

# Deadlines and Overtimes

Collected Writings on Sports and Life

Bill Lyon

## With This World Series Ring, I...

It is a fragile, tenuous relationship, this marriage of professional athletes and a defiantly prideful city.

As with most marriages, there is, from time to tempestuous time, broken crockery scattered on the floor, passion wasted on things not worth the price, hurtful words that cannot be recalled, and on bittersweet occasions, a tearful make-up.

Which brings us to Philadelphia and its baseball team, wed for better or for worse for 126 years now, which is a remarkable, even miraculous, tenure when you think on it.

The city's hard-edged reputation precedes itself, and athletes are wary. Like wolves that smell roasting meat, they circle warily around the campfire, slinking uncertainly about in the shadows, wondering, fretting: "Do I really want to play here, in front of these lynch mobs?"

But every great once in a while, each side is brought to realize the true depth of its marriage. Like, for example, when you win a World Series.

Secretly, we glory in our hard-edged reputation. We take a perverse pride in being known as the proving ground of sports—relentlessly demanding, quick to judge, quicker still to root out the slackers and the charlatans.



But beneath that rhino hide of ours lies a marshmallow: gooey, soft, yielding. You bust a gut trying, you spend your blood and assorted body parts for us, and we will melt.

But even we surprise ourselves when the chance comes along. Like, say, a parade of champions. World Series champions. Or, to use the earthy Anglo-Saxon term for fornication as memorably uttered by Chase Utley: World F----- Champions.

To a man, the Phillies were overwhelmed by the parade and the reception. They were engulfed by a sea of people. They thought they knew what they would see, but it was so much more sweeping than that.

And they were made to grasp the magnitude of this marriage, made to understand the umbilical that binds city and team with an almost mystical force.

“This is way better than I ever expected,” said manager Charlie Manuel.

They chant his name now, shout it from the rooftops. Four years ago, he was derided as a clueless country bumpkin. Now, and forever, he will occupy a place in the Hall of Winners. Such is the power of a championship.

But why? What is the appeal of a band of mercenaries with bat, ball and glove winning a tournament?

It is a civic validation of sorts. We didn't actually win anything ourselves, but our team did, and by extension we did, too. We're not suddenly smarter. Or better looking. But it feels like it, feels like there's pride back in our stride.

And there is the matter of welcome distraction, an escape from all that besets us. That's the gift players bestow on the city. And the city, in turn, showers them with...well, you've seen the parade pictures.

The players, caught by surprise at the outpouring of affection, try to return it in kind. They pledge their own fealty. They will be a Phillie, and a Philadelphian, till the day they die, promise.

Cole Hamels, who has a perspective to match that killer dead-fish change-up, talked about coming back, old and retired and maybe a little fat, and being accorded the standing ovation and the devotion still showered on the 1980 champions.

Unlike many things in life, this is forever. Or until the next parade. Which could be as soon as next year.

The core of this team is, after all, young. There is every reason to think its best ball is still ahead of it.

Hamels said he couldn't wait to float down Broad Street again.

And again. And Again.

For a time, at least, the negativity withers like things dying on the November vines. The marriage between wary player and defiantly prideful city flourishes.

A new dawn? Consider this sign along the parade route: "I Promise Never To Boo Again."

Here, that is the highest compliment.