

More than a game: The Cubs in the playoffs

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [November 1, 2003](#) issue

An exasperated parishioner once wrote me a note explaining that my references to sports in sermons were not effective for her and, in fact, were increasingly irritating. She didn't understand them, didn't like competitive sports of any kind, and suspected that the American sports ethos might be responsible for the mess America makes in the world.

Years before, a teenage daughter sharply objected to the dominance of sports talk between father and sons at the dinner table. "Is that all you guys care about?" she asked. "Well, no," I meekly answered. The other boys, 11 and nine at the time, said, "Yes." She, by the way, was a fine and highly competitive athlete.

Sports talk was dominant in Chicago as the Cubs were agonizingly close to reaching the World Series for the first time in 58 years—not having won it in 95 years. George Vecsey of the *New York Times* wrote that Chicago fans can recite "the familiar litany of disaster, and on occasion wear T-shirts which proudly announce, 'Any Team Can Have a Bad Century.'" Cubs fans can be found all over the world, thanks to the reach of superstation WGN. A mission study team for the congregation I serve took time out during a recent trip to Cuba to find a hotel with a television to watch a Cubs playoff game.

Why should the Cubs matter to so many people? And why do some of us care so deeply? When the subject comes up I like to remind the skeptical that the game of baseball has inspired some great writing by people like poet Marianne Moore, and the *New Yorker's* Roger Angell, and John Updike (whose account of the last game the great Ted Williams played in Boston's Fenway Park, "Hub Fans Bid Kid Adieu," is for my money one of the best pieces of writing ever).

I also like to trot out A. Bartlett Giamatti's *Take Time for Paradise: Americans and Their Games*. Giamatti was a Renaissance scholar, president of Yale, and for a short time before he died in 1989 the commissioner of Major League Baseball. Giamatti

wrote: "Sports represent a shared vision of how we continue, as individual, team, or community, to experience a happiness or absence of care so intense, so rare, and so fleeting that we associate the experience with experiences otherwise described as religious . . ."

Giamatti argues that we learn more about the values and culture of a society by observing how it uses leisure time, how it plays, than by studying how it works. He says baseball is about "freedom and country," a game played without reference to the clock and therefore theoretically played in the context of eternity and that the goal, home, is "a state of mind where self-definition starts." A base runner rounding third and heading for home, Giamatti said, is not unlike Odysseus on his way to final reunion.

Well, maybe that's a bit much. But it gives me the cover I need to keep indulging my interest. With the Cubs in the playoffs, I lived each day with a heightened awareness, keen anticipation and a little nervousness. Not a bad description of being fully alive.