

## Patrick Mahomes and Me

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My sister called from the East Coast on a Sunday afternoon. “What are you doing today?” she asked.

“Football,” I said.

“Is your boyfriend playing?” Hyperbole was her go-to on this topic.

“At 3:25.”

“Are you nervous?”

“Not yet,” I lied. “But I will be — by kickoff. He hurt his ankle again ...” I’d already said too much.

“You love him,” she said. I felt her grinning through the phone.

“I do not.”

“You do! You love him!” It was no use; she’s relentless when she thinks she’s onto me. “Deirdra says he’s a punk.” Deirdra is my sister’s best friend. She’s into college football and can’t stand the NFL.

“Deirdra doesn’t even know him,” I said.

“Oh, and you do?”

Late on a Sunday afternoon four years ago, I turned on the TV to an NFL game and heard the announcer going on about some player named Patrick Mahomes and his “golden arm.” Wait, I know that name, I thought. Pat Mahomes. He pitched for the Twins. Decades ago. I covered his Major League debut. Valedictorian of his high school class, he’d turned down scholarships in baseball, basketball, and football to play in the majors and had been drafted by the Minnesota Twins. Did he reinvent himself for the NFL? Then I did the math. *Pat* Mahomes made his pitching debut in 1992. *Patrick* must be his son.

Four years ago, I was a casual football fan. I’d turn on the TV late in a game and stay if the score was close. I’d watched only two or three Super Bowls, none to the final score. I thought oversized thuggery was all it took to play in the NFL. But watching Patrick Mahomes, even I knew this was not business as usual at quarterback. He outmaneuvered the tackles and ends, slipped the linebackers, and — body suspended on a vertical plane — launched the ball into a receiver’s hands. He was a kid at reckless play. He was *fun*. And I wanted to head outdoors and run long for a spiraling pass.

In no time I was planning my weeks around Chiefs games. I watched alone to concentrate and took in everything Patrick Mahomes, from the mop of a Mohawk under his helmet to his quick swivel-hip trot walk. The watery sound of his voice at the scrimmage line took some getting used to, but all in all, I couldn’t get enough of him.

I even got into the press conferences on chiefs.com. Athletes do drone on, responding to questions, revealing nothing. I liked how Mahomes met the questioner eye-to-eye, seeming to actually listen and consider his answer like someone in conversation. On a roll, though, he too strikes a certain cadence, favoring the refrains “keep working” and “better and better.” He gives credit where credit’s due, analyzes mistakes for insight, and takes responsibility: “It starts with me.” In the next moment, he might come from the heart. Last February, minutes after the debacle that was Super Bowl LIX, looking ashen but sounding matter-of-fact, he answered a question comparing this Super Bowl defeat to LV in 2021 (the Chiefs won Super Bowls LIV, LVII, and LVIII in 2020, 2023, and 2024 respectively): The losses, Mahomes said, “hurt more probably than the wins feel good.” Old-fashioned descriptors apply to him, words like thoughtful, genuine, intelligent, sincere. “Awfully likeable,” as one of my friends put it. After watching Mahomes’ interviews, I was ready to sell my possessions and follow him.

The Chiefs looked invincible by the end of my first season (2022) as a fan. In the AFC divisional round playoffs (January 2023) against the Jaguars, a 240-pound linebacker landed on Mahomes’ right ankle. Mahomes left the action just long enough for X-ray (no broken bones) and mummy-like taping. Back in the game, he limped and skipped from huddle to scrimmage line; invented new angles from which to throw the ball, keeping weight off his ankle and foot; and played through the pain. The Chiefs won by a touchdown. One week later, despite reinjury to Mahomes’ ankle, the Chiefs beat the Bengals by a field goal in the last second of the game, and went on to win Super Bowl LVII. The next season, 2023, the Chiefs were the first team in 20 years to win back-to-back Super Bowls. I revelled in the well-being of winning.

Things changed in 2024. The chance of a three-peat — three Super Bowl wins in a row, never before accomplished in the NFL — dominated sports media. The premier competitor, urgent-eyed with the ball in his hands, Mahomes wanted this Super Bowl hallmark as much for the Chiefs, the franchise, and the fans as for himself. And I wanted it because he did. So much pressure. The Chiefs continued to win, but week after week games came down to freakish one-score showdowns. In one game, the Chiefs beat the Chargers by one point, blocking a game-ending field goal. Thrilling, yes, but my tight gut and racing heart all but took the fun out of it.

