

**90% OF THE GAME
IS HALF MENTAL**

*And Other Tales from
the Edge of Baseball Fandom*



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Emma Span

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the Edge of Baseball Fandom*

EMMA SPAN

藏书章



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INTRODUCTION: Don Mattingly's Mustache

I worked at a used-book store in high school, and one day during my junior year, a few months before the start of the Yankees' steam-rolling 1998 season, Yogi Berra came in to do a signing for his first collection of Yogiisms. He lived in town—Montclair, New Jersey—and was sometimes spotted hanging out with a pal at the Hilltop Nissan nearby, a dealership for which he also did low-low-budget local TV ads. In fact, it was during a speech at Montclair State University that he delivered his famous line “When you come to a fork in the road, take it,” advice I follow to this day.

The signing was big news at the Montclair Book Center, all hands on deck, and I was taken from my usual duties realphabetizing the romance section to work crowd control. A line formed around the block hours early, and we were instructed to make it clear to everyone that Yogi would sign his book and only his book—absolutely no baseballs, cards, body parts, or infants.

Like, I suspect, many members of my generation, at a young age I'd developed a lingering confusion over whether Yogi Berra had been named after Yogi Bear or vice versa, or if perhaps it was all just a crazy coincidence. But by age sixteen I knew exactly who Yogi was: the best catcher of all time (Johnny Bench who?), winner of ten World Series, catcher of Don Larsen's perfect game, notable quotable.

Yogi in the flesh was a bit of an anticlimax—he was a small, sturdy, gnomelike man who looked quite a bit like my grandpa Mur-

ray. He was pleasant but clearly going through a long, tiring routine, understandably on autopilot. My boss introduced me at one point, when I brought Yogi a glass of water, but I had no illusions that he'd taken any notice of me.

“Ninety percent of the game is half mental” is of course a famous Yogiism, though there's some debate as to whether he ever said those exact words. Maybe it was “Ninety percent of this game is mental and the other half is physical,” or “Baseball is ninety percent mental and the other half is physical”—or maybe it was actually Phillies manager Danny Ozark who said whatever was said. I don't think it really matters, though. Someone said it, or something like it, and if it wasn't Yogi then it should have been. With old baseball stories, I'm of the “when the legend becomes fact, print the legend” school of thought.

About nine years after that book signing, I saw Yogi again, in the Legends Field locker room in Tampa, when he was a spring training advisor to the Yankees and I was a fledgling sportswriter. He looked exactly the same, and I thought about asking him if he remembered the Montclair Book Center, but once again he seemed tired after a long day, heading to change in the coaches' locker room—so I didn't make an impression on him that time, either. Maybe the third time will be the charm one day.

Like a lot of fans, I tend to track major life events by what was going on in baseball at the time, rather than the other way around—so the time between Yogi sightings stretched from the winter after the Yankees lost to Cleveland in the Division Series to the spring before the Yankees lost to Cleveland in the Division Series. But it was one of those moments that make the years feel a lot longer. Writing about sports had never so much as crossed my mind when I first handed Yogi a glass of water, and not quite a decade later, I hardly felt like the same person.

Fandom, like religion, is largely an accident of birth, a matter of geography and parenting rather than temperament, nurture more

than nature. It's certainly possible to convert later in life, and plenty of people do, but it's a difficult process that forces you to question some deeply held beliefs and risks alienating family and friends.

I grew up in New Jersey in the 1980s, and because my dad became a Yankees fan, I did, too. Back then the Yankees were, so far as most kids in Jersey were concerned, Don Mattingly, and though I didn't know much about baseball back then—long before I had figured out what the deal with Yogi Bear was—I knew that Mattingly was awesome. In fact, that's just about all I remember about the Yankees in the eighties, along with an occasional flash of Winfield or Henderson. It's probably just as well that I seem to have blocked out the pitching staff.

It's hard to overestimate what a looming presence Donnie Baseball was back then. Toward the start of the 2006 season, my friend Ted, who grew up in Connecticut, sent me a text message during a Yankees game. He was watching it on an emergency-room TV, waiting to be treated for what turned out to be a collapsed lung (or 'spontaneous pneumothorax,' which would be a good name for a bad metal band), and he admitted later that it was difficult and painful to breathe. But I only found that out the next day, when his roommate called to let me know Ted had been checked into St. Vincent's—he didn't mention any of that in his text. He just wrote: "Don Mattingly shaved his mustache?!?!"

