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Introduction

Suppose you could be anyone, within the world of sports . . .
A superstar in any game, a person with all sorts
Of money coming in, not only just from what you do,
But from the shoes you wear and from the drink
 you're drinking, too . . .
And from the cars you drive and from the broker that you choose,
And from the clothes you wear and from the credit card you use . . .
But I digress. If you could star in any of our games,
Would you elect to do so? Look, I won't be naming names,
But people at the top of any game have problems, too . . .
They stand above the crowd and people know just what they do
Each time they leave their houses—"houses," plural, they have lots,
And all of them—those houses—are in preferential spots.
But if you have no privacy unless you fly your plane
To some secluded island that you own, well, that's insane.
So I would not be anyone who's so completely known
That he or she could not be sure to ever be alone.

Still, wouldn't it be fun to be so good at what you do
That when you do it, people gasp and shake their heads? It's true
That hitters, shooters, golfers, skaters when they are the best
Supply our need to know that somehow high above the rest

Of all that's mediocre, shabby, disappointing, flat . . .
Float wonders that can lift us past the dross of all of that.
So would you be a cause for gasping? Would you be a star?
Or are you, fin'ly, happier with being what you are?
It strikes me, as I ask the question, it's a silly thought . . .
But maybe few among the ones who lift us thus have sought
To be as large as they've become in our collective dreams.
They've all been working too hard to look up, perhaps. It seems
That stardom, when it comes, must have surprised at least a few
Of those who have attained it. Huh. I wonder if that's true?

Well, this one's gone astray, I guess, as musings often will,
Especially the ones that muse upon the living thrill
That athletes can embody when they triumph while we watch
Them making moments full of grace while doing things we'd botch,
And also on the cost that we demand those athletes pay
As they, in their brief moments, work at what we still call play.

1.

In the Name of Names, Because There's No Other Excuse

Justice Now

DECEMBER 20, 2002

I want Justice Now.

Or, more accurately, I want to have had Justice Now last Monday about 12:45 p.m., and I'm already through the tunnel into East Boston, which gives me time enough to get to Suffolk Downs to put all the money on Justice Now in the first.

At 86-1, Justice Now, running with a herd of forgettable \$4,500 to \$5,000 claimers, came from sixth, closed hard over the last few furlongs, and beat My Advantage by a head to pay \$173.40 for \$2.00.

Justice Now.

A whispered hint . . . a goofy notion . . . anything that nudges me out of my chair, away from the desk and the telephone and the word processor, anything that urges me out to the track that, on a cold Monday, one of the last mad shopping days, had to be nearly empty, serene in the strange way of an outdoor sport on an indoor day.

My friend, what a Christmas gift it would have been.

Justice Now.

The perfecta, Justice Now and the second horse, My Advantage, paid over \$1,200. The trifecta was good for \$27,201. But don't misunderstand me. I'm not greedy. I'd have settled for nothing more than Justice Now.

On some future morning I will open up the sports section. I'll idly glance at the thoroughbred charts to see what's running at the local oval, and there the news will be. I'll find the glowing possibility of . . . oh, I don't know . . . Fair Play. World Peace. Equal Rights. Right there in the small print I'll find War No More. Open Opportunity. Feed the Poor. Or maybe . . . Share the Wealth. Charity's Day. Nobody Hungry.

Or maybe not. Maybe Monday was my shot. I didn't interrupt my routine for Justice Now. Maybe I'd have missed 'em all. Free Food. Empty Shelters. Brave Struggle. Maybe, secure in a routine, I'll always miss them. I hope not. I'll try to be paying more attention next time.

In the Names of Boxing

DECEMBER 15, 2004

Favorites? How do you have a favorite? Designating a favorite would mean choosing between Frank Moran, who was billed as "the battling dentist," and George "Boer" Rodel, a handsome South African with a glass chin who earned the nickname "Diving Venus."

Some boxing nicknames are easy to explain. At the end of 1895, a Baltimore fighter named Joe Gans had managed to win thirty-one consecutive fights to establish himself at the top of the fisticuffs line. To the surprise of no one familiar with the way boxing promotion works, over the next decade or so there emerged Allentown Joe Gans, Baby Joe Gans, Cyclone Joe Gans, Dago Joe Gans (as well as the considerably more politically correct Italian Joe Gans), Michigan Joe Gans, Panama Joe Gans, and four different fighters calling themselves Young Joe Gans.

I learned all this foolishness from Geoffrey Ward's magnificent new book, *Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson*, and there is more silliness where all the young Joe Ganses come from.

Consider the fighter know as Kid Carter, whose real name was Edward Blazwick. He was, as Ward points out, "born in Austria to Croatian parents, but because of his yellow hair, he began his career as 'Young Olsen, the Gangling Swede.'"

Then there were Rough House Wilson, Truck Hannah, Bombo Chevelier, and Frenchy the Coal Man. And there was not only Battling Levinsky, but Battling Norfolk. Battling Norfolk? Any relation, I wonder, to the guy who fell beside Richard III at Bosworth Field? Battling Richmond might have been a better choice.

