't get on the floor by herself!"). You remain dispassionate, impartially applying the rules. You reside in Switzerland.



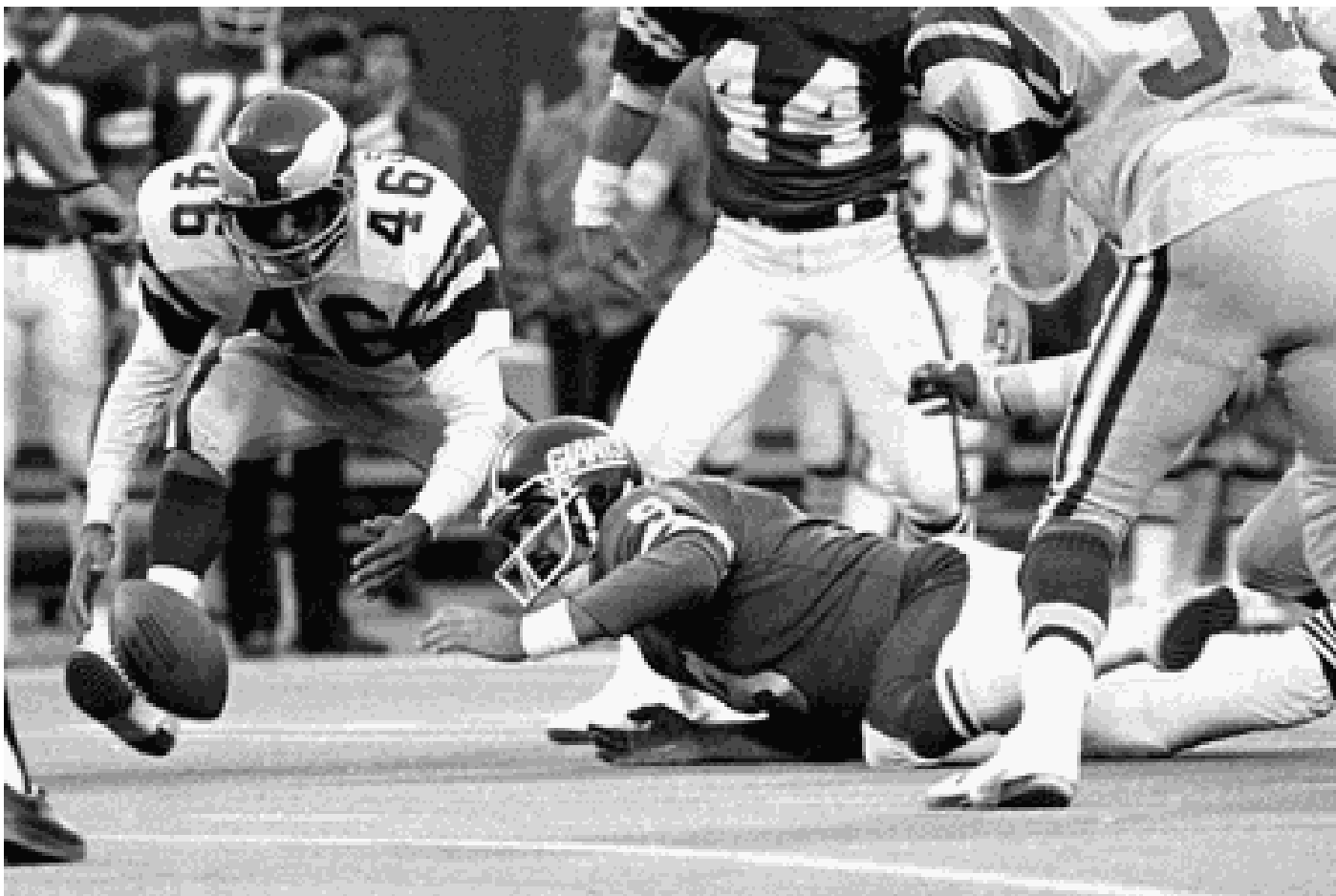
But once you cross over to fandom, listening to a '69 Knicks broadcast under your bedcovers or sitting in a monsoon at Rich Stadium in Orchard Park, you have gone to the Dark Side. Being a fan is frustrating, maddening, aggravating and painful with sprinklings of hope, tension and drama. Being a fan rarely provides clarity and insight, and never enough satisfaction.

