

## What? So Proudly We Hail?

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"I have some good news and some bad news," the caller announced without introduction.

"Oh?" I responded, recognizing the voice of my brother on the line. "What's the good news?"

"Your niece has been invited to sing the national anthem at an NBA basketball game."

"That's wonderful. So what's the bad news?"

"They'll cut to commercial while she's singing. We'll never hear a note of it."

Regrettably, my brother's news illustrates a basic fact of life in our country today. First, we ask professional performers to sing the anthem before sporting events because we know the spectators won't. Then we spare the television audience having to listen to it so they can go to the bathroom before the game starts.

As I searched my mind to find a reason for the rather uncharacteristic sadness I felt at the end of that phone conversation, my thoughts drifted back to a very different experience I had shared with the same brother some thirty years earlier. In my memory, I found myself once again seated on a FinAir jet flying from Frankfurt, Germany to Helsinki, Finland. I was returning home from a scientific conference in Vienna and I had scheduled a side trip to visit my brother, who was in Helsinki attending a dual track meet. It was not surprising that Tom would be attending a track meet on the weekend in question. He had moved to Sweden that year, 1966, to become one of their national track and field coaches, assisting the Swedish national team in its preparations for the 1968 Olympic games in Mexico City.

On the airliner over northern Europe, the man in the next seat introduced himself.

"You are an American?" he queried.

"Yes," I replied, offering my hand.

He explained that he was a Finnish businessman returning from a meeting in Frankfurt to his home in Helsinki.

"And what takes you to my homeland?" he asked.

"I'm going to a track meet," I replied.

"Indeed," he responded with increased animation, obviously interested by my answer. "And you have tickets to the meet?"

"No," I answered, puzzled by his familiarity with an event that I had assumed would attract little attention except from track nuts like me. "Will there be limited seating?"

"Oh, yes. All tickets have been sold out for months."

"For months? You're kidding. How many people does the place hold?"

"Fifty thousand."

I sat stunned while the man unfolded the newspaper he was holding and showed me the front page. I didn't have to be able to read Finnish to understand that the big news in Helsinki that Saturday was track and field.

He went on to explain that the "dual meet" I was planning to attend was the biggest athletic event of the year in both Finland and Sweden—equivalent in the United States to the World Series and the NFL and NBA Championships all rolled into one. It was a fiercely contested rivalry that alternated between the two capitals each year. This year Finland was the host country, and as my traveling companion advised me proudly, the Finns had never lost at home.

The plane arrived on schedule, but by the time I reached the downtown terminal in Helsinki, I had less than an hour before the start of the meet. With time running short, I quickly found a place to store my luggage, flagged a taxi and instructed the driver to take me to the stadium—"schnell!" I hoped he could understand my elementary German well enough to appreciate the need for haste.

Apparently he did, because he smiled, nodded knowingly and took off like a scared rabbit.

Again I checked my watch. I had no idea how I was going to get into the meet without a ticket, but if the driver could get me there quickly, I'd still have a little time to find a way. Then, almost before I had a chance to settle back in the seat, he screeched the taxi to a halt, turned in his seat, pointed to his watch and pronounced with a grin, "Schnell!"

I looked out to see where we were, but there was no stadium in sight. We were stopped in front of a hotel. Noticing my confused look, the driver pointed impatiently across the street. There stood the destination he thought I wanted—the Helsinki railroad station.

Frantically, I told him, "No! No! Stadium! Stadium!"

"Ja! Ja!" he replied, shaking his head affirmatively and pointing at the terminal building across the street.

Finally, I grabbed his hand, pulled him from the cab and led him into the lobby of the hotel. By now I had had just enough experience as a European traveler to remember that most hotel clerks spoke English. The clerk quickly translated my instructions and the driver nodded his head in response. Giving me a quick wink as we turned to leave, he asked, "Schnell?"

"Schnell!" I responded as we raced for the cab.

It was not far to the stadium and, because of our detour to the railroad station, the pass gate was now the closest entrance. He dropped me off a couple of blocks from the gate and I joined a mass of pedestrians surging toward the arena. I still had about twenty minutes.

