

Dilemma of a Knick (and Anti-Celtic) Fan

By JEFF GREENFIELD

"The child is the father to the man," said Wordsworth, thus demonstrating this romantic poet's keen insight into the deepest soul of the contemporary American sports fan—at least, this contemporary American sports fan.

For what other explanation, other than the sheer indestructibility of childhood impulses, can explain my emotional confusion these last three National Basketball Association playoff seasons. In 1974, I was beginning research on a book about the Boston Celtics; in 1975, I was attending most of the Celtic playoff games; last year, the book completed, I was an interested bystander.

In each of these seasons I had a direct, personal interest in the success of the Celtics. The more championships they won, the more they would validate the book's thesis (and title), that this was indeed "the world's greatest team." The more the Celtics built on the legends of the Russell-Sharman-Cousy-Heinsohn-Jones-Jones years, the more the chances of my book selling.

So what was I doing silently cursing each John Havlicek-triggered fast break, each Dave Cowens rebound and outlet pass, each Jo Jo White jumper? Why did I feel such joy when Kareem Abdul Jabbar's sky hook sent the 1974 playoff finals into the seventh game?

Why could I scarcely conceal my pleasure when K. C. Jones's Washington Bullets knocked the Celtics off in 1975? And why was I so let down when Boston finally won that triple overtime fifth game last year in Phoenix?

Like Clipping Coupons

The answer, I believe, is that the child in me is in firm command, leaving the rational checkbook-balancing, taxpaying grownup in me writhing in a hammer lock of unsuppressed emotion. As a longtime Yankee fan in the days of the Dan Topping-Del Webb dynasty, I could never understand friends who called themselves, chillingly, "anti-Yankee fans," rooters whose loyalties lay with any team that stood between the Yankees and another pennant or world championship. And yet, I now see, I was developing in those years a powerful, allied notion: I was becoming an "anti-Celtic fan."

Year after year, as the helpless New York Knicks fell 14, 20, 30, 35 games

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off the lead, the Celtics would clinch the title by some ridiculously early date (Palm Sunday? Washington's Birthday? Twelfth Night?) and hang another banner in Boston Garden, until that ancient arena began to look like the showroom of a Turkish rug merchant. While Russell, and Cousy, and Sharman, and Sam, and K.C., and Havlicek, and Sanders climbed the stairway to basketball's Pantheon, we New Yorkers suffered as Ernie Vanderweghe and Harry Gallatin and Ray Felix and Willie Naulls and Carl Braun and Sweetwater Clifton got to clean out their lockers by the first glint of the vernal equinox.

Even when the Knicks became contenders, we anti-Celtic fans never really got our full measure of vengeance. After years of games in which the dominant impression was one of a dozen green-clad players streaking past a Madame Tussaud's defense, the Knicks came to glory at precisely the wrong time.

In 1969, the new Knicks (Reed, Frazier, deBusschere, Bradley, Barnett) were beaten by the Celtics on their way to their last Russell-era title. The next year, the Celtics were out of the playoffs and the Knicks were denied the pleasure of lambasting them en route to their first title.

Only in 1972 did the Knicks convincingly beat the Celtics in the playoffs, and that was spoiled by the loss to the Lakers in the finals (Boston fans claim—with depressing credibility—

that the Knicks got to the finals in 1973 only because of Havlicek's shoulder separation.)

The Horns of a Dilemma

So what I found I carried with me as I began work on the Celtics' book was more than 15 years worth of insane jealousy, envy, the classic hostility of the loser to the winner. Even as my inner grownup whispered sweet dreams of increased royalties and paperback sales with each Celtic score, my inner adolescent was remembering metaphorical New York blood all over that parquet floor up in Boston. And so my gut was rooting one way even as my head was telling me to cool it.

I suppose I am happy that Boston is again a champion; that it is, even without Cowens, a contending team. And I suppose it is damaging to my book's thesis that the once-tightly knit Boston organization seems to be afflicted by tensions and emotional upheaval. But as I read that there is trouble in Boston—between players and players, between players and coach—there is still a small part of me that is breathing a sneaky sigh of satisfaction.

Perhaps when the view from the balcony at Madison Square Garden begins to be obstructed by a dozen championship banners or so, this child will depart. Until then, no matter how much it hurts my pocketbook, I'll keep pulling for the other guy. You don't quiet a child all that easily.