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The Agony of Defeat

When being a true sports fan means learning how to suffer.

By Peter Telep
UCF Forum columnist
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UCF Instructor Peter Telep '95 '98MA and his daughter Lauren, a senior health services administration major at UCF, show off their Knight pride. (Photo courtesy of Peter Telep '95 '98MA)

I have a confession to make: I'm not a true sports fan. I'd love to be one. I wish had what it takes. But I don't. Not yet.

I'm still struggling with this, and out of a deep sense of guilt I wanted to be honest with you. I'm just a poser in a UCF Knights shirt. I feel ashamed. I want to love my team. I really do. But I need help.

Let's reset the play clock a few years to the days when the UCF Knights football team couldn't win a game. Like many of my colleagues I had simply ignored them. I'm a geek and a Star Wars fan. I'm not a sports guy.

I'd go to parties thrown by my wife's friends (mostly business people), and I couldn't tell you what was happening with any teams. Didn't know. Didn't care. So I never had much to talk about it. No one other than me was collecting Star Wars figures or watching The Empire Strikes Back on TBS.

These clean-cut, muscular MBAs would ask what I thought about this coach leaving or that player getting selected as No. 1 for the NFL draft. I'd smile, sip my beer, and wish I could use Jedi mind tricks to escape the conversation.

But then something happened. The Knights started winning games. A lot of games. And I started watching them on TV and learning more about the college football system. And then that 2017 season: 13-0. Conference champs. National Champions! And then 2018! College Game Day! Holy cow! That year I actually attended a game! Go Knights! Charge On! While we lost our bowl game to LSU, we put up a great fight against an SEC team.

How do you remain a true fan and never give up hope, even when all looks hopeless?

So this year I was pumped! We were going to do it! Another perfect season! And then that shocking loss to Pitt on the road. My expectations were high, my emotions raw. Suddenly, we were losing games, and my excitement was evaporating faster than the summer rain off the Bounce House's bleachers.

If you consider yourself a true fan, may I ask how you do it? How do you stand by your team even when they're losing? How do you remain a true fan and never give up hope, even when all looks hopeless?

After the Knights would lose a game, I'd go on social media and read rants about firing the coach and blaming the team for lack of discipline. Haters would chime in and write the nastiest things about our players and fan base. The disappointment and vitriol was palpable. Defending the team was like a full-time job for some fans, leaving them emotionally drained. Others simply ran out of time, money and energy to remain faithful.

Wow. Collecting Star Wars figures is so much easier! Once the figures strike a pose, they never get called for penalty yards that result in them losing the game! In fact, I've never gotten so mad at my Star Wars figures that I wanted to hurl them across the room. However, at least twice this year I considered destroying my TV while watching a Knights game. I've been left exhausted, depressed and ready to throw in the towel.

Lest we not forget, UCF is my workplace for over 20 years and my alma mater. So I started talking to people, searching for insights.

The Knights have two incredible seasons that are now part of our history, our armor to shield us from the bad years.

I asked one of my cycling friends, Kevin Clark, a diehard Miami Hurricanes fan, how he has remained a true fan for most of his life. Kevin said that the team's rich history allows him to ride out the bad seasons. He reflects on and is thankful for the team's amazing past and doesn't take the future for granted. I found that really interesting and helpful. The Knights have two incredible seasons that are now part of our history, our armor to shield us from the bad years.

I remember when I played Little League and hit my first home run. We got slaughtered in that game, but my dad kept telling me how proud he was of that great hit. I guess even when the team loses, there are individual accomplishments we can still recognize and celebrate. Those facts are more important than our raging emotions.

Of course we shouldn't forget the reason we became fans in the first place, the pride we felt about belonging to something larger than ourselves, our fan base like a great warrior tribe going into battle against another tribe, all of us dressed in our ritual colors, all of us fans and friends. None of us alone. Strength in numbers to get through this. Together. To suffer. Together.

And there it is. Maybe being a true fan means you have to suffer. It's in the losing seasons that your true fandom is really born. It's easy to love a winning team. Perhaps the truth of our fandom lies in enduring the losses and doing what we always do: Charge On!

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