



King's View: Sports, the great unifier

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The Suburbanite

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Manchester, Ohio — There are plenty of people who don't like sports. They think too much importance is placed upon sports, many times at the neglect of academics. They argue that too many young athletes are led down the wrong road by sports and are made to believe that these games are the end-all and be-all of their young, developing lives, only to have the kids be left high and dry because they failed to pay that much attention to their schoolwork.

We respect all those opinions, but those are different debates for a different time.

The point here — and it's a point that I'm convinced can't be debated in any sensible way — is that sports are a great unifier, especially in small communities. They tend to draw people together — people who sometimes don't even like each other, and haven't for years -- and break down other societal barriers that can't otherwise be broken down.

People show up at the game games, find themselves rooting for the same team and become friends. They forget — at least for a while — why they didn't get along.

And there was no greater unifier in recent Manchester High School sports history — or maybe even the recent histories of any of the high schools in The Suburbanite's coverage area — than the Panthers' 49-45 victory over visiting Perry two Friday nights ago, on Nov. 5, in an opening-round Division IV football playoff game.

By the end of the contest, you could have sat those fans down and figured out how to achieve world peace. They were all one — one group — that evening. Everyone had checked their egos — their likes and dislikes, their personal opinions, their quirks — at the door.

Here's what happened, and even now, I still don't believe that it happened: The Panthers and Pirates played a close, back-and-forth game right from the start. In the first 3? minutes, in fact, Perry scored on a 70-yard touchdown pass and Manchester tallied on a 77-yarder, giving a preview of the kind of rock-'em, sock-'em title fight this would be.

Manchester led 13-6 after one quarter, 28-25 at halftime and 34-25 after Mark Noble's 48-yard touchdown run with 10:11 left in the third quarter.

Then it was Perry's turn. The Pirates scored 20 unanswered points in the next 16 minutes, going ahead 45-34 with 7:33 left in the game.

At that point, some Panthers fans started heading for the exits, and that's understandable. It was brutally cold, and they had had to sit out in the elements for an extra half-hour after the Perry team buses got caught in traffic and arrived at James France Stadium at 7:20 p.m., pushing the start time of the game back from 7:30 to 8.

From a football standpoint, the Manchester fans were thinking, "This has been a great game and our team has had a great season, but since we're 11 points behind with relatively so little time left, there's no way we can catch up. Even if the Panthers score on their next possession, Perry will come right back and score and/or run out the clock. Oh, well."

Manchester did indeed score on Tyler Masters' 3-yard run and got the two-point conversion with 4:43 remaining to cut the lead to 45-42.

But then, just 50 seconds later, the Pirates fumbled the ball away on its next possession and Manchester cornerback Kyle Dougherty recovered at the Perry 35. The Panthers ended up scoring on a Noble's fourth TD of the night, a 1-yarder, with 45 seconds left, to go on top 49-45.

By this time, many of the fans who had left, got wind of this iconic comeback and sprinted back into the stadium to watch it.

Dougherty, the fourth of four brothers of that outstanding family to play for the Panthers, then sealed the deal with an interception at the Manchester 30 with 9 seconds remaining. Given up for dead only a blink of an eye before, these gutsy kids refused to quit and had somehow found a way to win.

A miracle? Maybe. We'll let you be the judge. Certainly, it was one of the greatest games the Panthers have ever — ever — played.

People who have dignified jobs jumped up and down like little kids. There was one big group-hug going on in the stands. Others just stood off on the side and wept.

Yes, wept.

Then they all went off into the cold night hand in hand, knowing they'll never forget what they had just witnessed.

You don't see that at a school open house, but the kind of community spirit it generated gets people interested in attending the next house. They liked the football. Now they want to see the chemistry and history programs.

When this happens, everybody wins, most notably the students, for they realize that even at their young age, they can indeed make an impact in their community.

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