We Could All Learn a Thing or Two From Fans of Lousy Sports Teams

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When I attended a Washington Wizards open practice at D.C.’s Capital One Arena earlier this month, the focus was more on spectator entertainment than Rocky-style workouts. The season opener was a week away, and the players ran drills at half speed and engaged in silly skills competitions for fans, including a basketball version of Connect Four. But as a lifelong Wiz devotee, I was having an awestruck, love-you-man moment. Here I was posing for a photo with Phil freakin Chenier. Franchise royalty. My childhood idol. Back in the 1970s, when Chenier was draining jumpers and sporting a Richard Pryor mustache, the team routinely chased titles. These days? Not so much.

Being an NBA fan who loves the Wizards is a little like being a foodie who adores turnips: It just doesn’t make sense. Since the 2000–01 season, only the Knicks and Timberwolves have lost more games. The franchise last advanced beyond the second round of the playoffs in 1979 (back when they were called the Bullets), and they’ve missed the playoffs 16 of the past 25 years. We fans have endured 40-plus years of frustration and disappointment, mainly from the typical issues—bad defense, bad draft picks, bad trades—but sometimes from … weirder ones: One All-Star player was charged with a gun felony involving a teammate, and another was once suspended without pay for being overweight. It’s all #SoWizards, to use a Twitter hashtag.

And yet, I made it out to the open practice with a few hundred fans on a Tuesday night, wearing a Wizards T-shirt and feeling the faint, irrational warmth of preseason hope. Anyone can root for a winner. That’s easy. Last season, the NFL teams with the top-selling merchandise were the Cowboys, 49ers, Patriots, Steelers, and Chiefs. Each team finished with a winning record. In Philadelphia, the currently undefeated Eagles and the World Series–bound Phillies have generated a 20 percent or more increase in business for local restaurants, sports bars, and memorabilia stores.

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