

# WHAT IT REALLY MEANS TO BE AN EAGLES FAN

By WILLIAM C. KASHATUS

**T**HE EAGLES' poor start has been devastating not only for the fans, but also for the players, coaches, front office and owner.

But that's no reason to throw beer at Donovan McNabb, or demand the firing of Andy Reid.

Maybe we should rally 'round the team instead of criticizing them for their refusal to re-sign some veteran defensive stars, and not instituting a more effective running game. The Birds need our support now more than ever before. At least that's what I learned as a kid, thanks to one of the most passionate Eagles fans I've ever known.

Howard Barnes would have been sorely disappointed by the Eagles stumbling first two games, but his eternal optimism wouldn't have allowed him to reveal those feelings to the children who rode his school bus.

I met Barnes in 1964 when my parents enrolled me at Frankford Friends School, where he was the resident historian, custodian and bus driver. As the first kid on the bus each morning, I quickly became the beneficiary of his encyclopedic knowledge of

Philadelphia sports and his special love of the Eagles.

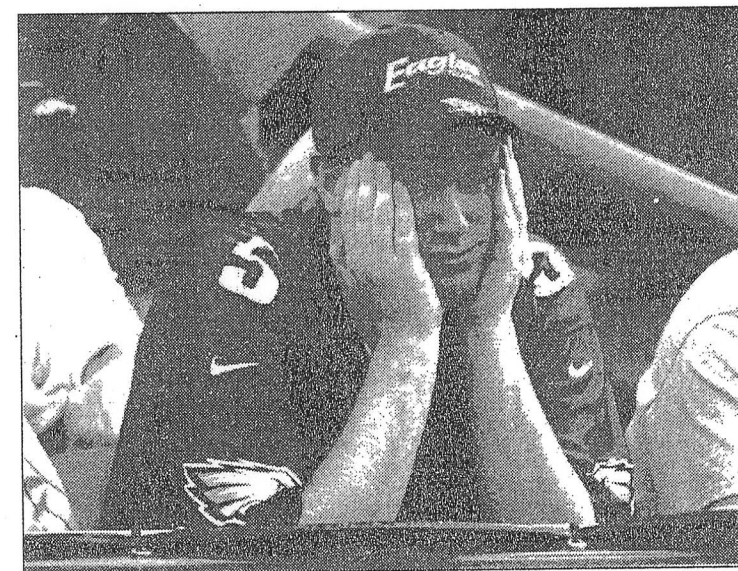
These were dismal years for the Birds. Since winning their only NFL championship in 1960 — a stunning 17-13 victory against the storied Green Bay Packers — the Eagles would post just two winning seasons over the next 16 years.

It was pretty painful being an Eagles fan in those days, especially when the other kids on the bus abandoned the hometown team to root for the Packers, or worse, the Dallas Cowboys.

Whenever I mustered the courage to wear an Eagles sweatshirt to school, I incurred the jeers and insults of these "Boo-birds-in-training." It hurt, and Mr. Barnes knew it, too.

Somehow, he made those seasons bearable for me by recalling the Frankford Yellow Jackets, Philadelphia's first NFL team. The Yellow Jackets, who became the Eagles in 1933, were Barnes' childhood team. "Thousands of fans would make their way by train, bus or trolley to their playing field on Frankford Avenue and Devereaux Street," he told me.

"There was a special relationship between the community



STEVEN M. FALK / Daily News

and the team. They cared about each other, win or lose, probably because we were all neighbors."

Barnes inspired me with his spell-binding accounts of games past, especially the Jackets' 7-6 victory over the Chicago Bears in 1926. That victory gave them a 14-1-1 record, which allowed them to clinch Philadelphia's very first NFL championship.

"The moral of the story," he would always remind me, "is that it can happen again."

"You just have to have faith. I did, and we won it again in 1960."

Of course, Barnes was referring to the one and only Eagles championship team, but the operative word was "we." The fans genuinely believed that they were part of the team.

Barnes, who died in 1996 at the age of 86, liked to call himself a "gentleman fan" who approached the Eagles losses with the same class as their victories.

Never did he boast when they won, and he suffered in silence when they lost. If he had a problem with the team, he would address it politely in a letter to the general manager or owner. To do anything more, he believed, would compromise his integrity.

Like most die-hard sports fans in this town, the only thing I hate more than losing is feeling like the owners of our teams take my and my hard-earned money for granted by fielding an inferior squad.

But that's not the case with these Eagles. They are in a mental — not physical — funk. They don't need negative motivation. That would only make our city look worse than the unattractive reputation we already have in the sports world and kick our own team when they're already down.

So let's cut the Eagles a break by remembering that there's more to being a fan than blindly coveting a Super Bowl berth.

There's faith in a team that you've grown up with and a responsibility to act with class — win or lose. ★

William Kashatus usually criticizes the Phillies, but he's even reconsidering that