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Eagles Fans: Portrait in Passion

OTHER NFL CITIES might do the same thing, but only in Philadelphia is it considered part of the culture. You know what we're talking about ...

“Boooooooooooooo!”

“Sometimes I can still hear it, and I’ve been retired for 30 years,” said Adrian Burk, who quarterbacked the Eagles for six seasons (1951–56).

“Philly is a tough town,” said Sonny Jurgensen, the Hall of Fame quarterback who began his career with the Eagles in 1957.

My rookie year, I won three of my four starts, and they still threw beer cans at me when I came through the tunnel. I said, “My God, what’s going to happen if I do bad?”

One game against Dallas in 1961, I was booed when I was introduced. I mean, I was booed by everybody. The first pass I threw was intercepted. The boozing got worse. The second pass I threw was intercepted, and fans started coming out of the stands. Our trainer got into a fight with a couple of them behind the bench. I thought we were going to have a riot.

I wound up throwing five touchdown passes, and we won going away. The fans were cheering me by the end, but they weren’t loud cheers. It was polite applause, like you’d hear at a tennis match. I couldn’t please them. A friend of mine went to the game. He told me, “Man, I never heard anything like that. Everybody around me was booing you.” I asked him what he did. He said, “I booed you, too.” It was the thing to do.

The Philadelphia fans were rough on Jurgensen. Part of the reason was that he followed Norm Van Brocklin after the Dutchman quarterbacked the Eagles to the NFL championship in 1960. Jurgensen had a great season in 1961—he set the club record with 32 touchdown passes—but he wasn’t Van Brocklin. He did not take the Eagles back to the championship—although a 10–4 season was no small achievement—and there was just something about Jurgensen that irritated the fans. With his easy grin and playboy reputation, he seemed too cavalier. To the fans, he was the opposite of the fiercely competitive, driven-to-win Dutchman.

Jurgensen recalls one fan shouting, “Go back to the taproom, you bum.” To which he replied, “It’s Sunday, they’re closed.” In 1983, when Jurgensen was inducted into the Hall of Fame, he reflected on his seven seasons in Philadelphia and admitted the boozing bothered him more than he let on. “The

thing is, you don’t understand it,” he said. “You’re out there trying to win, trying to do good, and they boo. Why?”

Generations of players—and not just quarterbacks—have asked the same question. There is no simple answer. Indeed, it is one of the most complex issues surrounding the team. Eagles fans: Are they the NFL’s best—or worst?

In truth, they can be both depending on the day, the season, and the score. If the team is winning, they are the loudest, most supportive fans in the league. If the team is losing, all that emotion swings the other way.

But even that formula—win = cheers, lose = boos—is not absolute. The fans booed Jurgensen when he won *and* lost, then they booed when Joe Kuharich traded him to Washington for Norm Snead. Philadelphia fans like to say they never boo anyone who gives an all-out effort, yet they booed Ron Jaworski and no one could have left more of himself on the field than Jaworski did in his 10 seasons at the Vet. So the Philly fans are an unpredictable lot. Knowledgeable, yes, but also more fickle than they like to admit.

One thing is constant: They show up. Eagles fans have filled the seats from Shibe Park to Franklin Field to Veterans Stadium to Lincoln Financial Field, year after year, for almost half a century. Club president Joe Banner recalls the team winning just three games in 1998 and having an increase in season-ticket requests the following year.

“This is the most passionate fan base in the NFL,” Banner said. “We had 25,000 people come to training camp one day to watch practice. There were probably another 5,000 who tried to get there but couldn’t because the roads were so jammed. Andy [Reid] needed a police escort to get from the dorm to the practice field.”

“This is a football town,” said quarterback Donovan McNabb. “If the other sports don’t win, they say, ‘Well, football is getting ready to start.’ And when football season starts, they don’t care about anything but winning. And when you’re winning, they love you. And when you lose, they’re trying to find answers as to what’s going on.”

“When I first got here, I thought these fans were crazy,” linebacker Ike Reese told Bob Brookover of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. “Looking back, we only won three games that year, so I can understand it now. But I never experienced the verbal abuse or some of the boozing that went on during 1998. Now I understand how passionate these people are.”

“The fans are tough, I know from experience,” Jaworski said. “I didn’t like being booed. No one does. We all want to be liked.