There is no lack of great and memorable names in baseball and basketball, of course, but only boxing gives us "Mysterious Billy Smith," who, according to Jack Dempsey's manager, Doc Kearns, was so named because he was always doing something mysterious, such as stepping on your foot and then biting your ear.

But a favorite? All right. A favorite. Reduced at the end of his career to fighting patsies, Jack Johnson once faced Blink McCloskey, whom Geoffrey Ward tells us was "so-named because before the bell rang, he carefully removed his glass eye and handed it to his corner man for safe keeping."

What's in a Name?

MARCH 20, 2004

Fans of obscure team nicknames and unusual mascots were left with mixed feelings after the first day of play in the men's NCAA tournament. The Salukis of Southern Illinois University were swamped by Alabama's Crimson Tide. (The fact that the Saluki, identified with ancient Egypt, is the oldest purebred in the dog kingdom, apparently did the basketball Salukis no particular good.)

On the other hand, the Jaspers prevailed. A Jasper is player for Manhattan, the team that upset Florida on Thursday. The nickname comes from a fellow named Brother Jasper, who introduced a number of sports to the institution when it was young, and also invented, perhaps inadvertently, the seventh-inning stretch, which spread from the campus of Manhattan to the Polo Grounds, and then to all the known baseball universe.

Anyway, the Jaspers live to fight and stretch again. They next play Wake Forest.

In the women's tournament, the fourteenth-seed team from the University of Wisconsin at Green Bay is prepared to rise from its almost certain defeat at the hands—or claws—of the Cougars of Houston. The Wisconsin–Green Bay team is nicknamed the Phoenix.

Campbell University, which last appeared in the NCAA tournament twelve years ago, fields teams known as the Fighting Camels. There are any number of schools with such mascots as Tigers, Lions, Bears . . . even Demons and Devils . . . but so far as I've been able to determine, only Campbell has Fighting Camels. Likewise, I think the University of California at Irvine has the only Fighting Anteaters. Inspired, I suppose, by the sound the anteater in the comic strip *B.C.* makes when his tongue finds lunch, Irvine's fans cheer by shouting "Zot!"

I've always been a sucker for any team nicknamed the Fighting Saints. That's what they call the men's teams at the college of St. Francis in Joliet, Illinois. The women's teams are, not surprisingly, the Lady Saints, though not, officially, the Fighting Lady Saints.

I rarely root for Duke, since the Blue Devils are usually a favorite, and I prefer underdogs, but if the competitors retained their original nickname, the Methodists, I might relent.

If I ever find myself attending a game involving a team from Mary Baldwin College, I will cheer for it. Mary Baldwin's athletes are known as the Fighting Squirrels.

Incidentally, while *Only a Game* analyst Charlie Pierce was peering over my shoulder at this commentary in progress, he told me that he once attended a game involving Penn High School in Mishawaka, Indiana. That might not seem immediately significant, but consider that the teams there were known as the Cavemen . . . and the Lady Cavemen.

Keeping the Book

JANUARY 17, 2004

Keeping the book at a basketball game means marking down each point scored so the guy running the clock and the scoreboard isn't entirely on his own. It also means keeping track of who's scored each point for each team, how many fouls each player and each team have accumulated (so the officials will know when to toss a player from the game and award foul shots, and then more foul shots), keeping track of how many timeouts each coach has called, and keeping track of which team gets possession after each jump ball so the other team can get possession after the next jump ball.

In short, keeping the book is a terrific way to miss the game.

So I always try to be deep in meaningful conversation when the coach of the team my daughter plays for looks balefully into the stands before a game and asks for a volunteer to keep the book. But last weekend he caught my eye, and I was it.

Keeping the book for this particular group is complicated by the composition of the sixteen-member team. At a given point, the coach may put out a lineup of Christi, Kristen, Krista, Christine, and Kerri, with Kiki, Kath, and Kelly kneeling by the scorer's table, waiting to come in.

There is no confusion with the fouls, which the officials always indicate by number, as in, "23, blue, in the act of shooting, two shots."

The problem comes when the coach turns to the guy

keeping the book, who, on Sunday, was me, and asks “how many on Christi?” unless what he’s really asked is “how many on Kristen?” or “how many on Krista?” “or how many on Kristine?”

The other problem comes when one of the eight previously named players—Christi, Kristen, Krista, Kristine, Kerri, Kiki, Kath, or Kelly—scores while I’m still looking at the book, trying to figure for out whether the coach has asked about Christi, Kristin, or Krista, and whether any or all of them are in foul trouble.

“Who got that last one?” I ask the guy next to me . . . the guy running the clock and the scoreboard.

“Kristi,” he replies, unless he’s said Kristen or Krista, or Kristine . . . or even Kerri.

Though I’m pretty sure the final score’s right in the book, Kerri or Kelly may have been shorted a point or two in favor of Christi or Kiki. Krista fouled out . . . unless it was Kristin. I’m not sure which one had five. It may have been Kristine.

I am sure that the next time the coach looks balefully into the bleachers for a volunteer to keep the book, he’s going to have to find Kerri’s dad, or maybe Krista’s, or Kristin’s or Kristine’s, ’cause I’m gonna want to watch the game.