

# FALL, FRIDAY NIGHT, AND FOOTBALL

The town is all abuzz about Friday night. The Cedar Crossing Bears are 8–0 and have the home field advantage over conference rival Martinsburg, who are also 8–0 on the season. Smaller towns generally take their football seriously in this neck of the woods.

I went into the barber shop the other day and the big matchup was all everybody talked about. Most of the men talking grew up here in Cedar Crossing, never played football, or have no children playing football (I take that back, sort of, as one man has a grandchild playing on the Cedar Crossing Bears team), but they never miss a home game. As far as any of those ancient fans could recall, there had never been an occasion where these two teams both had perfect records so late in the season.

After I left the barbershop, I stopped by the hardware store and found Jess Hawkins and Tom Mallory having a somewhat heated argument about

whether today's 8–0 team could beat the 8–0 team of 1969.

Across the street at the Cedar Crossing Gazette newspaper office, you could see a big sign in the window that said, “See you Friday night at the game. Go, Bears!”.

My own interest, besides that required as a resident, came about because my daughter is a cheerleader and I have invested a lot of gas and time in picking her up from cheerleading practice. Not only that, but I labored hard with the principal to get just a tad more modesty in the cheerleaders' outfits. I tried to do my pleading in a low-key, behind-the-scenes approach. I question my furtiveness, though, ever since Barbie Weatherspoon, my daughter's best friend, fellow cheerleader, and member of our parish, accidentally misspoke my name. Instead of Pastor Arnie, she said Pastor Blarney. I let it slide, though, because as her pastor, she knows I will take retribution later.

Friday night eventually came around and the stadium overflowed with fanatics, I mean fans, of the hallowed sport of football. A good number of brave souls from Martinsburg filled the south

bleachers. Bear brown or black dominated everything else. My wife and I sat at about the 40-yard line halfway up the stands. The drummer from the Bears' marching band stirred the passion of the home crowd, as if they really needed firing up. Nevertheless, tradition mandated such stirring as part of the pregame program. When the drummer finished the warmup exercise, the teams came charging out onto the field. My wife said something to me, but the crowd noise completely drowned her out.

After a period of stretching, jumping up and down, slamming shoulder pads, and butting helmets, the teams stretched out along the sidelines. The announcer blared over the loudspeaker to stand for the color guard and join in the singing of the national anthem.

When the color guard marched off the field, each team gathered in a huddle for a prayer—yes, they still do that in most of small-town America. I served for a couple of years as the team chaplain, but I always had an awkward feeling about the pregame prayer. In the middle of a group of fired-up testosterone cases eager to get started, I often found what words I spoke of kindness and peace

somewhat at odds with going out to obliterate your opponent. I know many other clergy didn't have that problem, but I did. By necessity, the prayer was pretty generic. I much preferred working with the kids on non-game days. I could then remind them to extend a hand to the opposing players that they just knocked on their rears.

Tonight, we'll be watching our daughter, of course, but also #76–Riley Wolfe, the hulking son of Jack and Margo Wolfe, two of our hard-working farmers and parish members. We'll likewise be watching for #16–Thomas Coffers and #23–Roger Monroe, both also members of our parish, but as sophomores, probably won't be starting tonight.

While the game will hopefully be a good battle and fun to watch, sometimes it can also be fun to watch the people in the stands watching the game. Fellow students come with an array of team colors, attire, signs, and symbols. Two lads wore full bear costumes and were probably the warmest people at the game. I had a teacher in our parish who once made the comment to me that she wished a few of her students could be half as creative in English class as they were at football games.

Interclass competition to cheer the loudest added to the boisterous environment.

My daughter and my wife both informed me that I could not wear any type of clerical garb at a football game. They seemed rather insistent about it, though I've seen no sign stating that prohibition. Little do they know that I'm wearing a football jersey under my coat that promotes the football program of Westchester Lutheran, the college where I did the first four years of my theological studies. If I get too warm, I may just unzip my jacket. I am aware of the rights granted to me by the U.S. Constitution—I think.

Two rows down from where we sat, I saw Eleanor MacPherson, a demure, petite mother of four athletic boys. Prior to last year, when her oldest son first began playing varsity football, I had not known of her particular condition. It seems this lovely, charming woman, when entering a football stadium, becomes a ... well ... a boisterous, aggressively loud partisan fan in the stands. The next day, when seen on the street, she is once again the shy wife and mother. No one has yet fully investigated this metamorphosis. I, for one, shall remain merely an observer.

About midway through the first quarter, my wife and I detected the easily recognizable smell of beer. Inconspicuously turning around as if I was looking farther up in the stands, I found the man sitting directly behind us to be Billie Edwards. Billie knows there is no alcohol allowed in the stadium, but he brings it in anyway. Eventually, someone will see him taking a swig from a brown paper bag and report him to security. Then security will come and escort him out of the stadium. By now, security knows him and will always check him at the gate. It is with a small amount of admiration that I look at Billie and his creativity in continuing to get in while concealing the beer, and yet it is with great sadness that I see the complete waste of such creative thought.

