

## Sport's Grief: Some New Research Sheds Light On A Peculiar Phenomena

By Steven Kotler on June 25, 2008 in The Playing Field

A few days ago, I was on the phone with a good friend and fellow die-hard sports fan. He lives in Boston, I live (or did until very recently) in Los Angeles. Predictably, he was trying to rub my nose in the recent Celtics triumph over the Lakers, talking all sorts of trash and asking me if I was having the nightmares yet.

I told him, that as of late, there have been no Laker's loss nightmares, but-oddly-I've spent much of the past week having incredibly vivid terrors about the first true love of my life, my dog Ahab, who passed away last February. I mentioned that this struck me as odd for a number of reasons.

The first is that my wife and I run a dog rescue. Since we specialize in sick and older animals, canine death is not something we're unfamiliar with.

The second reason is that, while Ahab was obviously on my mind for much of March and April, by May the pain had started to dissipate and there were long stretches where I hardly even thought about his passing. But suddenly, I've been having incredibly vivid dreams about Ahab and waking up in tears-not a normal state of affairs under almost any circumstance-on several occasions.

My friend told me that the same thing kept happening to him, only his nightmares were about Eli Manning's miracle pass to David Tyree which, also last February, upended the New England Patriot's perfect season and won the New York Giants the Superbowl.

At first I thought he was joking, but no, turns out, he was actually losing lots of sleep over this. Something about this struck me as odd. I know that "sport's grief," the inability to get over a tragic home team loss, isn't as rare as it sounds. As a native Chicagoan, I had an incredibly hard time watching basketball in the months following Michael Jordan's retirement (his first one, by the second I was over it). I asked around and found that more than a few die hard fan friends, at one time or another, seemed to suffer a similar fate.

Now nightmares are one of the most common Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder symptoms, but that didn't quite seem to fit our problems. But, as it turns out, there is some new research that does shed some light on this question.

Earlier this month, UCLA psychiatrist Mary-Frances O'Connor published a study in the journal *Nueroimage*, looking at the brain patterns associated with "complicated" grief. Complicated grief is a technical term for those cases of deep loss that are impossible to get over.

This study used fMRI technology to look at both the brain's pain centers and reward centers in people suffering both uncomplicated (the kind you get over) and complicated grief. They did this by recruiting test subjects who had suffered the loss of a loved one and showing these subjects a picture of the person who had died while simultaneously snapping photos of their brains (a different photo of a stranger was used as a baseline).

What O'Connor found was that both sets of people had activity in their pain centers, but only those suffering complicated grief had action in their nucleus accumbens, a portion of our noggins commonly associated with both reward and social attachment.

"The idea," says O'Connor, "is that when our loved ones are alive, we get a rewarding cue from seeing them or things that remind us of them," O'Connor said. "After the loved one dies, those who adapt to the loss stop getting this neural reward. But those who don't adapt continue to crave it, because each time they do see a cue, they still get that neural reward."

This, she feels, means that people who are still getting this reward cue have difficulty letting go because their brain hasn't yet managed to rewire itself after the loss.

Now this study was done primarily using images of women who have lost sisters to breast cancer (for whatever reason breast cancer grief is incredibly hard to overcome) and not done with photos of a favorite team, but it struck me as curious that our sports-really nothing more than games gussied up with pageantry and professionalism-could produce exactly this kind of reaction.

That said, it is also worth pointing out, that for a certain kind of over-zealous fan (my friend in Boston for example), the relationship with a favorite team is one of the most constant and passionately maintained relationships in his life, even if it works primarily in one direction. Does this new research explain 'sport's grief?' Probably not entirely, but since no researchers are actually addressing the topic, this may have to do for a while.