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Wingnuts

Head coach Mike Babcock's whistle blows signaling the end of practice. The players gather at center ice for a few last words before heading to the locker room. As the athletes exit, a few remain on the ice, which is worn from the hour-long practice. Center Kris Draper scoops up close to 50-used practice pucks and skates around the rink tossing them into the hands of adoring fans who attended the public practice. Soon thereafter, goaltender Manny Legace is the sole player on the otherwise empty ice rink. With his goalie mask off and sweat trickling down his face after a strenuous practice, Legace skates towards a corner in the rink where a small rectangular hole in the glass lies. Fans shove jerseys, pucks, and photos through the tiny box in hopes of obtaining a signature from the number one goaltender in the NHL. While his teammates soak their bodies in hot showers, Legace signs jersey after jersey for the next thirty minutes. He signs every single item that is asked of him to autograph before slipping into the locker room. Later, Legace will tell the *Detroit Free Press* why he did it: "I just remember as a kid, I used to go to open practices. I remember the feeling when I got snubbed by one of the guys. They just walked by and wouldn't sign. Kind of just took it to heart. Not a big deal. Just a half-hour out of my day."

The Detroit Red Wings have a long storied history dating back to 1926 as one of the Original Six teams in the NHL. The organization has collected ten Stanley Cup victories including three since 1997. From the glory era in the 1950s to the "Dead Wings" of the 1980s to the dynasty of the moment, Detroit has followed the team as crazed Wingnuts, a term coined for the extremely passionate Wings fans. During the

playoffs, the Spirit of Detroit statue in front of the City-County building is draped in a giant Wings jersey. After each of the three most recent Stanley Cup victories, over one million people packed Hart Plaza in downtown Detroit to cheer on the newly crowned champions in a parade. When the NHL was locked out last season due to a labor dispute, Detroit's economy lost \$2.2 million for every missed home game. Detroit makes around \$80 million throughout the 41 home games every season according to financial experts. The team has helped enrich the city of Detroit at a time when the city is known more for its negative characteristics than positive ones. As Detroiters lose jobs with automobile jobs being sent overseas, the Wings have provided those living in Detroit and its suburbs a bright reprieve from its economic blues. The hockey team doesn't change an individual's employment status, but when the Wings win in Detroit, everyone feels like a winner.

An hour and fifteen minutes before the doors open, people start to gather outside Joe Louis Arena. The snow falls around us, looking beautiful on this early February morning. A family from Port Huron is first in line. The girl, who's only two years older than her brother, frequently runs to the railing overlooking the players' parking lot in hopes of catching a glimpse of her favorite hockey players. She laughs in delight at the sight of players driving shiny black Hummers and Suburbans into the lot below. Two college age females clasp their numerous 8x10 photos in hopes of obtaining an autograph from one of the athletes featured in the photos as they discuss previous acquisitions from similar events. As time passes, our toes and fingers go numb in the sub-20 degree weather, our breathing becomes shallow, and our noses start to run as our bodies attempt to ward off the frigid winter weather. The waiting line swells to encompass over 500 fans, just in time for the Fox 2 Channel cameraman to record the

image of a freezing mass of waving Red Wings fans waiting to attend the public practice.

It's not uncommon to find lines of frozen fans waiting outside in cold Michigan weather in the middle of January or February to partake in a Wings promotional event. At a Darren McCarty autograph signing at Hockeytown Authentics in Troy, close to one thousand fans stood in ten-degree weather for over four hours to obtain a signature on their favorite pieces of memorabilia. The fans, bonded by a single passion, would walk to a nearby café and bring back hot chocolate for their freezing counterparts. With his ties to the community, McCarty is one of the fans' favorite Wings. Aside from running the McCarty Cancer Foundation, which is dedicated to fundraising research for the cancer that killed his father, multiple myeloma, he is also involved with the Make-A-Wish Foundation and Motor City Mitten Madness. Susannah, a Detroit Wingnut, made this comment after McCarty's father passed away, "Forget every unbelievably crass athlete demanding a higher salary or whining about the lack of respect he gets, McCarty has demonstrated the epitome of sportsmanship and integrity during a time that must be unbelievably hard on him and his family."

