

this is thesauerbrunreport.com archive page covering the time period 7-4-10 to 5-20-11:

Greetings from Baltimore.

First night in town here I hit Yanks/O's with Marc at beautiful Camden Yards. After a 48-minute rain delay, the Yanks immediately unloaded offensively on emergency O's starter Brad Bergesen.

The game was over from the start. CC (pictured above) threw his first pitch with a five-nil lead and coasted through eight shutout innings. The final was 13-2 Yanks.

Jorgie started at first base for the first time since 2008, which looked and felt incredibly cool. Tex hit a massive home run blast into right field, nearly landing in a Boog's BBQ grilling station. It rained much of the evening before a small crowd that was nearly fifty-percent Yankee fans.

Animal Kingdom's trainer Graham Motion threw out the first pitch in an awkwardly staged ceremony in front of the Orioles dugout about an hour before the game started.

The night before, these same two teams played each other in a fifteen-inning affair that lasted 4 hours and 56 minutes. Baltimore skipper Buck Showalter used all eight pitchers in his bullpen plus the planned (then aborted) Thursday starter Jeremy Guthrie. The Yanks pen made out much better. Rookie Hector Noesi ate up four scoreless frames, leaving New York with fresher arms for Thursday night's game. Turns out it didn't really matter because of the way CC performed.

What can you say about Sabathia. The guy struck out nine, walked none and wasn't at all bothered by horrible field conditions. This is what he does. Just about every fifth day, he goes out there and makes it look easy.

I arrived Thursday morning in Baltimore with similar ease.

The airplane ride down was a 35 minute up-and-down on a 74-seat twin turboprop out of Newark.

From Baltimore/Washington (Thurgood Marshall) International Airport, it's a 35-minute light rail trip to downtown. The one-way fare is a buck sixty. I'm staying at a chain hotel a few blocks north of the ballpark.

As I've stated here before, Baltimore's problems are on full display for the visitor to see. There are many vivid, haunting scenes of poverty, addiction and human neglect in this city. On stretches of downtown streets, I fail to see renewal or hope. You can be walking along for a block or two and see nothing but sick and tired people before a worker or tourist passes.

I'm simply navigating point to point on a weekend fun trip. I'm not searching for misery. The city's sores seem to be prominent. While other urban centers moved on or evolved away somewhat from crack and plywood-covered windows, the Baltimore I'm seeing continues to appear as bad as it did three, five, ten, fifteen years ago.

After walking out of the Lexington Market in broad daylight Thursday, I was approached casually four separate times by men uttering a one-syllable word that sounded like "heat" or "pete." Who knows what

this means, but I'm guessing it's not something I'm buying or selling.

I had a "soft crab" sandwich at the legendary Faidley's for lunch Thursday. It was de-lish.

5-20-11 0025

I'm headed down to Baltimore Thursday for Preakness weekend. The swirling rain system that's drenched the Atlantic coast all week will be gone by Saturday. Sunshine and warmth are forecasted for Old Hilltop on the big day.

The Kentucky Derby winner Animal Kingdom will attempt to keep alive the near-impossible prospect of winning a triple crown. It's a feat that hasn't been accomplished since 1978 when Affirmed won the Derby, Preakness and Belmont.

To win those three big races in just five weeks has proven too difficult for the current era's three-year-old thoroughbred. Since 1997, we've watched seven horses win the first two legs of the crown - and then get beat in the Belmont. It takes a very special, sturdy horse who can maintain endurance off tiring efforts to nail down the most prestigious distinction in the sport.

The crown has been so elusive, some have suggested widening the time between crown races to make it a more attainable achievement. To change the terms, however, would cheapen the feat.

Animal Kingdom certainly has characteristics suggesting sturdiness. He's a big boy and his trainer has a reputation for cautiousness and a special interest in equine health and performance without resorting to pharmaceutical tricks. The six weeks without racing before Animal Kingdom's explosive 2.75-length win in the Derby might mean the colt has something left in the tank for the Preakness. His winning Derby time was legit and he's said to be healthy-looking as he bides time in private quarters on a 350-acre chunk of peaceful land in Cecil County, MD.

The only concerns about Animal Kingdom's ability to win as the strong Preakness favorite hinge on his breeding and eagerness to return to competition on such short rest. Animal Kingdom's parents created a horse that was born to run on grass. His derby win defied his lineage. Who knows, maybe The Kingdom has mind power to love running on dirt and will continue having success doing so. The larger question is whether he can burst from the gate and run a mile and three-sixteenths Saturday with the same power he did two weeks ago. There will be ten horses in the field of 14 who come in fresher, and without the burden of having gone deep in the well to participate in the run for the roses.

At odds of about 5-2, I won't bet on Animal Kingdom to win. In addition to the possible problems cited above, I'll also assume The Kingdom will fail to get the hassle-free path he enjoyed in the Derby.

I'll play my derby pick Dialed In to deliver the kind of performance he wowed with a few times in his short career before finishing eighth in the derby. Dialed In's human connections stand to collect a \$5.5 million bonus from the Pimlico Racecourse operator with a win Saturday and there's no doubt the horse will enjoy finishing a race with quicker opening fractions by the pace-setters.

My decision to stick with Dialed In after his derby downer may perhaps be irrationally driven by fear of

abandoning him at the wrong time without regard for pure past performance analysis. But so be it.

I'll add Sway Away and Mr. Commons to betting tickets in various forms. Both are fast, fresh horses with a shot.

For the second year in a row, Pimlico is offering all-you-can-drink beer for a one-time charge of 20 bucks in the infield. How this concept passes muster with the track's legal liability advisors is beyond me. The race track is on record saying it's making the beer cups bottomless because it wants young people to fill the massive green space inside the fencing around the turf course. The obvious potential problem would come should there be linkage between a cheap, open beer tap and a fatal wreck after the six-figure crowd leaves in vehicles after the races. A very weak public transit plan makes the Preakness crowd especially reliant on the automobile.

5-18-11 1700

Political science professors trying to educate students about the phrase "revolving door" as it applies to American politics need not look further than the example set last week by Meredith Attwell Baker.

Baker is an Obama-picked commissioner at the FCC. Her job allows her vast governmental regulatory power over television, radio, cable, satellite and broadband industries in the US . She's one of five FCC commissioners and she was noticeably vocal in her support of the controversial Comcast takeover of NBC-Universal. She voted "Yes" on the Comcast deal in January and she wanted it done without delay and without too many conditions. You could say Baker helped lower the regulatory bar for Comcast.

So, what happened four months later?

The new Comcast giant has given Baker a sweet job with the title "senior vice-president of government affairs." She'll leave the FCC in a few weeks and you can be sure her salary will be significantly higher than what she was paid to "regulate." Interestingly, Baker had previously worked at the lobbying powerhouse Williams Mullen.

The ease with which Baker has moved from the regulated to regulator and back can only be understood with an acknowledgment that federal, state and local governments have long allowed such shady and abrupt changes in job titles.

Yeah, there are examples of the revolving door churning out logical, above-board job moves because of an employee's familiarity with the terrain. But too often, it's too easy to connect dots of suspicion about motive and purpose by the private sector employer enriched by its new, well-formed connection to government.

The Baker hire by Comcast is blatant in its stink. It crosses an ethical line that unfortunately is all too easy to ignore in a US political system that allows doors to revolve.

5-15-11 0130

It's probably too late to prevent the Islanders from leaving Long Island, but a dubious new plan

announced Wednesday at least gives the team's owner and Nassau County politicians some cover when the Island's only pro sports team skips town.

At a news conference to announce a proposal that may well be dead on arrival, Nassau County boss Ed Mangano said voters will be asked to consider a referendum that would authorize the county to borrow \$400 million (taxpayer-backed) to pay for redevelopment of the current Coliseum site. Most of the dough (\$350 million) would be used on a new 17,500 seat arena. A small chunk (\$50 million) would buy a new minor league ballpark and other improvements at what's currently an ugly but valuable piece of land.

Mangano will be the front-man for selling passage of the referendum. He'll try to convince a constituency already saddled with an extremely high tax burden that losing the Islanders is worse for the county than taking on risk associated with another \$400 million in debt. Mangano says the Islanders and contractors making money off the new building will be required to offset costs associated with the added county borrowing once the place is built. Mangano claims there will be zero net taxpayer burden when all is said and done.

You can be sure the referendum's language and the county's accounting assumptions will be closely examined to verify Mangano's claims. It also seems likely there will be opposition to Mangano's call to conduct the election on Monday, August 1st. Half of Nassau County will be on vacation that day and it's well known that low voter turnout boosts the chances of unpopular measures.

Francesca discussed the matter at length on his WFAN radio program Wednesday. Mike lives in Nassau County (Manhasset) and supports a new building for the Islanders. But he says the referendum will get crushed without an iron-clad assurance it won't raise taxes. "Unless they can make a very good case that this will not cost the people anything from their pocket, it will not pass. It won't even come close," said Francesca.

Almost a decade ago, Islanders owner Charles Wang announced plans to redevelop the Coliseum site without the crutch of public money. Political interference killed Wang's vision. His team's lease agreement with operators of the current dump of an arena expires in 2015. Wang has made it clear he'll go elsewhere without gaining the certainty of occupying a modern facility.

I find it hard to believe Wang can get a satisfactory new home built off financing from a \$350 million bond issuance - and I find it hard to believe it will even come to that. The whole thing smells like a way for Wang and the county to let the Isles slip out of town without being the villain. By linking the future of the franchise with a somewhat confusing middle-of-the-summer ballot measure, it's easier to blame the team's relocation on the public when the vote fails. That's what it feels like to me, anyway.

But who knows. The respected hockey writer Chris Botta has written a piece for ESPN's web site saying passage of the referendum is a slam dunk.

What nobody is really talking about is the required passage at least two separate votes of Nassau County's legislature to enable the referendum's bond issuance mechanism to kick in. You'd expect Mangano has those votes lined up, but again, let's see if opponents of public arena financing expose holes in the plan.

The other twist overlooked in coverage of Mangano's announcement was his bizarre decision to voice support for a Shinnecock Indian casino at Belmont Park while making the case for the Isles arena referendum. With nearby Aqueduct's slots emporium finally nearing reality, there's no way the maze of government bureaucracy will allow installation of new games of chance at Belmont. For Mangano to speak of the casino idea hand-in-hand with the referendum raises doubt about his mindset, strategy and political motives.

My personal preference would be for the Islanders to stay on Long Island. Wednesday's announcement offers hope, although I think Mangano and Wang may quietly understand this effort is unlikely to succeed.

If the referendum is defeated, it'll allow those packing the moving truck to leave in the light of day.

5-11-11 2030

My 19-year run of annual attendance at the Kentucky Derby is over. I'll watch it on television instead this year with a small group of friends in Sunnyside, Queens.

I expected feelings of withdrawal this week at certain points. I normally arrive in Louisville on the Tuesday before the Derby. It had become yearly tradition to gamble, eat and drink with hearty enthusiasm for five straight days. This year, I stayed home.

I'm actually glad I did. The Derby experience is an expensive and tiring ordeal as I tackled it all those years. Shortly after last year's Derby trip, a few of the more regular attendees declared their intention to skip the 2011 race. I thought about going anyway to make it 20 in a row but found their more clear-headed logic helpful in making my final decision. We'll go to the Preakness in two weeks instead.

I've had no pangs of regret as I absorb the hub-bub from afar. I can handicap in a more comfortable zone and will enjoy not being in the middle of that big crowd with an ill-fitting suit.

I like the morning line favorite DIALED IN (#8) to win the race. He's only raced four times in his career, but has demonstrated a powerful, closing move. He's bred to handle the Derby's 10-furlong distance and has been kept on a steady, well-planned training regimen by a horseman wiser than many of his peers in the run-up to this particular event.

I've never correctly selected the Derby winner. I've come close a couple times. This year, my choice will only return 11 or 12 dollars on a \$2 win bet should he cross the line first. That return on two bucks will go even lower should the two-year-old champ Uncle Mo scratch from the race.

I'll be hoping for a dry track. And I'll be hoping horses running in front for the first half of the race are moving fast. That'll set it up for what should be a visually-impressive late charge from Dialed In. I'd expect his jockey Julien Leparoux (dubbed the "French Tickler" by our friend Whitey a few years back) to take the long cut as the field turns for home. Traffic jams have ruined the chances of many tough Derby horses over the years, and that could happen to Dialed In. But The Tickler will hopefully steer clear of trouble and will press the go button with clean space in front of him.

Here's your Derby superfecta:

Dialed In

Master of Hounds

Animal Kingdom

Nehro

Good Luck and Happy Derby Day to all.

5-5-11 1545

The Catholic priest leading last Saturday morning's funeral mass at St. Henry church in Ohio couldn't help but smile when he talked about how long my Grandpa lived. The Rev. Benedict Magabe recited the number several times.

102.

Magabe is one of two priests who say mass at a cluster of five rural parishes in Western Ohio about 60 miles north of Dayton. Magabe arrived in the US from Tanzania in 2008 as part of a priest exchange program. He was ordained in 2006. As he expressed amazement that a man could live to the age of 102, Magabe noted that the average adult in Tanzania doesn't live to see the age of 50.

The visitation, mass and graveside service were all well-attended by a crowd that included many local residents with varying degrees of relation to either my Grandma or Grandpa. When we crossed Main Street to get from Hogenkamp Funeral Home to the church, a St. Henry police officer parked his cruiser in the middle of the road to stop traffic.

It was windy and chilly when my two brothers, three cousins, my cousin's husband and my aunt's friend Tom carried the coffin from a black hearse to a stand a few feet from the burial site. Before leaving the cemetery, those in attendance sprinkled holy water on the casket. A gravedigger watched from a distance as we left for a small reception in the basement of the church.

My cousin Jim spoke at the mass and described the peace and love he felt from my grandparents on weekend visits he shared with them as a young man. Others spoke of my grandpa's influence on their lives. My Grandma's youngest sister told a wonderful story about my grandpa's occasional mischievous streak.

We drank lemonade and ate chipped beef sandwiches at the reception and told stories about my Grandpa. The socializing came to a quick end and people started making long drives out of town. As we left, the same church that hosted the funeral a few hours earlier was celebrating a wedding mass. It was Magabe's job to lead that ritual, too.

To the eye, St. Henry, OH (bearing the same name as the church) defied my simplistic notion that small-town America is suffering and neglected. It's vibrancy took me by surprise. The community

members I spoke to conveyed great pride and love for their way of life and the opportunities that exist. There are manufacturing and farming jobs, they say, that have survived the current national downturn. Two sisters at the visitation told me their brother owns a farm machinery company that exports some of its goods to Russia. An optimistic and gregarious retired guy with the same last name as my grandpa spoke of a long career at a facility that continues to manufacture “lift truck” devices in nearby New Bremen, OH.

-Many of the same opinion-makers who mocked the crowd doubting President Obama’s birthplace credentials are now belittling those who want some independent verification of the President’s narrative on the dramatic US assassination of Osama bin Laden. I see nothing wrong - nothing kooky - about not fully accepting Obama and the US Government’s description of its middle-of-the-night bin Laden rubout without some backing evidence. I understand Obama’s reluctance to further inflame extremist enemies with the release of what would likely be an unpleasant photo of bin Laden’s body - or footage of the “burial at sea” but I think it’s reasonable for people anywhere on the political spectrum to want a little proof. The fact the US narrative describing the attack on bin Laden’s compound has already changed significantly adds to the curiosity. Obama’s deceptive effort to understate the US role in Libya is additional subtext to a nation digesting face value explanations of a military operation that has brought with it a huge political positive for a commander-in-chief seeking another term. Perhaps Obama is saving some variation of a smoking gun for a time when doubters gain more traction. Or maybe he’ll continue to insist his word is good enough. Either way, I don’t think it’s crazy for Americans to wish there was some independent assessment or understanding of such an important moment in our nation’s history.

5-4-11 1830

I went up to the Bronx Tuesday night for White Sox/Yanks and saw a dandy of a baseball game.

Skipper Ozzie Guillen and the Good Guys in Black limped into the big city with 11 losses in the last 13. The phrase “hot seat” was being used in reference to Ozzie’s spot in the dugout. A four-game set with the Yanks didn’t appear to be good tonic to turn things around. But then Phil Humber threw a gem on Monday and on a beautiful Tuesday evening at the Stadium, there was another thrilling White Sox win.

Konerks went deep off the messed-up-in-the-head Yanks set-up man Raffy Soriano and journeyman Sox infielder Brent Lillibridge made two game-saving plays in right field bottom nine to win it for Chicago 3-2.

Making just his eighth right field appearance in an unremarkable pro career to date, Lillibridge robbed A-Rod and Cano for the game’s final two outs. Both plays induced gasps from the crowd of 40,785.

Guillen has said recently he’s not worried about getting fired. He’d likely get a flock of employment offers should the White Sox part ways with him after eight years as the team’s manager and a dozen before that as the club’s shortstop.

The Lillibridge heroics probably wouldn’t have unfolded had Soriano done *his* job. But something is off

with the converted Dominican closer signed by New York before the season for a cool 35 mil for three years.

Perhaps New York is getting to Soriano. Or maybe one of the game's best closers last year needs an adjustment period to gain effectiveness in his new role.

Whatever the case, Soriano is a big, unexpected problem for the Yankees a month into the season. Said Francesa on the radio Wednesday: “(Soriano) has completely come apart...He has been utterly awful...You have to be concerned right now that he’s gonna turn into a bowl of pudding. There’s a chance that could happen. Clearly he has a big-time arm, but relieving in clutch spots is as much about your head as it is anything else. If you’re head isn’t there, it doesn’t matter how good your arm is.”

A night before the Tuesday troubles, Soriano watched a pop-up drop just behind the mound. It was a ball only he could catch. Yankee fans saw the play as a lack of effort by Soriano and are already booing him pretty hard.

To add awkwardness to the situation, Yanks GM Brian Cashman is on record as saying he didn’t want to pay Soriano big dollars to set-up Mo. Cashman was overruled by team co-owner Hal Steinbrenner.

I sat in the right-field bleachers near the Creatures. I bought a ticket for \$5 on Stub Hub. With service charges, the total cost was \$14.95. Had I realized the Stadium was selling five dollar seats at the box office, I would have got my ticket at the door.

All three Yankee outfielders (Swisher, Granderson, Gardner) have elaborate artistic responses when their names are yelled during roll-call by the Creatures. The infielders, however, do nothing more than raise their glove hand to acknowledge the great tradition.

There’s a new stand in right field selling big cups of Czechvar draft for \$12.

The crowd was noisy and rowdy. Several fans sitting in right field were ejected as the game went on. A few were tossed for infractions that appeared to be little more than incitement through display of affection for the Red Sox.

I arrived when the doors opened at 5 PM and watched batting practice from a padded seat down the right field line. Swisher and Joba were both super-engaging and friendly with fans who were there early.

When baseballs bounced into empty sections near me, grown Yankee fans ran to retrieve them with an enthusiasm and aggressiveness that doesn’t compute with me but it was entertaining nonetheless.

It was the D to the F for the quick trip home.

I’ll be away for the next few days to attend my Grandpa’s funeral . It’ll be held in the small town of St. Henry, Ohio on Saturday morning. An expected wave of strong thunderstorms Thursday evening here in New York has prompted me to attempt a getaway before the weather hits.

Back here next week.

4-27-11 1600

My grandpa died Tuesday at his residence in suburban Chicago. He was 102.

Arrangements aren't finalized yet but he'll be buried next to his wife Alma in St. Henry, Ohio. The two had been married for 72 years before Alma passed in 2005.

My Grandpa was a gentle and kind man with a deep voice. He captivated crowded family gatherings from his customary position at the end of the table. His wandering, non-fiction tales were spun from a productive, hard-working life shaped in part by a young adult period that coincided with the Great Depression.

He ate lots of Wisconsin bratwurst and lots of my Grandma's homemade pie during a stretch of deeply enjoyable retirement years that spanned three decades on the shores of Lake Winnebago in Wisconsin. It was during that very satisfying period of life-after-work that my Grandpa rode a bicycle as often as the weather would allow.

I'd like to believe he departed without too much suffering. He never really complained about the typical ailments associated with such advanced age but it appeared getting around had become a real chore.

The thing that was most difficult for him was carrying on at the age of 96 without his wife. He didn't raise the white flag but his routine was thrown badly off course by the loss of his soul mate.

His faith is such that he'll be on the lookout for her now that he's gone from here too.

4-26-11 1600

I hit the campus of St. John's University in Queens Thursday afternoon to see the Johnnies baseball team play the first of a three-game set with Big East rival Notre Dame.

I was simply looking to get outdoors and enjoy a sunny, spring day at the ballpark. I didn't expect the remarkable performance I witnessed.

Sophomore St. John's right-hander Kyle Hansen (pictured above) dominated the Irish lineup, striking out 15 in a complete game, four-hit shutout. The Johnnies won 6-0.

Hansen's performance was a beautiful thing to see. He's six-foot-eight, 215 pounds. When the Johnnies bullpen got active in the eighth and ninth innings, I wasn't sure Hansen would be allowed to finish the game. He did. His pitch count totaled 114 when it ended.

I didn't see a radar gun behind the plate but it appeared Hansen has a legit fastball to set up the other stuff

in his repertoire. Irish batters were way late on the heater. Their knees buckled on the hook.

Hansen looks like a sure-fire major leaguer to me. He threw lots of strikes. But when he didn't, he dotted spots all around the zone - just enough to keep his tendencies a mystery. He worked quickly. It appeared the shutout was important to him. Hansen grimaced demonstrably when borderline ball/strike calls went against him late in the contest and he didn't hide frustration a couple times when his fielders failed to make a play.

The lens on my camera allowed me to spy on his grips. He relies heavily on a pitch that is delivered with his index finger retracted or folded. It looks uncomfortable but he's getting a nub on the outside of the ball - using his middle and pinkie fingers as the control mechanisms. I'm assuming it's a sinker - or a split-fingered grip. Whatever it is, he used it a lot. But he also worked in three other distinctively different grips which would suggest his skills are at an advanced level typically not seen in a pitcher his age.

Hansen is two years removed from St. Dom's HS in Oyster Bay, NY. He was selected in the 40th round of the MLB draft by the Brewers in 2009 but chose college instead. He follows in the footsteps of his two brothers (both were Johnnies pitchers). His brother Craig was a dominant closer for St. John's and was selected in the first-round by Boston in 2005. Craig Hansen pitched for the Red Sox for a couple years before getting moved in a three-way deal to the Pirates. Both Manny Ramirez and Jason Bay were also pieces in that transaction.