But I knew where [the fans] were coming from. The team had been losing for years, and the fans were sick of it. It was honest and I understood it. It was better than what we had in LA [with the Rams] where you had a Hollywood crowd, 93,000 people, and you could hardly hear them.

"I look back on those [Eagles] years, and I wouldn't trade them for the world because I really believe they made me stronger. They made me tougher and taught me how to deal with adversity. Although [the boos] hurt at the time, they built my character."

"I've heard Ron say that," said tight end John Spagnola, who played with Jaworski for eight seasons. "He says the fans were like a parent scolding him to make him better. That's one way of looking at it, I guess. I think Ron's being very gracious. It's not everyone who could handle it that way. Some guys would collapse under that [booing]."

Philadelphia fans were known as pretty tough lot as far back as the 1950s when they booed Del Ennis, who was a hometown boy and All-Star outfielder with the Phillies. They booed the Eagles, too, except for the magical 1960 season when Van Brocklin led the entire city, Pied Piper-like, to the NFL championship. The booing resumed shortly after that.

But an interesting thing happened in the late '60s: The fans organized. They focused their dissatisfaction. Instead of 60,000 separate boobirds, they formed one angry flock. The man responsible was Joe Kuharich, who presided over perhaps the darkest era in Eagles history. In 1968, Kuharich's fifth season as head coach and general manager, the Eagles lost their first 11 games, and the fans formed a "Joe Must Go" campaign with buttons and banners. They even paid to have a plane fly over Franklin Field trailing a "Joe Must Go" sign.

"[Kuharich] has pulled the city together as though he had tightened a noose around its neck," wrote Milton Gross in the *New York Post*. "He has rallied it as one around a funeral pyre. He has made the City of Brotherly Love forget about water pollution, the departure of Wilt Chamberlain, and the roof blowing off the Spectrum. He has been responsible for a kind of cultural explosion which may be without precedent in the history of professional sports."

Wrote Sandy Grady in the *Philadelphia Bulletin*: "Any machine politician would marvel at the way Kuharich has united 3,000,000 people. Richard Nixon has promised to pull the country together, but Kuharich has already done it."

One fan, Frank Sheppard of Cherry Hill, was not content to just wear a "Joe Must Go" button. He created the Committee to Rejuvenate the Philadelphia Eagles (CRPE) and bought advertising in the local papers, urging a fan boycott. He wanted the Eagles to play the New Orleans Saints in an empty Franklin Field. Sheppard felt that would send a more powerful message to Eagles owner Jerry Wolman than a lot of buttons and boos.

Several days before the game, Sheppard told Grady his movement was taking hold. "Amazing the way it's mushrooming," he said. "It shows that all you need is the right idea at the right time."

Sheppard must have been disappointed on Sunday. For one thing, 57,128 fans came to Franklin Field to see the pitiful 1–11 Eagles play the 3–8–1 Saints. And to make matters worse, the Eagles actually won, 29–17, a victory that cost them the first overall pick in the college draft. The fans had consoled themselves throughout the miserable 1968 season with the knowledge that, as the worst team in football, the Eagles would be able to draft O. J. Simpson, the Heisman Trophy winner from



Ron Jaworski did not allow the boos at Veterans Stadium to spoil his relationship with the Philadelphia fans.

USC. But by beating the Saints, the Eagles fell to third in the draft, behind Buffalo and Atlanta, so instead of O. J. Simpson, the Eagles wound up with Leroy Keyes, whose NFL career was brief and forgettable.

The national press celebrated. "The bush league fans in that city don't deserve an O. J. Simpson," wrote Brent Musburger, who was then a columnist for the *Chicago Daily News*. Jimmy Cannon, the syndicated columnist, called Philadelphia "a bog of nastiness" and concluded, "O. J. Simpson doesn't belong there ... the Devil's Island of football."

For the fans, the frustration boiled over when the Eagles finished the season at home against Minnesota. A crowd of 54,530 trudged through the snowy streets and sat in the biting cold, watching the Eagles lose to the Vikings, 24–17. At halftime, Frank Olivo, a 20-year-old South Philadelphian dressed as Santa Claus, came onto the Franklin Field track and waved to the crowd as the public address announcer said, much too cheerfully, "The Eagles wish you a Merry Christmas."

