

# Football for dads

Ka Wai Cheung, November 2023

There is one (and only one) way to get off of your phone for an entire day. I know you've been trying to detox from the addiction that lives in your Patagonia pocket—the one that sits right in front of your chest so the vibrations of your college friend's text shocks your heart the same way a hungry lion's roar did to your 40-year old ancestor a few hundred thousand years ago.

Back then 40-something meant you were the eldest of the pack. As the teens and 20-somethings scampered off behind the bushes, your hairy 44-year old nearly dead body moved at a third of the pace your mind wanted it to. You'd be eaten. That would be the end of it. Today, 40-something means the beginning of your second life. A life no one taught you to navigate when you were whatever age you were before your kids came into your life from the stork that you keep telling them about.

*The stork. The tooth fairy. Santa.* Your real heroes. These are beings you idolize not because of the goods they bring but because of their uncanny efficiency to deliver the goods. That quality you once had and mistakenly think you still do. “None of these are real,” your seven-year-old son says. Seven year olds ruin everything.

Too lazy to unzip your pocket all the way, you wiggle your phone out of it and give it a few rubs on your pants to remove the perspiration (How does a phone sweat exactly?). Your phone starts eight-inches from your face from old habits before slowly receding to a spot 18 inches away. The text comes into view.

“So close!”

And just like that, your college friend has ruined your Saturday evening. The one you've planned for, for the past six days.

*Game starts at 11am central. Minus two. 9am here.*

*Game DVR'd. Auto-recorded. Whatever it's called now.*

*Andrew's soccer game starts at 10am.*

*We must leave the house by 9:15am. TV must go off at 8:59am.*

*All text messages from potential spoilers silenced.*

*Window of opportunity opens at 8pm. Wife has granted 90 minutes, I repeat, NINETY MINUTES of free-time. 60 minutes of game time + 20 minutes of fast-forwarding time allotted + 10 minutes of buffer for overtime.*

Like any operation, one missed detail can ruin the whole thing. You must make sure to hide your text alerts. Not put your phone on vibrate. Not mute them. Make sure those damned things don't even reach the lock screen.

You may think to hide alerts from specific contacts because of the uneasy feeling that your aging parents need a way to get to you at any moment's notice or a last minute text message about the soccer game will come through. This is not really practical though. Your rolodex of potential spoilers runs a spectrum based on quality of opponent, differential between spread and in-progress game score, and loyalty of fandom.

For example, suppose unranked Northwestern (my alma mater) is playing a home game against #3 Ohio State. If I check my phone at 12:30pm PT (2:30pm CT) and receive no texts, I can safely assume the Buckeyes won handily (something like 45-13) covering the 21-point spread easily to boot.

On the other hand, if my heart startles two to three times just after the noon hour, you better believe I just missed something miraculous. They took a risk and blitzed the corner on fourth down and preserved the victory. Any number of people I haven't heard from since NU's last victory over OSU in 2004 might come through the fleece jacket.

If, however, I feel my heart buzz one time around 11:44am PT and once again one time around 12:03pm PT, rest assured that NU went up 27-21 on a miraculous fourth quarter drive only to lose 28-27 on the game's final possession because that damned bend-but-don't-break defense shit never ever works! And that text will be from Kevin and it will say "So close!"

Fall Saturdays in perpetuity, you will be off your phone all day.

It helps to have relocated a few time zones from your alma mater, to a place where no one else cares about your team. You then don't have to avoid dodging conversations with other like-minded brethren at said soccer game. Except if someone's a fan of the other team. So best to get to know your friends' parents and keep track of the ones who went to a Big Ten school.

Juke past the phone thing and the people thing and you will contend with your final issue. The spouse. She knows about your predicament. She knew about this years ago and signed off on the agreement anyways. She knows not to look at the score herself because she knows that you know you can sense the situation from

the pheromones she emits. But she does anyway, not to mess with you but because she needs to know what she's dealing with tonight.

It's 8pm on a Saturday night in late October. A particularly long day of soccer for the boy turned birthday party for the girl turned chaos for a few hours in the evening. The kids are asleep. You have dodged your way through the day without a sniff at today's score. This alone is a minor miracle.

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There is nothing like being in bed in the comforting darkness of a fall evening watching a football game that happened in daylight eleven hours ago when the kids are in bed. Except that your team is losing 31-10 and it's the end of the third quarter.

The wife is reading a book (probably about breast-feeding still) bearing through your grunts and sighs. "Why are you such a pessimist?" she says.

Holy shit. The clue. You know that she knows the score but she doesn't know that you know that she would never ask such a question with full knowledge that your team lost the game (or does she, and she has just decided to mess with you?). The rest of the game is like watching the lottery numbers unfold on your screen knowing they're all going to hit.

37-34. 21 miraculous unanswered points in the fourth quarter and an overtime victory. Three quarters of a game without knowing the outcome and then knowing the outcome is the one you hoped for. That's about the best you can do these days.