When you're a fan, you don't navigate the staid business and administrative side of sports. When you're a fan, you have crossed over, past the Twilight Zone to the Dark Side, where your team loses much more often than it wins championships. You're a budding Chris Farley living in a van down by the river.

I prefer the keyboard over the boxseat. It's emotionally safer. But I have a history of turning to the Dark Side since 1969. It started well enough. Cazzie Russell had made an appearance at my basketball camp, and that winter "Cazzie from the corner!" became a signature call during late-night clandestine rendezvouses with the Knicks when I was supposed to be asleep. It culminated with Willis Reed limping into the Garden for a Game 7 rout of the Lakers and an NBA title.

A year later, my next pick didn't go so well. In November, I gave up my paper route to my brother Fran to become the basketball manager for Larry Casey. The Morristown Green Rockets went winless in the 1969-70 season, and Fran collected all my Christmas tips. Kit Smith, Earl Bice, David Durant, Steve Sherry and Billy Hockey were great guys, but we won only one game the next year. Still, not a nickel from my stinking brother.

The New York Giants lured me into their clutches in 1970 when they looked like a playoff team but lost the last regular-season game. They finished second behind the stinking Dallas Cowboys and out of the playoffs. Fran Tarkenton arrived as the savior the next season and the Giants went 4-10. Tarkenton was banished to the stinking Vikings, who promptly went to three Super Bowls. I was stuck with Joe Pisarcik fumbling away games while Fran Holleran unceremoniously turned off the TV with his foot. For a year, we used needle-nose pliers to turn the set on and off. Homer Jones would beat the stinking Cowboys deep and drop the ball. Aaaargghhh.



At Buffalo State in 1975, I was force-fed the Bills through the local media in the pre-ESPN era. OJ Simpson traveled behind the Electric Company, not a white Ford Bronco, but the Bills never made the playoffs. They struggled through a 20-game losing streak to the stinking Dolphins. I came back from my newspaper job in Ohio for a rain-drenched game in 1979 when the Bills looked like they were finally going to end their misery. Trailing 9-7 with only enough time for a field-goal attempt, I watched a wall of wind and rain off Lake Erie push Tom Dempsey's kick just outside the uprights. My friend at The Buffalo News was annoyed when we phoned in a callous headline – Dempsey misses field goal by half a foot. The journalism gods paid me back fourfold for that one about 20 years later.

The Buffalo Braves were a college kid's dream. After a 35-cent bus ride down Elmwood Avenue, you could sit in the nosebleed seats of the Aud for \$1.50. Affordable for a college student. The Braves offered a former rookie of the year in Ernie DiGregorio, reigning MVP Bob McAdoo and Buff State's skywalker, Randy Smith. They were young, talented and couldn't get past the stinking Celtics. They imploded the next two seasons and moved to San Diego. Stinking Clippers.

When I worked in suburban Cleveland, I joined the Ohio branch of the Dark Side for the early 1980s. The Indians were entertaining if not mediocre. Super Joe Charboneau had overcome a stabbing in Mexico, then hit 23 homers to win 1980 AL rookie of the year. But he was remembered more for his dyed hair, drinking beer through his nose, and fixing a broken nose with some pliers and a few shots of Jack Daniel's. He flamed out from injuries after three seasons. The Indians pilot light dimmed too. They went from .500 to division bottom feeders by '83.

The other tenant at Cleveland's Municipal Stadium, the Browns, had become the Kardiak Kids with a series of late-game rallies. They got to 11-5 in the 1980 season before breaking a city's heart with a playoff loss to the stinking Raiders. The clinching interception, Red Right 88, gave me and the city the red ass until I moved to Rochester in 1984.

