

Cheering for the Birds — and us

By William C. Kashatus

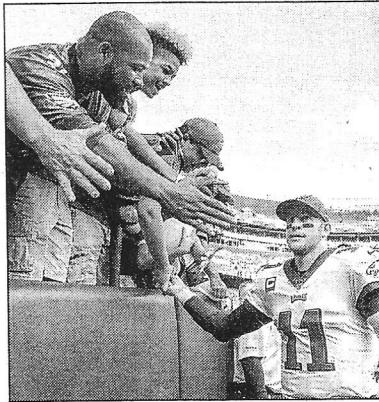
As Philadelphia made its pitch for Amazon HQ2, we heard all about the city's assets: respected universities, nationally recognized museums, excellent restaurants. But the real Philly can be found in the neighborhoods and hearts of the clock-punchers and blue collars who define the sports culture, especially when it comes to football.

More than any of the city's professional sports franchises, the Eagles hold a strong and enduring grip on their fans. This year, the bond has become even tighter, in part because of the season's successful start and the team's ranking among the very best in the National Football League. But there's more. Simply put, these Birds remind us of ourselves.

Eagles fans live in a black-and-white world of heroes and bums. They go to the Linc to seek refuge from life's disappointments. They rely on the Birds to provide a temporary escape from the frustrations of work, the ups and downs of marriage, or ungrateful children.

When the Eagles fail, the fans can become vindictive, especially the more cantankerous ones. These "Boo-Birds" delude themselves into believing that if handed a jersey and pads, they could perform better than the players — or, at least, play harder and show more emotion. Sometimes, that's all Eagles fans really want. Oh, yeah, and winning the Super Bowl would be nice.

Of the 32 teams in the NFL, 13 have never won a Super Bowl title, including the Eagles. True, the Birds did win three championships (1948, 1949, 1960) before the NFL merged with the American Football League in 1970. But generations of fans have no memory of those victories. All they've ever known is disappointment. The most devastating losses came in the Birds' two trips



Carson Wentz greeting fans after beating the Redskins on Sept. 10.

CLEM MURRAY / Staff Photographer

to the Super Bowl, in 2005 (New England Patriots, 24-21) and in 1981 (Oakland Raiders, 27-10).

What's worse, each of the Birds' National Football Conference East rivals has won at least three Super Bowls: Washington Redskins (3), New York Giants (4), and Dallas Cowboys (5). That only makes the Philly fans' inferiority complex more difficult to bear, even as it hardens the resolve to succeed.

With all that history, the Eagles and their fans embraced their underdog status this year, and it's paying off. Sophomore quarterback Carson Wentz, who was passed over by the Cleveland Browns in the 2016 draft, was sporting a 13-to-3 touchdown-to-interception ratio, a 99.6 passer rating, and 133 rushing yards six games into the season.

Of course, the so-called experts claim he's overrated, pointing to his completion rate and yards per attempt as evidence. But who cares if Wentz continues his blue-collar penchant for throwing and rushing for touchdowns? He's the kind of hard-edged player we love in this town.

And Wentz is not alone among Birds who were undervalued by oth-

er NFL teams but have been significant contributors to the year's success. Consider these standouts from the first six games:

Running back LeGarrette Blount, released by the Patriots, averages 5.6 yards per carry and has logged 70 carries for 390 yards this season with two touchdowns. He often takes two or three defenders along for the ride when he's gaining yardage. Blount also runs "angry," which has made him a fan favorite.

Wide receiver Alshon Jeffery, dropped by the Chicago Bears, is one of Wentz's most popular targets. He is averaging 13.2 yards per reception, and his 24 receptions have resulted in two critical touchdowns. Plus, the former Pro Bowler's experience as one of the top receivers in the NFL over the last five years has allowed him to mentor the Birds' younger receiving corps.

Kicker Jake Elliott, dropped by the Cincinnati Bengals in pre-season, has made 12 of 14 field goal attempts, single-handedly keeping the Eagles in many contests. His game-winning 61-yard field goal clinched a 27-24 win over the hated Giants. It was the longest in franchise history, as well as the longest by a rookie in the NFL.

General manager Howie Roseman brought all these men to Philadelphia. He understands the psyche of Eagles' fans, as well as the kind of player who can succeed here.

Of course, there are no guarantees that this season will end in a first-ever Super Bowl title for the Eagles. Injuries, salary disputes, and locker-room difficulties have derailed many a championship run.

But there seems to be something special about this year. A feeling that our time has finally arrived. A feeling that, as we root for the Eagles, we cheer for ourselves.

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