

Conversion vs. inborn: the factors in fan-aticism

By ERIC YODER

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Some people are converted into fans. Some of us are raised fans.

If you convert to something, you'll be serious enough about it to stay committed and you'll never be unconverted. Just ask religious converts. Those raised with a belief, though, may come to challenge it. But they find it hard to shake.

Call me one of the latter. I was born in a Penn State household and raised a Penn State fan. My first bib had a Nittany Lion on it. Through high school, I wore the blue and white — at great risk of bodily harm because my school's arch-rival wore those colors. I often wonder if my decision to attend Penn State was made because I liked the place or because I could rattle off the starting line-up.

My loyalty hit its peak when I skipped playing in a freshman high school football game to see a Lions game. I wouldn't have played much anyway, but that kind of thing can make you stop and review your priorities. The answer was easy: I had made the correct choice.

Commentary

Becoming a sports writer at The Daily Collegian was unsettling because I was forced to be objective. The Collegian is not a branch of the Sports Information Department, although many people think it should be. It wasn't easy to become a non-fan. Old habits die hard. Especially if the first word you learn after goo-goo and da-da is "Paterno."

Joe Paterno wasn't the coach when I was born, but that didn't stop my father (class of '50) from making me a Penn State rooter. Dad had played in the Blue Band and still makes it to as many Homecomings as he can to tromp around where athletes younger than his sons play. The family has a connection with the football program of a sort — a few years before I had been born, my uncle had planned to try making the team, but fell down a flight of stairs on his way to the try-out, breaking a leg. Considering that a bad omen, he gave up the idea.

At about age 3, when it became obvious that neither my brother nor I would ever consider going to try-outs, we forgot about re-writing the record books and settled down to be fans.

First came the sweaters, coats, hats, shirts, etc. with lions on them. I was a walking publicity photo. We replenished our supply — and the neighborhood's, as my father had turned the whole block into Lion backers — when we came to games, at least once a season. It was anything but a Happy Valley for us.

I don't remember much about those

early years except three things: the lousy seats, the lousy weather and the lousy games.

The seats invariably were of the end-zone variety. My father belongs to the Alumni Association and gets seats through its lottery, apparently being unwilling to contribute a thousand bucks or so a year to the Nittany Lion Club to get some decent seats.

Those seats and the other factors

usually made for a miserable afternoon. If the weather was good, the game wasn't, and vice-versa. For us, of course, a "good" game was defined as a Penn State win. Penn State didn't lose much in those days, but could be counted on to choke when we visited. My most vivid memory of University Park when I first arrived here as a student was sitting through a monsoon to watch the Lions get clobbered by Navy. And that

was in 1964, so you know it made an impression.

When we couldn't make it to the game, we'd listen on the radio. It seems we did our fall house-cleaning every Saturday for 11 weeks to the tune of Penn State football. I still shudder at the sound of Fran Fisher's voice with fear someone will hand me a bucket of soapy water and make me clean their basement.

But we loved every minute of it.

Without Penn State, I would never have seen Dallas or New Orleans. One of the best times I ever had was staying in the same hotel as the team for the 1972 Cotton Bowl and seeing daily the men who were then my heroes. The same happened for the Sugar Bowl. It was somehow reassuring to learn those people were human, after all and not above having a good time on Bourbon Street.

The fascination of the Dallas game — besides a stunning come-from-behind 30-6 victory — was my father winning a football autographed by the players. About a dozen of them are now in the pros, including Harris, Mitchell and Cappelletti. We were offered \$100 for it on the spot, but wouldn't sell it for any amount then or now.

I miss that kind of thing. Being a fan was fun.

Hills Witch Hunt



9:30 a.m.

THIS SATURDAY The Witch Hunt begins Saturday morning at 9:30! Witch hunters will search for plastic pumpkins with witches inside. When you find one, you win!

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