

Detroit Sports City

By E Martin Nolan

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What do we mean when we say “Detroit”? It depends on context. When in reference to the auto industry, we refer to an historical legacy. But there is a large gap between this historical Detroit and the actual Detroit, which was largely abandoned by the “Detroit Three” car companies. Henry Ford couldn’t get out quick enough. The building that housed his first assembly line [still stands collecting dust](#) on an empty stretch of Woodward Avenue in Highland Park (a small, hurting city within Detroit—it’s where *Grand Torino* is set). Ford’s famous Rouge Plant, where he eventually moved his operations, is still chugging away though, looming from Dearborn over Southwest Detroit. It’s *just* across the city line, but is quite purposefully outside of the city.

Chrysler is headquartered in a gigantic suburban compound off I-75, way north of the city. Today, a tiny fraction of the jobs left in the city are in the auto industry. GM’s emblem is branded on the Renaissance Center, but that downtown headquarters/fortress looks out upon exactly one GM plant in the city (there’s also one Chrysler plant). So when the auto industry’s rebound is called “Detroit’s recovery,” are we really talking about Detroit?

The meaning of “Detroit” is similarly thrown into doubt by the obligatory “like Detroit, Detroit?” when you tell someone you’re from there. And they are right to assume you mean some or other suburb of Detroit, because most of the area’s people live in the suburbs. But I’ve always believed that a suburbanite *is* from Detroit, and that the exact suburb is secondary. You’re not going to say “I’m from Farmington Hills,” because then you’d have to add “that’s just outside of Detroit” anyway. So even if you’re not from Detroit, Detroit, you’re from “Detroit.”

Because “Detroit” refers to a region as well as to a city. Yes, there is the city proper, but again you have to qualify that, as in by saying “the city proper,” if that is what you mean. The name alone, on the other hand, includes the whole sprawling metro area, which is held together by its battered central city. But how can an eroded, and now bankrupt, central city hold together 4.2 million people, most of whom live in the relatively (but not consistently) prosperous suburbs?

Conceptually, and by tradition. It does so because there is nothing else to do so.

The capital and wealth of the Detroit region is mostly dispersed among its suburbs. It should be noted that the suburbs are also suffering from population loss these days, and that this formulation is simplified, but the gist is clear: the economic and political might of the Detroit region dwells just outside the darkened central city

(literally darkened [in 2013], as in half of the street lights are not on), or in a few areas of the city proper. Given that, it is tempting to look at the Detroit suburbs, consider that they are the economic engine of Southeast Michigan, and wonder if it's possible for suburbs to exist on their own, without needing to be connected to the "urb." Can we call them the "subs?"

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A gullible alien could land in and drive through Oakland County convinced that this is simply a self-sustaining network of leafy cul-de-sacs, mostly empty parks, garden suburbs, malls, strip malls, 4-lane roads, 5-lane interstates, big box stores and the occasional old town center or inner-ring urban-ish strip. But our alien would keep sensing some other presence, and keep seeing and hearing this name, "Detroit." Perhaps it would come to believe this is their deity, or founding mythical hero whose story contains some historical truth but is wrapped up in legend. It would notice the name is often accompanied by what must be its associated totem animals, the lion and the tiger, along with its totem mechanism, the piston, and the weird amalgamation of the winged wheel (the origins and intended meaning of which our alien can only guess at. Like Stonehenge).

So our alien, particularly given to accepting myth, would have to conclude that even though "Detroit" is simply an old story, it is one that is central to these people's identity, and that at some deep fundamental level these people are Detroit, and Detroit is these people. That would be partly right and partly wrong. Detroit is a city of divides. Black-White, city-suburb, east side-west side, old money-new money-no money, etc. Yet without a doubt, a thing definitively called "Detroit" does exist, and it stretches beyond the city limits. So what is it that these disparate places share? Is it simply the history, the fact people in the western suburb of Redford, in the eastern suburb of St. Clair Shores, Wayne in the south, Birmingham in the North, and Detroit in the center, were all a part of the same emptying of the urban center? Is the poor family in Brightmoor connected to the rich one in Auburn Hills only in so far as contrasts are connected, through the gulf between the two realities?

Pondering that, it's tempting, again, to conclude that "Detroit" is simply a coincidence on a map, an area these diverse, disconnected places just happen to share. This hunch is supported by the lack of institutional interaction within the region. The region's governments—or more precisely, the city's government and the suburban powers-that-be—have often promoted separateness more than unity, although there has been some movement in the other direction lately.

But while city and suburban hostility and competition has been the norm, there is one thing around which the region as a whole can gather. A person in Detroit, drinking Red Dog, and a person in Auburn Hills, drinking a French Pinot Noir with overtones of leather, violets and fresh cash, both hate themselves for believing the Lions might be decent next year. They all still love Rasheed Wallace. They'd all freak

if they thought they spotted Justin Verlander. They share this from afar, and it does little to bring them into physical contact. But they share it nonetheless.

Detroit is not without other worthy and enduring institutions, like the Detroit Zoo, the Detroit Institute of Art (both regionally supported), the Detroit Opera House, The Eastern Market, Belle Isle, the beautiful Guardian and Fisher Buildings, Wayne State University, Detroit Medical Center and the rebounding Downtown and Midtown areas in general. But when many Detroiters rarely leave the city limits, and many suburbanites rarely pass through the city limits aside from occasional downtown visits, the sports teams have always lent a desperately needed cohesion to the whole and supported the myth of a unified “Detroit.”

