

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

'Baseball's What We Need'

(My original title: 'Red Sox Nation: Meet Cardinals Nation')

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October 26, 2004

WORD COUNT: 580 words

"There's a passion in other cities," legendary former Cardinals broadcaster Jack Buck used to say, "but there's a fairness attached to it here." As the World Series turns to Busch Stadium tonight, Red Sox Nation is about to learn what Buck meant.

To illustrate, imagine a former Red Sox player who, while he played in Boston, was injury prone and underperformed, but now was starring for another team. Sox fans would boo him and make him the butt of their jokes.

Cardinals Nation reacts differently. This post-season, when former Cardinal J.D. Drew played well for Atlanta, St. Louis was forgiving. St. Louis Post-Dispatch columnist Dan O'Neill observed that, "if you're a fan of baseball, a fan of God-fearing young men with worlds of talent, you have to hope Ol' J.D. keeps going, too."

In early August, Cardinals Nation gave Larry Walker a standing ovation before and after his first at bat as a Cardinal. That might not strike you as significant. But it will when you learn that Walker's debut was a strike out. Cardinals Nation amazes many newcomers, not just Walker, with its exuberance.

Red Sox fans, of course, see things another way. They think St. Louisans are soft because they're not vicious enough. They see a mild demeanor as evidence of a lack of passion.

Part of the difference between these two great baseball cities may be rooted in differences between the Midwest and the East Coast. The Midwest is substance over style - the simple over the cosmopolitan. St. Louis, for instance, has nothing to compare with Boston's trendy Newbury Street.

Folks on the East Coast often find Midwesterners to be plain and simple. And maybe they're right. Cardinals Nation loves its team. Plain and simple.

But along side these differences are some fundamental similarities. Neither fan base actually "lives for this" as the Fox ads encourage. Both live for something greater.

Red Sox Nation recognizes that the tragic death of a college student amidst celebration after ALCS Game 7 is more devastating than any Yankees loss ever could be. Cardinals Nation knows that the 13 lives lost in last week's plane crash near Kirksville are more important than the 9 innings scheduled for tonight. Indeed, with such tragedy in our papers, devoting so much attention to baseball may seem out of line.

But perhaps more baseball is just what we need. Perhaps we need a reminder that we're playing a team game, that corporate management can be trusted, that David can beat Goliath, and that when called upon, men can achieve what once seemed impossible.

The three biggest names in this series - Pujols, Schilling, and Pedro - are also the most humble. They have each earned the right to brag and boast. They could dismiss their responsibilities as role models. But they don't. They accept responsibility. They praise their teammates. They point heavenward during games. All three desperately want to win. But all three recognize that it is a blessing just to be here - in these cities, in this World Series, in this country.

"Listen to Cardinal Nation!" proclaimed Cardinals broadcaster Mike Shannon after Scott Rolen's homerun in NLCS Game 7.

Yes, Red Sox Nation, listen to Cardinals Nation as we welcome you to St. Louis. We'll cheer for the Cardinals, and you cheer for the Red Sox. But when we sing the National Anthem, when we belt out God Bless America, and when we walk off the diamond in the 9th, let's cheer together for something greater.

About the author: F.X. Shen is a die-hard Cardinals fan who was born and raised in St. Louis, and is currently in graduate school in Boston. He can be reached at fxshen@fas.harvard.edu.