

## The Boston Red Sox of 2004: Connections to the Past and to the Future

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I usually write my monthly articles a few days before the end of the month. On the evening of October 30 I said to my wife, "I've been so busy with speaking engagements and so caught up watching the Red Sox in the playoffs and World Series that I haven't even started to write my monthly article." I added, "Not only haven't I started to write the article, I haven't even had time to think of a topic."

My wife said, "Why don't you write about the Red Sox?"

The idea intrigued me. Similar to many New Englanders and other fans throughout the United States, I feel a strong attachment to the Red Sox (is it any wonder that the fans are referred to as "Red Sox Nation"?). As is well known, even among those who are not sports fans, the Red Sox have just captured their first World Series since 1918 and in the process they truly had tapped a reservoir of emotions in their fans. Although they swept a very solid St. Louis Cardinals team in four games, in order to reach the World Series they first had to play the New York Yankees for the American League pennant. After losing the first three games to the Yankees, they staged the greatest comeback in playoff history by winning the next four games. The infamous "Curse of the Bambino," a myth (I should note that some people do not believe it is a myth) stemming from the sale of Babe Ruth from the Red Sox to the Yankees, was finally lifted.

Yet, at first I hesitated about writing an article that focused on the Red Sox. I thought, "My monthly articles are about psychological themes. Many of my readers may not even be sports or baseball fans." It is true that I have written a couple of pieces about youth sports and last month I wrote about Joe Ehrmann, a former professional football player and now a minister and high school coach, who instills wonderful life lessons in his players. But writing about the Red Sox and their World Series seemed more appropriate for *Sports Illustrated* than my monthly website article.

However, the more I thought about my wife's suggestion, the more I wanted to write about the Red Sox and the reaction of fans to their victory. I told myself that this was more than a sports story. It was a

story about connections and relationships, of bonds between parents and children, of perseverance, hope, and resilience. And then I wondered, “Are you attempting to cast the Red Sox victory in psychological terms to justify writing an article about them for your website?” Another part of me countered, “Well, even so, it’s still an interesting story.” I should note that my friends who are Yankee fans have agreed that the Red Sox story of 2004 is newsworthy, although perhaps depressing to most of them. As this inner dialogue about whether to write a story about the Red Sox continued, I told myself to sleep on it and decide tomorrow.

I am writing this article on the morning of October 31 having just finished reading accounts in *The Boston Globe* of the Red Sox victory parade held yesterday that was attended by an estimated three million people. As I read interviews with the fans and first-hand accounts of the impact of the World Series win, I reflected on the current Red Sox team and my and my family’s reactions to their victory. However, I also thought about another beloved team, the Brooklyn Dodgers, a team that brought great joy to me almost 50 years ago. I thought about noted historian Doris Kearns Goodwin’s book about these Dodgers, *Wait Till Next Year*. I decided to write the article my wife had suggested.

I realize that baseball or any sport may be seen as “just a game,” especially when one considers the many significant issues facing us in today’s world such as terrorism, war, poverty, racism, and the economy. However, in considering my personal experiences and in reading interviews in *The Boston Globe*, I believe that one can find an important place for “just a game,” a place that adds meaning to our lives.

I grew up in Brooklyn, New York in the 1950s. During my childhood there were three professional baseball teams in New York City, the Dodgers, the Giants, and the Yankees. The Dodgers had never won a World Series. Dodger fans experienced the same frustrations that Red Sox fans have felt. There was the loss of a playoff series to the Giants in 1951 to determine the National League champions and then losses in the World Series to the Yankees in 1952 and 1953. Similar to Red Sox fans, Dodger fans always uttered the refrain, “Wait until next year.” In 1955, the Dodgers won the National League pennant and once again faced the Yankees in the World Series. The Yankees won the first two games in Yankee Stadium. Not surprisingly, the borough of Brooklyn appeared to

have a black cloud hovering over it. Would Dodger fans once again say, “Wait till next year”?

Not in 1955. The Dodgers won the next three games at their home park, Ebbets Field, lost the sixth game at Yankee Stadium, and won a memorable seventh game at Yankee Stadium, 2-0, behind the superb pitching of Johnny Podres. It would be their only World Series victory while in Brooklyn; they moved to Los Angeles after the 1957 season. As the final out of the 1955 World Series was recorded, my brother and I shouted with joy. I vividly remember the smile on my mother’s face. She knew little about baseball, but appreciated the significance of what had just transpired. I recall the smile on my father’s face when he came home from work. And I will never forget the sound of honking car horns until the wee hours of the morning. It was one of the happiest memories of my childhood. It brought people close together if only for a short time.

In 1997, I read Doris Kearns Goodwin’s book about her childhood growing up in New York and the close bond she shared with her father in their love for the Dodgers. I was very moved by what she wrote. It re-awakened memories of my youth. Similar to myself, Goodwin moved to the Boston area to attend graduate school and became a devoted Red Sox fan. I re-read parts of her book this morning and was reminded of why her words had such meaning for me and why I thought of her book following the Red Sox World Series victory.