There were two entrances through the fence at the pass gate. One was a large vehicular gate powered by an electric motor. The other was a pedestrian entrance attended by an official. A number of other workers were standing around inside the large gate. I hurried up the to fence and pleaded in a loud voice, "Does anyone here speak English?"

My hope was that, if any of those officials could converse in English, the sight of a lone American standing outside the gate would be too great a curiosity to resist. It was. One of the men separated from the group and joined me at the fence. I introduced myself quickly, explaining that my brother was one of the Swedish national coaches and that I wanted to get word to him of my early arrival.

He turned to one of the other officials, exchanged a couple of brief comments and then returned, inviting me into the restricted area through the pedestrian gate. As I entered, I could see the man to whom he had been talking now scurrying down the long walkway toward the stadium entrance.

Like the businessman on the airplane, the Finnish official seemed grateful for the opportunity to converse in English with an American. In particular, he took some pride in being able to provide me a running commentary on the increased activity through the pass gate that had begun just after I arrived. Every few minutes, the large vehicular gate swung open and a black limousine passed by us.

"That is the head of our armed forces," my guide advised as one limousine passed.

"That is our foreign minister," he explained when another went by.

This astounding parade of high-ranking Finnish government officials continued until finally the gate opened for one last limousine. Everyone snapped to attention.

"That was President Kekkonen," I was informed in a whisper after the vehicle had passed by within a few feet of us.

Then, watching in awed silence as the president's limousine proceeded toward the stadium, I caught sight of a figure in a blue sweatsuit racing toward us on the walkway from the stadium

entrance. As the figure neared, I could make out the name "SVERIGE" in large yellow letters on the front of the jacket and then recognized that it was Tom, now waving wildly and calling for me to join him.

"Hurry up," he shouted impatiently. "We only have a few minutes before the national anthems. I want to record them."

I quickly thanked the official for his help and raced after my brother, who was already on his way back to the stadium. As we reached the entrance, he handed me a metal pin with a bit of blue and white ribbon attached.

"Here," he instructed. "Show this to the guard down below." Then he raced down some stairs ahead of me into a long tunnel. I could barely make out the figure of the guard seated at the entrance as my eyes tried to adjust to the dim light in the tunnel, and he had little time to react to us speeding past him into the labyrinth. I had no idea where we were or where we were going. My only goal was not to be left too far behind by the one-time championship runner who was leading the way.

Then, with my attention so engrossed in trying to keep up that I had no warning at all, we suddenly emerged from the tunnel and I found myself standing in bright sunlight—directly in the middle of the track and surrounded by fifty thousand roaring spectators. It was an absolutely unbelievable sight—but the best was yet to come.

"Shhh!" my brother cautioned. "They're going to start the national anthems."

The stadium went suddenly quiet and the Swedish anthem began. Although the vast majority of the crowd was from the host country, the bold and joyful sounds with which that small band of Swedish spectators filled the arena left me shuddering with exhilaration.

They finished with a loud cheer and the stadium hushed again. Not to be outdone by their rivals in the competition, more than forty thousand Finns then sang their national anthem with such a passion that their voices must surely have echoed far into the surrounding countryside.

As I recalled that moment in 1966, standing engulfed in the sounds of proud people raising their voices to honor their native lands, I was stirred once again. And I knew then the origin of my sadness after the phone call. It came from the realization that I will probably never live to hear our own anthem sung with such overwhelming national pride.

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When I wrote these reflections some years ago, I had pretty much accepted the fact that, to most Americans, the national anthem is simply a formality to be endured at public gatherings. However, when I stood recently in a stadium to hear the anthem sung by a student to five thousand silent people attending the graduation of a granddaughter's high school class, I began to wonder if this silence isn't a real measure of how little we have come to treasure the bonds that unite us—and how much more we have come to treasure our differences and disagreements. Those differences and disagreements will always be with us, but we cannot allow them to become what identifies us as a nation. If we want the world to know that we really stand united in fulfilling the purposes documented by our founding fathers, then we all need to sing, loudly and proudly, when we stand together at the opening of public events—like those anthems I heard in Helsinki those many years ago.