I wanted to know about Mahomes in these tense situations. How did he feel? How did he handle it? According to Chiefs head coach Andy Reid: the higher the stakes, the calmer Mahomes gets, and the better he plays. When he's calm, Mahomes said in the press conference, his instincts take over. (Instincts based on talent and experience, developed through relentless practice, study, and preparation.) Mahomes' reputation for fearlessness is such that Jason Gay, in the *Wall Street Journal*, referred to the Super Bowl as Mahomes' "personal man cave." So, I was all ears hearing Mahomes say "nervous" when he was asked how he felt watching the blocked field goal *from the sidelines* where he wasn't in control. Control, or trying to get it, indicates fear. Aha. So, Mahomes is human after all. This seemed to fit with another detail. Like many athletes, Mahomes is superstitious. Since players control next to nothing in competition, they develop small, reassuring rituals to create the illusion of control. (I learned this covering baseball.) In *Quarterback*, the 2023 Netflix documentary, Mahomes describes his pregame routine: Arriving at the stadium, he dons a hoodie and sits at the sidelines to "get into the right mindset;" then, *without stepping on lines or logos*, he walks midfield to the opposing team's goal post in the endzone to kneel and pray. Other actions follow in a specific pregame sequence, but you get the picture.

I really wondered about myself — my fascination with and absurd attachment to this superstar. So I was somewhat relieved to discover I wasn't the only Patrick Mahomes fan old enough to be his grandmother. You can find them on the internet. They look like otherwise regular people whose families for some reason went public with their affection for Patrick Mahomes, as if they were a kind of cute quirk of old age, and I refused to count myself among them. Mine was not an ordinary parasocial relationship, I told myself, not some platonic fiction that lessens loneliness and fosters belonging. I confided my concerns and sheepishness to a friend. My history with baseball, she assured me, explained my feelings for Mahomes. "He's *family*," she said.

White lines on the sweep of grass, the smell of fresh popcorn, the crack of the bat, and rising cheers formed my favorite memories when I was too young to know it was baseball, and I was with my father. He'd quit drinking when I was born, but quitting made his temper short, and as I started to walk and talk, he snapped at things I did and said. I grew afraid of him, and I shut down. Something was wrong; it was his alcoholic illness, but I thought it was me. A general fear settled bone deep.

***The next season, I showed up at spring training, pen and notebook in hand and a Twins-issued press pass tied to the spiral binding. I really had no business being there. I was not a journalist; I was a special ed teacher on spring break.***

When the Twins baseball franchise moved to Minnesota, we had box seats behind the dugout at Metropolitan Stadium 50 miles from our hometown, thanks to the bubblegum vendor for my father's grocery store. In grade school then, I was still quiet around my father, even at ballgames. But whenever Killebrew hit one out of the park, we'd jump to our feet, cheering, and turn smiles on each other. At home, I prayed the rosary while listening to Twins games on the radio, and cried when they lost.

My father started to drink again, secretly at first. When he stopped hiding it, the sight of the vodka bottle in a brown paper bag sickened me, and I came to hate his falling-down drunkenness. I was in college when he stopped for good. His new sobriety brought out a gentleness in him that took me years to recognize and appreciate. Eventually, I understood that alcoholism is an illness, and gradually the anger I felt toward him dissolved. But I still felt anxious in his presence and kept him at arm's length, even when I didn't want to. He wrote to me weekly, everyday news, a quick paragraph or two, sometimes including the play-by-play of the ball game he was listening to. The letters continued to come for the rest of his life.

As a young adult, I had no interest in baseball, and when a friend insisted on seeing a game at the Twins' new Metrodome, I didn't want to go. I was a swimmer and a runner and rode my bike everywhere. I wasn't into spectator sports, and I rejected indoor baseball on principle. But I'd recently broken up with my boyfriend, and my resistance was low. As it turned out, one look at the field — the white lines and green turf (I didn't care that it was plastic) — and I was hooked.

The Twins lost 102 games that season, and I bought a ticket for every home game. Only a thousand or so other fans could bear to watch this bungling team of fielding errors and bad at-bats, so I took an empty seat up close, between home plate and the dugout, to see the players' faces. I couldn't imagine failing so publicly — the wide open field, nowhere to hide. When their placid faces betrayed no feelings, I thought they must have the secret to handling fear, and I was desperate to talk to them.

The next season, I showed up at spring training, pen and notebook in hand and a Twins-issued press pass tied to the spiral binding. I really had no business being there. I was not a journalist; I was a special ed teacher on spring break. Though I'd been writing for pleasure since grade school, I had nothing but the scant praise of Sister Isadore, my sixth grade teacher, to recommend me. God knows I couldn't do math. Baseball statistics made my eyes glaze over, and I knew nothing about strategy. (On a 3-0 count, should the hitter swing or take the pitch?) And for all practical purposes, I was afraid. Afraid I'd be unable to think or speak. The only thing going for me was a compulsion I did not understand to find out how in a game statistically given to failure (good hitters make outs seven in ten at bats) they handled fear. So, under sunny Florida skies, I walked up to one player after another, faking it. As it happened they talked freely about everything from secret hitting zones to their preferences in gloves and bats. By the end of the day I thought, I can do this.