McCarty isn't the only Red Wings player to help out in the local community. Sick children at the Children's Hospital in Detroit smile in delight at the sight of their favorite hockey players in their ward. The Wings make this yearly trip to encourage and lift the spirits of young ones fighting illnesses like cancer. Yzerman signs a hat, sweater, and puck for Michael Columbia, a 13-year-old boy who was diagnosed with brain cancer in April. "Stevie's my favorite player," Michael told *The Detroit News*. "My father has told me a lot about him. He said he hoped that my treatments are good and that I don't get

sick again." It's this sort of kindness towards the community by the Wings that has led to such fervor among Wingnuts.

The Wings organization is one of the few professional teams to place a premium on the athlete's family, another reason Wingnuts respect the team and organization. Last fall on a road trip to the southeast, each player was allowed to bring a mentor, father, or son to follow every moment of the trip. Team players, coaches, and support staff had the opportunity to show what they do on a daily basis with those who helped them make it into the NHL whether it was on the ice or within the organization. Both Wingnuts and other NHL fans were really impressed with the organization placing family before hockey and acting on that priority. One Carolina Hurricanes' fan told me, "More teams should host trips like the Wings father son trip."

The sport of hockey is known for its aggressive play whether it's a hard check allowed within the rules of the game or a fight that breaks out resulting in numerous penalties creating a negative image for many people regarding the sport. Some parents don't want to expose their child to the fighting at a young age, but Wingnuts encourage their children to attend games and proudly dress up their young son or daughter in red and white. An enforcer, the fighter, has a primary job to protect the team's star athletes. If an opponent checks captain Steve Yzerman too hard, the enforcer goes after that player to show that the Wings star players cannot be messed with or there will be consequences. It's for this reason that Joe Louis Arena is at its loudest and most electric moments when a hockey fight breaks out during a game. All of a sudden all conversations stop and the mass of over 20,000 fans stand as one to cheer the home team's enforcer on.

A young two-year-old boy named Michael wearing a tiny Wings jersey autographed by Manny Legace and Kirk Maltby peeks over the rink board trying to capture a glimpse of the white ice and spectacle of the impressive athletes. The dad scoops up his blonde haired and blue-eyed son who quickly erupts into tears at the thought of leaving the glass and sight of the players. Adults and older children in the nearby surroundings smile and laugh as the young boy is already expressing the Wingnut attitude at such a tender age.

For many fans, it's the team history that fuels their passion for the Wings. Currently, about 14,000 individuals are on a waiting list for season tickets. As a result, season tickets are typically passed down from generation to generation. One fan noted this in his life, "My grandparents went to go see the Red Wings during World War II. My parents went to go see the Red Wings during the Vietnam era. I go to see the Red Wings today. I guess you could call it the Iraq era."

In smaller markets, Wingnuts engulf opponent's arenas like a group of ants attacking a sugar candy. For example, in a game against the Washington Capitals, red and white hockey jerseys overwhelmed Washington's MCI Center and "Lets Go Red Wings" dominated the arena for the entire night. Wings jerseys are the most purchased hockey jerseys globally so it doesn't come as a surprise when one fan asked his friends living in Germany if he could bring them anything from the United States. All his friends requested were some Jack Daniels and a Red Wings hockey jersey.

Dissimilar to the NBA and NFL where athletes are mostly from America, the NHL is composed of Americans, Canadians, Europeans, and Russians. This eclectic mix of athletes brings together a variety of cultures that you usually only see in the United Nation meetings. From the Russian Five in the 1990s when all five Wings players on the

ice consisted of star Russian hockey players to today's Swedish Seven, Wingnuts have appreciated the organization's superior scouting, especially of foreign countries.

It's easy to be a fan when the team is winning during the regular season and playoffs, but Wingnuts appreciate the players behind the jersey whether it's cheering on the athlete who scored a career high number of goals or welcoming a player's new baby into the world. A Wingnut isn't just a passionate fan, but a member of the Wings family. A self-proclaimed Wingnut once told me, "I love this team like a family. It's like you grow up with these guys because you've watched them for so long. When they hurt out there, you can't help but feel awful about it as if someone really close to you is hurt."

Wingnuts religiously follow their team because of its strong tradition such as the throwing of octopi on the ice at Red Wings games. The tradition originated from April 1952 when an eight legged octopus was thrown on the ice to represent the eight wins needed to win the Stanley Cup and it's been good luck ever since. Only in Detroit can one see 20,000 Wingnuts jump to their feet, scream so loud they go hoarse, stomp their feet until it sounds like the building will collapse to cheer on an out-of-shape middle aged man named Al Sabokta walking across the Joe Louis ice swinging a five foot wide octopus over his head with a huge grin on his face.