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At some level all sports stadiums feed the human need to congregate, to be amidst a body larger than ourselves. In Detroit, where the dream of individual autonomy was so marvelously achieved—to each his own car, yard and responsibility—this function is all the more pronounced. To sit with 60,000 of your closest friends and watch the Lions blow another one, in a city designed for separateness, feels like a collective unconscious acknowledgement that the Detroit way of life—isolated, private, independent—is unnatural.

In so many ways, sports fill in needs our culture denies. Football allows men to watch men dance (note the perfectly *choreographed* corner route) while allowing them to maintain their manly status and say they don’t watch dance. Likewise, sports have helped hold together the culture of Detroit while the institutional, racial, economic, and governmental forces within the region have been busy tearing it apart. That everyone—Black, White, Latino, Middle Eastern—misses Barry Sanders but understands why he’d retire early from such a shitty organization suggests that there can be common ground that cuts across this seemingly divided region. Sports are capable of generating that commonality because people realize that it’s just a game, and so they can approach it innocently, without baggage, ideological or otherwise.

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The giant bare wall of the Cadillac Tower looms over Campus Martius. The building once adjoined a neighboring tower, but when that was torn down, the bare wall was exposed. Campus Martius is the newly revived traffic circle at the heart of downtown, and the city’s “origin point.” After the fire of 1805, Augustus Woodward designated this as the focal point of the rebuilt city, and Compuware’s decision to build its headquarters there was symbolic of a possible new beginning.

The garish wall was covered by a giant poster of Barry Sanders from 1994-2000. Then it was replaced by one of Steve Yzerman. It was perfect. Detroit was designed like a half-wheel, with its wide avenues—Grand River, Gratiot, Michigan and

Woodward—shooting out from Campus Martius like spokes. To have our most beloved sports stars commemorated there affirmed that this, at its heart, is a sports city. Sports are the area's shared commitment. And it is often through that shared commitment that Detroiters imply a rare admission: that they care for each other.

Detroit's love for its professional teams meets an equally vibrant culture of youth sports. The region's spread out design is at least good for packing in fields, arenas and rinks. And youth sports provide a venue through which otherwise unlikely interactions between different parts of the city might occur. Without travel hockey, for instance, I'd know nothing about Downriver, the industrial (and post-industrial) hockey-mad region south of Detroit (and also the only plausible area that Journey's "South Detroit" could be referring to, there being no place called "South Detroit"—sorry Windsor).

Not that the rinks we visited Downriver were much different than any other, but it is nice to know it as a place, with real people in it, and not just some rumored reputation, some spot on the map. The more glaring interaction, though, occurred when the Downriver teams came up to play us at [Jack Adams' Arena](#) in Detroit. I seriously doubt those folks would've ever seen the intersection of Lyndon and Wyoming, or anything close to there, without hockey intervening. What they got out of it I cannot know. The *Slap Shot*-esq and racially-charged fights we occasionally had with these teams probably didn't help Detroit's image much, but the simple fact of those guys playing a mostly black team, one that was usually better than them, must have made some impression. At the very least, while Yzerman and Sanders loomed over downtown, doing their best to unite us, the larger sports culture of Detroit was, and is, creating interactions within the region that would otherwise not exist.

I do wonder, though, if Detroit's is a sports culture inherently, or if sports just fill a void for the region, one created by the divisions at the heart of the city's history. If it is the latter, then at least we have that. At least we have a Tigers playoff run ahead of us, and—like [the parents in James Wright's "Autumn Begins in Martin's Ferry, Ohio"](#)—a playing field to lay our burden down in front of, like a secular altar.

But then there's the fact that, as Frank Bruni [recently pointed out](#), Detroit people are low key and down to earth. Humbled by history, you might say, without recourse to obnoxious self-promotion. Detroit's is an underdog pride. That's why the *Free Press* went so [openly homer](#) about *Detroit 187*, which was just another bad clichéd cop show (but shows *never* get set in Detroit, so they had to cheerlead). That's we loved the 2004 Pistons so much, because they beat up on the flashy Lakers, or why beating up on Wall Street, I mean the Yankees, in the playoffs, twice, felt so damn good. That even goes for the Colorado Avalanche, who had Rick Reilly, in his hack-troll mode, [dissing the city](#) in their name on the last page of Sports Illustrated. Maybe, then, sports are the perfect venue through which a beat down but humbly prideful city would coalesce. Add to that the natural resources of Michigan, which allow fishing,

hunting and all other kinds of outdoor sports to thrive, and a genuine sports-centered cultural portrait begins to emerge.

That said, it's not Justin Verlander on the Cadillac Tower's wall now, as it should be. It's an ad for the MGM Grand Casino, or some other garbage. After Stevie-N, they put up a car ad. You could see them going for "well, it's not a sports star, but cars are Detroit too, right?" True enough. But when I looked at a 15-story-tall Barry Sanders up there dodging tackles, for us, I felt pride—a weird self-consciously undeserved and vicarious pride, but pride nonetheless. And I felt all of Detroit, from Wyandotte to Rosedale Park, from Troy to Canton, from Ferndale to Cork Town, from Joe Louis Arena to the Fair Grounds on 8-Mile Road, feeling the same pride. Even the interstates that took us away from ourselves trembled with the feeling. When I remember the car ad I just think of the forces that built that magnificent pockmarked mess of a city, and at the same time let it fall apart.