Unfortunately, Craig Hansen suffers from an ailment described as Parsonage-Turner Syndrome. He was released by the Pirates before the current season.

I'd figure Kyle Hansen will finish college and then turn pro. His brother played in the bigs the very same year he graduated. That's how good college baseball is these days.

The other guy on St. John's who looks like a pro is their shortstop Joe Panik. The junior from Hopewell Junction, NY ripped a ribbie triple in the seventh (pictured above). Wearing the same number as his favorite player Derek Jeter, Panik (#2) is a pure .400 college hitter with pop. He failed to get much action in the field, but he looks like a scrappy player with great potential.

The time of the nine-inning game was just an hour and 49 minutes.

A gusty wind blew from left to right - and then shifted straight out to right. The wind aided both of the two home runs hit by St. John's. Notre Dame's uniforms contained no green.

The ballpark plays fair. It's 325 down the lines and 390 to center. Just a couple hundred people were on hand. General admission tickets were \$6. It was a double-header. I left after the first game.

On the way out, I hit a bathroom near the adjacent outdoor soccer stadium. As I was walking into the men's room, you wouldn't believe who I saw walking out. It was none other than legendary St. John's basketball coach Louie Carnesecca. He had just washed his hands. Looking much younger than 86-years-old, Louie wore a black St. John's baseball hat, black jacket and black pants. He looked fit. I

said: "How are 'ya coach?" He smiled. I smiled. And then as I walked to the bus stop across from campus, I went past the basketball arena bearing Carnesecca's name and smiled again.

4-21-11 1815

Home delivery of the daily newspapers is great but it's messing me up.

What used to be foggy, early-morning glances at the clock - followed by return to lengthy slumber - has become temptation to exit sleep mode prematurely to rise, shine and grab the papers. The coffee pot starts soon thereafter and then there's no turning back.

Since the papers started hitting my lobby, I'm getting up three hours earlier each morning on average without regard for changing bed time on the front end.

I bought ramps at the Union Square Greenmarket Wednesday morning. Three bucks per small bunch.

Go back twenty years. We used to eat ramps in Helvetia, WV every spring at an annual shin-dig celebrating harvest of the pungent onion. They grow wild in and around Helvetia, WV. At that time, never was there consideration they'd become what they are now.

The Times food section ran a story this week saying ramps might be at risk of being over-harvested up and down the Northeast.

4-20-11 1745

Donald Trump is a brash, bullying bullshitter. There's no way he'll follow through with a serious, lasting run for president. I disagree with almost all of his stated social policy positions and I laugh when he asserts that every negotiation can be won with a strong arm. He looks like a big-time fool when he raises doubt about Obama's birthplace. But all that said, I don't think it's unreasonable for The Donald to get the mainstream media attention he's received the last month or so.

Legitimate independent research outfits are producing polls attempting to assess Trump's national viability versus likely or assumed GOP candidates in a 2012 run for that party's nomination. In each instance, Trump is generating something much bigger than a blip. He's garnering support in the teens against a crowded field headed by Romney, Huckabee, Gingrich and Barbour.

Trump won't actually run. He's just void-filling and self-promoting at an opportune time. There's discontent with the incumbent president. The prospective GOP field is weak and people of all political stripes are concerned about mounting problems associated with a debt-riddled country that has quit manufacturing stuff.

Who better to briefly tap into existing troubles than a guy offering at least the appearance of economic accomplishment. In a few months or less, Trump will shrink from intense national examination brought by his new status. His significant failures and deceptions as a real estate mogul won't get masked on the national political stage. Trump will eventually see there's no place for him in a two party system that insists on candidate conformity way too restrictive for his vision.

But while it lasts, I find myself paying attention to Trump's fun in the political sun. Last weekend he spoke outdoors in Boca Raton, FL to a group called the South Florida Tea Party. It was windy and Trump's hair held its own. His speech ran about 45 minutes and was carried on C-Span. Trump held a stack of regular-sized printer paper and referred to his notes only occasionally when he wanted to emphasize a certain point.

With great flair, Trump spoke mostly off the cuff. He rebutted hecklers and produced quick-witted cracks in response to repeated, unscripted yells from excited Tea Party folks in the large crowd. Trump says things about the United States as we now know it that no other major political candidate would consider uttering on a campaign trail. He's making the 2012 campaign interesting by widening debate parameters on tough topics. Many of Trump's talking points are impractical politically. He adopts cut-throat, cut-and-dry business practices and attempts to convert them into government solutions.

Start with Iraq. Trump believes the estimated \$15 trillion worth of oil sitting beneath Iraq is US property. He would disburse profits from US ownership of Iraqi oil to the US treasury to recoup the \$1.5 trillion it cost to intervene there. Trump says he'd also give "a couple million" to every family who lost a US soldier fighting the Iraq war. Allied countries who helped would be made whole plus interest.

To say Trump is anti-war wouldn't be accurate but here is some of what he said last weekend about current US military quagmires.

"We're spending billions of dollars a week in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya and nobody knows what the end game is. I want this money to be spent rebuilding the United States."

"In Afghanistan, we build a road. We build a school. They blow up the road. They blow up the school. We go back. We rebuild the road. We rebuild the school. In the meantime, in Alabama, Florida, New York and elsewhere we can't get any money for schools. It's crazy."

Trump gets red-faced and snotty when discussing economic success in foreign countries, especially when it comes at what he believes is the expense of the US. His beliefs aren't rooted in support for the ethical treatment of workers. His opposition to "free trade" or expansion of the "global economy" isn't tied to concern for fair wages or workplace safety. To him, a successful US economy is about winning and dominating and protecting.

"I'm all for free enterprise but I don't want Germany owning the NY Stock Exchange."

"How 'bout when the president of China came over a few weeks ago and we gave him a state dinner and all he does is rip us off. It's unbelievable. If it were me, he would have gone to McDonald's."

For a guy who lives in an ivory tower, Trump deserves some credit for making rational, regular-guy observations without concern about who might be offended. When talking about the state of US infrastructure last weekend, Trump described the condition of LaGuardia Airport in Queens to illustrate how badly standards have slipped.

"It's like coming into a third world country when I land at LaGuardia. It's old. It's dirty. It's falling apart. It's disgusting. They have a sign 'Welcome to New York' and it's made out of rotten two-by-fours on a

little grass mound.”

All that’s true. His basis for comparison are gleaming new airports in the Middle East and Asia.

Enjoy the bits and pieces of truth mixed in with trash talk and right-wing rhetoric you’ll get from Trump in the next month or two. It won’t last much longer, but the sum of it all will be more interesting than what you get from the rest of the GOP field combined.

4-19-11 2100

The New York City folk singer Vince Martin appeared on WBAI’s Radio Unnameable last week. He played a few tunes and shared stories from moments in a career that has spanned six decades.

Martin was joined in the WBAI studio by host Bob Fass and fellow guest Alana Amram. As usually happens on the middle-of-the-night Fass program, life as it’s lived by the struggling city dweller became the focus of discussion. Martin described the strong pull to return he’s felt when leaving the city, something generated in part by New York City’s unique disregard for closing shop late at night. Said Martin: “Where else but in New York can you go out at four in the morning and get anything you want? Anything! I mean, *anything* you want.”

4-14-11 1730

A new Roman Catholic mass script is coming just after Thanksgiving this year and some of the updated passages translated from Latin to English seem kinda clumsy.

The church’s faithful (including those who make infrequent Mass appearances) will no longer recite and/or listen to word sequences that have been lodged in their mindset for decades. Priests too.

A front page Times story Tuesday revealed discontent among some priests over the Vatican-ordered changes intended to restore authenticity to the mass and bring it greater alignment with the scriptures.

Before communion, no longer will you hear and say “Lord, I am not worthy to receive you.” Instead, it’ll be: “Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof.”

The Apostles’ Creed gets a darker twist. The passage following description of the crucifixion, death and burial of Jesus will no longer go “He descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again.” The new way will instead be said “He descended into Hell...”

The most abrupt change for those in the pews may well be the new response to the priest saying: “The Lord be with you.” For as long as I can remember, it’s been a cue to the flock to say: “And also with you.” Come late November, the books (or missalettes as they’re called) containing the mass script will advise the audience to say: “And with your spirit.”

I’d expect many parishes will continue certain amounts of improvisation in their mass celebrations. Limited custom-tailoring of a mass to an audience has gone on at Newman Centers or progressive Catholic churches with the existing missal for years. Some Vatican rules are stricter than others. Some get broken. If you’re Catholic, don’t be surprised if the new translation handed down from on high isn’t fully

implemented to the letter by a segment of a priesthood that likes the mass just fine as it is.

4-12-11 1545

The imminent end of Katie Couric's unsuccessful five-year run as anchor of the CBS Evening News has brought a flurry of interesting Times coverage the last few days.

Using the best set of sources any reporter covering television can boast, Bill Carter described how Couric was blocked from contributing significantly to 60 Minutes despite a contractual assurance she'd have that role. Carter also reports that when Couric legally finalizes her exit from CBS, her next professional endeavor will be a syndicated talk show with a launch as early as this fall.

On Monday, Carter also revealed that a Couric reunion with Matt Lauer is "under serious consideration" even though Lauer is locked in at NBC and will get a huge offer to stay there long term.

Carter's colleague Brian Stelter followed up that news with a scoop set to appear in Tuesday's paper. That story says brilliant newsman Scott Pelley is Couric's likely successor in the big chair at 6:30 every night. Stelter quotes an unnamed CBS exec who says the job is Pelley's "to lose."

One Stelter theory contained in his story that I disagree with is the notion that the CBS Evening News anchor job is somehow a lateral or downward move for Pelley coming from his very prominent role at 60 Minutes. Couric's lack of chops and inability to narrate serious breaking stories kept the network in the ratings basement, but the CBS job is a top three on-air gig in the broadcast news business. ABC is beatable and Pelley would quickly prove he could preside with great credibility over a program that lost its luster under Couric.

I'd immediately jump from Williams to Pelley should the latter take over at CBS. I think it would be fascinating to watch Pelley cover the world's big breaking story on network television and I really hope Stelter's story is true.

As for Lauer, I suppose he could let mountains of NBC dough be a deciding factor when his current deal runs out next year. That would likely mean continuing on a frilly Today show that is unwatchable with Meredith Vieira and would get worse if and when Ann Curry or Trish Regan gain the co-host slot when Vieira leaves.

-Golf fans have been reminded repeatedly over the last four years that Rory McIlroy is a major champion in the making. His excruciating collapse at Augusta doesn't change that view. In fact, the way McIlroy conducted himself after such a massive unraveling offers great hope for his future. The intense pressure of a disintegrating Masters lead begets a deep panic. After he stepped off 18 Sunday with a big, fat 80 on his card, McIlroy said he would absorb the humbling experience in a positive way. The tone he took stood in sharp contrast to the snippy and hostile post-round remarks Tiger Woods spouted when Bill Macatee put a CBS mike in his face. In a report filed for ESPN's Sportscenter, reporter Tom Rinaldi praised McElroy's honest summation of the brutal collapse. "Victory doesn't require dignity. Defeat does. And Sunday,

McElroy showed a graciousness no green jacket can measure.”

-The winner of the Masters, Charl Schwartzel, shared an interesting anecdote with golf writers about his preparation in advance of winning the green jacket. Crediting advice from veterans Nick Price and David Frost, Schwartzel said he spent the last three weeks finding the “fastest” putts on every green he played. “Every tournament I went to, I just practiced the fastest putt I could find, even though they were only five feet, to learn to hit the putts that softly. It really paid off. I felt so good on these (famously fast Augusta) greens this week.”

4-11-11 1930

The overwhelming majority of thoroughbred racing’s fandom rush to embrace equine stars deemed the sport’s next savior. Fans isolate individual animals who dazzle on one day and deem them special going forward. They proclaim them unbeatable, bet on them blindly and then watch them lose races against rivals cast by the same people as hopelessly inferior.

The desperate hope for an invincible super-horse inevitably produces disappointment when the sport’s fandom (and those who market horse racing) envision unrealistic and historically infrequent marches of sustained greatness.

On a beautiful Saturday afternoon in Ozone Park, Queens, the undefeated three-year-old colt Uncle Mo was the latest super-horse to deflate the hopes of a fandom that will now move on and rally around another individual.

Uncle Mo came into Saturday’s Wood Memorial with four wins in four starts. He was a champion at age two and would have been the overwhelming Kentucky Derby favorite in four weeks had he simply crossed the line first in the Wood.

When the Wood field was finalized last Wednesday, there was outcry from the sport’s spazzy internet crowd. The seven other horses entered against Mo were criticized as a weak bunch with no hope. Even a few seasoned trainers who condition otherwise respectable rivals in the race conceded they were running for second place. All Mo needed to do was show up and collect the winner’s check of 600-grand.

Bettors emptied wallets on Mo to win. Fifteen minutes before the race, the tote board said you’d get just a dime for every dollar you bet on Mo to win. That miniscule return didn’t scare those drawn to the sure thing. They bet more and more on him, convinced by a week’s worth of rhetoric that it would be a nine-furlong walk in the park for a horse owned by a confident and animated Queens billionaire.

The NYRA gift shop sold Uncle Mo t-shirts and had a line twenty deep the whole afternoon. On the way into Aqueduct Racecourse, fans were handed Lance Armstrong-like rubber bracelets emblazoned with Mo’s name. The crowd was announced at 12,144. That’s a bigger number than most racing days at Aqueduct but significantly smaller than 20-thousand-plus you’d often see at that track ten years ago.

When the gates opened, there was a pretty good roar and Uncle Mo went to the front. He coasted leisurely on the lead for almost a mile then got tired. There was no burst or reserve energy unleashed at the end.

Uncle Mo got beat, finishing third.

Toby's Corner returned \$19.40 to the scattered few who bet two dollars on him to win. Toby's Corner ran three 2011 races in the Northeast leading up to the Wood. All were all good performances and the foundation laid by those efforts likely boosted his stamina. He didn't have a bracelet made in his name but now he'll rest up and try to stay healthy for a run in Louisville on the first Saturday in May.

Uncle Mo had raced just once since November. A month ago, Gulfstream Park in south Florida created a special race tailored to Mo's schedule and distance desires. Mo wasn't tested in that five-horse field and likely would have benefited from a more ambitious racing schedule going into the Wood. The problem these days is that the connections of talented horses shy away from too much racing before the Derby out of concern a setback or injury will knock them out of a run for the roses. Making the Derby has become an obsession that conflicts with historically normal models of preparation and seasoning.

Mo still could run in the Derby. He just won't go into it with the same expectations that were assigned to him before his first defeat. And that's ok. Fans should let go of their desire for a singular figure as they follow the game.

With demolition and construction progressing simultaneously to make way for a new slot machine facility at the site of what was the large Aqueduct grandstand, all fans were forced to cram in on the clubhouse side. It was crowded. Temps were in the fifties under sunny skies, allowing a few thousand to gather on the apron past the finish line. A large section of seats on the second floor with a great view of the finish line was reserved for big shots. Unfortunately, few with access opted to sit in those seats, leaving the regular fans to occupy a second floor section of seats past the finish line.

Vehicular traffic exiting the track after the feature was a slow crawl until Marc creatively steered our ride to Brooklyn over a median onto free-moving roadway.

We had a great group dinner at chef Joaquin Baca's place The Brooklyn Star. Those who ordered the whole trout loved it. A service failure impacted those who got the chicken-fried steak.

4-10-11 1700

Aside from my folks, the out-of-towner who's racked up the most trips to see me over the last decade has been my Mom's youngest sister. My aunt Linda comes at least once a year, usually for just 24 hours or so. She digs the big city and we've covered a lot of territory without ever running out of new things to see.

I enjoy the role of tour guide, leading guests on adventures that often include stops in the outerboroughs. Never is there a shortage of exciting sights.

The highlight of this week's visit from my aunt came Tuesday afternoon. After dropping off luggage at her lodging spot in Times Square, we took the E to the D and rode down to Sunset Park, Brooklyn. A 25-block stretch of Eighth Avenue in the 40's, 50's and 60's below Green-Wood Cemetery is loosely defined as Brooklyn's Chinatown. I find it more authentic than the Chinatowns in Manhattan and Queens. There's zero tourist vibe and a dense collection of restaurants and markets.

We had lunch at place on the corner of 53rd and Eighth. A group of old men sat near the back smoking cigarettes under a sign that said “No Smoking.” Ordering in English was a struggle but we ended up getting served a giant plate of shrimp mixed with white rice, grilled cauliflower, green onions and carrots. We also each were handed small, piping hot cups of egg drop soup. A pot of hot tea came halfway through. Everything was great. It’s as if they knew what we wanted without us really being able to tell them. The bill for everything was \$8.50.

I grabbed a takeout menu at the exit. It appears to include the restaurant’s name translated to English. Open 24 hours a day, the place is called “C & L of East Ocean Restaurant.”

After exiting onto Eighth Avenue, we were glad to see sunshine had replaced a cold rain. People jammed the sidewalks carrying bags of seafood and produce. We walked into a “mall” on Eighth Avenue. It was a fascinating maze of commerce. Narrow passageways led to stalls stocked with clothing, toys, DVD’s, ginseng and vitamins.

That night, we attended the kickoff to Caroline Kennedy’s 12-stop, ten-city tour promoting a new collection of poems hand-picked by her. It was held at a chain bookstore on Union Square. If you bought the book, you could sit in a section of seats up front. If you didn’t, like us, you were relegated to the back. The best part of the evening came when Caroline entered the room. There was genuine excitement in the crowd. Ooohs. And Aaahs. And then flashbulbs popped from a large group of professional photographers who chase stars.

The poetry reading and discussion didn’t go well. There were audio problems. One of the poets who contributed to the Kennedy anthology (Sharon Olds) had serious feedback originating from her microphone. Many in the crowd walked out during the event. Some were probably just there to see Caroline, just to get a glimpse or snap a blurry digital photo.

Kennedy mentioned politics only once. She said selection of one of the book’s poems was motivated by the awkward month of so early in 2009 when she put her hat in the ring for the Hillary senate seat vacancy.

Then-governor David Patterson badly mishandled and disrespected Caroline’s candidacy and ended up naming the giggly centrist Kirsten Gillibrand to the coveted post.

No doubt Caroline would be a far better, far more effective, far more liberal junior senator from the state of New York had Patterson gone that route. But, who knows, at the age of 53, we’ve likely not seen Caroline’s last flirtation with politics. Let’s hope not, if that’s what she wants.

Two NYPD officers guarded Kennedy when she walked into the event and then positioned themselves in the audience to watch for trouble-makers. There was no trouble. In fact, there wasn’t even an opportunity for audience questions.

Before my Aunt left Wednesday, we also found time to eat a slice at Artichoke Basille’s on 14th Street. It’s the best pizza slice in the city. We also had a slice of cranberry sage pie at Four and Twenty Blackbirds in Brooklyn. Yum. We got a cup of coffee at Sweetleaf in Queens and took it over for the

stunning sights at Gantry Plaza State Park. And then we capped things off with lunch at M Wells in Long Island City on the very same day the place got positive Sifton treatment in the Times food section.

4-7-11 1800

Folded in half and tucked individually in plastic bags, my home-delivered Times and Post make it only as far as the busy foyer outside the locked main entrance to my six-story building.

By the time I wake up to retrieve them, the newspapers have been sitting there for a few hours. Dozens of neighbors who work normal hours have walked past them by that time.

On Fridays, I leave for work well *before* the papers are delivered. For that reason – and because my late wake-up call the rest of the week leave my plastic-wrapped bundles vulnerable to getting swiped by passers-by – I had long resisted being a home subscriber.

But when the Times announced details of its long overdue and justified website pay wall last month, it didn't include unlimited web access for daily purchasers of the newspaper from the newsstand. Guys like me actually spend more money on the paper than the home subscriber but can't verify loyalty. For that reason, I was basically forced by the new website pay wall to become a home subscriber.

To continue buying the paper on the newsstand while paying fifteen bucks a month for unlimited access to the web site would equate to coughing up more than double the home subscription cost. Since the home subscriber gets free, unlimited web access, I had little choice but to sign up for delivery.

So far, so good. I added the Post, too, since that was part of my newsstand routine. After a couple weeks of delivery, nobody is messing with my papers before I get them. And on Fridays, I just wait until I get home from work before reading the news.

4-5-11 0130

Yankees GM Brian Cashman indicted his own decision-making by complaining that the Mets "abused" pitcher Pedro Feliciano before letting him walk away a free agent. Cashman and the Yanks just handed Feliciano \$8 mil guaranteed over the next two years knowing full well the lefty reliever led the majors in appearances each of the last three seasons.

Met skipper Jerry Manuel found a way to stick Feliciano in 92 games (many of them meaningless) in 2010. That's the fourth most relief appearances in a season in major league baseball history. While Cashman is correct in saying Feliciano was badly over-worked, it's foolish for him to bemoan receipt of damaged goods when it was clear from the back of Feliciano's baseball card that his arm was in danger of falling off. Feliciano opened the 2011 Yankee season on the disabled list with soreness in his throwing arm.

-Met knuckleballer RA Dickey plans to climb to the top of Mt. Kilimanjaro next January. Dickey told David Waldstein of the Times he has wanted to conquer the tallest freestanding mountain in the world ever since reading Hemingway's short story "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" during his junior year in high school. Dickey's intellect, curiosity and eccentricity have made him a wonderful subject for baseball

writers in this city since he became a Met last year. Before the current season, Dickey signed a two-year contract with \$7.8 million guaranteed. That's big dough for a guy who floundered through much of a fifteen-year pro career before honing his wicked knuckler last season.

-The FOX Sports telecast of Yanks/Tigers Saturday afternoon included unique in-game advertising at the bottom of the screen. The creative ad writers/planners working for Anheuser-Busch positioned a highly-effective narrow strip of pop-up copy that said "GRAB SOME BUDS" at various points during the game. While it may have served as a timely reminder for the baseball fan/beer drinker watching at home, it felt a bit out of place when the ad flashed early in the game during a Miguel Cabrera plate appearance.

