

# Football lifts spirits in a hard-luck city

As I watched the New Orleans Saints' triumphant return to the Super Dome one recent Monday night, I felt a little homesick. I am not from New Orleans, but from Buffalo, a city that has long understood that football is so much more than just a game.

I have looked forward to football season since I was 7, when I started watching games with my Dad. I would pester him with question after question trying to understand the game. "Why are they going backward?" I asked him. "That's a penalty," he explained. "Why are they going into that tunnel?" I asked. "It's half time," he chuckled.

As fall's leaves change color on Sundays, so does the city's landscape. Church outfits are discarded for the familiar red, white and blue team colors. Bills hats, jerseys and jackets are everywhere. And for four hours each week, men and

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women from 8 to 80 stop worrying about jobs, families or war, and the collective consciousness of the city focuses on the Bills game.

Back in the '60s and '70s, Buffalo men like my Dad worked in the factories — Bethlehem Steel, Chevrolet, Buffalo Forge. These jobs meant steady pay, union membership and benefits. When the factory bell rang, it signaled security and time with your family.

But when the recession ripped through upstate New York, the factories left. And I remember feeling as if a collective despair had descended on the city. For many people, the Bills were one of the few good things left in Buffalo. I suspect that is how many New Orleans residents feel about their Saints.

Like Katrina, the recession forced people to leave Buffalo in droves. And unlike the rest of the country, when upstate New York missed the economic boom of the



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'90s a lot of local college kids like me graduated and left. I traded in my navy blue Bills sweat shirt for pumps and pearls and a life in New York City.

That was 20 years ago. But there's still no place like Buffalo to watch a football game. It's impossible to explain to someone who hasn't experienced it. But sitting with 80,000 cheering fans is one of the best ways I know to forget your worries. You can't help but get caught up in it, it's a rush like no other. I return every year just to reconnect with that feeling.

When my sister and I took our then 9-year-old nephew to his first game, the kid with the finicky appetite ate not one but two foot-long hot dogs. It was cold and raining, but he smiled the entire game. And I sensed that I was passing along the same love of the Buffalo football experience that my Dad passed along to me.

Watching the ESPN coverage that Monday night, I sensed the people in New Orleans felt just like my nephew did at his first game.

The New York Times recently ran an article about Buffalo's resurgence, with its new mayor and developers anxious to resurrect the forgotten metropolis. Who knows? Maybe Buffalo can return to the thriving city I remember. It certainly would be nice to see.

As for New Orleans, obviously, a football game can't erase the horror that followed Katrina; it can't bring back a home or a loved one. But nothing restores the human spirit faster than having something to laugh and cheer about.

To my brothers and sisters from New Orleans, take it from a Buffalonian: Hang in there, no matter what happens to your city, your personal spirit can literally be renewed one game at a time.