Goodwin wrote at the conclusion of her book, “Sometimes sitting in the park (Fenway Park) with my boys, I imagine myself back at Ebbets Field, a young girl once more in the presence of my father, watching the players of my youth on the grassy fields below—Jackie Robinson, Duke Snider, Roy Campanella, Gil Hodges. There is magic in these moments, for when I open my eyes and see my sons in the place where my father once sat, I feel an invisible bond among our three generations, an anchor of loyalty and love linking my sons to their grandfather whose face they have never seen but whose person they have come to know through this most timeless of sports.”

Obviously, there are numerous ways for people to connect with each other. Many of my website articles as well as the books I have co-authored with my colleague Dr. Sam Goldstein emphasize the theme of connectedness. Most of our connections are not based on allegiance to a

sports team. However, given what has transpired between the Red Sox and their fans the past few weeks, I especially thought about Goodwin's comments in light of our connections with others.

I watched the first game of the World Series at my son Rich's home in Maine where my wife and I were visiting for the weekend. The addition of two granddaughters in the past couple of years has prompted frequent trips to Maine to see Rich, his wife Cybele, and my adorable granddaughters (I am a biased grandfather), Maya and Sophia. As the Red Sox recorded the final out in the first game, Rich came over to me, and with a broad smile on his face and a sense of relief that both of us experienced in this 11-9 victory, he spontaneously gave me a high five. As he did, I thought back to the first Red Sox game to which I had taken him, in 1973 when he was five years old. It was against the Yankees. I still remember his expression of awe as we came up the ramp and he saw the field.

I watched the final game of the World Series from a hotel room on Long Island in New York. Actually, I missed the first four innings since I was giving a talk (who knew that when I scheduled the talk a year ago, the Red Sox would be playing the final game of the World Series). Earlier in the day my wife and I had spoken and she said to call her after the game. My younger son Doug left a voicemail message to call him. I turned on the television in the hotel room and was delighted to see the Red Sox leading 3-0. I called Doug and said things looked good. I also thought about an e-mail Doug had sent me a few days earlier. He and his wife Suzanne have an adorable (I already mentioned I am a biased grandfather) six-month-old son, Teddy. Doug e-mailed to say that Teddy has already waited six months for a World Series victory and it was about time it happened.

As relief pitcher Keith Foulke snared a ground ball and flipped it to first baseman Doug Mientkiewicz for the final out, I shouted, "They did it, they really did it!" Tears of joy rolled down my face. Why tears? Isn't it just a game? Afterwards I recognized that the tears were rooted in memories of my parents, my childhood, my neighborhood, my wife, my sons. They were rooted in the years of frustration that had finally ended for the Red Sox. I immediately called my wife. What excitement, what joy! Yesterday Doug sent us a photo of himself and Teddy looking intently in front of them. The note on the e-mail read, "Real parenting. As you can see, I'm teaching Teddy important life lessons. . . like how to watch Red Sox World

Series highlights.” It was humorous but an indication of another link between generations.

And then there were the many personal, poignant accounts noted in *The Boston Globe*. A man placed a copy of the *Globe* on his father’s grave to let him know the team had finally captured the World Series. There was the physician who took his family regularly to a diner in Fitchburg, Massachusetts. The diner was owned by Yankee fans who teased him about the inability of the Red Sox to win a World Series. On his deathbed in 1979, the physician told his son, “The one thing I wish had happened was that the Red Sox had won the World Series. If they ever win that World Series, I want you to go out and buy the most expensive bottle of champagne you can find and go back to the diner and put that bottle on the counter and say, ‘This is from the Doc!’” The son followed his father’s wishes the day after the Red Sox won the World Series. The diner was already closed when he arrived so he left the \$100 bottle of champagne he purchased with an explanatory note at the door. The new owner of the diner said he would deliver it to the men who formerly owned the diner.

Leigh Montville, a well-known sportswriter and lifelong Red Sox fan, described his reactions to the Red Sox victory in the following way: “I suppose I’m not much different from anyone else around here. I thought about departed friends and long-ago moments. I heard from people I hadn’t heard from in years. I told my wife I loved her. I told my kids I loved them. I drank a little champagne. I flew through the air. I talked to my dog in French and he talked back. I smiled a lot. I say so far so good.”

Just a game? Who knows. All I know is that with all of the problems we face, a group of baseball players, coming together as a team, brought a sense of joy and excitement to people in New England (and Red Sox Nation everywhere). Their performances transcended the playing field. Their exploits will become lifelong, indelible memories for countless parents, grandparents, children, and friends. I hope in whatever form it takes, we all have occasion to experience the hope, fun, and exhilaration that New Englanders have experienced the past few weeks.

I guess my wife knew that I just had to write about this experience. As Leigh Montville said, “So far so good.”

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