-The commercial-free FM station WBAI in New York is carrying one hour of English language news from Al-Jazeera on weekdays at 5 AM. The growing Al-Jazeera news operation is based in Doha, Qatar and is covering chaos in the Middle East and North Africa with an amazing number of reporters on the ground. Why Al-Jazeera's television or radio programming isn't carried more broadly in the United States is a mystery to me. The political tilt is no more discernible than that of the BBC. The Al-Jazeera network is demonstrating a deeper commitment to coverage of the world's current daily focal points than US-based entities with budget constraints. I think it's just a matter of time before we see Al-Jazeera carried widely both on US cable/satellite systems as well as on US radio stations with frequencies on the left side of the dial.

4-4-11 0130

I can't explain why, but Dan Bejar's ninth full-length Destroyer record Kaputt has become kinda big.

In terms of buzz and probably sales, Kaputt is the biggest Destroyer record of Bejar's brilliant fifteen-year career. It's a super-mellow disco record. It's a sharp departure from Destroyer's previous eight, great releases. Bejar is one of the top songwriters of his generation and so he's entitled to do Danny Disco or whatever the great Merge record label will agree to put out. What has shocked me is that the public seems to love Kaputt with a level of enthusiasm that towers over anything Bejar generated doing rock and roll.

Chicago fans jammed Lincoln Hall (capacity 507) Tuesday night and acted as if they adored the new material. Bejar likely realized that a Tuesday night sellout at a venue that size came as a direct result of new fans who got pulled in by Kaputt.

I personally felt obligated to see the live presentation of a record I didn't like because of loyalty to an artist whose previous body of work has had a profound impact on me.

With a full band crowding the stage, Destroyer performed all but one cut from Kaputt. They did it near sequentially, sprinkling in Airplane, Painter and 3000 Flowers from earlier releases to make it tolerable for the die-hards who can't find a way to process the disco.

The trumpet player JP Carter stood to Bejar's right and was the star of the show. Bejar sung from a long, skinny microphone. He held it like it was hot to the touch. Bejar never picked up a guitar. He banged on a tambourine occasionally.

Known for being uncomfortable on stage, Bejar didn't say much and was as much in his own little world

as a front man could possibly be.

The crowd was deeply respectful. There was flat, dead silence between songs. Not a whisper. One fan yelled out for Snow White a couple times. Another complemented Bejar on his hair. But by and large, this was as well-behaved of a crowd as I've ever seen.

I don't want to sound like it's the end of the world, but I was definitely taken aback seeing Bejar singing a couple of his tunes with the aid of lyric sheets. Memorization of songs as lyrically dense as Bejar's must be tough but he can't go out there with cheat sheets. It's embarrassing. For him. You gotta drop the tunes you don't know. Play the ones you do.

Destroyer is about halfway through an ambitious national tour. They are performing 27 shows in 30 days. The band's tour bus was parked on Lincoln Avenue directly across from the venue. It looked well-equipped.

The Philly band War on Drugs opened and sounded really good. We walked in on their set a bit late but immediately got sucked in. They closed with the great tune "Arms Like Boulders" which is the first song off their '08 debut LP Wagonwheel Blues. Lead singer Adam Granduciel sounds a bit like Dylan.

Before Granduciel exited to make way for the main act, he advised the crowd where Destroyer's trumpet and sax players would position themselves.

Lincoln Hall sells Busch Light tall boys for three bucks. I had several. I like Lincoln Hall. The sound is good. My only small complaint is the dark stairwell leading to the main floor. It's a little tricky. There's a ramp that runs down the sides. That's the way to go if you're holding spillables.

I went to the show with my pal Photo. We ate 1 AM Mexican food at Allende near the venue. It was top-notch.

Before the show, we met up with Timmy from St. Loo and his pal Gary for burgers and beer at the DMK Burger Bar on Sheffield at Wellington. It too was solid.

3-31-11 1600

Careful to avoid interfering with Monday's prime-time television window, President Obama chose to explain the first war launched on his watch at 7:30 PM in the East. The expertly delivered remarks ended conveniently by 8 PM. There would be no alteration in the live telecast of "Dancing With the Stars."

"Wherever people long to be free, they will find a friend in the United States," said Obama. In the case of Libya, a loosely organized collection of rebels fighting Qaddafi are the "friends." For a week and a half, the rebels have been the beneficiary of a US-led attack on Qaddafi's apparatus to retain control of a citizenry inspired by blooming democracy movements in countries to Libya's East, West and South.

Obama wants us to believe Qaddafi's military was on the brink of wiping out Benghazi. To illustrate the scope of evil intent the US was stopping, Obama invoked the name of a US city to ratchet up the scare quotient. "If we waited one more day, Benghazi – a city nearly the size of Charlotte – could suffer a

massacre that would have reverberated across the region and stained the conscience of the world.”

Those who hoped Obama’s presidency would soften US militarism couldn’t have felt good about what they heard Monday night. They listened to a President who at times sounded like his predecessor (despite concerted efforts not to). Both now have raised alarm about a looming (perhaps bigger than real) threat that needed to be stopped immediately. And both did so without acknowledging or fixing hypocritical US alliances and strategies in a region that is certainly confused about our broad intent.

Obama frames Libya as a necessary, time-sensitive intervention to save 700-thousand innocent civilians. We really don’t know for sure how Benghazi would have turned out had we kept our million-dollar missiles in storage. Obama states as fact that massacre was imminent. He exaggerates the extent of involvement by the international community to differentiate himself from Bush.

It actually got a little nonsensical when Obama boasted about this week’s NATO takeover of mission control, implying the US will be left with little to do beyond jamming Qaddafi’s radios.

There was no specific mention by Obama of concern with similar violence being doled out by our despotic chums in Bahrain, Syria and Yemen. That stuff didn’t make the speech’s cut. Before he could get to that, it was 8 o’clock and this country’s attention turned to dancing.

-Headed to Chicago later today for about 36 hours. I’ll see Dan Bejar and Destroyer play this evening at Lincoln Hall and then spend the day Wednesday visiting my nieces on the city’s far north side. Have a good week.

3-29-11 0122

Maureen Dowd of the Times ended her twice-weekly column Wednesday noting President Obama has now demonstrated a foreign policy reflex similar to that of George W. Bush. Said Dowd: “Both men started wars of choice with a decision-making process marked more by impulse and reaction than discipline and rigor.”

To compare W’s run-up before Iraq 2 and Obama’s surprising lead-in to authorization of a shower of 29-hundred pound US Tomahawk missiles on Libya may not be totally fair without knowing the scale of ultimate commitment to the latter.

My primary disappointment isn’t Obama’s lack of effort in explaining justification or a clear strategy in Libya. What I oppose most is a consistent, deceptive Obama message portraying the US as a mere support component in a larger coalition, with others doing the bulk of the heavy warfare.

Go back to a couple weeks ago. Best I can tell, Obama was indeed reluctant to use US armament. Oddly, it seemed as if France and Britain had much greater intervention hunger and had to twist Obama’s arm. Time passed. Pressure from Europe grew. Qaddafi became more bold. The GOP’s McCain and Graham made noise about Obama’s feet-dragging.

When it came time (late last week) for the UN no-fly resolution to pass international muster, Obama and his diplomacy team aggressively pushed through an expanded no-fly that gives broad leeway militarily

beyond keeping airspace clear.

Obama skipped town with the First Family on a scheduled trip while simultaneously green-lighting the launch of way more million dollar missiles than any of the other coalition countries combined. Last Sunday, top Pentagon officials were tripping over explanations of US intent while the President pushed for free trade in places with cheap labor.

I'm not hung up on Congressional approval. But I thought we signed up for a war-as-last-resort President who would go out of his way to be honest if compelled to initiate and enable military aggression on his watch.

Nicholas Kristof of the Times did a column this week that attempts to make the case for justification. He says we're stopping a slaughter. Others counter we're choosing sides in a civil war.

That debate will be fought in all jurisdictions participating in this war. What would help make US citizens much less cynical about participation in yet another assault on a former friend turned enemy is for their president to be much more straightforward about our very dominant role in the attack.

-The neighborhood weekly "Brooklyn Paper" reported Wednesday that LIU-Brooklyn was "in negotiations" with operators of the new, under-construction arena at Atlantic and Flatbush to play some of its men's hoops home games there when the building opens next fall.

-Rock and roller Ted Leo did an excellent interview at SXSW with the four women in the new band Wild Flag. A video feed of the ten-minute spot is up on You Tube. The most encouraging aspect of the IFC sponsored Q and A came when Wild Flag drummer Janet Weiss told Leo that the collaboration was more than just a quickie get-together. She said Flag will "be a band that tours and makes records." Wild Flag's Carrie Brownstein said the band will gather at a Sacramento recording studio in April with the goal of a September release on Merge. Punk rocker Chris Woodhouse will oversee recording. There is no bass player in Wild Flag. As Leo pointed out in the interview, Wild Flag keyboardist Rebecca Cole generates sound that essentially lays down bass lines. That it sounds so good and natural is a testament to both Cole's talent and the quality of her equipment.

3-24-11 2120

The 11-day vacation I'm on is almost over and I'm a little worried the wall-to-wall fun of it all is gonna generate some kind of whiplash when it's time to go back to reality.

The latest, just-completed segment of the March 2011 hip-hip-hurray-cay was a 48-hour visit with my friends Roberta and Jared down in Durham, NC.

Me and Jared created deep indentations in his couch as we watched game after game of the NCAA men's basketball tournament. We only left the house once. On Saturday evening, we made a 20-minute trip to Allen and Son in unincorporated Blackwood for an authentic North Carolina barbeque experience.

Allen and Son (pictured above) is a small, out-of-the-way roadhouse serving chopped up chunks of tender pork shoulder that's been slow-cooked on-site over hickory. The meat is served to customers on a fresh

hamburger bun. A thin, peppery vinegar sauce with heat sits in what look like plastic ketchup bottles on the table.

The meat almost melts in your mouth. It has an incredible richness in flavor. There's no beer. The iced tea is southern sweet.

Allen and Son also takes great pride in its homemade pies. A chalkboard in the front dining room lists a bunch of different types. We shared a slice of the coconut chess and were blown away. The crust oozed soft, fresh, buttery greatness.

The weekend's drink of choice back at hoops-watching headquarters in Durham was a hoppy, dark ale called Peacemaker. Made by the Raleigh brewer LoneRider, Peacemaker is so good it could probably bring a lot of peace to a lot of people if consumed in healthy doses. I'm not sure if one can easily purchase Peacemaker outside of Tobacco Road but I'll be on the lookout.

-I thought the studio combo of Johnson/Anthony/Pitino/Smith/Barkley was really good this weekend. Barkley's clear lack of college hoops aptitude actually makes him better as the wildcard on the panel. He's simply watching games on a monitor and then making observations from the perspective of someone who is conditioned to analyzing the pro game. Barkley went way beyond the jester act in this setting. He's accidentally insightful because he has a much lower threshold for accepting certain mistakes that simply don't happen in the NBA. The weekend's several games with crazy endings produced excellent chances to assess strategy and Barkley's blunt takes were refreshing. When Greg Anthony was talking, I found myself looking at Barkley slumped in his chair at the end of the set wondering what may next come from his mouth. Pitino was a little tight and seemed to bite his tongue in spots to keep from offending those in the coaching fraternity. But you can tell he'd be good once freed from the constraints of an active coaching job.

3-21-11 2200

My three-night run of English rock shows ended with a memorable and exhilarating performance by The Babies at Camp Basement in London.

The Babies began as a collaborative "side project" for Cassie Ramone (Vivian Girls) and Kevin Morby (Woods). Now it appears quite possible The Babies can turn into something much bigger. Perhaps even bigger than the two respected bands that had been Ramone and Morby's primary creative vehicles.

With a new record out (and two EP's prior to that), The Babies have embarked on their first adventure outside the United States as a band. This show was the first of a short week-long run of dates in the UK, Netherlands and Germany.

If the loving London embrace the band received during and after its 55-minute set on City Road is an indicator of things to come, perhaps it's time for Ramone and Morby to drop the "side" from "side project" and keep making Babies records.

"Breakin' The Law" and "Meet Me in the City" both moved at a faster pace than the recorded versions. Both sounded amazing. Morby and Ramone contribute pretty equally. Many of their songs blend

wonderfully timed vocal and guitar interaction between the two. Morby may be more of a ringleader but we're talking about two interlocking parts that have developed a chemistry that's pretty fun to watch unfold on stage.

About half-way through the set, the Babies played a "new" song meaning something fresher than the new record. That would suggest yet another recording is on the way.

Before launching the band's encore, Morby asked the crowd to join him in singing "happy birthday" to bandmate Ramone. Morby said it was Ramone's 25th birthday.

The place was jam-packed. It was clear from the lyrics being mouthed in the audience that many owned the band's new full-length out just a month ago. One fan who could have passed for a Craig Finn twin (wearing a dapper English short-billed cap) danced feverishly in a zone of space in front of the stage that had been informally cleared just for him. I'm guessing the guy wasn't deliberately trying to be the sideshow he became. I believe the music simply took him over.

In comparing the London rock and roll crowd to one that would attend a similar-type show in New York, I noticed a few differences.

- (1) The individually chosen hair-styles of choice (boys and girls) are way cooler in London.
- (2) There seems to be greater enthusiasm for pre-show drinking on site, rather than the timed entrance one will see in New York.
- (3) I found it striking how much effort and thought seemed to go into music played during breaks between sets. My sweet spot got hit by obscure Dylan and then a Dutchess and the Duke song before Woods on Wednesday and then an unknown English-sounding band covering Lola on Thursday.
- (4) Sound at all three shows was lush, quirk-free and near-perfect in rooms with great acoustics. Seems like just about every time I go to a show in New York, there's frustration or in-set fiddling with sound levels. Not so on this trip.

After the show, I jumped on a #205 double-decker bus back to the hotel. The cash fare was 2.2 pounds. About two-thirds of the way into the ride, the bus suddenly terminated and the dozen of us on board were asked to exit. I should have requested a transfer from the driver, because at that point I had spent my last batch of English money on beer, leaving just the 2.2 pounds for the ride home. It was late and I didn't really know where I was. Instead of shmoozing my way onto the next #205 to pass, I decided to search for a bank machine and take out more money so I could catch a cab.

I quickly found an ATM and just as quick found a cab. I was back to the hotel in no time.

Other notes from the trip not mentioned previously:

-I never really had an outstanding meal. I mean, I ate well for the most part. I had a really tasty chicken and leek pocket-type snack at Paddington Station. I had a solid chicken on a pita sandwich at a Turkish place near Camp Basement. The crab corn soup at Blue Ginger in Manchester was solid. I laid off the fish

and chips. I don't know. The best thing I ate on this trip was the mushroom soup I had on the airplane ride going out.

-I drank beer in six different pubs in addition to the cheer at the rock clubs. I mixed up the beer selection quite a bit but found the best of all of them to be Tuborg, a Danish beer. Each pub I went to was warm, inviting and in no way awkward for me, the by-himself drinker. Soccer in the early evening is a real draw at the pubs. Men (from those in suits to more blue-collar guys in florescent work vests) mingle happily as they watch the matches. A big match was on each night I was in England.

-The train fare from Manchester Airport to downtown was 4.1 pounds. The train from downtown London to Heathrow was 18 pounds. Interesting to note that London public transit charges about 7 pounds for an unlimited-ride single day pass good for use on buses and underground trains. New York City recently did away with its day pass. There's a way to access Heathrow via the underground for much cheaper than the 18 pound express train, but it involves lots of local stops.

-The immigration officer who quizzed me upon arrival in Manchester asked me what brought me there. As is my policy, I told the truth. "I'm here to see a rock and roll band," I said. This typically invites extra scrutiny. In Canada a few years ago, it led to an extensive search of my belongings and more interrogation. When I told the English woman in Manchester I was planning to see the band "Woods" at the "Deaf Institute" that same evening, she shrugged her shoulders and let me go on my way. "Never heard of them. They must not be very big." she said.

-There are several discount air carriers doing business in England and the fares they advertise can be ridiculously low. Billboard advertising in Manchester promoted 32 pound one-way fares to Majorca on Easy Jet Airlines.

-On various above-ground train rides, I noticed many back-yards in England are accessorized with a trampoline. I'd guess the percentage of back-yards that include a trampoline to exceed 50-percent with that number higher in parts of suburban Manchester. I wouldn't normally notice trampolines but my co-worker Vinny from Long Island has been raving about the trampoline he just put in his back-yard and I can't wait to go back to work and tell him about my observation.

-There were several funny moments on this trip. I already mentioned the Craig Finn look-alike dancing as if there was no tomorrow, but a couple other things stick out. On Tuesday night in Manchester, The Doozer gazed toward a massive, mirrored globe hanging from the ceiling. In the driest monotone voice imaginable (and a thick British accent), The Doozer paused and said: "That's the biggest disco ball I've ever seen." The next night in London, Woods sound-effects producer G Lucas Crane could be seen attempting to make his way across a room crowded with young people sitting on the floor. He had to step gingerly around these impediments to reach a door leading to back stage. Near the end of his journey, he began suddenly skipping and jumping to the beat of the music before disappearing behind the stage.

-The coffee chain Costa is better than Starbucks and the advertisements Costa runs in London newspapers make that legitimate boast. I ordered my American-style coffee at Costa "flat white" and it was great.

-The bathrooms at Manchester's Piccadilly train station require a 30 pence exact change payment to

access.

-The Guardian newspaper is unabashed in its disappointment with President Obama. In just the few days I picked it up, the Guardian was highly critical of Obama's handling of both Bahrain and the US soldier accused of being the Wiki-leaker.

-Legal betting shops are everywhere in London. I mean, everywhere. Why can't we have those, too?

-The shaved head appears to be popular among young Englishmen who aren't rock and rollers. The fancy, fluffy scarf is popular with everybody. Men, women, young, old, rock and rollers, everybody.

After a Friday night back in New York, I'll get on a plane again for a weekend down in Durham, NC. My bracket is shot with the Louisville loss. I had them going all the way.

Talk to you next week.

3-18-11 1720

Wednesday night's Woods gig took me to the bustling Shepherd's Bush neighborhood in West London. I caught the first half of Chelsea/Copenhagen at the White Horse before crossing Uxbridge Road to reach Bush Music Hall.

The venue didn't generate the feeling of awe I had the previous night in Manchester. Bush Hall was a large, carpeted, chandelier-filled room. The capacity crowd sat on the floor for the first two bands and then sprung to their feet for the Woods set.

"Bend Beyond" was again the highlight. As he did the night before, Ben from The Doozer emerged from behind the stage to fill in on drums. Jarvis Taveniere (pictured above) put down a mesmerizing guitar sound that you have to see to believe.

Woods now leaves behind Spectrals and The Doozer as they head to Brussels for the Thursday night stop on this 14 city tour. There isn't a single open day during the run. Who gets enlisted to play drums on future dates is unknown. Ben from The Doozer says his three-night contribution is over. What a nice guy Ben is.

The bottle of Jameson's that was passed around by the Woods guys on Wednesday in Manchester didn't re-emerge in London. Perhaps the long trip to Brussels was a factor in that decision.

Shows here start early and end by 11 PM. I like that.

On the five-minute walk back to the (above-ground) underground stop at Shepherd's Bush, I passed dozens of middle-eastern restaurants and shops that were still in full gear.

I had eaten dinner before the show at the Taylor Walker pub near my hotel. For about 15 British pounds, I had steak pie, mashed potatoes/gravy, vegetables and two pints of Bombardier. The steak pie had a buttery, flaky crust which encased a scoop of meat stew.

Pints both here and in Manchester have run between three and four pounds each.

My lodging spot on London Street is just a block from Paddington Station which runs express trains to Heathrow Airport. I leave early Friday. Before that, there's one more rock show to attend. The Babies play in Hoxton tonight. It's Cassie Ramone's birthday.

I don't yet have a vibe on whether St. Patrick's day is a big deal here. I'm wearing green for the occasion but haven't really spotted others doing same.

I'll miss the St. John's game tonight but good luck Johnnies.

3-17-11 1415

In London now after a two-hour, five-minute train ride from Manchester Piccadilly to Euston. From there, it was a two-line ride in the tube to reach my hotel near Paddington Station.

Things took a little longer than expected, so I had to scrap what would have been a quick visit to Kempton Park.

I only have one night down with two to go and I've already had more fun than should be allowed.

The Woods show last night at Manchester's Deaf Institute was amazing. The gig mirrored in shape and style the performance at Monster Island about six weeks ago. The band is minus key member Kevin Morby (doing Babies dates currently). This development has coincided with main man Jeremy Earl deciding to take a seat and go all acoustic. Jarvis Taveniere now shoulders much more responsibility, moving back and forth between the drum kit and up front with a guitar. Some of the tunes are played without a drummer. A few last night included a step-in effort by the bass player from one of the show's opening acts - The Doozer.

I really miss Morby's presence, but material from the forthcoming Woods LP "Sun and Shade" holds up real well without him. The near-capacity crowd last night was visibly moved by the epic ten-minute ass-kicker "Bend Beyond."

I received unsolicited commentary from a young man standing next to me near the stage which I thought was powerful. The guy said he was from a small town east of Manchester. He said Woods was far and away his favorite band - and that it was his dream to see them play in New York City some day.

Funny, Woods is my favorite band and it was my dream to see them play in Europe.

Dream come true. Hope the kid's does too.

3-16-11 1755

Greetings from Manchester, England. I arrived here about 6 AM local time Tuesday after catching a 7:35 PM departure out of Newark on Monday.

Those sitting on the right side of the airplane had a spectacular view of a lit-up Manhattan under clear

skies about 90 seconds after take-off.

The flight lasted six hours and five minutes. There wasn't much turbulence other than a few ripples about four hours into the trip.

The near-full 757-200 cruised at an altitude of 38-thousand feet and flew pretty consistently at a speed of 550 to 600 miles per hour. Those numbers come courtesy of the real-time flight data channel which I occasionally glanced at for the duration of the flight.

All but a few people on board slept . I went the opposite way. I drank as much coffee as the flight attendant would pour me and read newspapers.

I've also started reading the Suze Rotolo autobiography.

The plan for this big trip was late to develop. I knew long ago I'd take a week's vacation to coincide with opening weekend of the NCAA basketball tournament. The idea was to visit my hoops-addicted friends Roberta and Jared down in Durham, North Carolina where we'd watch game after game after game on the tube.

When Woods announced plans for a lengthy European tour a few months ago, it became an exciting prospect to think about catching a few dates on the front end of this vacation, keeping the Durham plan intact. The Woods show at Monster Island Basement in Brooklyn back in early February was so great, I couldn't wait to see 'em again soon.

