

This Is What a Chinese Thinks of Pittsburgh

by Karen S. Zhang

A few days ago I bought a Pittsburgh Penguins beanie, a T-shirt, and a jacket. Not only because they are among the omnipresent souvenirs in town, but also they will remind me of my *first* ice hockey team as I prepare to leave Pittsburgh after two years of study.

Coming from Guangzhou, China, I'd never considered myself a sports fan. Two years ago, holding my acceptance letter from Chatham University, I told my folks ecstatically I was going to study in Pittsburgh. Their first reaction was "Oh, Pittsburgh?! It's a heavy industrial city, isn't it?" I wasn't sure, knowing from my American professors in China only that Pittsburgh is a sports town. But I still couldn't locate the city because Pittsburgh doesn't have an NBA team. The NBA has a huge audience in China. For my generation, the frenzy started before Yao Ming joined the Houston Rockets, in the era of Michael Jordan. Naturally, I came to associate American cities and states with their respective NBA teams.

So I expected Pittsburgh to offer a sports layperson more than sports. And it does. The breathtaking view of the Golden Triangle where the three rivers join together never tires me. The mirrored fortress of PPG Place complex shimmers with the glory of modern Pittsburgh. The Carnegie Library, the Cultural District, and the Drue Heinz Lecture Series make me feel proud that I'm living in one of the top five most literate cities in America.

Yet I still felt disconnected from Pittsburghers in the first few months. While traveling in the suburbs, I saw several yellow banners that read: *You're in Steeler Country*, flapping in the wind like welcoming hands waving. I didn't understand what the Super Bowl was. What's the attraction of a sport with a score of muscular men chasing and piling together in the field? Even our Chatham University president, Dr. Esther Barazzone, called for support of the Steelers in her emails to the whole campus. Just a week before the latest Super Bowl, she encouraged us to wear Steelers jerseys or dress in black and gold. Who would expect the top leader of a Chinese university to make a similar announcement? If any campus-wide notice isn't about academic matters in China, it's usually political. Say, a delegate from the Department of Education of Guangdong province would be visiting our campus next week, please be ready and give our warmest welcome. If economic achievement is what Chinese cities nowadays are competing for, sports championships must be what American cities are vying for.

Pittsburgh, like a human being, has her own unique temperament. Only after you spend more

time with her will you understand her deeply. I've had many firsts with her: the first American city in which I have lived and consider a home away from China, where I learned to drive and bought my first car, where I published my first article in America, celebrated my first snowy winter, watched my first baseball and hockey games, sipped my first matzo ball soup (now my favorite), spent my first Fourth of July watching the spectacular fireworks with thousands of Pittsburghers, and was even moved to tears hearing "The Star-Spangled Banner."

Not until the night at the end of 2010 when I sat with a full house of Washington Capitals fans in DC's Verizon Center watching them play the Penguins did I understand how Pittsburgh's sports bring a strong cohesion to her denizens, near and far, young and old, women and men, and even outsiders like me.

Before the game started, after learning that I cheered for the Penguins, the red-clad couple next to me said, "Oh, too bad. You're rooting for a team which will lose." I grinned but felt injured. A wave of heat burned inside me. What's this? It's only a game. Why do I care so much about who wins? But looking at the signs hung up by the Capital fans who were booing the Penguins, I felt irritated. Whenever the Penguins defended a goal or scored, I stood up and clapped. The few other Penguins diehards in the crowd and I were the odd ones crying, "Go Pens!" in a sea of red jerseys rooting for the Caps. With a 3-2 victory, the Penguins didn't let us down. Overwhelmed with joy, I turned to the couple beside me, but they were long gone.

This is when I deeply feel Pittsburgh's sports unite people. This is what excites me when Penguins fever warms up my Chinese blood. This is how I find a mutual language to connect with Pittsburghers. And this is how Pittsburgh brings me a sense of home.