Like almost everything else, baseball fandom gets more complicated as you get older, especially when you're pulling for the Yankees, who after all have come to stand for some very unappealing things. "Rooting for the Yankees is like rooting for U.S. Steel," goes the old saying, and while the metaphor may be outdated (like rooting for Microsoft? For ExxonMobil?), the sentiment still applies. The Yankees can be tough to defend. In 2007 they outspent the Tampa Bay Devil Rays by more than \$165 million; sure, the Rays' ownership were cheapskates who apparently couldn't care less about their thirty-seven fans, but that's still fairly embarrassing. So is the fracas over the public money used to fund the new Yankee Stadium, and the

completely insane through-the-roof ticket prices for premium seats at the new place, which opened in the middle of a crushing recession.

I miss the days when I just had to feel bad because they spent too much money and won all the time and Steinbrenner was a dick. It was sort of like the sports fan's version of liberal guilt. Don't get me wrong—I enjoyed every one of the Yankees' World Series wins to the fullest and wouldn't trade them for anything, and given the essentially irrational nature of sports fandom itself, it's an entire level above silly to feel guilt over your team's success. That said, I can't deny that it's nice to root for the little guy, or even just for a team that the rest of the country doesn't viscerally despise. If you're a Yankees fan, you get no pity from anyone—fair enough, of course—and you spend a lot of time either making half-assed apologies for your team or telling people to fuck off, depending on your personality.

I tend to go in more for the half-assed apologizing, obviously, especially since I've long had a secret crush on the Mets. Older Yankees fans have told me this wouldn't be the case if only I could remember the 1986 World Series winners: "They were scuzzballs, these obnoxious degenerates," says my friend Mark, a teen at the time, with considerable heat more than twenty years later. "We had Mattingly and Willie Randolph, but *they* got to win. It was just so wrong."

So maybe I'd feel differently if I'd been born a few years earlier. Then again, maybe not; I've always been drawn to obnoxious degenerates. And sure, the Mets have a payroll of around \$145 million as of this writing, but because Goliath is right across town in the Bronx, the Mets still get to be the little guy. Their history plays into that, too: they had such an archetypically awful beginning that even in their best seasons, at some existential level they're still the inept group who lost 120 games. Mets fans don't want to win any less than anyone else, but they're very rarely ashamed of being Mets fans . . . even if sometimes they're ashamed of the Mets.

I can't actually call myself a Mets *fan*, since I haven't been through the wringer enough with that team to earn the title—haven't suffered enough, basically. And the one year they made it to the Se-

ries once I was old enough to pay attention, they were playing the Yankees. Of course I couldn't root for them then, even though that meant trying halfheartedly to defend Roger Clemens. Go Steel!

Sports bigamy is one of the very few vices New Yorkers will not tolerate. Most social taboos—including many forms of drug use, any conceivable sex act between two consenting adults, misdemeanors, and the less violent felonies—are looked on with more leniency than trying to root for both the Mets and Yankees. On an intellectual level, I realize that loyalty to an arbitrary collection of millionaires who play a game while wearing clothes of a certain color is not really an integral moral principle or a character issue.

That said, I'm no traitor.

In between seeing Yogi Berra in my high school workplace and Yogi Berra in my adult workplace, I'd lucked into my dream job—or more accurately, into a job that had seemed so unlikely that I hadn't even bothered to dream about it—as a sports reporter for the *Village Voice*.

Covering a team professionally—even just briefly—changes things, just like everybody says it will, even if you're not actually trying to be objective. There's no cheering in the press box, as the saying goes, and you have to be as businesslike as humanly possible if you're going to be the only girl in a locker room, so when I got a sportswriting job I adapted in a hurry, rewired my brain on the fly. Almost overnight I became more detached while watching games, more invested in baseball as a whole and less in particular teams. Even after I stopped getting regular press passes, I kept a lot of that vaguely professional demeanor. I still rooted for the Yankees, and pulled for the Mets, too, if they weren't playing each other, but I was generally not so saddened after a loss or exultant after a win as I might have been a year or two before. I didn't love the game any less, but I had less emotional investment in any particular outcome. Or so I thought.

It turns out that old partisan passion is still there, even if it hibernates sometimes. I realized that in September a few years ago, during the last Yankees–Red Sox game of the season. My friend and I watched it near our Brooklyn apartments at the Lighthouse, an otherwise excellent establishment that sometimes served as an unofficial Red Sox bar. That night it was packed with extremely loud, cocky Boston fans, who completely drowned out the handful of Yankees supporters as well as my polite, professionally detached clapping. It was Clemens versus Curt Schilling, a close game; the Yankees were fighting for their playoff lives. Derek Jeter finally put them ahead by one run, but then came the ninth inning. Mariano Rivera loaded the bases, and David Ortiz stepped into the batter's box.