So here I am. Woods plays in Manchester tonight. I'm staying at a Holiday Inn Express just down the street from the venue. As I sit here typing, I'm waiting for the hotel to let me check in. I arrived at the registration desk at about 7:30 AM and they told me to come back at noon. I wandered around downtown a bit. I sat in St. Peter's Square with a cup of coffee and more newspapers for about an hour but have returned to the hotel lobby.

When I asked the newsstand guy across the street for the Manchester morning paper, he handed me the "Manchester Evening News." This struck me as odd, so I said: "No. I'd like the morning paper."

"This IS the morning paper," he said. OK, then. At 45 pence, I'll take it.

There are lots of French guys in the hotel reception area eating breakfast. I strongly suspect they've come to see Marseille play Manchester United in Champions League play at Old Trafford tonight.

The other big brewing soccer story in Manchester is excitement about the city's two big clubs meeting in four weeks to play a FA Cup semi-final in London. A story in the Manchester paper says law enforcement officials in both Manchester and London are formulating security plans aimed at keeping Man City and Man-U fans from mingling on the trip down.. Their plan includes the prospect of running "blue" trains and "red" trains to keep rival supporters segregated.

Significant space in the sports pages is devoted to horse racing. Almost four full pages of in-depth coverage and beautiful photography appeared in Tuesday's Guardian about the four-day Cheltenham meet

for jumpers. Guardian turf writer Greg Wood says Cheltenham is Britain's biggest meeting of the year in betting terms. It's interesting to note that the meet runs four consecutive weekdays (Tuesday through Friday).

I don't care much for jump races, but it's great to see such enthusiastic coverage of the sport. Unpredictable outcomes (with field sizes as large as 19) are expected according to the coverage I've read and the beauty of the Cheltenham facilities is striking.

Tomorrow, I'll take a train down to London and see Woods play there. And then Thursday, as luck would have it, the Babies are playing on the other side of town, so I'll see that great young band for the first time ever.

Woods left New York one day before me. They flew into London and got a ride north from the guy fronting Spectrals. Both Woods and Spectrals played Birmingham Monday night.

Spectrals will also open for Woods in Manchester and London. I like what I've heard of the Spectrals' recordings and look forward to seeing them too.

There won't be a whole lot of sight-seeing on this trip. C'mon. I'm on a rock and roll tour.

3-15-11 1800

Where a team is placed in the March Madness draw is sometimes more important than the seed it's assigned. That's the case with St. John's this year as they make their first trip to the Big Dance in nine years.

On merit, St. John's deserved to be no worse than a five seed. But when D-J Kennedy suffered a season-ending knee injury in the Johnnies' Big East Tournament quarter-final loss to Syracuse, the committee knocked them down a peg because of Kennedy's value to the team. It's how the committee has worked in recent years. A team that has a bid locked up often has its current state of affairs scrutinized more than its season-long body of work.

Getting knocked down to the six line may end up being a blessing for Lavin and the Red Storm in this instance. St. John's drew a manageable 11 seed in Gonzaga and then gets the winner of BYU-Wofford in the second round.

BYU is a total paper tiger on the three line after the school abruptly shut down Brandon Davies for breaking the school's honor code. BYU is empty and lost under the rim without Davies. Yeah, Jimmer Fredette is the best college basketball player in the nation, but BYU can't clean glass and will get demolished by St. John's in the second round should the two meet. The only small consolation for BYU is they'll get a couple of games in Denver and likely will enjoy some kind of home court advantage.

I'm not saying St. John's is automatic against Gonzaga. But should the Johnnies handle their first-round chore, I'm guaranteeing victory against BYU.

Elsewhere, I sympathize with Colorado fans for getting shafted but the most glaring problem I see with

the committee's work this time around is the imbalance they created in the East region. You're looking at regional quarters in Newark that could come down to Ohio State/Kentucky and Syracuse/North Carolina. There's no other region that can possibly come close to filling its quarters with teams of that quality and basketball tradition.

I mean, I'm happy for Newark. They're gonna have a wild time at Bello's across from Newark Penn Station with basketball fans dancing in the Ironbound, but the committee needs to spread the wealth a little.

The East is way too stacked.

The softness of the Southeast makes it Pitt's tournament to lose. I'll take the Panthers to win the whole thing with three Big East teams making the Final Four (Pitt, Louisville, U-Conn).

-I leave for England later today. This is gonna be a fun rock and roll trip. Here's the itinerary:

Monday, 3-14: Fly from Newark, NJ to Manchester, England

Tuesday, 3-15: Woods and Spectrals play The Deaf Institute, Manchester, England

Wednesday, 3-16: Woods and Spectrals play Bush Hall, London, England

Thursday, 3-17: The Babies play Camp Basement, London, England

Friday, 3-18: Fly from London (Heathrow), England to Newark, NJ

I have about a two-hour window on Wednesday to visit Kempton Park Racecourse.

I'm toting a laptop, so look for an update or two as the week goes on.

Cheerio.

3-14-11 0130

Much of the news coverage I've seen about contentious negotiations on a new contract between the NFL and its players generally casts both parties as greedy.

The notion there could be divisiveness in a process that divvies up a \$9 billion pot of annual revenue drives many football writers crazy. It's producing simplistic assessments of the bargaining process and overly broad assignments of blame.

The fact it all came to a head on the same day Japan got hit with a massive earthquake brought ridiculous attempts to lay guilt-trips on both sides about bargaining strategy. On the USA Today web site, columnist Mike Lopresti blasted both the players and the league for making public statements about the status of talks while Japan was suffering from massive destruction. "Let's just say that the NFL folks picked a pretty bad day to come before the world with grim faces, as if they were victims of fate. Did Roger

Goodell and DeMaurice Smith look to be in anguish? Were their houses still standing?... This was not the moment for people fighting over splits of a vast fortune to stand before us, as if their plight should move the public.”

And via Twitter, the National Football Post writer Andrew Brandt: “The dichotomy of Japanese people fighting for their lives while NFL owners and players fight for their share of \$9 billion is striking.”

It’s not striking, really. And it’s not inappropriate for this process to take turns on days when events in other parts of the world are obviously more important.

The players are fighting a long-term attempt by the league to pull in a larger chunk of a massive profit pool. When negotiations started, the owners asked for a billion dollar yearly give-back by the players. As of Friday, Times NFL writer Judy Battista reported owners had offered to settle for \$320 million additional annual. Battista says the players’ union countered with an annual concession of \$137.5 mil along with withdrawal of its demand for a decade’s worth of financial records compiled by individual teams.

Litigation rather than negotiation became the theme Friday night after 320 vs. 137.5 was deemed by the union to be a gulf too wide. Several players took to their Twitter accounts to apologize for what they felt the fans might feel is a negative development. No apology is necessary from the guys who risk serious injury playing the game. If Battista’s reporting is correct on the money side of it, the distance between the two parties isn’t as daunting as once thought.

It’s mid-March. Fans won’t be angry until regular season games are lost. Players are justified in seeking to protect some semblance of the current revenue split while resisting two additional regular season games. That they’re conceding 137.5-mil shows some flexibility, right?

It’s inevitable for public updates on this process to coincide with crises unfolding all over the globe. I say we’re watching an interesting labor relations case with both sides fighting for dough they believe is better in their respective pockets. Football fans are capable of processing real-life international tragedies on the same day as union de-certification and an anti-trust lawsuit.

Coverage of the process shouldn’t default to blanket assessments of greed by both sides simply because of the size of what’s split.

3-13-11 0130

I bought the ticket to see Wednesday night’s Bright Eyes show at Radio City several months ago when the new Superchunk record was getting heavy rotation in my apartment. Their appearance on the bill as a warm-up act clinched the decision to go.

Little did I know until a few days ago that a third great band would also perform.

They’re called Wild Flag and they’re fronted by Carrie Brownstein of now-defunct Sleater-Kinney and former Helium singer/guitarist Mary Timony. The inclusion of another Sleater alum Janet Weiss on drums

qualifies Wild Flag for supergroup status.

These supergroups often don't amount to the sum of their parts. Wild Flag still hasn't even put a record out. But they were really great on the big stage on Sixth Avenue. Brownstein's guitar makes incredible rock and roll sounds and she delivers them with occasional leg kicks. The band's stage energy is high level and they appeared to be having great fun. I was won over in a big way and will eagerly await their debut release.

The crowd was unusually age diverse. There was old, older, young and younger. Most fans didn't bother to take their seats until about halfway through Superchunk. On a stage with space for 36 Rockettes, Mac lurched and jumped around much of it. The Chunk played 45-minutes. Ten-songs. The highlight was "My Gap Feels Weird."

I don't love the new Bright Eyes record top-to-bottom, but the new tune "Triple Spiral" was intense. "Old Soul Song," "We Are Nowhere and it's Now," and "Beginner's Mind" all sounded great. A big band assembled behind Oberst sounded tight. All but two songs from the new record made the set list.

As I've said before about Radio City Music Hall, there's really no place like it. It's beautiful and as fan-friendly as a place can be. You feel lucky that a band you like gets to play there. The bathrooms upstairs and down are the nicest I've ever seen. There were six-thousand people in the place Wednesday and the only line I saw was for t-shirts. You never have to wait for a beer. In between sets, you can't help but gaze at the orangish-colored ceiling and walls.

I sat in the first row of the first mezzanine level. A young couple from Delaware sat next to me. My ticket cost \$25 plus \$11.70 in various Ticketmaster charges.

3-10-11 1745

The Pitchfork rating assigned to the fantastic new Babies record is about half of what it should be.

The

[review](#) that accompanies Pitchfork contributing writer Paul Thompson's 5.8 rating includes pointed criticism of Cassie Ramone's vocals on the Babies' self-titled full-length. Thompson opens his critique by saying Ramone plays "fast and loose" with her vocal pitch and that her voice is a "source of contention in the indie rock world."

Thompson alleges laziness and makes the claim Ramone can't carry a track without heavy vocal participation from bandmate Kevin Morby. "(Ramone's) voice draws curlicues around the verses, sounding like she'd rather be doing almost anything but singing them," says Thompson.

I strongly disagree. A nonchalant or indifferent sounding vocal style doesn't merit automatic correlation with low performance or quality. Ramone is blending her distinct, unassuming, almost-shy singing voice with Morby's menacing growl. The contrast makes the band great. It makes the record great. When the two don't interact within a song (as in "All Things Come to Pass"), Ramone has no problem conveying deep emotion without flashing range or putting heaping spoonfuls of sweetener in what comes out of her

mouth.

Ramone's voice isn't the only band's element of sound to purposely hit notes out of tune. Guitar lines hit spots that are turned on their head repeatedly throughout the record with wonderful effect. It's a style. It's not conventional tune-making for charts or commercial FM radio. It's a sound that will reach a different, underutilized sweet spot in some listeners.

It didn't do this to Thompson, obviously. That's cool. I mean, he gave the latest New Age record a 8.8. He gave the pretty so-so Bay of Pigs EP by Destroyer a generous 8.0 and handed out a 9.2 for the Dirty Projectors' Bitte Orca release.

None of those three records are easy ear candy. Thompson's high marks for those releases demonstrate an interest in adventurous sound. The fact he lowers the boom on Ramone is hard to figure. It's also unfortunate because she's a talented young artist getting harshly criticized by an important indie rock media outlet. Ya' wonder how she takes it. Does it bother her?

I've not seen Ramone offer a public rebuttal to the Pitchfork review but her Twitter feed has linked to [a piece](#) that appeared on the web site Punknews.org. The writer John Gentile didn't name Pitchfork or Thompson specifically, but said criticism of Ramone's voice missed the point. "Wasn't Janis Joplin accused of being flat and off key when her records were released? Now, some 40 years later, Joplin is seen as a visionary of a new style. In addition, the same publications that criticize Ramone's delivery praised Lil Wayne's wheeze and Kanye's mumble. That's not to say that Lil Wayne or Kanye are bad. Rather, they have invented new vocal delivery styles to well-worn genres. If they can invent new ways to sing, why can't Ramone?"

3-8-11 2017

The political risk would be too great for a president with re-election on his mind, but wouldn't it be something if Barack Obama orchestrated the release of accused Wiki-Leaks document supplier Bradley Manning with time served as final punishment?

Isn't eight months of solitary confinement in the brig enough for a troubled kid whose alleged actions enriched a nation's view of war and diplomacy?

The latest tightening of the US government's punishment screw on Manning involves taking away his grundies at night-time. The Department of Defense says it's a suicide prevention effort. Manning's lawyer says it's degrading and unjustified.

Obama ran on a platform that included a pledge to treat military prisoners humanely. Here and now he has a low-ranking US soldier on home soil who faces long, hard time for a non-violent offense that opened a fascinating window on the work of US diplomats across the globe. I understand the risk posed by exposure of classified information but there seems to be wide agreement that little national security harm was done from what's been released to date. The documented actions and opinions of a meddling superpower with snoops in every international city isn't all that shocking or infuriating to our enemies *or* friends.

There's an unconfirmed notion that Eric Holder wants Manning to finger Julian Assange as the driving force behind the data theft. The thinking is that Holder will keep Manning in the hole until he implicates the Wiki-Leaks boss as an encouraging pusher for dirt so it hits the conspiracy threshold. That's troubling. Assange is the daredevil publisher who was careful to include more established seekers of truth as wingmen for a project that deserves an A-plus for its educational value. Assange shouldn't be pursued by the United States criminally.

Obama and D-O-D should be more concerned about how a young man with a track record of instability has access and ability to review, record and deliver vast amounts of information from the government information vaults to a third party.

Let the young man go. Give him his underwear back. Let him walk back out into a country where young people like him have a hard time getting a job. That - and time served - will be punishment enough.

3-6-11 0130

Thirty years removed from its run of four consecutive Cups, the Islanders franchise is limping into uncertain territory.

Owner Charles Wang says he's losing \$20 million a season. His grand plan for a new arena and associated development on the mostly barren acreage near the existing 40-year-old Nassau Coliseum is held up by local government opposition.

Wednesday's 4-1 Islander win over Minnesota in Uniondale was played before an announced crowd of 7098. Capacity is 16,250. I sat in the upper bowl with a re-sold ticket that cost me five bucks.

I'm the odd fan who loves old buildings and I love Nassau Coliseum. The sightlines are fantastic and every aspect of the fan experience is uniquely Long Island.

Wang has said the Islanders will honor a restructured lease agreement with the company that manages the Coliseum and play there through 2015. Where Wang and the Islanders go or what he'll do with the team after that is unclear. In an era when luxury suites are a required revenue generator for any franchise, staying at the existing arena is out of the question.

A move to a new hockey arena at the Willets Point site in Queens adjacent to the Mets ballpark has been discussed but 2016 is coming quick. The chop-shop owners there are a feisty bunch resistant to giving up their businesses and may not get cleared out anytime soon. The Wilpon family's disaster of a balance sheet makes it seem impossible that they'll participate in an Islanders relocation to Queens.

The new Brooklyn arena is nearing completion and would be ready for a hockey tenant but Dolan and the Garden are said to have power to block - or at least complicate that idea.

The Islanders really belong on the Island. Without even the faint promise of a new home there, however, it feels like Wang is open to the possibility of a sale and move.

Thursday's Times used three paragraphs of wire service copy for its coverage of the game. The Times

sports section largely ignores the Islanders these days although it did a nice profile piece on new Isles goalie Al Montoya in the Wednesday edition.

Montoya (pictured above) is quite a story. He turned away 33 of 34 Wild shots Wednesday. Just a couple weeks ago, Montoya was floundering as a backup for the AHL team in San Antonio with little hope of promotion.

When the Islanders quickly lost three other goalies to injury, they got desperate and picked up Montoya from Phoenix for a late-round draft pick. In eight games here so far, Montoya has a goals-against under two.

Interim Islanders head coach Jack Capuano deserves to return next year. He's one game under five-hundred since taking over but has his young team playing hard. There have been 12 different Islander coaches since 1998.

Islanders enforcer Trevor Gillies was tossed in the second period for a violent hit on Minnesota's Cal Clutterback. Watching it in real time wasn't as cringe-inducing as seeing the replay. Gillies was coming off a nine-game suspension for similar type rough-stuff in the now-famous fight-filled game with the Penguins a few weeks ago. It's likely Gillies will be suspended again.

I took public transit to the game. It was the subway to a commuter train to a bus. For those that drove, the electric utility on Long Island sponsored what's called "Carpool Night." The first fifty cars with four or more people in the vehicle got free parking.

Islander fans have a great variety of personalization on their jerseys. Maybe it's because many of their star players don't stick around forever. In line for the bathroom between the second and third periods, I stood behind four guys wearing Islander jerseys. There was a Dubielewicz, a Simon, a Peca and an Aucoin.

-Eleventh Dream Day has a new record coming out a week from Tuesday. It's the band's first new release since 2006. The Thrill Jockey web site has made the record's nine songs available for preview listening on a streaming player. I'm especially fond of track five, "Divining for Water." Rick and Janet sing together beautifully on the super-catchy song about the toughness of life.

3-3-11 1100

My just-turned-four-year-old nephew made a funny observation while opening birthday gifts last week at his home in suburban Chicago.

He received mainly toys and a few articles of clothing.

Near the end of his party, there was a birthday card from my parents to be opened.

It's my Dad's custom to slip unusual, unpopular currency in family birthday cards and in this instance he decided to give my nephew a two-dollar bill.

After looking at it for a moment, the two-dollar bill brought a genuinely excited reaction from

four-year-old Sam. "Now I can buy TWO things!" he said.

3-1-11 2215

Rahm Emanuel's victory speech after gaining a convincing majority in Chicago's mayoral race last week included a reverential nod to the guy he'll replace.

More than two decades of tightly-consolidated Richie Daley power will be an "impossible act to follow," said Rahm. The compliment was expressed as if Emanuel was admiring Daley's performance in office. But what's really daunting about stepping into a job occupied by a Daley for all but 14 of the last 56 years is inheriting what became a family dictatorship that neglected swaths of neighborhoods west and south and allowed public transit to deteriorate city-wide.

Rahm spent \$11 million to win 55-percent of the vote in an election that 42.2-percent of the city's eligible voters participated in. He needed fifty-percent plus one to avoid a run-off and can thank the ineffectiveness of Carol Moseley-Braun's campaign for winning on the first go-around.

Braun garnered only 9.0-percent of the total vote. She failed to get any kind of boost from black poll-goers who have the numbers to be the city's top electoral power player if viewed as a bloc.

Emanuel says he visited 110 CTA El stops during his campaign. A politically-motivated legal challenge to his residency helped rather than hurt his candidacy. He won 40 of the city's 50 wards. I haven't seen any exit-polling data, but ward totals indicate Emanuel received significant backing from a broad cross-section of the electorate. African-Americans supported him in big numbers.

The cynic would say Emanuel was swept in by the Daley-built machine. A massive campaign funding advantage certainly helped. You'd hope for Chicago's sake Rahm has noble intentions and will govern as if he has an expiration date.

He'll begin occupying the mayor's office May 16. He wouldn't have been my pick if I had a vote, but I wish him luck from afar. I'm still not clear why Daley stepped away before he got pushed or indicted but it'll be nice to see a new face running Chicago.

2-27-11 0100

My nephew's birthday party celebrating the big 4 point 0 was originally supposed to go down a week ago Sunday. But when he woke up with a serious sore throat that day, word went out the celebration was postponed.

Lucky for me, it was re-scheduled for Wednesday of this week (his actual birthday). My off days at the job are always mid-week, so I miss a lot of the fun, weekend get-togethers. Not this time.

The re-scheduled party was set to start in suburban Chicago at the "Jump Zone," a big industrial space filled with inflatable things that are meant to accommodate reckless kid fun. When we arrived at Jump Zone, the facility's assortment of equipment was deflated. The Jump Zone was closed. There would be no jumping. The kids were bummed.

My sister-in-law immediately made a decision to avert what could have been an ugly birthday party revolt by announcing that the festivities would now begin at the nearest Chuck E. Cheese's.

While there was brief, lingering disappointment about the unexpected Jump Zone no-go, it quickly faded in the rear-view mirror as we pulled into Chuck's.

Chuck E. Cheese's was founded in 1977 by the same guy who brought us Pong and Atari. There are five-hundred of these joints scattered across the US. We didn't eat the pizza.

They sell beer. My brother and I tried some.

The highlight by far came when the Chuck E. Cheese mascot emerged from a back room and began dancing to a popular top-40 tune with a beat. Kids stopped playing games. They gathered around the mouse-like mascot and gazed at the performance.

The scene became intensely surreal and memorable when a heavy-set teen who stamped our hands at the entrance began dancing too. The young man was responsible for stamping each child's wrist with a number that corresponded with the number applied to the adult who brought them. The hand-stamper/doorman wasn't eager to dance with the Mouse but did so out of duty, it appeared. His moves were tentative and he didn't smile.

What the young man did was take one for the team. His facial expression made it clear he was dancing only because it was his job. He exerted just enough energy and demonstrated just enough artistry to reveal that deep down inside he had a gift. He wasn't gonna share his gift at that moment - in that place - but a little flash of brilliance slipped out for those paying attention.

As we exited, I made a point of complementing the doorman on his dance participation. He was thankful. "I do what I can," he said.

2-24-11 1600

Aside from the audacious attempt to grab a much larger slice of the revenue pie from its players, NFL commissioner Roger Goodell and most of the league's owners want two regular season games added to the schedule.

That's crazy.

The slate of sixteen regular season games is plenty.

The league is trying to sell regular season schedule expansion by arguing it's simply transforming two meaningless pre-season games into real ones. That's true from a competitive standpoint but it ignores the significant added demand it would put on the guys who strap on the helmets.

Most starting NFL players don't play the final two preseason contests the way they fly around on a regular season Sunday.

With Alan Schwarz regularly writing stories linking the rattling of brains on a football field with severe

and permanent neurological consequences, is now the time to add two skull-buster sessions to an already grueling campaign?

No way.

We'll likely not learn what Dave Duerson's deliberate donation to science reveals until negotiations on a new players union contract are much further along. But man, shouldn't there be a pause for reflection about Duerson's decision to kill himself in a way that allows medical professionals to see what football did to his brain?

Goodell and the owners need to be careful about the future of a league that's producing retirees who are experiencing nightmarish, debilitating ailments. Respecting Players Association opposition to an 18-game schedule must be a necessary league concession in the name of player safety.