At first, there were boos. Then someone threw a snowball. Quickly, the idea spread. Soon, hundreds of fans were venting their anger by throwing snowballs. Olivo tried to make the best of it, smiling and waving, but finally the barrage became too intense. He began ducking, then holding his hands over his face to protect himself. He was fortunate not to be injured.

Matt Millen, who won three Super Bowl rings as an NFL linebacker, was at the game with his father. Millen was 11 at the time and rode to Philadelphia on a bus from his home in

upstate Pennsylvania. "It was a miserable day and a miserable team," Millen was quoted as saying in *The Great Philadelphia Fan Book*. "[Throwing snowballs] was the only fun part of the game. Everybody joined in—fathers, sons, even the old ladies."

When the Eagles returned to the field, the fans began throwing snowballs at Kuharich. Fullback Tom Woodeshick tried to stay as far away from the coach as he could, lest he catch a stray one.

"It wasn't easy because Joe paced the whole game," Woodeshick said. "I'd go to the end of the bench where I thought I was safe, and pretty soon snowballs were flying over my head. I'd look up and there was Joe."

After the game, Kuharich hardly mentioned the fans, saying only, "They boo the president. They probably boo their wives. That's the nature of America today." But Bob Brown, the All-Pro tackle, was furious. He called the fans "creeps" and said he wanted out of Philadelphia. (Brown forced the team to trade him to the Los Angeles Rams in the off-season.)

"The fans in Baltimore are not like that," said kick returner Alvin Haymond, who was in his first season with the Eagles after four years with the Colts. "I don't know what you'd call the fans here. Animals, I guess."

That is how the legend began: Philadelphia fans are so mean, they threw snowballs at Santa Claus. It has been repeated so often, some people think it is a banquet joke. Jeffrey Lurie did

not believe it until shortly after he purchased the team when he was having lunch with a Philadelphia writer and asked, "Did they really throw snowballs at Santa Claus?"

When Lurie was told yes, his eyes widened. "Really?" he said.

Lurie was told about a similar incident in December 1989, when the fans at Veterans Stadium threw snowballs at Dallas coach Jimmy Johnson. They hit Al Jury, the back judge, in the head and knocked him to the ground. They even threw snowballs into the CBS broadcast booth, where play-by-play man Verne Lundquist likened Philadelphia to Beirut.

Some of the snowballs were taken to the washroom and run under water to turn them into ice. Others were loaded with rocks, batteries, or crushed beer cans. It was so perilous on the field that the Eagles mascot and cheerleaders headed for cover early in the fourth quarter. Wrote Bill Conlin in the *Philadelphia Daily News*: "Tough as it was to do, we thrust our richly earned reputation for mean-spirited crowd violence to a new low."

Owner Norman Braman called the fans' behavior "a disgrace." He ordered a ban on beer sales at the stadium for the remainder of the season, which was only two games.

In 11 years as owner, Lurie has seen both faces of the Eagles fan: the good and the ugly. In 1997 the team played a Monday night game against San Francisco, and the national TV audience saw a record number of brawls—police reported 60 fist-fights in the stands—and one fan was arrested after firing a flare into the upper deck. There were no injuries, but the game was such an embarrassment that the team and the city decided to take action.

