

The Miracle of the Army-Navy Game - by KT McFarland

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Every year, something miraculous happens the first Saturday in December - the Army-Navy game. It is one of the most fabled and long-standing rivalries in American athletics. Navy Midshipmen and Army Cadets spend their entire four years of college saying 'Beat Army' or 'Beat Navy' dozens of times a day. In the weeks leading up to the contest both Academies wage mock war against each other - with pranks, commando raids and high jinx. This year a squad of Army Cadets-turned-Special-Forces sneaked from West Point to

Annapolis to kidnap Navy's mascot, Bill the Goat, then made a hostage video and sent it around the world on YouTube. The day before the game, each Academy sends a game ball hundreds of miles, tucked under the arms of Cadet and Midshipmen marathon runners. On game day the entire Army Corps of Cadets and Navy Brigade of Midshipmen traveled to a neutral city for the battle.

Not only is the Army-Navy game one of the oldest college football competitions in the nation, in many ways it is one of the best. It's not that the football is great, because it's usually not. The young men who play for Army or Navy weren't recruited by the top university teams -they're too small, or too light. They aren't semi-professional football stars, living, eating and studying apart from their college classmates. The men who play at West Point or Annapolis major in physics or electrical engineering and spend more time doing homework and marching in drills than at football practice. When they graduate they won't be drafted by the NFL. It is the last organized football game most of them will ever play. In a few months time, they will be ensigns standing watch on ships in the Persian Gulf, Marine lieutenants flying helicopter reconnaissance missions in Afghanistan, and Army lieutenants walking the streets of Baghdad.

So why is the Army-Navy game one of the best in college football? Because it is a metaphor for what is best about America. It shows us that we are at our best when we fight ferociously in the game but afterwards, no matter who wins or who loses, we come together as brothers.

The finest moment of the Army-Navy game comes after the whistle blows.

Last Saturday, Navy won 38-3, in a game that was closer than the final score suggests.

At the end, no fans rushed onto the field. Nor did they head for their cars to get ahead of the traffic. They stood at their seats, took off their hats, and put their hands on their hearts. The entire stadium was silent, respectful, alert.

The players don't do war dances or whoops of victory, either. Both teams walk solemnly across the field and meet at the 50-yard line. They shook hands and patted the backs of their opponents. They took off their helmets, tucked them under their arms and walked together to Army's side and, shoulder to shoulder sang the Army alma mater to the entire 4000 Corps of Cadets.

Both teams then turned and walked to the Navy stands and sang the Navy Blue and Gold anthem to the 4000 Brigade of Midshipmen. If you looked up at the stadium screens you could see that many of the players had tears in their eyes. If you looked at your neighbors in the stands, they did too. Because what everyone in that stadium witnessed was the miracle that is America - that after the fiercest of contests we can rise above the victory or the defeat and come together as one nation. Regardless of our religion, family heritage or political affiliation, we are first and foremost, Americans. As much as our differences matter to us, our shared patrimony matters more.

Within a few weeks Americans will begin our presidential campaign ritual. The contests will be fiercely fought, sometimes honorably, sometimes not. But politics is not for the faint of heart. There will no doubt be plenty of times the ref should throw a flag on the play, but in politics the only referees are the voters.

When this campaign season is over, the ballots cast and counted, and the victor declared we should all remember the sight of the Army and Navy football players standing shoulder to shoulder on their field of battle, paying homage to their opponents in the shared belief that what matters more than our partisanship is our brotherhood.

Wouldn't it be a miracle if we could follow their example and, after this next election, lay down our rivalries and animosities and suspicions, and realize that we're in this together - and that what is more important than being a Republican or a Democrat is being an American.

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