It was all a business. These were just men doing their jobs, and at some point it might be my job to write about them. Neither team was, objectively, morally superior to the other. The Red Sox were no better or worse than the Yankees, and neither were their fans. This had been a dramatic game and it would be interesting to see what happened next, but there was no need to get all worked up.

Except I realized suddenly that if David Ortiz got a game-winning hit off Mariano Rivera here—*Mariano Rivera*—I was going to fucking die.

Not only did I care passionately whether the Yankees won this game, it would be a personal vindication: it would mean I was right and all those loudmouthed Sox fans infesting my bar were wrong, which I wanted very badly to be the case, especially after another beer. The at-bat went on forever, and every pitch was heart-stopping. When Ortiz finally popped out, I went limp with relief, yelled, high-fived, smirked . . . and, I'm afraid, urged a few especially strident individuals to go back to Woostah where they belonged.

I got a measure of detachment back by the time I woke up the next day. But I was relieved to know that it would take more than a year or two of sportswriting to completely kill my irrational, biased, obnoxious inner fan. It might not show very often, but if you surround me with crazed Massholes, load the bases against Mariano Rivera in

the ninth, and put David Ortiz at the plate? That's like getting between a mother bear and her cubs, then poking her with a sharp stick.

Something about baseball lends itself to metaphor. You can see that in the sheer number of baseball expressions that have entered everyday language: strike out, strike three, home run, on the ball, dropped the ball, off base, touch base, out of left field, get to first (or second or third) base, cover all the bases, rain check, throw a curve, screwball, batting a thousand, smash hit, on deck, on the bench, knock it out of the park, ballpark figure, bush league, play ball, play hardball, batter up, step up to the plate, take one for the team, whole new ballgame.

Beyond that, people will compare almost anything to the game. Over the years I've heard that baseball is like a poker game, that marriage is like baseball, that sex is like baseball, that baseball is like Darwinism, that baseball is like war, and—most of all—that baseball is really, when you think about it, a lot like life. I've even caught myself starting to say that once or twice myself, and the comparison is tempting. But it's just not true: baseball is nothing like life, which is why it's so great.

A lot of my friends aren't baseball fans, or sports fans of any kind, and sometimes I'm still a little surprised that I'm one myself. I was an awkward bookworm of a child, and as an adult (more or less) I'm obsessed with novels and movies and music, generally part of a culture that tends to look down on sports as the arena of jocks or meatheads—an irrational, immature devotion to a silly and unimportant game. Though baseball more than any other sport has a long-established niche for geeks like myself, as Roger Angell noted, it's often hard to defend the passion it provokes. Why does anyone care, people ask, smugly confident because they know you don't have a real answer, whether a muscled multimillionaire uses a stick to hit a small ball past other multimillionaires?

I know many people who were baffled when I tried to explain the

fuss kicked up after the Mets' 2007 end-of-season collapse, when Tom Glavine, the pitcher whose terrible performance on the last day of the season cost his team the game and therefore the pennant, made a point of refusing to say that he was "devastated." "Devastated is a word used for greater things in life than a game," Glavine noted. "I was disappointed in the way I pitched." He was, obviously, completely right, 100 percent correct . . . and yet. Within the context of that game and that season and the New York Mets, it was absolutely devastating.

A few people were actually crying in the stands that day, families and friends huddled together in shock, lingering long after the game, or cursing out everyone with even a vague connection to the New York Mets. And when Glavine's words were splashed all over the media, fans were infuriated. Partly, I think, it was because no one wants to be reminded that something they've invested so much time and energy in is basically unimportant in the scheme of things—we already know that—but also because, as a direct result of all that invested communal time and energy, it actually *does* matter.

As Roger Angell continued in the above quote, "What is left out of this calculation, it seems to me, is the business of caring—caring deeply and passionately, really caring—which is a capacity or an emotion that has almost gone out of our lives. And so it seems possible that we have come to a time when it no longer matters so much what the caring is about, how frail or foolish is the object of that concern, as long as the feeling itself can be saved. Naiveté—the infantile and ignoble joy that sends a grown man or woman to dancing and shouting with joy in the middle of the night over the haphazardous flight of a distant ball—seems a small price to pay for such a gift."

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90% OF THE GAME IS HALF MENTAL

CHAPTER 1

Either Why You Shouldn't Gamble or Exactly Why You Should

I wish I could tell you I spent my childhood playing stickball on the streets of Brooklyn, but in fact I grew up in a New Jersey suburb, and on the rare occasions when I was cajoled or threatened into playing a sport, I was lucky if no one wound up in need of medical attention. My lack of hand-eye coordination is legendary, and while I've made it a point to stay as far as possible from my high school since the day I graduated, I imagine people there still talk about the time I tried to play badminton.

