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# 'The Soxaholix': It's Not Ovah, Though It's Ovah

By STEFAN FATSIS

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A year ago, two native Boston Red Sox fans lamented the team's certain demise in baseball's playoffs at the hands of, yet again, the hated New York Yankees.

"It's hard to live here," Bill Callaghan said. "It's very hard to live here." Replied his colleague Mike Sweeney: "In the morning over breakfast, I see them roll the dead down Beacon Street."

The 2004 Red Sox, of course, vanquished the Yankees and won their first World Series in 86 years. But the 2005 team was swept out of the playoffs last week by the Chicago White Sox. And so the inner turmoil continues for Bill and Mike and their co-workers at a white-collar Boston office, characters in a cult online comic strip called "The Soxaholix."

Part Doonesbury, part Bill James, part graduate seminar in literature -- Bill and Mike's lines are from Charles Bukowski's poem "the rent's high too" -- "The Soxaholix" chronicles the schizoid emotions that govern Boston fans like the tides. Its author is the pseudonymous "Hart Brachen," the name chosen to sound like "heartbroken."

Mr. Brachen quotes from Proust, Rilke, Joyce, Plath and the Bible -- plus TV shows like "Star Trek" and "The O.C." -- as often as he does from Sons of Sam Horn and Boston Dirt Dogs, two popular Red Sox Web sites. "Instead of starting with cake and tea," he says, referring to Proust's "Remembrance of Things Past," "it starts with the smell of a hot dog."



Literary infatuation with the Red Sox dates to John Updike's 1960 essay about Ted Williams's last game. John Cheever declared that "all literary men are Red Sox fans." Poet Tom Clark wrote about pitcher Bill Lee. In 1973, the Boston Globe published an Opening Day story written entirely in Latin. On page one.

With epic defeats in 1975, 1978 and 1986, the Red Sox clinched first place in the metaphor division. But even before the World Series triumph, "people sort of had enough of the literary interloper coming in and identifying with the pain and angst and Athens and Sparta," says Glenn Stout, author of "Red Sox Century," a history of the team.

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"The Soxaholix" is part of a countermovement, much of it online, to reclaim the team for its true fans. In thick Bahstin accents, the clip-art characters disdain the romanticization of the Red Sox and fans who jumped on the bandwagon. They are statistically savvy and swear a lot. While nothing matters to them more than the team, they also slyly recognize that baseball isn't life and death. More important, Mr. Brachen says, is "the sharing of the misery, the sharing of the joy."

The 40ish Mr. Brachen grew up in New Hampshire and lived in Boston after college but left to attend a graduate program in English in the South. Inspired by the politically incorrect post-9/11 online comic "Get Your War On," Mr. Brachen says the strip was a way for him to reconnect with his team.

"The Soxaholix" debuted on Opening Day 2004, its point of view immediately clear. The characters loathed the arrogant Yankees and the notion that fans would be set adrift if the Red Sox became champs. "Yes, I'm trembling in the scary novelty of this... this... winning," a character named Doug Roy said in the first strip. "Stupid lazy media hacks and celebrity fans just have no clue."

A few days later, Bill and Doug discussed blogger Ana Marie Cox, known as Wonkette. She posted a link. Other blogs did, too. Daily readership quickly climbed to about 500, soaring during the World Series run. This season, "The Soxaholix" has averaged about 1,600 readers per strip, with as many as 12,000 on some days.

Mr. Brachen, who says he wants to stay anonymous to maintain the strip's irreverence, lives with his wife and dog in a trim subdivision in an Eastern college town, where he works for an online software company. His tidy home office is devoid of Red Sox memorabilia. He gets to Fenway Park only once or twice a season and doesn't follow every inning of every game. "I feel guilty because I'm not the fan people think I am," he says.

A perpetual psychic connection to the team matters more, he says. To write the strip, Mr. Brachen gets up at 5 a.m. He reads the Boston papers online, scans fan sites and checks online highlights. "I know the story, I know who the villains and heroes are," he says. Behind his desk is a six-foot stack of books, from "Baseball Prospectus 2005" to "The Gnostic Gospels" by Elaine Pagels. Oft-quoted favorites like poet Joe Wenderoth's "Letters to Wendy's" sprout Post-It hair.

Mr. Brachen employs a stream-of-consciousness technique. After a late-season defeat, he watched the eerie drama "Lost" and awoke convinced the Red Sox were dead. That got him thinking about the show "Ghost Whisperer." He checked the next episode: A boy gets hit by a train but doesn't know he's dead. Substituting the Red Sox for the boy and the Yankees for the train, Mr. Brachen had the first two panels of a conversation between Bill and Doug.

He clicked to the bio of the show's star, Jennifer Love Hewitt. That let him conjure, in Doug's words, "the perfect slashah/horrah" sequel: The Yankees return from the dead to terrorize their rivals. But Mr. Brachen also had been ruminating about how fans shouldn't forget 2004. So he had Doug acknowledge the logic of optimism, linking to a discussion on the Sons of Sam Horn site. Then he recalled a line about memory in a poem by Richard Howard. "Happiness is founded on forgetting," Bill said in the last frame, "only wisdom, poor wisdom, relies on memory."

The Soxaholix loved how winning felt; when pitcher Curt Schilling beat the Yankees in last year's playoffs, Susan Wentworth, the office's 20-something free-spirit, said, "I got pregnant, immaculately." After last week's swift playoff exit, though, their fatalism returned. "Our honeymoon with God is ovah," Doug said in yesterday's strip, the lines of which were taken from Philip Schultz's poem "untitled, number 63 in the sequence."

Says Mr. Brachen: "It's no longer, 'Everything in the entire universe is lined up against us,'" he says. "It's more, 'Was this just a onetime favor, a onetime gift, a onetime miracle?' That becomes the new fear -- do we just get one per

lifetime?"

*Mr. Fatsis is a Journal reporter in Washington.*

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