My first publication was a one-page, lighthearted verbal sketch of the Twins team of characters. After it ran in a regional magazine, one of two Minneapolis arts weeklies gave me the chance to write regular baseball columns. The following year the second paper recruited me. I covered the game by way of a featured player. I didn't critique his weaknesses, as a real journalist must do. The texture and tension in my stories came from his struggles with things like slumps and losing streaks or adjustments imposed on, say, a pitcher reassigned to the bullpen or a fielder to designated hitter. I felt at home in the dugout and behind the batting cage. My sense of belonging was strictly nonjournalistic, but it let me follow my instincts when I was talking with the players.

For most of the decade or so I covered the Twins, Tom Kelly managed the team. Medium in size, wearing tinted, metal-rimmed glasses under the brim of his cap, he looked nothing like my lanky father, but in his presence I felt self-conscious, as if I was the child and he was the authority. My mind went blank. Words wouldn't come. I couldn't speak.

Eventually, after Kelly managed the Twins through one World Championship (a second Championship and a Manager of the Year award to come), I asked to interview him for a magazine profile. I thought if I got to know him I wouldn't be afraid of him. He agreed to the interviews.

Kelly had played first base in the minor leagues and had had one shot at the majors. But after only 49 big league games, he was returned to the minors where he finished his active-player career. I thought he'd have something to say about fear and failure. "I just wasn't good enough," he said, brushing off my line of questioning. Fair enough, I thought, a man of no excuses. He didn't show up for the full set of interviews though, so I talked with other baseball people who had known him since his minor league days. I'd once pursued Hall of Famer, Rickey

Hendersen, three days before he sat down for an interview, but I didn't have it in me to persist with Kelly. I was curious about an aspect of baseball he seemed to consider irrelevant. When I asked about team chemistry, for example, he said something like, "Team chemistry is as good as the next day's starting pitcher." End of story, he seemed to say. In my view, it would have been just the beginning.

In 1992, the Twins headed north from spring training with a 21-year-old fastball pitcher named Pat Mahomes. He was the only rookie on the team and the only black player on the pitching roster. Lenny Webster, Mahomes' minor league catcher and friend, was eager to see how Mahomes would handle his first chance in the Majors, since he'd bragged to Webster about his own imminent stardom: Enough starts and he'd get that ROY (Rookie of the Year) award. "I hope they rake your ass," Webster came back at him, "just to wake you up a little bit!" He gets so cocky and talks so much trash."

"I get like that," Mahomes told me. "Losing hurts me. It's a funny feeling like there isn't gonna be a tomorrow."

I remember feeling protective of Pat Mahomes, having no clue that I was projecting my own stuff onto him. I wanted Kelly to make it easier for the young pitcher to feel comfortable and fit in. Kelly's managerial strengths had to do with baseball strategy and tactical decisions (how many innings to let Mahomes pitch). The softer side of player development — on-going feedback and encouragement — not so much. It didn't help that Kelly was allergic to the moxie inflating some young players' sense of their abilities. Baseball will humble you, the thinking goes; don't tempt the Fates. I decided to cover Mahomes' major league debut. Thirty years later, I still had a copy of the column I wrote. Here's a glimpse:

*The gold chain at his neck catches the light and beams from the pitcher's mound. Mahomes exhales once deeply. He gives his shoulder a shake that ripples down his arm. His eyes are still but his body is charged. You half expect to see steam rising as it does from the hood of an overheating car.*

As I reread the story, I remembered Pat Mahome's father Johnny had traveled to Minnesota for his son's first major league start, while his mother Cindy watched in Lindale, Texas, on ESPN. She had been paralyzed in an auto accident when Pat, the oldest of three children, was six. "He has always had a lot of responsibility, along with me," Johnny told me, soft-spoken like his son. "I guess he took it on to help me." Johnny had coached Pat's teams from the time Pat was five years old through high school. "Probably too early, but I would always tell him you are a success if you perform to the limits of your ability," Johnny said. "He was my son, so I hit the ball a little harder to him."

Two walks, a balk, and a three-run homer summed up Pat Mahomes' first major league inning. Over the next five innings he settled down, throwing strikes and fastballs with real heat. The Twins lost 4-3 but Mahomes was not the pitcher of record, the loss was not his since a relief pitcher had replaced him at the top of the seventh, and the Twins tied the game at the bottom of the inning. But that's not how I remembered it. In my mind's eye, Kelly had walked to the mound, taken the ball from Mahomes and sent him to the dugout without so much as a pat on the back.