Back in Western New York, I immersed myself in the Bills when I joined the copy desk of the Democrat and Chronicle sports department. I toiled on the Light Side for most of each week, trying to figure out how to present consecutive 2-14 teams to the reading public. For 3 hours each Sunday, I withdrew to the Dark Side. The malaprops of interim coach Hank

Bullough helped me cope. He became the Yogi Berra of the NFL with thoughts like "we keep beating ourselves, but we're getting better at it."

The 1990s brought an unprecedented four consecutive Super Bowls and unprecedented four consecutive losses. The Bills lifted our emotions to a precipice, then cast them over the edge. The Super Bowls were a blur. We were consumed by the daily sports report plus four bonus pages each day. On the weekend, we published a 20-page special section with eight pages the day afterward. The Big Game seemed like an afterthought. We resorted to tailgating in the parking garage about 1 a.m. after the game. Out came the beer, chips, some golf clubs for a chipping contest. The homeless guys sleeping near the steam grates fared the best. Their next morning was like Christmas Day. They awoke to find the extra beers.

I simply did not know how to find a winner. I met Larry Casey, Tim Pitcher and Don Gordon of Hammond, Robert Drummond of Heuvelton and a few others to play 3-on-3 basketball in the Empire State Senior Games. Playing with Larry, a boyhood mentor, convinced me to join. He convinced me we would win. We lost all three games of the play-in round. All we got was a T-shirt. My stinking participation trophy. The next year we added Mike Hebert of Heuvelton to play point guard. Larry convinced me we would win. We kept our record perfect – 0 for 6. We didn't even get a stinking participation T-shirt.



My beloved Cleveland Indians lured me back to the Dark Side in the early 90s. Who watches the deliberate, almost pedestrian action of baseball on TV? Me! I contracted with MLB.com to buy the Indians road games. Because I live outside their market, they tossed in the home games for free. I won't pay for cable TV and its lousy service, but I do get roughly 155 Indians games annually. That defines dedication. My wife terms it obsession.

There were three teams that bore long World Series droughts in the last 15 years. The Indians hadn't won the Series since 1948, with Larry Doby and Satchel Paige integrating the American League. The Red Sox had endured the Babe Ruth curse since 1918. The Cubs were the worst. They hadn't won it since 1908.

The Indians teased me in 2008. They built a 3-1 best-of-seven ALCS lead against and carried a 3-1 lead into the seventh inning of a potential clincher. Then reliever Jose Mesa began shaking off his catcher. By the time his bobblehead moment had ended, Boston rallied and the ALCS returned to Fenway Park where Boston won the last two. That was the year the BoSox snapped their World Series drought. It had been tantalizingly close to becoming a Cleveland triumph. Stinking Red Sox. Stinking *Sweet Caroline*.

2016 looked like the year. The pitching was superb and Frankie Lindor and Jose Ramirez were knocking down fences en route to the World Series. The Tribe's 3-1 lead had shrunk to 3-2, but the Series shifted to Cleveland. I met my old housemates downtown before Game 6. We couldn't justify \$300 scalped tickets on top of the bar bill so we watched on TV. Later, we wandered down to Progressive Field and watched on the big screens behind the left-field wall. The Cubs blew them out so we returned home. Game Seven at home – I liked the odds. Wait, I'm deep into the Dark Side – our odds.

The next night, the torture continued in my own living room. Cleveland was nearly out of fresh arms and fell behind early. Rajai Davis dug in against Aroldis Chapman while the scoreboard blinked 100 mph. When Davis lined a two-run homer for a tie, it was fandemonium. The suspense built in the ninth when a rain delay struck. Then the dream evaporated in the 10th inning. Chicago ended its 108-year drought. Stinking Cubs. Stinking ghosts of Ernie Banks and Harry Caray.

So when the Buffalo Sabres lose 18 in a row, I remember they have reached the Stanley Cup Finals twice and lost. No big deal. With that streak, they have kissed the playoffs goodbye.

There are still two teams that I haven't touched on. I didn't pick them; it was done for me by Francis and Eileen Holleran. The Irish endured centuries of abuse at the hands of the British. Stinking Cromwell. But there is hope for the Catholics. It's Easter Sunday. Celebrate. Christ the Lord is risen today. Stinking Judas.

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