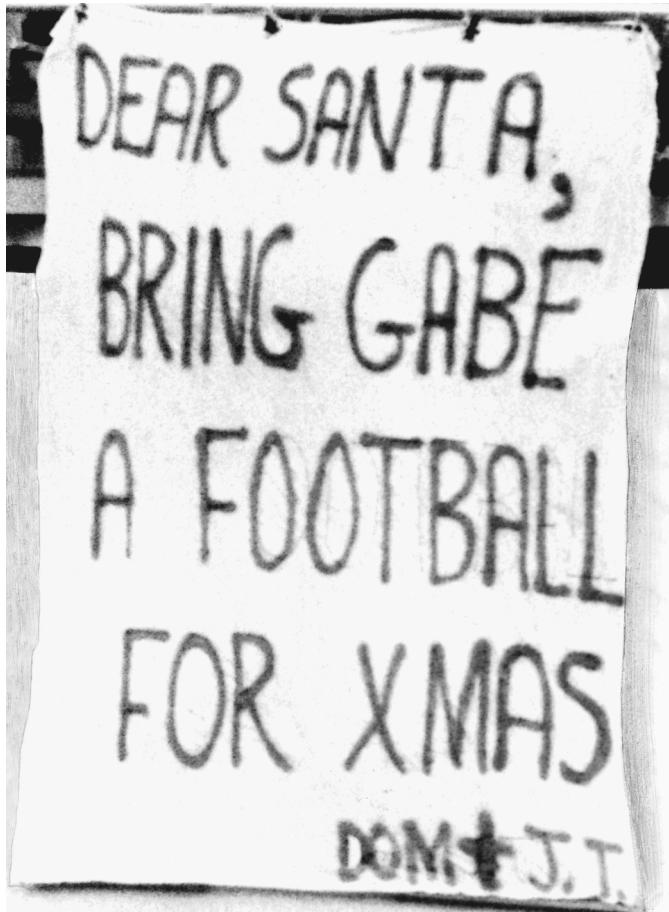
A court was created in the basement of the Vet with Judge Seamus McCaffery dispensing justice on the spot. Where in the past, a drunken or abusive fan would simply be ejected from the stadium, now he was handcuffed and taken to the courtroom—actually, it was a storage area for the Phillies grounds crew—where Judge McCaffery, a no-nonsense former homicide detective, would issue a stiff fine, and if the offender couldn't pay, he was sent to jail.

City Councilman James Kenney supported the court. "I'm a lifelong Philadelphian, I'm a lifelong Eagles fan, I like my Coors Light," he said. "But there is no excuse to start drinking at 10 o'clock on a Sunday morning with the intention of going to the Eagles game and rolling around in the aisles. You start acting like a creep, it's going to cost you \$250 or \$300, which puts a big hole in your beer money."

On the first day of the court—while the Eagles were defeating Pittsburgh 23–20—20 fans were brought before McCaffery. Eighteen were found guilty of disorderly conduct and fined. They also were forced to give up their season tickets.

The Eagles court cut down on rowdy behavior, but it did not eliminate it. In 1999, Michael Irvin of the Cowboys was injured when he fell headfirst onto the hard turf at the Vet. As he lay motionless, many in the crowd of 66,669 cheered. When paramedics wheeled a stretcher onto the field, there was another cheer. Irvin had suffered a spinal cord injury that would end his career, yet a large number of Eagles fans reveled in the sight of the All-Pro receiver being loaded into an ambulance.

"This cannot pass by as just another incidence of our peculiar civic charm," wrote Rich Hofmann in the *Daily News*. "You can't put it in there with the snowballs or the night the guy launched the flare at the seats across the field. This isn't boozing or badgering or anything like that. This is twisted. This is sick."



Eagles fans have a long and colorful history with Santa Claus. In 1973, they made this Christmas wish on behalf of quarterback Roman Gabriel.



The 700 level at Veterans Stadium. "They call this the City of Brotherly Love, but it's really a banana republic," Bill Parcells said. "[The fans] let you know what they thought of you and it was almost always in very negative terms."

Dallas running back Emmitt Smith said he was "disgusted to death." Even the Eagles were appalled. Said wide receiver Charles Johnson, "Our fans pride themselves on being tough, but that wasn't tough. That was plain ignorant."

"The fans who booed are idiots, there's no question about it," said Ed Rendell, a season-ticket holder who was then mayor of Philadelphia. "It's one thing to root hard, but it's a game. How important is a game that we would cheer somebody that may be paralyzed? It's inconceivable to me."

Rendell went on to say, "I've heard comments from fans who said, 'Anyone who goes to an Eagles game should know they can't bring their kids with them.' That is unacceptable to us as a city, and it's certainly unacceptable to the Eagles organization. Taking your kids to a sporting event is one of the best experiences you can have."

That became the image of Philadelphia fans. In January 2003 a Florida travel agent refused to book packages for Tampa Bay fans who wanted to see the Buccaneers play the Eagles in the NFC Championship game. The agent, Dennis Pfeiffe, was quoted as saying, "The potential for client injury [in Philadelphia] has our insurance agent lying awake at night. There is a portion of [Eagles] fans who are terrible; they're rude and obnoxious. That's a known fact."