-The costly acquisition of Carmelo Anthony via trade was driven by meddlesome Knicks owner Jim Dolan against the wishes of his own GM according to Howard Beck of the Times. Beck cited the word of several unnamed sources in reporting Knicks GM Donnie Walsh opposed trading for Carmelo at the steep price ultimately paid late Monday night. I agree with Walsh. The Knicks were team-building with Felton manning the point and Gallinari from outside. Even Mozgov was showing flashes. The team's gap was on defense. Carmelo won't help in that department. As it is, Chauncey Billups better be ready to play serious minutes or the deal makes little sense until a point guard is found. The current post-trade roster won't defend anybody. The only relief I feel is that Fields wasn't involved in the deal.

Off to Chicago for a couple days to see my nephew turn four years old. Back here at the end of the week.

2-22-11 0200

Last Wednesday's dull front page Times story describing an exclusive jailhouse interview with Bernie Madoff included a disclosure that must have rankled at least a few people in the Grey Lady's newsroom.

Early in the piece, reporter Diana Henriques said the face-to-face talk she obtained with Madoff was part of ongoing research for a book she'll roll out this spring. Henriques acknowledged she had been corresponding by e-mail with the convicted Ponzi scammer in advance of her behind-bars sit-down with him.

The book disclosure was presented as if it were a plug, which is bad enough for a reputable newspaper like the Times. Worse I think would be Times readership's inclination to wonder whether Henriques withheld any information for the newspaper story so it would be fresh and juicy for the book.

It's not at all unusual for newspaper reporters to author books on subjects they once covered. This feels different. Madoff had not done a news interview since he landed in the slammer. The ground covered from the jailhouse meeting as revealed by Henriques wasn't compelling. The way the book was brought up was commercial in nature. There was detail about the publisher, book title and estimated release date. Fair or not, the lack of a Madoff bombshell revelation in the newspaper story makes you wonder if anything is being socked away for the book.

I suppose it would have been difficult to reassign another reporter without a book as the final goal. Madoff likely chose Henriques to chat with off the earlier communication. The proper way to go here would be for the reporter to wear just one hat on an active story. You're either a reporter working for a daily newspaper – or an author working on a book – not both at the same time.

-I've been hearing lots of raves about the lobster roll at Luke's but it wasn't until last Thursday that I finally tried one. A quarter-pound of claw meat is stacked high on a super-fresh soft and toasted piece of white bread. The lobster meat is buttered liberally and has a touch of spice. There's no celery or other filler. It's just a heaping mound of fresh lobster on a roll barely strong enough to hold it together. It's fifteen bucks and totally worth it. I hit the East Village spot, one of three Luke's locations in Manhattan. The origin of the lobsters used at Luke's is updated on chalkboards near the register and outside the store. One the day I was there, the lobster had come from Casco Bay off Maine.

2-20-11 0115

I took a little trip to lower Manhattan on the off day Thursday. The purpose was two-fold. First, I wanted to stand with the crowd across from city hall that met to oppose WalMart's effort to set up shop in New York City.

A city council committee held its second hearing on WalMart at its temporary meeting space at the Emigrant Savings Bank building on Chambers. Before the hearing, a coalition of neighborhood activists, union members and independent merchants chanted "WalMart Free - N-Y-C!" among other slogans expressing discontent with powerful big box retailer.

This is a battle New York City will eventually lose. WalMart will worm its way around government's limited regulatory power and patchwork community pressure. It will eventually slip into this market by leasing space at existing developments. WalMart will sell lots of cheap shit and businesses that are owned by actual members of the community will suffer. Some local businesses will shut down. The mega-corporation with no community ties, narrow margins and zero concern about drastically under-cutting its competitors will ring up huge sales and send it off in bundles to the main office. WalMart will never demonstrate true allegiance to its local workforce. Once it opens up a first store, more will follow. When Charles Barron is the leading front-and-center opponent to WalMart's incursion here, you know efforts to stop it aren't stiff enough. People like cheap shit. You'd think New York City would be different in terms of attempting to preserve the character of the urban landscape, but activists of that ilk aren't paying attention. WalMart is on a full offensive to gain entry here, and they'll win before there's a broad mobilization of opposition.

The other purpose for going downtown Thursday was to see the new Gehry high rise on Spruce Street (pictured above). There's still scaffolding and what appears to be a temporary freight elevator attached to one side of the 76-story structure, but it's all but done. Almost all of it will be rental apartments for the upper crust. Architecture critics have started weighing in and everybody loves it.

I need to see it from the East and South - and in different lighting - before I go as nuts as everybody else - but I liked it. I saw it under cloudy skies standing at city hall. It definitely adds uniqueness to the skyline in the daytime. The picture above doesn't capture the creative swirls and quirks in the exterior. A few

blocks West of 8 Spruce is Ground Zero, and the sky won't be pierced on that site for a couple more years.

To see Gehry's building of great beauty rise up in such close proximity to the site of the fallen towers is something to feel good about - and may tide us over a bit until World Trade gets fully rebuilt.

2-17-11 2000

The succession of Times articles detailing Mets owner Fred Wilpon's entanglement with Bernie Madoff's ponzi scheme didn't unearth the clear-cut conspiracy some were predicting.

I'm not saying Wilpon isn't in deep trouble. And I'm not saying his full ownership position in the Metropolitans isn't in serious jeopardy.

But what you got from the Times last week was basically advance dribs and drabs of information contained in the Irving Picard lawsuit filed on behalf of those who got nothing but a goose egg in their Madoff accounts. It was easy to see that the Times coverage was driven by the leg-work done by Picard and his team.

After settlement discussions to make the Picard lawsuit go away hit a dead-end, Wilpon decided to offer a defense. He basically said hey: I had a half-billion go up in smoke with Madoff myself and Picard is over-stating the phantom profits I pulled out before the house of cards collapsed.

It's an interesting legal battle now between Picard and Wilpon. Picard alleges the entire Met empire (team, ballpark, television network) was built and acquired with the backing of Wilpon's complex and deep financial relationship with Madoff.

Picard says Wilpon got massive business leverage from Madoff accounts in no small part because their performance was freakishly consistent and positive regardless of market swings. The phony rate of return in Met/Madoff accounts bolstered Wilpon's ability to obtain loans. In 2005, Picard alleges Wilpon went to Bank of America and used a Madoff account as collateral to borrow the money that built SNY.

Picard not only wants Wilpon to cough up the \$300 mil he alleges the Mets pulled out before Madoff got caught. Picard also wants hundreds of millions more as damages because he says the Mets built its massive business off a rotten pot of stolen money. Legal precedent on damages in a case like this isn't clear but Picard is taking dead aim at shooting down Wilpon's claim he was another innocent victim. Picard says the Mets closely monitored Madoff's techniques in connection with the consistent, unrealistic positive returns and had to know something was fishy. There's no allegation of a conspiracy, but Picard says Wilpon ignored blatant red flags because Madoff's scam kept the Mets boat motorized.

Fred counters that even the mighty S-E-C looked at Madoff's books and missed the wrong-doing, so how can Picard expect the Mets to square the numbers?

Isn't the half-billion down the drain enough of a hit for the Mets?

I don't know. I don't know if Picard will win his fight for damages. He may recoup the few hundred mil

Wilpon pulled out before Madoff got caught but not much else.

No matter what happens with the legal case, it now seems likely that Wilpon's dream of handing the ownership keys to his meddlesome son Jeff is dead. Consider the math: the value of franchise is \$858 million. The team's debt obligation is \$1.5 billion. Picard wants hundreds of millions on top of all that. Attendance was off sixteen-percent last year from the year before and will probably drop double digits again this season.

Efforts by Wilpon to sell a quarter share of the team are likely being met unfavorably by some interested parties because of the team's taint and the younger Wilpon's inclination to stick his nose in the day-to-day.

I'm hoping for a full sale of the team. Wilpon can't be trusted going forward. I'm not saying he knew Madoff was a crook, necessarily, but he lied to fans a few years ago when he said the ponzi collapse had no bearing on the team's finances. Independent of that, I'm told by the best friend of an ex-Met manager that Jeff Wilpon interferes with baseball operations at a level that will make it hard for the organization to be consistently successful with him involved.

It may take the intervention of MLB to force a full sale. The facts as we know them now may not be enough for Bud Selig to push for that. What shouldn't be considered acceptable by the sport's powers-that-be is an underwater franchise that's allowed to limp along in its current state.

2-16-11 2100

Both the Washington Post and Politico ran stories over the weekend saying Arizona congresswoman Gabby Giffords looms as a formidable candidate for the US Senate seat being vacated by Jon Kyl at the end of next year.

Please.

Can we at least wait until Giffords leaves a rehab hospital in Houston and see what kind of shape she's in before we throw her into a process that can sap the strength of the even the most seasoned and hearty public office seeker?

I understand why democratic party operatives in Arizona are excited. A Giffords candidacy would get a certain amount of automatic support because of what she's gone through.

Turning Kyl's red-as-it-gets seat into a pale shade of blue would be a good outcome.

But it feels really weird at this juncture for Arizona Democratic Party Chairman Andrei Cherny to publicly fuel prospects of a Giffords run while she slowly recovers from a gunshot to the brain.

Multiple news organizations reported that Giffords had eyed the Kyl seat before she got shot, but does anybody including Giffords really know right now what her ambitions or life desires will be when she gets on with a routine?

It's not unusual for trauma victims to have their future limitations downplayed by supporters in the form of lofty expectations or goals. I'm not saying Giffords wouldn't make a fine US Senator. But let's allow

her a long, productive, and full recuperation before we hand her a big challenge on top of the one she's already dealing with.

A 2012 run for US Senate may very well be too much, too soon for Giffords.

2-15-11 0130

Legendary in-house Indianapolis Motor Speedway announcer Tom Carnegie died Friday at the age of 91.

A

[well-written obit](#) on Carnegie in the Indianapolis Star sparked a rush of long dormant memories of attending 500's and qualifying days with my Dad over a stretch of about 15 years starting in the late 70's. It's impossible to think about those days without remembering Carnegie. He was as crucial to the Indy experience as the race cars were. Carnegie's deep, distinctive, entertaining and informative public address voice was the best I've ever heard on the inside of any sporting venue.

Since it was impossible to observe the entire two and a half mile racing oval from a regular seat, fans relied on Carnegie to tell them what was happening on the backstretch (and usually in my case, the second, third and fourth turns too). Loudspeakers scattered across the massive facility carried Carnegie's voice.

I remember sitting through long rain delays, anxiously awaiting Carnegie's updates on weather. When efforts to dry the track with large blowers had gone on for what seemed like forever, Carnegie would suddenly come on and announce a projected resumption in racing time. He was a serious, high-level professional but he would also take opportunities to playfully ramp up drama just before announcing a new track record – or new pole-sitter on qualifying days. Carnegie's voice would elevate in excitement level most when he announced a lead change on race day.

The Star obit said Carnegie worked 61 Indy 500's. The last race month he worked full-time was 2006, although he had gone back for spot duty each year since.

The Carnegie moment I'll never forget was when he told fans that Gordon Smiley had died in a horrible 1982 qualifying wreck between the third and fourth turns. I was 16 years old at the time. A really long delay followed the crash – and then a grave-sounding Carnegie made the sad and dramatic announcement: "Ladies and Gentleman..."

I don't remember his exact wording of it, but he was able to pull it off with great dignity and a deep gravity that drew a collective groan and gasp that I've never again heard at a sporting event.

2-13-11 0100

The author of the best work of fiction I've ever consumed has penned an amazing and agonizing non-fiction account of the abrupt death of his wife and their short life together before she passed. Entitled "The Wave," the 11-page story written by Francisco Goldman appeared in last week's New Yorker magazine.

I read Goldman's novel "The Ordinary Seaman" shortly after arriving here in 1998. It blew me away. A few years later, I read it again with even greater appreciation. Time went by and I forgot about the author and the impact the book had on me.

Then last week, the New Yorker (with a controversial cover mocking Mayor Bloomberg) hit my mailbox. There was a well-done piece about the Wal Mart Black Friday trampling fatality on Long Island. And then came the Goldman piece.

With warm and intriguing details about their courtship, Goldman describes what sounds like an almost perfect romance. He then goes on to recount his wife's 2007 body-surfing accident at a beach in Mazunte, Mexico. A photo of the couple on their 2005 wedding day appears on the page that marks the one-third mark of the story. As I read on, I kept going back to the photo as if the smiles in it would somehow soften the horrible tragedy described by Goldman. Instead, looking at the photo makes the outcome harder to take.

-NYC Taper has put up a high-quality [recording](#) of last Friday night's Woods show at Monster Island Basement. Taper used output from the board mix and combined it with a layer of sound garnered from a microphone positioned high atop a support beam in the middle of the audience. I had noticed the mike while watching the gig and didn't think much of it. Turns out it helped produce perhaps the best live recording of Woods ever made. The set's opening number "Pushing Onlys" sounds great as does another new song "Born to Lose." The mix captures Jeremy Earl's vocals at a depth in quality that exceeds even what's been produced on their studio recordings.

-Almost two weeks after arriving in Cairo to cover the Egypt uprising, NBC reporter Richard Engel has finally been reunited with the piece of luggage he packed for his current, open-ended job assignment. Engel says his bag was located at the Cairo airport and delivered to his lodging spot. Via Twitter, Engel expressed joy and posted a photo of the small stack of clean clothes he can now use as he reports on the biggest news story of 2011 to date.

2-8-11 2055

It's not deliberate contrarianism that motivates me to say the heavy doses of criticism aimed at Christina Aguilera and the Black Eyed Peas is unfair.

The 40-something crowd (of which I'm a member) scoffed up a storm on their fancy Facebook and Twitter pages Monday to mock Christina's anthem flub and the Peas' musicianship on Super Bowl Sunday.

I can't tell you how many times I've been at sporting events that started with a botched version of the Star-Spangled Banner. It happens. If anything, Aguilera deserves credit for a graceful recovery out of a mistake that many would have melted down from. Most viewers had to think twice about whether there was a mistake at all. Is a lip-synced, error-free performance with a taped vocal track what the masses would prefer? I say no way. Let it be live and unscripted.

As for Fergie and the Peas, I thought the show's visual presentation was impressive. Hundreds of

costumed support performers made for quite a sight. When Slash popped out of the stage, I was genuinely surprised. How did Slash slip into Big D for dress rehearsals without Peter King or Adam Scheffer spilling the beans in advance?

If it's another over-the-hill rock and roll act you crave during your Super Bowl bathroom break, feel confident you'll get another one next year when the big game is played in Indy. Mellencamp is odds-on to sing about America .

No doubt Billy Joel and Bon Jovi are penciled in for the Meadowlands in three years.

After a string of consecutive geezer acts, we got something different with a little spunk.

Why not let the Black Eyed Peas bring their spacesuits and dance moves and hybrid genre of music to a coveted performance slot seen by millions? I liked it. It was a good, good night.

2-8-11 0130

With talented bass player Kevin Morby devoting a few months to his other band The Babies in Los Angeles , Woods carried on without him Friday night in Brooklyn at Monster Island Basement.

Advertised as a Woods "acoustic" show, the gig actually had plenty of electric and electrifying elements.

Drummer Jarvis Taveniere came out from his regular position behind a percussion set-up to front the show on electric guitar. He was the only performer to stand during the hour-long set. G Lucas Crane did his customary lay-down of beautiful noise garnered from cassette tapes. Crane's sounds are filtered through a self-made system controlled by sliding knobs.

The star of this show was Jeremy Earl, the bearded lead singer with a voice so high-pitched it could pass for Tiny Tim. Earl (pictured above – right) played acoustic guitar and remained seated throughout.

Unless you were among those pressed up against the stage in the first few rows, you couldn't see Earl during the show.

The closest I could get to the stage without fighting for position was about fifteen rows back – so I was limited to a view of Taveniere and nothing else.

Two members of the band Real Estate rotated in and out of the lineup to lend a hand during a few of the songs. The wandering and intensely-shifting mood and pace of the tune "Bend Beyond" was exceptional. There were new songs I'd expect will appear on a release due later this year and enough well-known numbers to gain full attention from a crowd that had been chatty all evening.

Earl is reserved, borderline shy during gigs. He doesn't say much between songs. The fact he sat for this show didn't thrill me but I suppose the acoustic tag gave him an excuse.

This was my first trip to Monster Island . It's a venue used regularly for shows booked by the promoter Todd P. To get there, you basically walk west on Metropolitan Avenue until you hit the river.

There's no signage or obvious guidance to help one find a spot tucked among what look like industrial establishments. Both the sidewalk and street in front of the venue were covered with several inches of ice and snow. It was \$9 to get in. A long flight of stairs without a railing leads you into the basement performance space. When I got there at about 10 PM, the place was packed. I bought a three dollar Bud and immediately felt squeezed by the density of the crowd. The bill's undercard included Ducktails, a popular act led by Real Estate's Matthew Mondanile.

A few minutes before Ducktails took the stage (at about 11 PM), Todd P announced that the venue would begin turning people away at the door. From his perch at the sound board, Todd P spoke into a house microphone and asked the crowd to inform friends en route that they wouldn't get in. "I think we can all agree there are enough people here," he said.

When I heard that, I felt relief that it wouldn't get any more crowded than it already was. I found an empty pocket of space near the back and settled in.

Ducktails and Real Estate have a longstanding association with Woods and often appear on the same live bills. It obviously works for the guys in those bands, but speaking as a big Woods fan, I don't totally get Real Estate or Ducktails. There's a deep drop-off in performance level from Woods to Real Estate. Ducktails is tolerable – and more inclined to deploy interesting guitar sounds. But Woods is on a whole different level – both with song lyrics and the dynamic of their sound.

As was the case when Real Estate opened for Woods on a string of dates last year, Ducktails drew the larger audience Friday night. After the Ducktails set, about a third of the crowd hit the exit. So, you have a weird dynamic with set order acknowledging Woods is the better band despite having less drawing power.

One more observation about Monster Island Basement: there's just one toilet total for the whole place.

-The mounds of snow in front of New York City dwellings and on top of parked cars developed a rarely-seen lacquer-type sheen late this week. The glassy shine on the snow's exterior came after freezing rain and regular rain fell Wednesday. Temperatures then dropped well below freezing Wednesday night, creating an artificial-looking and ornamental change in the snow's appearance.

2-5-11 2350

New York City's top two high school teams met in Brooklyn Tuesday night to renew the best public school hoops rivalry the city's had for at least a decade.

Top-ranked Lincoln and second-ranked Boys and Girls have dominated the PSAL and very well could meet for the city championship at the Garden in five weeks. These two teams play each other twice each year in the regular season and often meet again for the Brooklyn Borough Championship before playing one more time for city supremacy.

Lincoln has the richer, recent history. It owns 11 city titles (seven since 2002) and four state

championships. The Coney Island school always seems to have great speed and skill at point guard and the current team is no exception.

Senior Shaquille Stokes (pictured above) can pop from 3 and has a lightning-quick, impossible-to-defend move to the hoop. Stokes scored 18 Tuesday night in the 61-56 Lincoln win. After the game, Lincoln coach Tiny Morton told the assembled tabloid reporters that Stokes is the “best player in the PSAL, maybe in the city.” Stokes has reportedly received wide interest from division one programs including the University of Iowa. He has yet to make a college decision. From what I saw, Stokes has what it takes to be a great player at the next level. He’s 5-10 and is still transitioning from an earlier emphasis at playing the two, but his speed is out of sight and he has a shot.

Waiting in the wings at Lincoln is another great point guard. Ethan Telfair is a sophomore (pictured above in white jersey). His brother is Sebastian Telfair. Sebastian had a high school hoops career at Lincoln that will be remembered forever. He went straight to the NBA in 2004 and has struggled to make an impact with five different pro teams. Ethan bears a strong resemblance to Sebastian in both appearance and playing style. Because of Stokes’ greatness, Ethan only played about ten minutes Tuesday. You’d expect he’ll get a full shot next season.

This was supposed to be a Lincoln home game but it got moved to the gym on the campus of LIU-Brooklyn to accommodate strong fan interest. The Wellness, Recreation & Athletic Center is a 2500-seat venue on the corner of DeKalb and Ashland. The crowd was late-arriving but nearly filled the place. As is the case whenever these two teams meet, there was a heavy NYPD and School Safety personnel presence. All fans walked through metal detectors on the way in.

It was ten bucks for adults to get in. I’d support the PSAL moving at least one of these two teams’ regular season meetings to LIU each year. It’s an easy facility to reach by subway and the 6 PM tip allowed city hoops fans easy access to a marquis matchup.

The game ball used was emblazoned with the words “THE ROCK” in big black letters.

The Boys and Girls uniform includes a black patch that says “MICK.” The patch is a tribute to longtime school principal

[Frank Mickens](#), who died in July 2009. Mickens is credited for improving the academic climate at Boys and Girls HS. The school in Bedford-Stuyvesant had suffered from disorganization and disorder before Mickens arrived in the mid-80’s. Mickens’ legacy includes the historically important hiring of Boys and Girls head basketball coach Ruth Lovelace eighteen years ago. To install a 23-year-old woman as the head coach of a boys high school basketball seems unthinkable (even to this day) among many male school administrators, but Lovelace (pictured above) has had a wonderful career. She won the city title at Boys last year and it’s clear she has the respect of her players. In the huddle, young men stand tightly-bunched around her and give her instructions full attention.

On the court, the Boys and Girls players play the game without the taunting and showboating you see from other city programs. Lovelace deserves credit for this. In the fourth quarter, a Lincoln player aggressively taunted junior Boys swingman Jeffland Neverson up and down the court. Neverson refused

to participate or retaliate.

The game was broadcast on the Cablevision channel MSG Varsity. WFAN update guy Rich Ackerman called the game. Interestingly, he stood at his position between the player benches during the second half while his broadcast partner was seated.

2-2-11 1445

Complete, top-to-bottom company integration is still probably at least a year away, but the newly-combined Continental/United airlines held its first quarterly earnings conference call as a single entity last week.

Lots of numbers got tossed around. The company said a \$160 million fourth-quarter profit got swallowed up by a \$485 million hit attributed to “merger-related costs” and other “special charges.” The company said revenue was way up vs. 2009 but rising fuel costs offset a good portion of the increase. Newspapers that ran stories about the announcement all stuck close to the airline’s press release.

A few analysts from big Wall Street banks asked important questions on the conference call seeking to shed light on the mega-merger’s progress. The subjects of inquiry included (1) the status of sticky negotiations on a new contract with the union representing pilots of the combined airline. (2) specific job reduction numbers expected as a result of “synergies” from the merger (3) reconciling a fleet of 710 mainline jets manufactured by two different airplane-makers and future aircraft purchase plans in that regard and (4) potential impact on airline revenue (through ticket-selling) by Google’s purchase of ITA Software.

