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TIME

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SWEET HOME, MINNESOTA

By Garrison Keillor

Out here on the windswept prairie of Minnesota, where we have only three seasons--either winter is just over or winter is on the way, or else it's winter--and where by March we feel dull and flat and lost in the boondocks, it is pretty luxurious that the U. of M. basketball team won the 1997 Big Ten championship and went to the NCAA tournament. It's the best news all winter.

Our team has a 27-3 record, but it's no powerhouse: it's one of those scrappy defensive teams that win big games by one or two points and give you three heart attacks in the last four minutes. The right team for a state of Germans and Scandinavians who believe in hard work, perseverance, and don't think you're somebody special, because you're not.

We Midwesterners have a sixth sense, and it's the sense of inferiority, a feeling that if we were really any good, we wouldn't be living here. This can lead to truly dumb attempts to compensate, such as a recent article in a local magazine saying that Minneapolis is as hip as New York City. The magazine is the sort that goes in for cover stories like "Twenty-Five Best Sunday Brunches" or "Thirty-Six Ways to Turn Your Bathroom into a Place You Would Want to Spend the Entire Afternoon In"--and the article was terminally dopey, as any article about hipness would be. You don't hear New Yorkers talk about how hip their city is; they talk about harrowing cab rides, rapacious plumbers, crackheads on the sidewalk, all the usual urban horrors. New Yorkers know it's not cool to talk about being hip. Some Midwesterners don't understand that.

Inferiority is a big public issue here at the moment: the Minnesota legislature is debating whether to build a stadium for the Minnesota Twins, who might skip town if they don't get one, and where would that leave us? Back in the minor leagues, that's where. No different from Des

Moines or Omaha. The Governor, who favors the stadium, recently told the people of Minnesota, who do not, that without major league sports the Twin Cities would be like Des Moines, "absolutely dead," which caused some consternation in Iowa and not much in Minnesota, where the fear of being like Des Moines, or necrophobia, is not so potent, except in Minneapolis, of course.

Des Moinesity (or Omahaness) is a bigger issue in Minneapolis than in St. Paul. In St. Paul--a city with not so many Sunday brunches, whose residents look on bathrooms as places you go in and do your business and come out--we have our own ballpark, next to the railroad tracks south of the State Fair Grounds, where our baseball team, the Saints, plays against teams from Duluth, Sioux Falls, Sioux City, Fargo-Moorhead, Madison, Winnipeg and Thunder Bay. We wave at the trains as they go by, and we always have a good time regardless of what happens on the field. Between innings, a man walks up to the home-plate ump, leading a pig with a bag of fresh baseballs on its back. Once, a player from an opposing team was offended by the pig and turned to the umpire and said, "That is so bush league," and the ump said, "This is the bush leagues."

In St. Paul, America's 57th largest city, we're all right with that. Nobody who sits near me at the ballpark seems to feel personally diminished by living in a minor league city. We do not consider ourselves fundamentally so different from Duluthites or Sioux Fallsians or Fargo-Moorheaders. We all eat the same brand of corn flakes, and one size sock fits all. However, in Minneapolis, the 42nd largest American city, there are people who imagine it to be the Manhattan of the Midwest, the Paris of the Prairie. This is embarrassing to us St. Paulites, like knowing a small man with a bad toupee who thinks he is Tom Cruise. What can you say to him, other than "Stop that"?

To most Minneapolitans, St. Paul is an inexplicable growth on their eastern flank, their New Jersey, their Pasadena, the place you don't go if you're hip, and those people are heavily into hipness. At Walker Art Center, the custodial staff has to be careful not to leave a pail and a mop unattended during exhibition hours lest it attract a crowd of Minneapolitans struck by the angularity of the thing, the openness, the vocabulary of liquidity. Minneapolis, not St. Paul, is a mecca for performance artists, people who can't sing or dance or write or act but who can crawl through a pile of truck tires wearing a shower curtain and wave a flashlight and say things. Minneapolitans lean forward and watch them, perspiring, afraid that some subtlety may escape them. St. Paulites look at each other and say, "Whose idea was this?"

What truly distinguishes Minnesota isn't majorness or hipness but a sweetness of character that perhaps is brought out by bitter weather and sensory deprivation, and that you can't show off to

outsiders because the moment you do, it's gone. This is a state of people not so far removed from the farm, and farming is a civil business that believes in sharing new information and helping your neighbor. It produces good-hearted people who are tolerant, helpful and friendly. Farming is why the narcissism quotient is low here, and people avoid stupidity when possible, not wanting to be a \$10 haircut on a 50[cent] head. The sort of arrogance that amuses New Yorkers is here considered gauche.

I personally favor building a golden stadium in Minneapolis encrusted with precious gems, but only for our own amusement, not to make us major league, which we're not and don't want to be. We've seen major league places, and that's one reason we live here instead.

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