Even when the Eagles moved across the street to the swankier Lincoln Financial Field—with a decidedly more upscale crowd—the image of the beer-swilling, itching-to-

start-trouble Philly fan lived on. When Minnesota earned a trip to Philadelphia in the 2005 Divisional playoff, a Twin Cities travel agent warned Viking fans that if they attended the game they would be doing so at their own risk.

"Don't look like a Vikings fan if you value your safety and possessions," said Steve Erban, president of Creative Charters. "The stadium is beyond civilization." Erban told the *St. Paul Pioneer-Press* he brought some Green Bay fans to the Linc for the 2004 wild-card game, and he claimed some Eagles fans doused them with beer and then tried to shove them down the steps.

Obviously, it is impossible to condone or excuse such behavior. But it should not be exaggerated or offered as representative of all Eagles fans. The louts and bullies are a minority. Most of the people who attend Eagles games are good fans: fiercely loyal, loud, and, yes, tough on the visiting team, but not in a threatening way. In fact, crowd behavior has improved so much since the move to the Linc that the Eagles court was discontinued in December 2003.

Most visiting coaches and players understand it. When Atlanta was preparing to come to Philadelphia for the NFC championship game in January 2005, running back Warrick Dunn said, "I would say [Philadelphia is] one of the most hostile environments a player can play in because the fans are rude, the crowd is definitely behind the Eagles, and it's a situation of you against them."

Eagles fans gather on "The Roost" at Lincoln Financial Field. "This is the most passionate fan base in the NFL," team president Joe Banner said.



Dunn went on to say he preferred that atmosphere to what the Falcons typically experience at home. He said that when the Falcons defeated St. Louis in the NFC wild-card game, it was "the first time you could really feel the electricity of football [in the Georgia Dome], and that's how games are supposed to be. I know in Philadelphia it's like that week in and week out."

NFL Films once caught Giants coach Bill Parcells talking to Lawrence Taylor prior to a game at Veterans Stadium. "They call this the City of Brotherly Love," Parcells said, "but it's really a banana republic." In a 2002 interview, Parcells was reminded of the sound bite and asked for his final thoughts on the Vet, which was coming down after the season.

"It's a place I grew to really like in a kind of distorted, perverted way," Parcells said. "It's a place where they let you know what they thought of you, and it was almost always in very neg-

ative terms. But the more they [abused] you, the more you began to understand that it was part of a respect they had for you. It was kind of a vile way of doing it, but at the end of the day, you knew they really did have respect for you."

Jim Fassel, who also coached the Giants, had similar feelings. "The Vet was the one place we wouldn't let our families come because of the fans," Fassel said. "It's a rough environment. Those fans are on you. As a coach, if you were walking to the press box, they'd be throwing beer on you. But if you beat them, it all stopped. The same fans would say, 'Congratulations. Nice job.' I respect that."

"I've traveled to other countries, and when I told people I was from Philadelphia, they knew about the booing, that's how widespread the reputation is," said Dr. Joel Fish, a sports psychologist.

It's this whole negative thing which is unfortunate because it's only half the picture. That's because when something happens in Philadelphia, it makes the network news. It's like, "Look, they're throwing things. They're booing." It reinforces the notion that this is a horrible place.

But that passion and energy is part of a genuine caring the people of the city have for their teams. That isn't appreciated enough. I remember when the Eagles were winning two games a season and still selling out. Where else do you find that? Philadelphia fans identify with their teams, especially the Eagles, in a unique way. Listen to talk radio. If the Eagles win, the fans say, "We won." If they lose, it's "We lost." Our identity is wrapped up in our sports teams more than other cities.

This is a blue-collar town that likes to think of itself as a tough, hard-nosed place, and football is a perfect fit. Philadelphians love Rocky because they identify with the guy from the neighborhood who fought his way to the top. And in the movie, when Rocky gets a dog, what does he buy him? An Eagles jersey.

Vai Sikahema has seen this issue from both sides. He was a kick returner with the St. Louis Cardinals coming to Philadelphia as a visiting player. He recalls the team bus pulling into the Vet on Sunday morning and immediately being surrounded by Eagles fans "who looked like they wanted to kill us." Sikahema thought Philadelphia was an awful place filled with nasty people. When he became a free agent, he told his wife, "I can tell you one place we aren't going, and that's Philadelphia."