On each subject, the combined airline’s new boss Jeff Smisek offered either a “no comment” or the near-equivalent of same.

In other words, if the outside world or shareholder wants details about the melding of two carriers into the largest airline in the world, it’s not getting much insight from the guy presiding over the deal.

That’s not to say a few nuggets of info didn’t fall through the cracks of this call. It was revealed that over 200 airplanes in the fleet are now painted with the new “United” logo. The much-anticipated Boeing 787 (of which Continental will be the first US customer to take delivery) isn’t expected to join the fleet until the first quarter of 2012 “at the earliest.” And the sale of flights on the company’s two web sites now accounts for 28-percent of total sales.

-Jayhawks front man Gary Louris has never been one to hype a record, so his comments to Greg Kot about ten days ago caught my eye when I saw them in the Trib. Louris told Kot the new Jayhawks record due in late spring or early summer is the best of the band’s career. That’s saying a lot.

-I watched the premiere episode of Portlandia on IFC and won’t go back for more. I’m surprised Steve Buscemi agreed to participate in the first episode. It wasn’t funny. It wasn’t compelling in any way. It’s a show that won’t last.

-My cable provider Time-Warner has quietly added WGN America to the channel lineup. Not only do I

get to watch Tom Skilling on the News at Nine, I'll get selected Cubs, Sox and Bulls games.

-Jockey Julien Leparoux showed genuine excitement in the saddle Sunday afternoon while crossing the finish line first in the Holy Bull Stakes aboard the powerful three-year-old colt Dialed In. Leparoux slapped the right side of Dialed In's giant neck repeatedly to celebrate a thrilling win in South Florida. Dialed In rallied from at least fifteen lengths off the lead with a mad rush. The manner in which Dialed In won is reminiscent of the running style exhibited by Zenyatta during her long winning streak. It's a stroll to a roll. It's a running mode that's very, very exciting to watch. Dialed In has all the makings of a Kentucky Derby contender. It'll now be up to Dialed In's New York-based trainer Nick Zito to cautiously prepare a game plan that gives the lightly-raced talent proper seasoning without removing too much of the horse's stored-up rally ability come the first Saturday in May.

1-31-11 0145

A long overdue pay wall is expected to go up at the New York Times web site in the next few weeks. Details are limited but the Wall Street Journal reports that full, daily access will cost regular Times web users about ten bucks a month.

As a daily reader of the Times print product, I say bring it on.

Creation of content by some of the finest news gatherers in the world is expensive. Many Times reporters are paid six figures (deservedly so). Imagine the cost of covering news in all corners of the world. That's what the Times does with wider reach than any other US news organization.

Unfortunately, accessing free newspaper content on the web has for many replaced the tradition of paying a small sum to get one's fingertips darkened by newsprint ink during consumption of the physical publication.

It's great for the consumer, of course, but the something-for-nothing web model has forced news organizations to peel off large portions of its staff to close a declining revenue gap. Inevitably, the product suffers.

The Times has been hurt greatly from this shift in readership. The paper's paid print circulation is shrinking annually at near double-digit levels. Page width has shrunk and the Metro section is all but gone. The paper is in visible decline. Still, at \$2 a copy on the newsstand, there's no better place to turn for news - and really - there's no better value if you are among the one in four adults in this country who still pick up a daily newspaper.

Erecting the pay wall probably won't increase hard copy circulation. Just one in ten Americans under age 30 buy a newspaper. Something for nothing is just one explanation. Disengagement and disinterest must share some blame.

What the pay wall sensibly captures is untapped revenue from regular, daily Times readers who simply prefer the online format.

Smartly, albeit tardy, the Times is only seeking dough from those people. A meter will detect reader usage

and will hit up only those who consume vast amounts of info from the Times web site.

According to the Journal story, those who only dabble on the Times site will still be able to come and go with infrequency for no fee. The Times is only going after the hogs. And all they're asking for is ten bucks a month.

Fair for sure.

For a guy like me, I'll continue paying the \$17 a week to pick a Times off the big stack at the bodega or airport newsstand every day. I can't enroll as a subscriber because of my weird hours - and because papers tend to vanish in my building vestibule. But those who formally subscribe (even Sunday-only) will get full web access as part of their deal.

I have only one small concern about the pay wall and I'm not even sure yet whether this is a valid worry. One of the things I love about the Times web site is the thousands of reader comments posted daily in response to issues of the day. The commentary is often of more value to me than what's printed on the opinion pages. I hope the pay wall has no impact on reader comments. My only frame of reference is the Wall Street Journal's pay wall. The protected stories on the Journal web site block reader posts by those outside the wall. Hopefully the Times will leave reader comments alone.

-The Daily Racing Form unveils a correspondent this weekend who will no doubt make a big and entertaining splash for "America's Turf Authority." Pavement percussionist Bob Nastanovich will cover the National Handicapping Championship in Las Vegas. His video reports will be produced by the Hennegan Brothers and aired through the DRF web site with quick turn-around times from the site of the competition. Nastanovich's passion for wagering on horse racing (along with a fantastic, infectious personality) make his DRF video debut something I very much to look forward to.

1-26-11 2040

It's quite a place.

We ate, drank and gambled to the fullest extent on the 40-hour weekend visit to New Orleans, LA.

From our lodging spot above the R Bar (co-owned by the rock-and-roller Greg Dulli) in the Marigny, we were within easy walking distance of dozens of great taverns and restaurants. We were also just a few blocks outside the hubbub of the French Quarter.

My trip-mates Jeff and Marc each came armed with research on joints to hit, and hit them we did. When we entered our room a flight of stairs above the bar, we noticed there were a half-dozen free drink tokens resting on the bed's pillows. Those tokens made the R Bar our launch point for a boozy tour of a city that loves to party.

The Marigny is a cool, relatively quiet neighborhood packed with beautiful structures, most of which survived the big flood. Just a foot above sea level, this part of the city got some wind damage from the storm. It of course was also impacted deeply by the suffering and chaos all around it.

The data varies by source, but population in the city limits is down about 40-percent from what it was before the August 2005 hurricane.

A cab driver we spoke to Saturday night made an eloquent case for a total rebound. The retired city fire captain and lifelong resident with family roots dating back to the 1800's gave us a twenty-minute overview of the storm's impact and the current state of rebuilding. As he drove slowly through the beautiful Mid-City neighborhood, the cabbie spoke highly of the new mayor Mitch Landrieu. At a recent community meeting attended by hundreds of city residents, the cabbie said Landrieu patiently and thoughtfully waded through several hours worth of questions and concerns. The cabbie believes reinforcements of the city's flood protection system are real and meaningful.

Of course, jobs are the key to the vitality of any community. When employment associated with reconstruction tapers off, hospitality / education / oil /shipping / fishing will need to strengthen. There's also the issue of the city's highest in the country per capita murder rate. Our pal (and New Orleans resident) Jim told us on this visit he believes much of the city's bad crime stats are skewed by drug-linked violence in known and avoidable parts of town.

I'll say this for sure. I saw police squad cars constantly. Even in the non-touristy parts of town we passed through, there seemed to be a high level of law enforcement visibility. I understand there are neighborhoods in the city with large numbers of displaced residents who feel left behind or ignored by revitalization, but it's hard to discount the comeback argument. During odd weekend hours, I saw construction workers at multiple sites pounding hammers, cutting plywood and installing windows.

Certainly it's a city worth rebuilding despite unavoidable vulnerability to flooding. It's such a unique and offbeat place. The locals we had contact with are extremely proud of the city. They are genuinely friendly. Music is everywhere. What is done with food harvested from the Gulf is spectacular.

And oh yeah, there's thoroughbred horse racing

That was the primary reason for making this visit. About a fifteen-minute cab ride from the Marigny, Fair Ground Race Course is a smallish, enclosed plant. The featured race was the 67th running of the Grade 3 LeComte Stakes. In many previous years, this race featured 3-year-old runners with legitimate Kentucky Derby aspirations. Not so this year. A weak field of five had just seven victories between them going in. Wilkinson (#1 - red saddle cloth) got a nice ride from Garrett Gomez, closing into a slow pace along the rail. Wilkinson's final time was unimpressive and his trainer isn't the type to get ambitious about going to the KY Derby.

Our pal Jimmy works at the track and set us up in a clubhouse box. It's always weird watching horse races with a layer of Plexiglas separating fan from track, but the entire main plant is enclosed. It was low-50's outside Saturday and would have been a bit chilly minus the windows.

It's fresh air you crave, the back-of-plant paddock is nice. Or you can gather on the apron along the rail.

Overall, I was impressed with the track's amenities and the ease with which I circulated throughout it. Our only beef was that the track's physical characteristics seemed to lack the quirkiness or uniqueness of the

city it resides in. Owned by Churchill Downs, the plant's exterior was generic. An adjoining slots facility is avoidable in a good way, but there has to be some way to better incorporate New Orleans into the grandstand portion of the place.

Marc and Jeff both walked away from the track with more cash than what they walked in with, although the money would have been wider for them if the 8-year-old Argentinean Gran Estreno didn't win the Colonel Bradley. Gran Estreno was claimed by the sharp trainer Mike Stidham eighteen months ago for 20K and has gone on to win three graded stakes races and nearly a half-million dollars in cash. None of us believed in Gran Estreno but we should have, I guess. All he's done under Stidham is run big in sensible spots.

One of the trip's top highlights came just a few blocks from the track after the 11th race ended. We walked over to Liuzza's By The Track and had fried oysters, bbq'd shrimp and a cup of gumbo. The establishment sat in the middle of a residential area. It was busy and friendly. The horse racing channel TVG played on televisions above the bar.

The other major highlight came during Friday night's cocktail hour. We drank Sazaracs and absinthe at the Napoleon House on Chartres. Classical music played in the background. The absinthe produced a powerful, full-body buzz that had us walking on air later in the evening.

We also hit the following places (with descriptions in short form):

-Herbsaint for dinner Friday night. It was great, although a detailed analysis of the place would be better had I not hit the hard stuff to the extent I did before dinner.

-Clover Grill for breakfast Saturday morning. Great 24-hour diner on the corner of Bourbon and Dumaine. Great coffee.

-Central Grocery on Decatur for muffuletta. Central is credited for inventing the sandwich composed of salami, provolone, olive salad among other ingredients. We brought some muff to the track and had it for lunch. It was great.

-Apple Barrel Bar near our lodging spot (on Frenchman). This was the last spot we hit Friday. Fun.

-Bacchanal in the Ninth Ward. We had late-night snacks here Saturday. A big outdoor space wasn't in play because of the cold weather. The kitchen was winding down when we got there. It would be fun to go there on a nice night.

-Tujague's on Decatur. It bills itself as "one of America's great drinking establishments" and indeed it was great. We had a lengthy conversation with Tujague bartender Paul Gustings. A friendly fellow, Gustings laughed at our fondness for absinthe but served it to us anyway. The way to go with Gustings next time out would be to just let him take you on a drinking expedition of his choosing.

-Pravda on Decatur. This is a dimly-lit place where absinthe is front and center. It was the only place that served it to us in diluted form but it was great nonetheless.

I flew back Sunday morning through Houston. Taxi rides from the New Orleans airport to the city are a flat \$33 in both directions.

I leave you with a link to a

[short video clip](#) of a band playing on a New Orleans street corner late Friday night. The video quality stinks. I shot it on my cell phone. But the audio provides a flavor of what one might stumble across as you walk around.

1-24-11 1700

Just about everybody in attendance at the Huntley/Dundee-Crown high school hoops game wore pink on Wednesday night.

That's because the mother of Huntley senior starting guard Tyler Brunschon is battling breast cancer.

I was expecting just another high quality suburban Chicago high school basketball game when my Dad and I made the short drive to Huntley High. Instead, we got a heavy duty example of why high school sports can so effectively promote community and caring.

Each member of the Huntley squad handed Robin Brunschon a bouquet of flowers during a very emotional pre-game ceremony.

Last in line to express support for Robin's fight to regain good health was Tyler (pictured above). There were very few dry eyes among several hundred spectators in the gym as mother and son locked in a long embrace.

500 pink t-shirts supporting Brunschon were sold before the game with proceeds going to help pay her medical tab. A report in today's Daily Herald said Robin's final chemo treatment will take place next week with surgery to follow.

Huntley's opponent Dundee-Crown will mount a similar fund-raising campaign for Brunschon in a few weeks when the same two teams meet in Carpentersville.

The game itself was a hard-fought defensive battle. Huntley beat Dundee-Crown 48-34 behind 16 from junior point guard Troy Miller. Huntley is now 13-4 overall and 2-1 in a tough Fox Valley Conference.

The best player on the court was senior power forward Dylan Neukirch (pictured above). He brings a linebacker's approach to the floor. His top-of-the-key screens are punishing. The picks Neukirch set repeatedly opened up express lanes to the hoop for Miller. Neukirch also has a nice outside shot and his drives to the basket provoke fear for what they'd feel like at full impact.

Huntley also has a freshman who deserves paying attention to. At a legit 6-5, Amanze Egekeze played quality minutes and showed lots of poise.

For Dundee-Crown, the player my Dad and I most enjoyed watching was senior swingman Ryan Smith. He's listed at 6-4 and he appeared not to weigh more than 150 pounds. He was freakishly thin. During

pre-game warm-ups you thought there was no way he was a contributing member of the team.

But then the game started, and he was all over the place. He went hard to the floor several times and got right up. His uniform barely stayed attached to his beanpole frame but he played with great toughness and had good shooting range. He played all 32 minutes and gets the TSR Mr. Hustle award for this contest.

On Friday morning, TSR departs O'Hare for its first-ever trip to New Orleans. We'll attend the 67th running of the LeComte, a Saturday stakes race for three-year-olds at Fair Grounds race track.

A report on the New Orleans portion of this trip upon return to New York in a few days.

1-20-11 1500

Greetings from Huntley, IL. I'm taking an early-2011 week of vacation, leaving just four more vacation weeks during the final eleven months of the year. Rough, I know.

I'll spend a few days here in suburban Chicago before making my maiden voyage to New Orleans this weekend.

The flight from New York to Chicago on Tuesday morning was interesting on two levels.

1. The ever-evolving merger of Continental and United is a great boost to my effort to reach Chicago on a somewhat regular basis. For the first time ever, I boarded a non-stop United flight out of LaGuardia. It is dramatically easier and more relaxing than the way I've been doing it for the last dozen years. As a Continental employee, I have long made the trek to the busy hub in Newark. It takes me at least 90 minutes to reach Newark using a combination of subway/commuter rail/monorail. As a worker at the new behemoth combined carrier, my travel options double. United operates fifteen trips a day to O'Hare out of LaGuardia. In the morning, flights to Shy-town leave a half-hour apart. It's crazy easy for me to reach LaGuardia in fifteen minutes max. To step on an airplane without any of the grind long experienced going to Newark is a serious treat. It makes me way more positive about flying to Chicago, that's for sure.

2. A winter storm that passed over New York City early Tuesday morning left a thick coating of ice on all the airplanes parked at LaGuardia from the night before (including the Airbus 319 I rode to Chicago). Ice, of course, must be removed entirely from those planes before departing. I had a window seat above the left wing and got a perfect view of workers spraying heavy doses of heated glycol on an aircraft encased in thick, frozen precipitation. I'd estimate the depth of ice on the left wing was at least an inch before the glycol bath washed it all away. It was quite a sight as a powerful stream of de-icing fluid was propelled onto the aircraft from a hose held by a United worker in a crow's nest 40 feet above the ground. Ice chunks as large as surf boards slipped off the wing and crashed to the concrete below. A second treatment of green-colored anti-icing fluid came next to repel the continuing frozen precip. After taxiing to the end of the departure runway (but before takeoff), the flight's first officer exited the cockpit and jockeyed around customers in the cabin to get a view of the wings. The pilot was attempting to get a first-hand look at whether the second application of fluid was preventing a buildup of additional ice. Once satisfied with what he saw, he returned to the cockpit. We were airborne a few minutes later.

On Wednesday night, it's a big Fox Valley Conference boy's hoops matchup here in the middle of the

frozen corn fields. It's Huntley hosting Dundee-Crown. Few sporting experiences top high school hoops in suburban Chicago. I look forward to Wednesday night a lot.

1-18-11 1900

A full week's worth of news coverage, analysis and political posturing in the wake of the Tucson massacre glossed over or understated the biggest elephant in the room.

For a week, I heard moaning about the nation's coarse political discourse. I've seen fingers pointed and blame assigned to pundits and politicians who get hot with their rhetoric. I heard the President talk in broad terms about raising the level of civility. I watched on TV as a boisterous crowd in a basketball arena cheered when the US Attorney General heaped a big serving of holy bible on the mourning process.

What I didn't hear enough about was guns.

There's no jurisdiction in America that should allow common folk to buy, own and walk around with a concealed weapon that can empty a 33 bullet clip in a matter of seconds.

The Glock 19 (9 mm) semi-automatic pistol used in the Tucson killings was purchased easily and legally by alleged killer Jared Loughner for about the same price as a laptop computer. In many jurisdictions, the screening process to obtain the Glock 19 and other compact, rapid-fire weapons capable of massive human slaughter hones in only on those with a rap sheet. Loughner bought ammo for his Glock at a Walmart.

The pro-gun crowd would have you believe the Second Amendment protects rapid-fire madness for all. It doesn't. Bans on weapons that blast way beyond the scope of personal protection are constitutional if rational. Unfortunately, sentiment in most parts of this country doesn't exist to ban 33 bullet clips or weapons that fire off a torrent of shots. The Giffords/Roll shoot-down by a young man who confuses the number 6 with the number 18 (despite clearly understanding 33 bullets are better than 6) won't end up producing tougher gun laws given our country's obsession with the trigger.

But it sure would have been nice for the national discussion of the Tucson nightmare to have included a harsher examination of the ridiculous type of high-power, multiple-shot weapons made available to our citizenry.

A couple of other issues unrelated to guns I wanted to mention in connection with the Tucson carnage:

-Before stamping Loughner with the automatic whack job certification, consider his preparation for the crime. It seems plain to see he researched the Congresswoman's public schedule in advance. He learned when and where she would be and likely had an understanding she was a sitting duck. That aspect of this case should go at least some way in mitigating his well-documented statements that smell like they came out of a crock pot.

-San Diego attorney Judy Clarke will no doubt receive scorn from those who jump up and down for vengeance. As she has with other high-profile killers, Clarke will attempt to shield Loughner from a death sentence. Clarke's earnest legal defense of wildly unpopular defendants is a crucial and noble undertaking

in a society that often lets “open and shut” cases get shut before they open. Clarke has stepped out of her private practice often to represent defendants accused of heinous crimes. She is not a noisemaker or publicity hound. Clarke opposes capital punishment. Her work on Loughner’s behalf will be thankless and unappreciated - which is something full-time public defenders all across the country face all the time. The Times reported last week that Clarke returned a South Carolina-approved \$82-thousand fee for her services in the Susan Smith toddler-drowning case. Her stated reason for not accepting the money was so it could be used to mount defenses for other poor defendants in that state.

-The killing of a US District Judge in the Tucson massacre didn’t seem to get the appropriate billing in news coverage as the days passed. John Roll was the Chief Judge in the lone Arizona district judge jurisdiction. He was one of just 18 US district judges in the state and had a long and distinguished legal career. There are 535 members of Congress and about 670 US district judges. You could easily argue a Chief District Judge wields more power than most members of congress. Yet, Roll’s death seemed a footnote compared to the focus on Gabby Giffords’ amazing struggle to survive.

1-17-11 0200

I’m not sure why I waited so long to make a return visit to the alma mater.

Maybe it was repressed internal protest or self-punishment for not fully taking advantage of the degree the university handed me when I walked out of there.

Or maybe it’s because it takes more than a nominal effort to reach Columbia, Missouri.

I don’t know. I’m really glad I went. Sign me up for a home football game in the next season or two. I want to see the town when it’s not buried in snow and 3 degrees Fahrenheit.

My lodging spot on Broadway made it convenient for trudging through the slush to campus. Much has changed up and down 8th and 9th Streets and on Broadway. I noticed Aardvarx is on 10th but couldn’t remember if that’s where it always was. The Blue Note is on 9th, above Broadway now. And a joint called Mojo’s has taken over the space once occupied by my favorite haunt, Park Place.

Once you reach Francis Quadrangle, there’s no confusion about what’s what. The breathtaking combo of Jesse Hall and the Columns appear exactly as they did when I last saw them twenty years ago.

The Columns (pictured above) have stood in that same spot since the 1840’s. The giant patches of open lawn on both sides of the six limestone stanchions make their position more dramatic and powerful.

I took a stroll past Ellis Library and stepped into the student union building. It now has the feel of a corporate hospitality center. It was very quiet. The whole campus was quiet. School was in session, but I didn’t see much student foot traffic. When I went past my old dorm building (Hudson Hall) Wednesday night, it appeared unoccupied. All the rooms were dark early in the evening. I’m assuming Hudson is getting a makeover.

The most impressive on-campus change was a bold university re-do on the primary student gathering spot. The MU Student Center is a brand new bookstore, food court and meeting compound on the Brady

Commons site. It's a bright, cheery and clean facility. It serves as a wonderful gateway for those visiting the school for the first time.

Over by the football stadium and old basketball facility (Hearnes Center) sits Mizzou Arena. Opened in 2004, the new home of Mizzou hoops was built for \$75 million. The Wal-Mart heirs Bill and Nancy Laurie wrote a check for \$25 mil to help pay for the place.

My friend Michelle has a pair of season tickets behind the road team bench. After a pre-game burger/beer at Booches, we took in Mizzou's 8-point victory over Nebraska. It was the final game in Columbia for the Huskers as a member of the Big 12 conference.

Attendance was 11,358. Capacity at Mizzou Arena is 15,061. The new building is a significant upgrade from the Hearnes Center (which still stands). The sightlines at Mizzou Arena are better and it's a more comfortable place. The best improvement was a decision to put students in the steep sections of seats behind the West goal. You have four-thousand kids stacked up behind the hoop shot at by the road team in the second half. When I was going to Mizzou games, the students were buried up high. Now, you've got four-thousand seats set aside for the fans who make the most noise.

The junior two-guard Marcus Denmon had 27 for the Tigers.

