

Boston's Fatalism vs. Philly's Cynicism

TOM DURSO

PHILADELPHIA

Fess up, Boston fans. Not only do you enjoy your status as baseball's premier fatalists; you revel in it. When Pedro Martinez took the hill against the Devil Rays on March 31 for the first pitch of the Red Sox' season, you once again climbed aboard the bandwagon, praying for success but expecting failure. And you wouldn't have it any other way.

The Sox, eternally two games behind the Yankees, are simply a sporting representation of New England's perpetual near-success. A grand plan to ease Boston's famously awful downtown driving scene ends up as the Big Dig, awash in corruption and beset by cost overruns. The rebirth of Providence is marred by a City Hall scandal so notorious it attracts federal attention. Homeboy Ben Affleck is about to get hitched to Jennifer Lopez, but all the media can talk about is the stomped-on heart of Cris Judd, J-Lo's Husband No. 2.

None of this surprises you, does it? Rather, it provides a ready-made worldview, shaping Boston as a city and New England as a region. Whenever any fine run of luck -- civic, sporting, or otherwise -- ends in inevitable heartbreak, you take the disappointment and nurse it, turning it something you wear as a badge of honor.

Living, breathing examples of what I observe are my Boston-area in-laws, both of them

transplants -- she with an upbringing in Philadelphia, and he born in the Deep South and raised the son of a preacher who evangelized in missions as far away as Brazil.

It doesn't matter where you're from. If you live near Boston and root for its teams, you succumb to fatalism as swiftly as Mookie Wilson's grounder ate up poor Billy Buckner. A phone call from my in-laws to my wife during any NFL Sunday produces the obligatory Patriots chit-chat, which often includes a winning Patriot score followed by the certainty that they're about to blow the game.

I know whereof I speak, for I am a lifelong Philadelphian. Like you, we live in the shadow of Gotham, a city whose teams we love to hate but whose fine citizens can't be bothered even to dislike us a little.

Unlike you, however, we take no kind of noble pride in our losses. What we nurture is a dark, dark spite -- the kind of thing that makes us want to kick puppies as we walk to our cars from our sad excuse of a stadium.

Boston, after all, lost the 1975 World Series, but the enduring image from those games, indeed, one of baseball's most evocative moments, is one of success: Carlton Fisk willing his dinger to keep to the right side of the foul pole, then leaping in ecstasy and unbridled joy when the ball stayed fair.

Philadelphia's most recent Series, in 1993, produced no such clip. What will remain in highlight reels forever is not Lenny Dykstra crashing two homers in Game 4 (a 15-14 Phillies loss, of course), or Curt Schilling tossing a brilliant shutout the following night. It's Joe Carter taking Mitch Williams's limp "here, hit me" fastball and launching it over SkyDome's left-field wall.

Just as you bemoan your woes, we've endured similar failure here. Our Phillies have lost more games than any franchise in American professional-sports history. Just think about that for a minute. The Flyers and Sixers have flirted with championships but come up empty since the early 1980s. And the Eagles, though finally considered a model football franchise, still haven't won a championship in more than four decades.

But while Boston's disappointments have

fostered a kind of charming fatalism, Philadelphia's have led to a nasty cynicism. You shrug your shoulders, accept that that's the way it's going to be, and look forward to next year with cautious optimism. We drain our \$6 cup of flat, warm Budweiser, gnash our teeth, and wing a snowball at Santa Claus.

Both of our fine cities have enough going for them to wave off athletic failures. It's fine -- great, really -- that we're not New York. One Big Apple is enough. Yet between your fatalism and our cynicism, I'll take the former every time. It is more noble and, probably, healthy to nurture hope in the face of the long odds of history than to accept bitterness and failure as inevitable.

Although that year, Santa probably had it coming.

Tom Durso is a lifelong Phillies fan.