If Mahomes had pitched a full six innings, as my own story had reported, the scene I thought I remembered — Kelly on the mound, taking the ball from Mahomes — could not have happened. After Mahomes had pitched a full six innings, he would have walked off the field with his teammates, and a new Twins pitcher would have taken the mound to start the seventh. Fear and resentment had distorted my memory. I wondered what else I was wrong about.

In August of that summer, my father died. I had no more questions for the players, and within two years I stopped writing about baseball. Pat Mahomes' Major League career spanned 11 years. He played for six different teams, a "solid" pitcher mostly in long relief.

Something was bugging me. Looking back was painful but avoidance made me restless and led me to poke around aimlessly on the internet. That's how I came across the ESPN broadcast video of Pat Mahomes' 1992 debut. I hesitated, then clicked the arrow to watch.

There he was on the pitcher's mound, looking composed, showing none of the nervous ticks even some veteran players display. And yet, you could feel the engine revving. Pitch by pitch, I confirmed what my story had reported: Yes, Mahomes had a rough first inning; yes, the Texas Rangers scored three runs on him; and yes, he eventually found his rhythm and controlled the location of his pitches. I watched the full six innings, pulling for him.

At the bottom of the sixth, the broadcaster announced that Mahomes was finished for the night. The camera panned to the dugout where the rookie sat on the bench, a white towel draping his neck, his face expressionless. Then, Kelly entered the frame. I watched him walk toward Mahomes, lean over, and pat and stroke the pitcher's back. I read Kelly's lips: "Good job," he said, as Mahomes stayed expressionless. From the pressbox, I'd had no view into the dugout; I wouldn't have known what happened. Watching the recording, I couldn't believe my eyes. Later on I remembered that Kelly had a survivalist media savvy; maybe the presence of the TV camera inspired his gesture in the dugout.

My story says that after the game Pat Mahomes stood in front of his locker, hanging his head. "Everybody said I did a good job," he told me, "but they always say that." I assumed "everybody" did not include his manager.

All these years, I carried a silent grudge toward Kelly. I hated him for not being who I wanted him to be, and I hated myself for ever wanting anything from him. When hating him made little sense to my maturing self, I still hated him for how I thought he'd failed a rookie fastball pitcher.

I can't change the fact that living with my father's alcoholism shaped me anymore than I can change the color of my eyes. It's part of who I am. In similar circumstances it overwhelmed me like pollen particles crystallizing in honey. Insight comes in retrospect but change does not easily follow. Sometimes I still feel anxious around the silent types and struggle to think and speak. Most of the time, though, it's okay. Within the fear is a yearning to connect and belong, a yearning that may be a cousin of the desire to compete and win. It occurs to me — Dr. Jung might even see in Patrick Mahomes my golden shadow.

In the daily press conferences the week of Super Bowl LIX, Mahomes was sounding philosophical, and when he answered the millionth question about the three-peat, the Stoic in him appeared. "My job is to do the best I can," he said, "and live with the results." I heard something ominous in "live with the results" like he was unconsciously preparing for defeat, and I wished he hadn't said it. I hear something different now. "Results," of course, includes success and failure. And I've heard Mahomes enough to speculate that "living with" means facing either outcome for what it has to teach. Most of us are failures first. We learn and make the most of the next chance.

I've noticed a certain harmony in failure. It shows up as serendipity and surprise. As evidence, my story: the random luck of tuning in to watch a football game and hearing an old familiar name; my compulsion to follow the memory of a tangled fear to its source; the serendipity of finding a broadcast recording I wasn't looking for and discovering my mistake.

One thing I'm sure of. If I weren't so taken with Patrick Mahomes, or my idealized fantasy of him, I wouldn't have revisited my baseball past and wouldn't have seen how fear distorted my perceptions and limited me. I'd have carried a grudge like a brick in a dusty backpack, with its weight continuing to numb part of my heart.

Early Sunday morning the week after the Super Bowl loss, I swam as usual at a fitness center. The hallways were empty when I was leaving, and the cafe was still closed. Coming around the corner in front of it, I met Patrick Mahomes eye-to-eye — a life-size cardboard cutout of him promoting his sport-drink coffee. He was smiling slightly, and his red T-shirt accentuated his hazel eyes. At the time the image was made, his Mohawk was still intact. As always, when the rolling camera found him on game day, a great calm came over me. I gave him a warm fist bump and laughed, thinking, *Wait till I tell my sister.*

“You’ve got it bad,” she said over the phone. “What would you do if you actually met him?” There was a pause. “Come on, what would you say?”

“I’d tell him I love him.”

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