As the team has for the duration of the current coach Mike Anderson's tenure, Mizzou plays a frenetic up-and-down, run and gun. The Tigers go into full-court press mode with great effectiveness and use a 9 or 10 man rotation.

Mizzou doesn't play much defense once the opponent cracks the press and there's no way the current team is going anywhere in the tournament using such great reliance on ripping off octane-fueled runs. The lows or lulls offset the frenzied, flying drives, especially in the Dance when you're facing teams that concentrate on the art of defense.

I haven't been to the Conseco Fieldhouse in Indianapolis, but based on my view from television pictures, Mizzou Arena seems to be modeled to some degree off that building.

A pleasant guy who I'm guessing was about 70 years old drove the shuttle van from Columbia to Kansas City early Thursday morning. He picked me up at the hotel at 5 AM. He was a very good driver and like the inbound driver, he offered me a small bottle of water before we hit the road. I feel the need to endorse the MO-X shuttle van service. For about fifty bucks, you get reliable, comfortable ground transportation from either the St. Louis or KC airport to Columbia.

-I had Tuesday dinner at Shakespeare's Pizza on Ninth. This was a place I never really went to during my time in Columbia. As I remember it, the pizza was so-so and a large pie cost a few bucks more than the places we'd typically order from. I do remember a late-night trip to Shakes on the night the Bears won the Super Bowl. We had run out of suds late in the game and couldn't turn to the regular outlets to re-stock because of a blue law. Shakes had a special license to sell take-out beer on Sundays, so I recall walking out of there about an hour after the Super Bowl with as much beer as we could all carry back to our dorm rooms at Hudson Hall.

1-13-11 2011

Greetings from Columbia, MO.

I haven't set foot in this town since 1990 after spending the better part of six years here.

Situated about halfway between St. Louis and Kansas City, Columbia is a college town through and through. When I was here twenty years ago, the population was about 60-thousand.. Rapid growth has taken that number into six figures in the last five years. I'm unable to explain the boom but perhaps will get an explanation on this while I'm here.

I made the long trip from New York City for Wednesday night's Mizzou/Nebraska men's hoops game. It'll be played at an arena that was built from scratch six years ago.

Air service into Columbia is scarce. There are a total of three flights daily between Columbia and Memphis operated by Delta (formerly Northwest). I opted to fly my home team carrier into Kansas City from Newark early Tuesday. A Columbia-based outfit called Mo-X operates a van shuttle service five times daily between Columbia and Kansas City's airport. The fare is about fifty bucks each way. I took the 2 PM shuttle out of the airport.

I'm a nervous passenger in vehicles on a good day but felt special discomfort on the first thirty miles of this ride. The driver had a lead foot and seemed to disregard the occasionally hazardous road conditions.

Once we hit the main interstate linking KC and Columbia, road conditions improved and my knuckles regained their color.

Before departing Kansas City's airport, the van driver opened a small cooler and offered each of the seven passengers a small bottle of water. The woman who sat next to me wore black sweatpants emblazoned with the Mizzou logo. When she gabbed on her cellphone early in the trip, she spoke what sounded like Romanian. All external signs suggested she was a gymnast. We exchanged no conversation.

One of two snowstorms that will merge and dump snow on New York City Wednesday morning left its mark here in Missouri on Monday. Much of the state got hit with six inches of snow. The low tonight in Columbia will drop into the low single digits. Public schools in Columbia were closed on Tuesday because of the weather. I don't recall much harshness during Columbia's winter season when I was here. It was the extreme heat of the summer that was unbearable.

I'm staying at a shabby hotel in downtown Columbia that has recently been bought. It will be torn down soon and then rebuilt before opening under a name affiliated with the corporation that runs Holiday Inns.

As I write this, I'm about to leave the hotel in an attempt to explore downtown Columbia. It will be tricky getting around, given the ice and snow that obstructs most of the city sidewalks. Thus far, Columbia looks nothing like how I remember it except for the abundance of signs with gun references. The hotel I'm staying at is two doors down from a bar called Field House. This was a nightspot that I mostly avoided when I was here twenty, twenty-five years ago.

1-11-11 1735

All three national cable news networks incorrectly declared Arizona Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords dead early Saturday afternoon.

I arrived at work about a half-hour after the story broke. I didn't give it full attention but I had the television tuned to MSNBC. The big four broadcast networks were in regular programming by the time I started watching.

What shocked me most about MSNBC's coverage was a decision by anchor Alex Witt to completely disregard clear-cut insistence by the hospital Giffords was transported to that the congresswoman was alive. About three hours after Giffords was shot, an information officer for University Medical Center in Tucson told Witt in no uncertain terms that the congresswoman was in critical condition and was undergoing surgery.

By that time, MSNBC, CNN and the FOX News Channel had pulled back from their assertions Giffords was dead. But somehow, Witt would continue to suggest for another 90 minutes or so that it wasn't clear if Giffords was dead or alive. Witt had been told flatly (in a live telephone call carried on the air) by the hospital treating Giffords that Giffords was alive! Did Witt not listen - or did she not want to believe that somebody shot in the head at close range could survive such an attack?

Any reputable news organization would have waited to move forward with the widely-circulated death declaration we saw Saturday until one of the following people confirmed it on the record with name and title attached: 1. High-level local law enforcement official or FBI. 2. A top administrator at the treating hospital. 3. The husband or parent of the victim. 4. A known staffer in the congresswoman's office.

If you start calling people dead off sourcing outside the circle of people above, you're in a rush to break the news fast and first rather than reporting it right. What Witt did was even worse. She had a legit, verified source tell her via telephone that Giffords was alive yet she still didn't fully buy it.

When a University Medical Center doctor dressed in operating table garb stepped before microphones at the hospital another hour or so after that, it was then fully clear the country's mainstream media had misstated the congresswoman's condition earlier in the afternoon. The doc said Giffords was responsive, she had survived, she was alive. She wasn't dead.

1-9-11 0155

Went to see Blue Valentine at the Angelika Wednesday. I give it high marks. Ryan Gosling goes into acting territory not seen by me since Laura Linney went on a roll of multiple spectacular performances starting ten years ago.

Gosling plays Dean, a really decent, funny, creative and eyes-wide-open kinda guy. Dean has zero career ambition. He works as a house painter and is totally content with a life that doesn't include chasing dollars or job status. Dean is hopelessly devoted to his wife Cindy (played by Michelle Williams) and even more so to her child from a previous relationship.

The film bounces back and forth between scenes from Dean and Cindy's happy young-love courtship and an intense 36 hour period five or so years later. It's in the latter day sequences that we see Dean and Cindy's marriage crumbling.

It's very uncomfortable to watch. I know plenty of movie-goers who don't want any part of a film that isn't uplifting. But Blue Valentine's tightly-written, thought-provoking portrayal of relationship trauma got such incredible performance output from Gosling and Williams, I walked away in awe.

Not by design, I watched Williams in the flick Wendy and Lucy on cable the night before seeing Blue Valentine. That movie is totally different in pace and feel, but I'd also recommend it. Williams plays Wendy, a young woman determined to escape a life rut by moving to Alaska. On her long drive from Indiana, Wendy makes a pit stop in Oregon. She takes her dog Lucy out of the car for some fresh air and leg-stretching and then returns to sleep in the vehicle. It's parked in a Walgreen's parking lot. The next morning, Lucy is awoken by a private security guard stationed outside Walgreen's. The guard asks her to move the car. Lucy attempts to start the vehicle, but it has broken down in a bad way down with hundreds of miles left in her journey. You get the impression Lucy's life was already difficult, but it's at that moment we begin to see her plan to turn things around unravel.

No happy ending in this one, either. You get a real feel for the current, real threat facing adults in communities without jobs. Wendy's dog gets lost, her car is toast and her cash is almost gone. About two-thirds into the story, Wendy has the following conversation with the security guard (played adeptly by Walter Dalton):

Wendy: "Not a lotta jobs around here, huh?"

Security Guard: (laughs) "I'll say. I don't know what the people do all day. There used to be a mill but it's been closed a long time now. I don't know what they do."

Wendy: "I can't get a job without an address, anyway. Or a phone."

Security Guard: "You can't get an address without an address. You can't get a job without a job. It's all fixed."

1-6-11 2030

The sightlines and comfort level at Red Bull Arena in Harrison, NJ, turned out to be such a pleasant surprise in 2010, one couldn't help but wonder when the new soccer-specific venue would stage its first rock and roll show.

Well, fifteen months after it opened for business, RBA will host its first musical act. A band called Dispatch will play the 25-thousand seat stadium June 18.

I had never heard of Dispatch. Web research indicates they're popular in terms of gate power and record sales. A sellout seems a guarantee. The band has gone in and out of "retirement" and will just do a handful of dates on the tour that includes this stop.

In an e-mail to Red Bull soccer fans, team boss Erik Soler said the organization had considered several concert proposals since the building opened, but felt the Dispatch show in June would be the “perfect occasion to host our first concert.”

I can only assume the band’s commitment to “social responsibility” played a role in the team’s decision. Perhaps Soler also got some assurance that the Dispatch fan profile brings a reasonable expectation of a trouble-free evening.

I have no interest in the gig, but hope it goes well. Success could prompt the Red Bulls to book more acts. Here’s hopin’ there’s one more New York-area Pavement show - at Red Bull Arena.

-Likely fearing difficult questions, Broadway director Julie Taymor has pulled out of her “Times Talk” appearance scheduled for Saturday. Taymor presides over the production of “Spider-man: Turn off the Dark.” Before the play launched, Taymor was all over the place. She pushed the hype button on a \$65 million show that’s the talk of the town for whoever would listen. With five weeks of previews in the books, the play’s ambitious acrobatic maneuvers have injured several cast members, one seriously. Early reviews by veteran theatre writers have been consistently negative. Taymor is now at a point in the play’s development where another injured actor would probably merit criminal charges for presiding over a dangerous workplace. Her Times Talk (a public discussion hosted by the Times) was a perfect spot to shed light on a subject of great interest to a community that lives and breathes theatre. At some point Taymor should probably attempt to publicly explain how the most expensive Broadway show in history has gone so wrong.

1-4-11 2130

The horrendous “excessive celebration” call on the Kansas State kid at the end of Pinstripe Bowl has been topic #1 for four days among the guys I talk sports with and on my favorite sports talk radio show.

The lack of other real college football bowl drama and a dull week 17 of the NFL season played a role in that, but the deep injustice of the Pinstripe conclusion merits all the outrage it has provoked.

Francesca does a NFL show on Sunday mornings. He spent a majority of the week 17 program with smoke coming out of his ears as he discussed the flags that fell when K-State wideout Adrian Hilburn saluted the crowd after scoring a TD with a minute to go. Down two points after the score, the celebration penalty put K-State’s two-point conversion attempt at the 17 yard-line instead of the 2. Game over.

Francesca had just gone off the air Thursday night when the play occurred. He said he watched the end of the game on a tube in the WFAN newsroom. Francesca said he was so upset, he immediately called Yankee Stadium seeking information about the officiating crew. He didn’t get it, but Francesca said he nearly demanded that he be put back on the air that night so he could vent.

Who knows if K-State would have converted the two-pointer from the two. But the Big Ten officiating crew led by referee Todd Geerlings should not be allowed anywhere near an important football game for a long time. The linesman and back judge who threw flags should have been called into a huddle by Geerlings to be reminded of the dozen or so more egregious displays of enthusiasm earlier in the game

that were not penalized.

The unsatisfying BCS system and bloated lineup of bowls are bad enough without individual games getting ruined by stripes who see things that aren't there. This isn't to say the Pinstripe Bowl wasn't an organizational success and an event that will likely make a permanent mark on the New York City sports calendar. The Yankees did a great job getting the Stadium ready just 72 hours after a big snowstorm. It's just sad the way the game ended.

-It wasn't my first choice for a first-round opponent, but I like the Jets Saturday night in Indy. All bets are off the week after that, however, should Gang Green advance and draw the hated rival coming off a bye week. My book has posted NYJ at +3 (-120) vs. IND, meaning the house is charging double juice if you bet the Jets and no vig if you play the Colts. The extra cost of betting on the Jets at +3 would suggest the line will eventually drop to +2.5, making a plus-side money line bet on the Jets the way to go.

1-3-11 0100

A late-week warm-up has melted most of the snow from the big storm that hit the day after Christmas, but the piles of garbage are getting bigger. Sanitation hasn't picked up any city refuse since Christmas Eve and doesn't plan resuming collection until Monday. In my neighborhood, building superintendents have been forced to display ten days worth of garbage street-side. It can be held in the basements of buildings only so long before its ripeness necessitates removal. Commercial spaces in the neighborhood use private trash haulers which helped avert what would have been even bigger eyesores in many city neighborhoods. As it is, mountains of heavy-duty plastic bags filled with tube-shaped compressed waste line most residential streets.

-The bus and subway fare increase implemented last week has multiple elements, but of most significance is the hike in cost of the 30-day unlimited ride pass. It went from \$89 monthly to \$104. With the base fare holding constant at \$2.25 per ride, the MTA has essentially stripped away the cost benefit of the monthly pass for those who use it primarily to go to and from work. The biggest disappointment to me about the latest MTA fare changes is the abolition of the one-day "fun pass." At \$8.25, the "fun pass" was great for one-day barnstorming efforts when visitors hit town. My folks would always get the "fun pass" on arrival and would give it a real workout, sometimes racking up to a dozen rides in a single day.

1-2-11 0100

Ground workers at Continental Airlines have ratified their first ever union contract. Ballots were counted Wednesday. The International Brotherhood of Teamsters say 3108 ballots were marked "YES" and 606 were marked "NO."

A simple majority of votes cast is all that's necessary for ratification.

The 30-month contract goes into effect immediately.

Perhaps most surprising about the contract vote was the number of workers who failed to participate. Only about half of the eligible voters bothered to mail in their completed secret ballot.

-TSR Radio returns with a year-end wrap-up Friday night. You can listen live beginning at 6:30 PM in the East.

[Click here](#) for program details including the number to call if you'd like to contribute with an observation about 2010 or a thought about 2011. If you can't listen in real time, check out an [archived](#) recording of the broadcast.

12-30-10 1330

The foot and a half on snow that dropped here the day after Christmas was accompanied by a blistering wind, wiping out a day and a half of air travel at a time when flights were sold out big-time.

The timing couldn't have been worse. Three big airports were effectively shut down for what was a couple of the busiest, most important travel days of the year. It'll take a week for airlines to find a way to move out the tens of thousands stranded by the slew of cancellations.

Even if NYC's three big airports were somehow able to operate full-throttle on Monday, it's not clear how passengers would have reached them. Public transit was in complete disarray and for-hire cars were impossible to flag. For people with cars, forget about it. Most vehicles are submerged and airport parking appeared to be a total mess.

In the span of two hours Monday afternoon, the only public transit activity I saw at LaGuardia was a single Manhattan-bound M60 bus. It passed by the main terminal at about 1 PM. None of the four Queens-bound bus routes were operational. I walked the 2.5-mile trip to work and can totally understand why the MTA decided to quit the Queens service. There were vehicles stuck in snow all over the place. Nearly every non-major thoroughfare I walked down was blocked by cars that had been abandoned. The bus I took home from work Sunday night made it through half the route, got stranded and then shut down.

The city is getting heat here for the pace of snow removal. The mayor takes pride in deals like this but he's been testy and defensive with this one. The city's response does seem more ineffective than usual, yes, but it's a top-six all-time snow total and the composition of the precip was unusually heavy and thick.

To blame the city for impassable, non-plowed side streets in Queens would be to ignore the fact that hundreds of vehicles are blocking the way. City buses, too. There's a staggering amount of work to be done before Sanitation can unleash its full strength. I'd reserve judgment for now on Mayor Mike but will aim a criticism dart at three targets.

1. The MTA's web site. New York City Transit has touted its technology, but MTA.info couldn't handle the web traffic that came its way when New Yorkers sought clarity on the operational status of their bus or subway lines. The web site was slow or down all day Monday and had no specific information on individual bus lines. There has to be a way to itemize which bus lines are operating and which ones aren't.

2. Snow removal at LaGuardia. The Port Authority contracts out its snow removal efforts to a company named Aero. Late Monday afternoon, there were giant snow piles dotting many of the key ramp and taxi-way areas making it impossible for most airlines to even entertain the movement of airplanes. I counted more than ten manned pieces of snow-removal equipment in the vicinity of concourses A and B

of the Central Terminal Building with engines running but saw no scooping or dumping being performed for stretches of an hour. The Port Authority told assembled media members that it would have one runway open for takeoffs and landings at 4 PM but that was a farcical, deceptive, face-saving gesture if you saw the condition of the areas where airplanes park. Airlines often get the brunt of customer frustration in crises like these, but it's the airport operator that ultimately controls whether the facility is barrier-free and whether individual airlines can safely process a flight. Because most airlines prohibit their local station managers from speaking to the media, the picture the public gets of airport chaos is one-sided spin by the airport operator. In this case, the Port Authority projects a competent voice to balance the inevitable televised images of lines of frustrated, stranded customers pleading for help at airline ticket counters.

3. The final dart goes to the folks who fail to shovel their walks. This is such a densely-crowded place with foot-traffic armies marching up and down streets all-day, every day. When the buses go down, hordes of people rely on a clean walk. Old people, especially. Today, the few residents who blew off their walk-cleaning responsibility forced pedestrians to flock into the street which only added to the madness of the day.

12-27-10 2100

The state of New York will lose two of its 29 US House seats starting in 2013 which means new district boundaries must be drawn to reflect the representation shrinkage.

New York state actually gained population (+2.19 %) in the ten years ending in 2010, but the increase was at a lesser rate relative to the rest of the country. It's now up to the New York legislature - and governor - to realign the state with two fewer house districts.

None of New York's 29 congressmen and women will raise their hand and volunteer to have their district eliminated, so I have come up with a quick and easy redistricting solution.

In the name of compromise, eliminate one GOP seat and one Dem seat and take 'em from districts where population loss is clear to see.

Remove the seat of newly-elected Republican Tom Reed (former Corning, NY mayor) whose district covers a large area in Western New York. At the same time, encourage Louise Slaughter of Fairport, NY to call it a career. An effective and loyal Democrat, Slaughter will be 83 when new lines are settled upon. Her district has bled population. Slaughter's relatively high stature would make her district's elimination a greater sacrifice politically, which may be necessary in the effort to extract a seat from the GOP.

New York's new governor Andy Cuomo will have significant say in how this all goes down. The one-from-each-party deal with insistence New York City holds steady is the way to go.

-I saw Sofia Coppola's latest effort "Somewhere" on Thursday at the Angelika. I liked it a lot. Several movie-goers were shaking their head at the ending but let those folks go home and think about it a little. Coppola improves upon on Murray in Tokyo and gets great performances from Dorff and Fanning. Two scenes really blew me away. In an Italian hotel suite, Fanning flashes a crazy kid stare of disapproval at her Dad after Dorff's bang for the night joins them for breakfast. Later, Dorff smokes a ciggie while

suspended horizontally on a floating air mattress in the Marmont pool. Coppola shoots the scene from a distance and lets Dorff float out of the frame agonizingly slow. Someday, Coppola will tackle a regular joe character in a blue collar city using her same brilliant techniques and look out then.

12-23-10 2145

I was pinching myself Tuesday night at Todd P's new midtown Manhattan performance space . The Showpaper 42nd Street Gallery is just one avenue block east of Grand Central Station and is surrounded by upscale retail. The Helmsley Hotel is across the street.

The Showpaper Gallery's location is the last place one would expect to find an all-ages venue booked by the risk-taking and important Brooklyn-based promoter Todd P. But there it is. It's a beautiful space with room for about 150. It's equipped with video games, a small stage and eye-catching artwork (including a Showpaper cover retrospective) on the walls. The pinch yourself part comes when you reflect on how wonderful it is for young people to have a place to hang out in this part of town in 2010. It's two minutes from regional rail and all sorts of subway lines. If Leona was still alive, she'd complain.

It would have been enough for me just to see the Showpaper space, drink a few beers and watch whatever act was playing. But what made it really fun was that the rising young rock star Cassie Ramone (pictured above) did a short gig. Ramone fronts Vivian Girls and The Babies and does plenty of solo shows backed by friends.

Two EP's from The Babies knocked my socks off in 2010 and the band has a full-length coming out in February on the Shrimper label. If the first cut "Run Me Over" is any indication of how good the rest of the new Babies record is, I can hardly wait to hear it. A solo record from Ramone is also expected in 2011.

A makeshift bar in the rear of Showpaper Gallery sold four-dollar beers and hard stuff poured from plastic 1.75 liter bottles for six bucks.

Todd P. was Finkelman-like in the way he prowled the room. He did all the sound, made sure the kids outside the front door were behaving themselves and coordinated with the doorman and bartender.

I said it here about a year ago, but I'll say it again. Todd P. deserves a ton of credit for sticking his neck out on endeavors like this. He insists that all his shows are conducted in open and comfortable environments for people under 21 without putting any kind of crimp on those who are older. His venues make the attendee feel like he's on an adventure. Todd P. undoubtedly takes financial hits and he dances around bureaucratic/legal barriers that could expose him to trouble. But name me a more influential supporter of independent music in this city. His business doesn't appear to be profit-driven. His venues have helped spawn a seriously great collection of young musicians who may not have gained performance experience otherwise. He also operates in parts of the city where people may not visit normally - and that's good for both community and individual in terms of gaining a broader view.

I don't know how long Showpaper Gallery will last at its current site. Events are planned there into next month. Get there while you can.

-The guitarist Kayla Cohen (known as Sultan) played before Ramone. Opening the night was an interesting and fun new band called Friends. Fronted by Samantha Urbani, Friends had a good portion of the crowd dancing.

-The Matt Dodge meltdown last Sunday prompted TSR to reach out to Todd Sauerbrun in the form of a Facebook message. I asked the Punt King if he'd consider exiting retirement to participate in a tryout should the Giants ask him. His immediate response in full: "Sure."

12-22-10 2155

Some new guy who lives on the sixth floor is super gung-ho about all the big holidays and led an effort this year to over-decorate the building with all sorts of electricity-driven Christmas stuff.

It's really in your face.

An automated sound system in the lobby plays Christmas carols and it's set loud enough so that it can be heard round-the-clock in the first floor apartments. I live in one of twelve first floor dwellings.

I'm not objecting to modest and tasteful displays of holiday spirit, but my building's exhibition is too loud, too flashy, too much.