I assume there is no other American city like Pittsburgh, whose people are so deeply in love and actively supportive of their sports teams. Can you wear your favorite sports team's jersey on all occasions, seven days a week? Steelers fans do. Sports are in the veins of Pittsburghers. My first attendance at an American funeral also took place in Pittsburgh. Within the eulogy came tidbits about the departed's love of the Steelers, a mournful moment filled with tearful laughter.

When the Steelers lost the latest Super Bowl the sadness that clouded the city felt no less than, perhaps greater than, the entire nation of Chinese feeling defeated when Beijing lost the bid for 2000 Summer Olympics to Sydney by two votes. Even though I know little about American football, I can

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identify with that sense of belonging. Perhaps my American friends understand now why I turned down a dinner invitation on a Penguins' game night or that I'd rather go for a Pirate game than a spring trip. As I count down to the end of my

stay in Pittsburgh, I really want to say to my first teams, *Thank you, Pittsburgh, for making a lonely expatriate feel at home. This is what will draw me back to you from ten thousand miles. Go Pens! Go Bucs! Go Steelers!* ♦

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Mel's Market

by Richard Lutz

Johanne walked down the sidewalk, carefully avoiding cracks, taking time to kick rocks and the



first fallen leaves of autumn. He went past his mother's hair salon and the newsstand where his father used to buy the paper in the morning. He saw the house his father had

grown up in with his six brothers and sisters and waved to his great-grandparents, planning to come back to visit later. He touched the tree that his father had carved his name into as a boy. His older brother Mike gave him a penknife for his birthday one year, and Johanne was sure to carve his name right next to his dad's, but then Mike had left and it didn't feel right anymore.

He crossed the street where his uncle Charlie had been hit by a car. He swerved off the sidewalk and into the street in order to avoid the house of the mean old woman at the end of the block. She always yelled at the neighbor kids for killing her flowers, but they never touched them.

Then he saw what he had come down the street to see: Mel's Market. Its welcoming front steps led up to a glass double door. Candy and soda was stacked along the walls like the ads at a major league baseball park. A group of kids that he knew and recognized sat along with were sitting on their bikes outside and laughing about something one of them had said. Across the street, about ten boys from his school played football in the grassy park. They welcomed him to join in, but he said he was busy because the teams would be uneven if he joined in now. He would always play later.

Stepping across the threshold, Johanne greeted the shopkeeper and headed for the soft drinks. He picked up a Coke and some Hershey's

candy bars—the yellow ones with chocolate icing that would taste the same decades from now. He walked toward Mel while poking his finger into the fold of the wallet in his back pocket, feeling to see if he had the money to buy the goods. The crisp edges of a bill caressed his fingertip, and somewhere in Johanne's heart it rang.

He approached the counter, and his smile met Mel's kind smile. Johanne frequented the store, not for the goods—it was just a convenient place for him to buy snacks, but what really attracted him to the place was Mel himself. Johanne had always loved to hear Mel's stories about the old days and the neighborhood as it was before Johanne was born.

"How are you, Johanne? It's been a while since you've come around," the old man said as he handed the items.

"Oh, you know. I was out of town for a school year."

"How was that?" Mel asked, pausing from the calculating.

"A hard fun. It was in New York, but it was just a week."

"Well, that's great. I've heard nothing but great things about the city."

"Yeah, I want to try there someday. Big money for the Yankees. I'm pretty good."

"Sure you are. Just keep working at it. Did I ever tell you about the time I pitched a no-hitter?"

"I don't think so," Johanne lied. He had heard the story at least twice.

"Well, back when I was about thirteen, I started for the Castle Street Braves. That was in the neighborhood league. They got rid of that a while before you were born."

Johanne nodded and shifted his weight to his feet to show that he was in rapt attention.

"So the story goes, I was a decent pitcher. Not the best, but I won a few games. One time I even won the city championship. But I was too distracted. One summer day, I was in the middle of pitching a no-hitter against our rivals, the Avenue Avenue Dodgers. Now, they had this ringer on the team who went by the name of Mickey Holland.