

GUEST ESSAY

I Was Transformed by the Best Cult Ever: Michigan Football

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I went to Ann Arbor, Mich., for a journalism fellowship because I was stuck in life. An outside observer might say I was depressed, unhappy and a little too obsessed with my dog. I felt isolated and lonely — part of the psychological epidemic that followed the pandemic.

Dozens of people told me two things about Ann Arbor: Eat at Zingerman’s and get season tickets for University of Michigan football. I love sports — I grew up on the Lakers and the Dodgers. I’ve written for Sports Illustrated and freelanced for ESPN and have covered women’s sports and inequity.

But I never wrote or cared about football. It wasn’t the violence; I’m a big fan of boxing and trained at Gleason’s gym for more than 15 years. Football just wasn’t part of my culture growing up.

I bought a student season pass for the home games. I figured I’d go to one game and probably sell the other six tickets.

But what followed changed my life — I was transformed by Michigan football. My mental health shifted; I was happy for the first time in a long time.

And it wasn’t just about football. It felt bigger than that — as if joining a massive crowd is novel and embarrassingly spiritual. We were in it together.

For my first game, Ann Arbor radiated maize and blue. I stopped at a tailgate with friends. You could see the bricks of the Big House — officially, Michigan Stadium — from their corner and hear the pregame hysteria. Strangers offered me squares of shortbread (each with a letter from M-I-C-H-I-G-A-N), sandwiches, chips, beer, White Claw.

I was still skeptical when I entered the Big House, but it was stunning. Something — some kind of mystical energy that can come only from 110,000 people chanting in unison — washed over me. I stood on the bleachers and yelled and cheered and mumbled the fight song (I didn’t know the words yet). I worried that the students pounding Fireballs would tip over and turn into human dominoes.

The place was so packed, but so purpose driven, that everyone held one another up, caring when caring was needed. They pointed out when phones fell, or someone needed hydration, or an escort out. In the Big House (the third biggest stadium in the world, if you count a claim by North Korea, which is tough to verify), I felt delirious joy, meditative peace, a sense of comfort. Maybe this is what being in a megachurch or a Trump rally feels like to true believers. Maybe I am a true believer in Michigan football.

Football wasn't an immediate salve. I was still feeling lost and displaced and confused ahead of the third home game. I knew that I needed to get out of the house, and so I walked to the game. From blocks away, I could hear the fans screaming and feel the earth move.

I entered the Big House again and again, for the rest of the season. For seven home games, I understood more about why I gravitated to the stadium. Something clicked. My mood, upon entering, changed immediately. I was swept up in frenetic joy. It was as if we, the fans, were a superorganism.

I tailgated in 19-degree frost, screamed for Victor, the Frisbee catching dog, chanted "Hail to the Victors" with the band, sang "Mr. Brightside," as loud as possible, a cappella, in unison, shared small bottles of tequila with people I've never met.

One surprising reality of the Big House magic is that there are so many people in one place that cellphones don't work — the infrastructure can't handle the density of users. There is no way to experience the two to three hours together except by paying attention and participating. There is no way to get lost in a horrifying social media feed or internet rabbit hole.

Through football, my mental health shifted; I was happy for the first time in a long time. I found strangers who became friends; long-lost friends (die-hard Michigan fans) who re-emerged in my life; relatives and colleagues who were alumni cheering on my cheering from afar.

I found myself joining the best cult ever: Michigan football. It has helped that we're undefeated (notice how I use "we" now) and favored to win the National Championship (starting with a College Football Playoff semifinal, the Rose Bowl, on New Year's Day).

Going to the games has allowed for release and purpose. Since Covid, I'm not alone in realizing how starved I was for this deep feeling. I entered a communal space with tens of thousands of fellow travelers who shared in the same experience, who had the same goals, to cheer, to win, to celebrate a team and a tradition — and to experience a collective sense of belonging.

In 2021, the Stanford literature professor Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht wrote a book about crowds and stadiums as a ritual of intensity. He covered the idea that crowds can open humans up to experiences beyond ourselves.

Since Covid, these gatherings are more pronounced. I realize escape is a privilege, but for me the season pass was cheaper than one session of therapy.

Somehow, I have evolved from a person with no relationship to football to a devoted fan who now spends her free time watching Jim Harbaugh news conferences and reading GoBlue blogs.

I am now a person who knows that in 1939, a live wolverine in a cage was paraded around the field at halftime. I stormed the field after the win over Ohio State — our last home game — and woke up with a sprained toe, four bruises, no ability to talk because I had been screaming, a sunburn (it was 19 degrees that morning, so who knows how that happened) and a spiritual awakening.

I was transported to a different level of being — elation.

My newfound obsession is not without reservations and questions. The players should be paid. A lot. What does it mean to have 22 players on the field, brains still developing, risking life and limb for the entertainment of a hundred thousand people in person and millions on TV? I don't know, but it's likely bad.

Still, after the epic victory over Ohio State, I felt like I might die without football. I could sense my devotion waning and needed that wild, frenzied collective love. I don't want this season to end.

I realized two things after our last victory: I am a Michigan football fan for life, and Coach Harbaugh gloriously has resting wolverine face.

When Michigan plays Alabama in the Rose Bowl in Pasadena, Calif., I will be at the alumni tailgate at 10 a.m., I will sit in the Michigan section, I will scream for our quarterback J.J. McCarthy and running back Blake Corum. The Rose Bowl is not the Big House; no place is the Big House.

But I want to be there. Scratch that. I need to be there to watch Michigan win — and to share that feeling with my fellow true believers.

Jaime Lowe is the author of “Breathing Fire: Female Inmate Firefighters on the Front Lines of California’s Wildfires” and “Mental: Lithium, Love, and Losing My Mind” and is a contributor at The New York Times Magazine.

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