



A Game for All Seasons

Sports and sports figures provide both a welcome relief from the stress of dealing with life and death in the ED and memorable ways of characterizing serious health care issues. When the Institute of Medicine issued its 2006 report “Hospital-Based Emergency Care: At the Breaking Point,” we thought that a quote about a popular restaurant by the late, great New York Yankees catcher Yogi Berra better described the severely overcrowded EDs and ambulance diversion: “Nobody goes there anymore—it’s too crowded.”

In late winter and early spring of this year, after vigorous attempts to repeal/revise the 2010 Affordable Care Act (ACA), a replacement bill was withdrawn immediately prior to a Congressional vote on March 24 due to a lack of support. Seven years earlier, when President Obama also seemed to have little chance of getting the ACA through Congress, we thought that there would be “many more balks before the president and Congress finally pitched a viable health care package to the nation.” Only a month later, however, with the ACA now the law, we suggested that our erroneous prediction was similar to that of “a father who convinces his son to leave for the parking lot during the bottom of the ninth inning of a 3-0 game only to hear the

roar of the crowd from the exit ramp as the rookie batter hits a grand-slam home run to win the game.”

In June 2012, when the Supreme Court ruled on the constitutionality of the ACA, many reporters quickly read the Court’s rejection of the first two arguments defending the ACA, and rushed to report that it was dead, without considering that the government had “one more out to go...[the one] casting ACA as a tax—considered to be the weakest player in the lineup—[which] managed to score the winning run to uphold ACA. Game over. Final score: ACA wins 5 to 4.”

But with the 2017 baseball season finally underway, it is a recent football game that provides the perfect paradigm for emergency medicine (EM) and emergency physicians (EPs). The New England Patriots were slight favorites to win Super Bowl 51 over the Atlanta Falcons on February 5, and the first quarter ended with no score. But by halftime, Atlanta was leading 21-3. In 50 years of Super Bowls, no team had ever overcome more than a 10-point deficit to win the game, and with a little over 8 minutes left in the third quarter, the deficit had widened even further to 28-3. Then the Patriots began to turn things around. Though the Patriots never led during regulation play, and no Super

Bowl had ever gone into overtime, the fourth quarter ended in a 28-28 tie, and the Patriots went on to win 34-28 in overtime.

Coming out of the locker room to play the second half of that game in front of over 111 million viewers must have been a daunting experience for the Patriots, but no more so than the experience depicted in EP/cinematographer Ryan McGarry’s award-winning documentary “Code Black,” in which he shows young EM residents walking through a packed waiting room to begin their shift, realizing that in the next 12 hours, they could never treat all of the ill patients waiting to be seen. But the young residents proceeded to treat one patient after another without ever giving up or losing their idealism, until in the end, they, too, had won the game against all odds.

Many patients arrive in EDs so ill that there is no reasonable expectation any intervention can save them, but we nevertheless try and sometimes succeed in doing the seemingly impossible. It is the type of medicine we have chosen to devote our careers to, and we are no less heroes than were the Patriots on February 5, 2017. Each time we go out to “play ball” in our overcrowded EDs, it is worth remembering another famous Yogi Berra quote: “It ain’t over till it’s over.” ■

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