Halftime eventually rolls around, and the bands get to do their thing. The brief rest period will enable both teams to regroup and adjust their strategies. So far, the match has lived up to expectations with the score tied at 14–14. Fortunately, I hit the concession stand just before the half ended and safely managed to come away with two fat dogs, I mean hot dogs, 1 coke, and 1 diet coke (according to my wife the diet coke counteracts the fat

in the hot dog, but I am grateful that such thoughts never enter my head). My wife has rather pathetic tastes in hot dogs, preferring hers plain. I, on the other hand, load up with generous amounts of every topping available in order to get my money's worth. I know, the concession stand's profits end up supporting the athletic program, but it's the principle involved. Besides, with the crisp fall air, all the extra toppings help to conserve the warmth of the hot dog, making it taste even better.

Midway through the third quarter, Roger Monroe, the sophomore from our parish, caught a pass at the 50-yard line and outran the defender to score a long touchdown. When the crowd on our side of the field finally settled down, I spotted Barb and Jack Monroe, proud parents of the lad, a few rows up and gave them a thumbs-up. The fourth quarter saw a goal-line stand by each team, and so Roger's touchdown run ended up being the decisive score in a hard-fought victory for the Cedar Crossing Bears.

When we finally got back to our car, I pulled out my small black notebook and made a note to call Pastor Eric Lingefelter and offer a word of encouragement for the loss. Pastor Lingefelter's son

plays linebacker for the losing Martinsburg team. The synodical ethics and policy manual requires that we offer support for our fellow clergy in certain circumstances. Of course, it doesn't specify high school football losses, but you have to read between the lines sometimes. I felt that this was one of those discretionary moments when it was important to remind Eric many times that Roger Monroe, a member of my parish, scored the winning touchdown. He should at least take solace in that it wasn't an atheist that put the nail in their coffin.

The Bears won their last game of the season the next week by the score of 52 – 0 and ended up ranked #2 in the state for smaller schools. The Cedar Crossing community continued to talk about the season for months afterwards. I even added to the spirit by elaborating in a sermon how we, as Christians, should handle winning in the secular world. I also talked about how we should handle losses as well (I thoughtfully mailed a copy of that sermon to Rev. Lingefelter in Martinsburg).

A week or two before Christmas, we received a Christmas card from the Lingefelters, and it showed no ill feelings towards us for Cedar



Crossing's glorious victory over Martinsburg. It seemed a little odd, though, that Eric included a listing of the scores for every meeting between Cedar Crossing and Martinsburg over the last 50 years. When I showed it to my wife, she just rolled her eyes.

Sitting in front of a crackling fire on a cold January evening with a hot cocoa in hand, I began contemplating if we, as bearers of the Gospel, could learn anything from football. I know it's a stretch, but if you can't think outside the box in front of a crackling fire with a hot cocoa in hand, when would you ever be able to.

I actually planted the seed for such thought while sitting in the stands of the big game between Cedar Crossing and Martinsburg. As I looked out across the stadium, I saw nary an empty spot in the bleachers. Compare that to the average church on Sunday morning when you would find nary a full pew. I suppose, to be fair, that if you took the biggest church building in the area and had all the different denominations come into that church at the same time, it might look much more encouraging. But, of course, that will never happen as the church has fallen victim to Satan's strategic plan of divide

and conquer. What then is the draw that will fill a stadium and leave a church half empty?

Most assuredly, a perfect winning season would fill a stadium and a losing season would not. So, if the contrast between winning and losing can make that big a difference in attendance for the game of football, how does that compare to the success or failure of the church? A win in football is plain enough, but what should we consider a win in Christianity? The answer, of course, is bringing a person's soul to Christ. Paul had numerous instances when he referred to winning people for Christ. Sadly, though, we don't really celebrate that win in the church with the same fervor that a community celebrates a win on the football field. I know, I know. It's just not the same. One is just a game. The other involves the life of the human spirit. Hardly a fair comparison, but remember, I'm just ruminating. Some church statisticians will cite the growth in numbers of the megachurches, but they rarely mention the losses of precious souls.

“I'm going to bed, Arnie,” said my wife. “Are you coming?”

“Not yet, dear. I’m ruminating a little right now.”

“Well, don’t stay up too late, sweetie. Remember, even the cows sleep.”

“Very funny ... goodnight.”

Now, where was I? Oh, yeah. I had a colleague once, who with a church very similar to the one here in Cedar Crossing, often lamented about the numbers in his church. The members of his congregation were largely conservative-minded farmers who liked to do things the way they’d done them for two hundred years. Not that he necessarily had a problem with that, but it didn’t lend itself to much flexibility in spreading the Gospel. It would kind of be like giving the ball to the fullback and having him run the same play off tackle every time. The one number that he had the most problem with was new members who joined the church by profession of faith as compared to transfer or birth. In the last five years of his ministry there, they only had one person join who was not already a believer or born into a family of believers. Transfers were almost nonexistent because of the nature of the community and, with an aging congregation,

deaths outnumbered births. I never really had a good answer for him as to how to change that. I guess I could compare it to a high school with a football team that perpetually had losing seasons. The stands are rarely filled, and high school football is rarely the talk at the local barber shop. The coaches have tried a multitude of different strategies, but to no avail. It's almost like they're waiting for some messiah to give them the answer.

In an odd sort of way, maybe we need to study the transformation of Eleanor MacPherson, the demure and petite mother of four athletic boys that I previously mentioned ... but my cup of cocoa is empty and maybe I'm just getting tired and should join the cows who have stopped ruminating ... I only hope Pastor Lingefelter can appreciate the compassion I showed him in his time of loss when he has the home field advantage next year.