I got into baseball the same way most people do: my dad. A native of Providence, Rhode Island, he grew up a bona fide Red Sox fan. But by the time he and my mother settled in New Jersey, after a newspaper career that had taken them to half a dozen cities, from Philadelphia to Boston to New York to Baltimore to Dallas, he'd gone rogue, following the local team wherever he happened to be. After all, in the days before satellite TV, cable, and MLB.com, your far-off hometown team was just a tiny box score in the paper. In the early 1980s my parents finally landed, settling about twenty congested miles from the Bronx, and my dad's adopted team became the Yankees.

There can't be many greater betrayals in sports fandom than ditching the Red Sox for the Yanks, particularly back then, when it looked like the Sox would never win another World Series. It seems like the kind of major life change that would require some sort of hearing or paperwork. Every few years, still not quite comprehend-

ing, I ask my father whether it wasn't hard for him to trade in his childhood team for their most despised rivals. His answer is always the same.

"No," he'll say flatly. "The Red Sox were a nightmare—a disorder. Autumn itself was ruined because every year it was associated with the Sox's horrific collapse—every single year. And all the squawking, bitching, and cursing . . . why would I choose to bring that misery into my house?" He wants to be able look at foliage without cringing in pain, he says. "*Every year*. Dashed expectations, bitterness and depression, an incredible amount of frustration—it's a disease. I mean that, a disease. I mean . . . *every single year*. No. I wouldn't inflict that on my family."

The Mets were actually enjoying more success than their crosstown rivals back then, in the prelude and aftermath of their 1986 World Series win. But they belonged more to Long Island than to Jersey, Shea was a nightmare drive from our house, and besides, my dad already knew the Yankees' history front to back—they were nothing if not familiar. Year by year they became more his team, and eventually mine.

Several factors combined in the early-to-mid-nineties to push my fandom to a higher level. First, Bernie Williams came up from the minors to play the outfield, and I loved him immediately—he seemed shy and had big, nerdy glasses, like me, though unlike me he would go on to become incredibly graceful, beloved by millions, and a millionaire. An introverted classical guitarist, he was the first player I imagined I could relate to on a personal level (this was long before the world was exposed to his Muzak-like jazz guitar compositions), and I paid closer attention to the games so I could keep an eye on him and offer my extremely intangible support.

Then in 1993, two things happened: the Yankees traded Roberto Kelly to the Cincinnati Reds for Paul O'Neill, and I hit puberty. O'Neill is an interesting figure, in that probably no other Yankee in the last twenty years has been quite so adored by the home crowd and simultaneously loathed by opposing fans. (It takes a truly dedicated

Yankee-hater to work up any real vitriol toward Williams or, say, the milquetoastish Scott Brosius.) O'Neill got to me because he so obviously *cared*, albeit far too much. He made that abundantly clear every time he followed an out with a furious helmet toss or vicious water-cooler beatdown. If he hit a single, he berated himself, muttering in anguish on first base, for missing the double. Bloopers to this day show a clip of him fumbling a catch and, overwhelmed by self-disgust, kicking the ball back to the infield.

Other teams watched these petulant displays with distaste—after all, many players care just as deeply as O'Neill without feeling compelled to prove it via Gatorade dispenser destruction after every double play. And George Steinbrenner didn't help matters by nicknaming him “the Warrior,” which was undeniably cheesy and eventually led to too many Pat Benatar scoreboard montages. None of this bothered me, however. You *had* to root for him, because it was painful to see anyone as abjectly miserable as O'Neill was when he failed; you feared that if he struck out in a really big spot, it might irreparably shatter his psyche.

Plus . . . he was cute. (Yes, he had what you might describe with technical accuracy as a curly mullet; it was 1993. Don't judge.)

I hate the popular image of the arrogant, entitled Yankee fan who throws an O'Neill-style fit if his team doesn't win the Series every year. But although my dad was never a terribly intense fan—he didn't live or die by the team, or mind missing a game, or explode with joy if they won or rage if they didn't—to be completely honest, he always had a slightly ruthless, Steinbrenner-esque streak in his fandom. He decided, for example, that Joe Torre was washed up way back in 2002, just one season after he'd taken the team to within an inning of an incredibly dramatic World Series Game 7 win (“Too bad you aren't old enough to remember Billy Martin—now *there* was a manager. We wouldn't even be having this conversation.”). And when Bernie Williams, formerly his favorite player, began to lose his legs and bat