But Jim McMahon, a former Brigham Young teammate, convinced Sikahema that Philadelphia wasn't a bad place. Largely on McMahon's recommendation, Sikahema signed with the Eagles in 1992 and settled so comfortably into the community that he became a fixture as sports director of WCAU television.

"Jim tells a story that describes Philadelphia fans perfectly," Sikahema said.

He was leaving the Vet, and there were two guys standing over the tunnel, shouting at the players, "You stink, you suck." Most of the players kept walking, but when the two guys shouted at Jim, he turned and gave them the finger. They looked at each other and as Jim walked away, they started shouting, "McMahon, you are the man."

That's the Philly fans. They're tough, they're confrontational, and they respect you if you give it back. They want their athletes to be like the guys they hang with. They poke you in the chest and tell you off, and they like it when you poke back. They say, "That's a man's man." Look at the guys who are popular here. Charles Barkley, Larry Bowa, Buddy Ryan. They're guys who didn't take any crap, and this is a no-crap town.

If Philadelphia fans seem quick to anger, it is easy to understand. The end of the 2004 season marked 21 years since any Philadelphia team in one of the major sports has won a championship. It is the longest drought of any American city with franchises in the four major sports. And of all the Philadelphia teams, the Eagles have gone the longest—45 years—with-out a title. Still, from Fishtown to Bryn Mawr, the fans keep the vigil.

"Their loyalty is without limit, their tolerance for suffering bordering on masochism," wrote Bill Lyon in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. "Each year they tell themselves this will be the year of 76 trombones leading the big parade. And then follows another crushing emotional bender, and you are sure that this time they will be scared away for good, fed up and sworn off. But then another season rolls around, and there they are back for more, hopeful beyond reason, expectant beyond logic."

In the 2004 season, the Eagles rewarded their fans by finally winning the NFC Championship game after stumbling each of the three previous years. After the 27–10 win over Atlanta, the fans celebrated in the Linc and on the streets of Philadelphia, braving subzero wind chill to revel in the moment.

"I'm a grown man, and I was crying walking away from those other championship games; it was like death," said Sandy Stern, a fan from Fort Washington who was interviewed by the *Inquirer* on his way out of the stadium. "But this just feels so unbelievable. My wife is pregnant with twin boys. Nothing except for their birth could match this. Twin Eagle fans."

Paul Campise watched the game from his Moorestown, New Jersey, home. A retired court stenographer, the 74-year-old Campise stopped going to the games after his second triple bypass. Before the last surgery, he told his doctor he wanted



An Eagles fan cannot bear to watch as the team loses its third consecutive NFC title game, this one to Carolina in January 2004.

to live long enough for three things: one, to celebrate his 50th wedding anniversary (he did); two, to make a hole in one (not yet); and three, to see the Eagles win a Super Bowl. He thought the 2004 season would be it, but the Eagles lost Super Bowl XXXIX to New England, 24–21.

"It will hurt for a while, but I'll be back," said Campise, who spent six months building a train platform and scale-model Eagles stadium (complete with a miniature Andy Reid) in his basement. "I've been following the team since the Steve Van Buren days, so I'm going to stick with them. That's what true fans do."

The Eagles fans made an impressive showing at the Super Bowl. An estimated 40,000 of them poured into Jacksonville, many without tickets to the game or places to stay, but they wanted to be there to show their support. They took over the city—people began calling it Philly-ville—wearing their Eagles colors and singing the fight song from morning until night.

But when the game ended and they were left with yet another heartache, most of the fans handled it with grace.

In a letter to the *Philadelphia Daily News*, Mike Marquis, a Patriots fan, wrote:

Your fans were in full force Sunday, booing the Patriot players, coaches, and even the cheerleaders. They turned the Super Bowl into a home game atmosphere. The E-A-G-L-E-S chants were nonstop. The "Fly Eagles Fly" song loud and clear. They did the rabid fan base in Philly proud.

But an untold story is that when the game was over, these same fanatics walked past those of us wearing blue and silver and congratulated us, offering a hand or even a hug. Those fans not only represented Philly well, but the atmosphere that is championship football. Your city should be proud of those fans who laid out the money to make the trek. They did it with passion and class.



Eagles fans tailgating before the long drive to Super Bowl XXXIX. The *Florida Times-Union* estimated that Eagles fans outnumbered New England fans 10 to 1 on the streets of Jacksonville.