And oh by the way, I didn't send you a Christmas card again this year.

12-21-10 0130

Never has the vending machine at my workplace provided as much entertainment as it did this weekend.

At some point early Saturday, a bag of Cheez Doodles got stuck in the rotating coils that dispense candy, chips and other snacks. I wasn't present for the original attempted transaction that ended with the Doodles dangling from an upper-level shelf. Certainly the purchaser must have felt frustration about losing 65-cents as he or she stared at the out-of-reach snack produced by the same people who make Wise potato chips.

What made the situation so richly rewarding from my perspective is that the stuck bag of Doodles gave the illusion that it was just a gentle push of the machine away from falling to the bottom for someone to grab.

Its vulnerable position made it impossible for people to walk by the machine without considering the prospect of poaching it.

I work in close proximity to the machine, so over the last two days I've been able to watch dozens of people attempt to dislodge the cheese-flavored bag of puffs using a variety of techniques. Some exerted brute force. Others tried to purchase another bag of Doodles from the line of several behind the one that was stuck. One guy even tried to buy the package of pretzels immediately above the Doodles in hopes the pretzels' descent would apply the necessary downward pressure to release the detained subject.

Nothing worked.

Nobody tried harder to get at the elusive Doodles than Vinny, one of the graveyard shift aircraft mechanics. Vinny approaches all problems with pragmatism and determination. When he arrived at work late Saturday night, he quickly and calmly attempted all of the maneuvers cited above by those who preceded his interaction with the vending machine. Vinny's efforts were met with the same frustrating outcome. There was no budging the bag of puffs. He purchased a bag of barbeque-flavored potato chips instead.

On Monday, the vending machine serviceman will make the first of his regular twice-weekly visits. He'll open the front panel of the equipment and restock it with stuff airport workers nibble on during breaks. He'll also likely put an end to the great Cheez Doodle saga of this past weekend by reinserting it in its proper place.

12-20-10 0100

A full decade's worth of lousy Knickerbocker basketball is to blame for the serious overreaction to the success of the current club. But even so, Friday night's Knicks-Heat tilt at Madison Square Garden had the authentic feel of a really big game.

This Knick team doesn't play defense, so it'll be hard to take them seriously in the postseason. But it's a squad with an interesting collection of scoring talent. It can reel off sustained spurts of offensive output.

Just one-third into the season, the Knicks have won most games they're supposed to win and played well in just about every game they were supposed to lose. They've shown enough in two months to justify the expression of a long repressed love this city has for quality hoops on any level.

Turn on the radio the last few weeks and people are talking Knicks. Francesa is talking Knicks. The guys at work are talking Knicks. Not because they're gonna win a title anytime soon. But with guys like Stoudemire, Gallinari, Felton and Fields, you have players who are easy to root for. Finally.

LeBron's first 2010 visit to New York came two nights after a dramatic two-point Knick loss to Boston. The Heat are the new beast of the East and so there was a wild Garden crowd to greet the proceedings.

I had a single seat up in the third row of section 419. I bought it well before the season started only because I knew it would be LeBron's first MSG spot since The Decision.

The building was really loud during a thrilling, evenly-contested first half. There were times when the crowd was so spirited, you felt like you were thirty years back in time when the sports crowd was nothing but sports fans.

The second half was different. Nobody could cover LeBron. He could have scored 50 if he wanted. Instead, he seemed more interested in showcasing all phases of his game on the Garden stage. He got the triple dub and took a seat when the blowout was sealed.

The big Knicks debate here now centers on how best to proceed with what feels like the inevitable

acquisition of Carmelo Anthony. To land him this season via trade would require shipping Landry Fields to Denver. I'd much rather wait 'til July 1 and buy Melo with the Curry obligation coming off the books.

The risk of course is that Denver will trade Melo no matter what and there's a chance Melo would bond with the team that gets him for the three or four months remaining on his current deal.

Fields has been so surprisingly super impressive to date, I can't see how the Knicks could possibly consider giving him up in a Melo trade. Just wait the season out. Fields is a rookie who plays like a five-year veteran. He's a big, smart two who gobbles up rebounds and jumps really high. The Knicks need to stick with this team as it's currently constituted and work on Melo next July.

-In case you didn't see it,

[here's the link](#) to video of LeBron's behind the back pass to Erick Dampier in the first half of Knicks/Heat Friday night.

12-19-10 0130

Just wrapped up a 40-hour visit with my parents. They came to the Big City Tuesday to celebrate my Dad's 75th birthday.

Usually my Mom and Dad visit separately. My small apartment doesn't have enough oxygen for more than one guest.

This was a special occasion, so they came together and stayed at a buck-thirty a night non-chain hotel on a busy stretch of 32nd Street between Fifth and Sixth. I visited them in the room and it was decent.

We hit Nets/Sixers on Tuesday night and had pre-game fun at Bello's in downtown Newark. The Nets moved their home slate to the Prudential Center this season and will play there until their new building in Brooklyn gets done.

As they did in East Rutherford, the Nets still struggle to draw a crowd but the Newark arena is a huge step up from the Meadowlands. Fans attending games in Newark are more boisterous, more diverse and more fun. Newark Penn Station is just a few blocks away, so you get more New York City hoops fans using public transit. There's also a community vibe in the stands with lots of school kids from the immediate area.

Philly won by five extending the Net losing streak to eight games. New coach Avery Johnson has the Nets playing D, but Jersey couldn't make shots (28 of 82 from the field). The best player on the court was Spencer Hawes. The 7-1 fourth-year center from the U of Washington scored 18 for the Sixers. All of his hoops seemed to come at key points of the game.

The Nets have a serious power forward in the making in rookie Derrick Favors. The 19-year-old played one college season at Georgia Tech. He was selected third overall in the most recent draft.

The hilarious dancing Net fan Phil Tozzi provided the evening's best entertainment. Seated about fifteen rows up from midcourt behind the scorer's table, Tozzi shakes it hard during timeouts. He has about a

hundred different moves and there is no debate from my standpoint that he's the funniest and most talented fan performer you'll see at any New York-area sports venue.

There was a Quin Snyder sighting at this game, too. The former Mizzou hoops coach got ran out of Columbia in 2006 and then spent three seasons coaching in D-league obscurity. I didn't know it until Tuesday night, but Snyder is now an assistant on the staff of new Sixers head coach Doug Collins.

Attendance was announced at 10,151.

Wednesday morning, we got up early and took the F train to Brooklyn to visit the pie-making sisters at Four and Twenty Blackbirds. Pie for breakfast? Oh yeah. Everything about the place makes you warm. Great toonage, rich coffee and crazy pie just out of the oven.

After that, it was back into the city for a matinee performance of the Christmas Spectacular at Radio City Music Hall. This is a Christmas production (with only one serious non-secular act) that's been pulling in crowds at the historic six-thousand seat theatre on Sixth Avenue for nearly eighty years. We had good seats in the mezz. The show started promptly at 11:00 AM. I'd say there were maybe fifteen-hundred empty seats.

Kids in attendance went wild during an awkwardly spliced-in video segment early in the show which required use of 3-D glasses.

The world-famous Rockettes are talented no doubt, but my gosh can this New York City arts institution discover the concept of racial integration at some point this century?

When the show ended, ushers cleared the theatre quickly so it could be cleaned and prepared for people attending the exact same performance at 2 PM. It's a Christmas show factory. Four or five identical performances are churned out daily at the same venue for Broadway show prices for seven weeks.

Other highlights of my Mom and Dad's visit:

- We stopped at Eataly (near the Flatiron Building) for a fancy pastry and a cup of coffee. This place is crazy. It's Whole Foods with an Italian surname. The offerings of meat, wine, pasta, olive oil, fresh-baked bread and seafood will make you dizzy.

- We visited the "Wreath Interpretations" exhibit on the third floor of the Arsenal Gallery in Central Park. Thirty creative pieces of wreath art were on display as is the annual tradition at the parks and rec facility off Fifth Avenue. The New York City artist Takeshi Yamada's "Giant Sea Serpent Wreath" (pictured above) is an interesting spin on what many know best as a round-shaped collection of evergreen branches. Yamada has long been inclined to use bones and other remnants found on the beach when he makes art. The serpent's head on display at Arsenal uses "taxidermy" parts. The "sands of Coney Island" were also used in its construction.

- Recently re-opened after a nine-month shutdown for a complete equipment overhaul, we took a one-way trip on the Roosevelt Island tram. A gusty north wind had no impact on the four-minute journey. The

Rosie Island tram offers great views of Manhattan from high in the sky (especially looking downtown).

-We went to go see the big Rockefeller Center Christmas tree. It appeared to be shorter and less robust than the ones I've seen in years' past. Perhaps seeing it in daylight makes it a less impressive sight. I don't know. It didn't have a wow factor.

-The best meal of the visit came Wednesday at the Meatball Shop on Stanton. It's a busy little place that asks the diner to visualize and make choices about how his/her meatball sandwich will be constructed. You pick the meatball, sauce, cheese and bread from a list of options. It's fun and the food is fantastic.

I saw my folks off at Penn Station Thursday before they jumped on a 6:01 AM train that dropped them at the big airstrip in Newark. They reported a safe airplane ride to Chicago, although my Mom is on the verge of getting submerged by a head cold that got legs from all our outdoor movement in NYC.

As I waited for a Queens-bound E at 34th Street for my own return home from Penn Station, a skinny guy toting a suitcase filled the tunnel with loud cries of pain. They were horrible, recurring groans with an occasional shriek of "Fuck!" mixed in. Commuters lining the platform ignored the commotion. It's not clear what the man's ailment was. Demons, maybe. He coulda been off the juice. Maybe he was hungry.

The E rolled into the station and the man in agony didn't get on. His blood-curdling yells could be heard through the closed doors as the train moved uptown.

12-16-10 1800

The popular TSR feature "My Brother Goes to China" returns next month. The three-part series will chronicle my youngest brother's early 2011 business mission to a patio furniture factory in Guangdong Province.

The freedom of American business interests to extract benefit from cheap labor in that country is clearly more important to the Chinese government than freedom for its own citizens.

That notion was on full display this week when the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to a 54-year-old Liu Xiaobo of China. Liu is a non-violent, thoughtful writer and professor who openly voiced concerns about his government's iron-clad refusal to allow political dissent by its citizenry.

Because Liu spoke his mind, he's imprisoned in China. He wasn't allowed to attend Friday's ceremony. The Peace prize and \$1.5 million check that comes it with will stay in Oslo until Liu is sprung from the clink.

The people of China sympathetic to Liu were unable to watch the Peace prize ceremony on TV or read about it on the internet. The Chinese put the censor clamp on all of it.

The chair of the Nobel Committee Thorbjorn Jagland delivered a wonderful speech at the prize ceremony near an empty chair intended for Liu. Jagland said in part: "Many will ask whether China's weakness – for all the strength the country is currently showing – is not manifested in the need to imprison a man for 11 years merely for expressing his opinions on how his country should be governed."

12-12-10 0130

There's no mystery about who will be handed the 2010 Heisman Trophy Saturday evening at the Times Square venue formerly known as Astor Plaza Theatre.

It'll be the guy with a cloud over his head and a big smile on his face. The talented, one-man wrecking crew from Auburn has been justifiably taken off the hook from a kinder, suddenly lenient NCAA despite charges Poppa Newton tried to pimp out his son.

A few Heisman voters have made noise about not being able to cast a first-place ballot for a young man who may have linkage to scandal, but Cam Newton will win the trophy by a margin that will rank in the top five biggest off all-time.

The excellent web site "stiffarmtrophy.com" compiles publicly-stated ballot disclosures from about one-fifth of the Heisman voters and extrapolates the totals with regional considerations built in. The site has correctly projected the Heisman winner each year since 2002. This year is easy, but the site also says Newton will probably garner in the neighborhood of 85-percent of the maximum points. Only Reggie Bush ('05) and Troy Smith ('06) had point totals of 90-percent of the max or higher.

Francesca cast his vote Monday via the internet. He announced on-air how his ballot looked. It went:

1. Cam Newton
2. Andrew Luck
3. LaMichael James

Francesca's top three will likely be the order of finish Saturday night.

If I had a ballot, I'd go:

1. Newton
2. Kellen Moore
3. Nick Fairley

-After almost a full week of action, the over-under set for the Auburn/Oregon BCS title game has held steady at an astounding 74. Unless there's a serious clock malfunction, that game is going under.

12-9-10 1830

Without getting into specifics about what caused the shutdown of New York City's financially troubled off-track betting shops, I wanted to highlight the primary absurdity of the most recent half-hearted, last-gasp legislative effort to save them.

New York's state senate gathered in special session Tuesday to consider an Assembly-passed bill that would have granted enough temporary relief to keep NYC-OTB open into the new year and perhaps

beyond in a stripped-down form. The bill didn't address many deep-rooted problems associated with off-site horse wagering in this state. It was basically a piece of legislation enabling New York City's betting shops to emerge from bankruptcy and limp along at a time when a limp is preferable to a breakdown. The cornerstone of the bill provided debt forgiveness to NYC-OTB in return for the surrender of its phone/internet business.

The upper-level gallery in the senate chamber was half-full with green-clad, unionized OTB workers who made the trip from New York City to Albany to watch the debate and perhaps influence the outcome with their presence. What they saw instead was a pre-determined result that played out mainly along party lines. Republicans stood and said they'd vote no because they were denied input on the matter (really what they wanted was their own backyard interests attached). Democrats argued in favor. But neither side of the aisle had a single member who displayed passion, interest or real concern in explaining the bill's guts.

The Staten Island senator Diane Savino chaired the debate and shook her head when the body's 12 absent members had their names called a second time during roll-call. A crucial special-session bill was just three votes shy of passage and twelve senators skipped the vote! In the end, it was indifference and absence that killed the bill. Savino looked up at the men and women in green jackets and flashed a look of embarrassment. A long disrespected block of four city dems (Diaz, Espada, Parker and Smith) didn't bother to attend the floor debate which isn't a surprise. But even the diligent Liz Krueger lacked courage to weigh in up or down despite the fact the Albany Times-Union reported she was in the capitol building when the vote was taken.

Resuscitation of this city's horse betting shops and associated web/television channel/phone account system will now likely will be linked to an effort to put it under the same roof as the state's other half-dozen OTB operations. Snuffing out the unique patronage clusters in each entity may prove to be an impossible barrier, but the folks who foresaw the current dilemma believe state-wide OTB consolidation is the only way to go.

-Contrary to the understanding most Met fans had the last few years, team owner Fred Wilpon didn't get totally socked by the Bernie Madoff rip-off. A Times story published over the weekend says the primary Wilpon/Met investment account overseen by Madoff grew in actual value as the Ponzi scheme played out. The account was worth well over a half-billion dollars according to the Times and was withdrawn in full with a \$45 million profit before Madoff got busted. The concern for Wilpon now centers on litigation seeking damages for those who lost their ass. Madoff pals/investors who cashed out - and got dough ahead of others who were shut out - are potentially vulnerable to future forfeiture of their tainted investments. We're looking at a Met owner already thought to be crimping the team's budget who may have to crimp even more in the years ahead.

12-8-10 2020

A newly-painted Airbus A320 emblazoned with the New York Jets logo made an appearance at LaGuardia Friday afternoon. The plane's arrival days before the biggest game of the year has some of my co-workers claiming it means there will be a good outcome for Gang Green in Foxboro Monday night.

JetBlue Airlines is a Jets sponsor. The company unveiled the new paint job on one of the 115 Airbus A320's in its fleet in October. The "Jets jet" movement through LaGuardia Friday was the first time it had been seen at the airport on Flushing Bay. It departed a little before 3 PM bound for Orlando, FL.

Several ground workers from various air carriers snapped cell phone photos of the airplane as it was loaded.

-Most of the news coverage about two Saturday US Senate votes on Bush tax cut extensions specifically excluding rich people mischaracterized the actual legislative action taken. In the Daily News, reporter Larry McShane said separate measures establishing limits for Bush tax cut extensions at \$200/250 K and \$1 million "failed to advance." He said "in each case, the proposal fell seven votes short of the required 60 for passage." What really happened was that both roll-call votes taken were efforts to end debate and allow a subsequent straight up or down vote on the two measures. In each instance, there were 53 "yes" votes. It takes 60 to end debate and carry on with a vote. Times reporter David Herszenhorn's story created a similarly false impression on what actually happened in the US Senate Saturday. Herszenhorn made no mention of what is really the Democratic Party majority's refusal to consider allowing the GOP minority to filibuster on behalf of the rich. Make no mistake. It takes 50 plus the VP to pass a bill. It doesn't take 60. If Democrats really want to pass a tax bill that prevents the wealthy from enjoying an extension of the Bush tax cuts, they simply need to allow the GOP minority to filibuster. The House has done its part. That body doesn't lose its majority until next year. Allow the focus to shine on 45 or so US senators protecting the rich. Help the public understand what a filibuster is. Help the public understand that it takes 50 plus one to pass a bill. If the filibuster goes on long enough, a majority of Americans will voice their displeasure with the motivation for it and make it stop. The public will no doubt pressure the minority to allow the senate majority to pass legislation that exposes millionaires to a tax increase. Instead, the US Senate with this President seems to think it needs 60 to get anything done and that's not the case.

12-5-10 0055

A lot of soccer fans in this country are upset the 2022 World Cup was awarded to Qatar instead of the United States. Certainly there are questions about how the organization running the World Cup arrived at its decision Thursday in Zurich.

Whether the selection process was corrupt or not, there has been stated intent by the international governing body of soccer (FIFA) that it aims to share the privilege of cup hosting with all regions of the world.

The Middle East has never hosted a Cup. FIFA boss Sepp Blatter can justify Qatar's winning bid with that reason alone. It certainly won't be balls of fun for soccer fans from Europe and North America to travel there. Lots of sand, not a lot of beer. But hey, it's a complex, diverse world and the spirit and energy of the World Cup is to be shared says FIFA.

Reaction from the man responsible for the US bid and the overall health of the sport in this country cried foul as Qatar and Russia (awarded the 2018 tournament) celebrated their triumphs in Switzerland's biggest city. US Soccer Federation president Sunil Gulati didn't offer a detailed conspiracy theory but

lamented a FIFA selection process that rewards “alliances,” “politics” and “tactics.”

Perhaps the most well-respected US soccer writer covering this story is Grant Wahl. He said FIFA’s decision to overwhelmingly reject strong bids by both the US and England is an indication the process was rigged. “Choosing Qatar and Russia is the biggest indictment possible that FIFA is not a clean organization. Petrodollars talk,” said Wahl on his Twitter site. Wahl also said it appeared Qatar soccer officials knew in advance their bid was in the bag. “I was in a FIFA ExCo (executive committee) voter hotel (Wednesday night). (I) Could see US/England bigwigs doing last-minute lobbying. Didn’t see Qataris anywhere.”

It doesn’t take a big leap to be suspicious of the FIFA executive committee. In October, The Sunday Times (UK) broke news that it recorded two FIFA committee members willing to sell their votes to a reporter purporting to be a soccer official with an interest in the site selection outcome. A subsequent BBC documentary shed light on additional vote-selling in the run-up to previous site picks involving current members of the committee.

There was talk of delaying Thursday’s vote but it went on minus two known vote-sellers and produced two countries that will host for the first time in their histories. The US hosted successfully in 1994 and will likely mount a bid to host the 2026 Cup. Between now and the process that will settle the 2026 host, the US should probably figure out whether it’s worth examining how and where to apply the wheel grease necessary to secure a dozen FIFA votes. Either that or maybe it’s time to forget about hosting for a few decades and celebrate these diverse 2018/2022 destinations by putting all focus on building a team that can win one of these tournaments. What happens on the field is far less susceptible to corruption.

12-2-10 2200

There’s one nagging question about the new contract proposal awaiting ratification by Continental’s ground workers.

Why did the company agree to a deal so quickly?

Management has dragged its feet when negotiating with Continental’s other unionized work groups. It has not been at all unusual for pilots and mechanics to watch a year or two go by after an existing contract’s expiration date without seeing the company demonstrate seriousness about reaching terms on a new deal.

Yet, when it came to dealing with the Teamsters and 7500 ground workers negotiating their first ever union contract, the pace of talks was light-speed as far as these things go. What gives? Why would the company so willingly throw what will be a double-digit raise and restoration of a shift premium at a sizable chunk of its work force without the delay tactics it uses with other work groups?

All I can figure is that the company wants to lock something in before the combined United/Continental ground workers group coalesces into what may be a more formidable bargaining unit. As it is now, the United and Continental ground workers remain separate in all respects with different unions representing them. An election next year will decide whether the Teamsters or Machinists union gets backing of the combined work group.

What heightens my suspicion about what appears to be the company's good faith on our new deal is a very prickly and hostile provocation it recently initiated against Continental's pilots. Over the years, most big airlines have moved to reduce their pilot labor costs by outsourcing significant amount of flying work to third-party outfits.

This outsourcing gained justification because it initially involved mostly small airplanes serving small communities. What's different now is that third-party regional airlines are acquiring 70 and 90 seat jets and then selling their flying services to the big airlines at a labor rate well below what the big airline would pay its own airmen and women to fly similarly-sized planes.

Continental's pilots currently have clear, firm contractual language prohibiting the company from using outsourced jets with more than 50 seats. It's known as a "scope clause." It's a job protector. And it's crucial to the future of the airline pilot occupation.

A month ago or so, the regime formed to run the combined Continental/United (soon to be known simply as "United") announced it was adding service in and out of Continental hubs using 70-seat jets operated by SkyWest. To get around the contractual ban on such an action, it simply slapped United flight numbers on the routes. United pilots lack the contractual protections from outsourcing their brothers and sisters at Continental have, which is apparently an opening in the eyes of the big-wigs. But really, it's an outrageous end-around tactic that takes aim at a crucial component of the Continental pilot contract. It's also an ill-timed provocation. The new, combined airline should be striving for peace and goodwill with its pilots. Instead, the company is striking what feels like a baton-blow to the knees of all pilots, creating a climate of distrust and anger.

There are so many horrible things about outsourcing in general but it's especially outrageous when an airline farms out the pilot job to the lowest bidder.

Pilots at both Continental and United took deep pay and benefit cuts post-9/11. They stay in shitty hotels and have rough schedules. They sit in tight confines all day and are responsible for the safety of many. Did we not learn a lesson from the outsourcing of the flight that went down in Buffalo in February 2009? Airlines may argue it's unfair to invoke that incident in this dispute, but it's clear the pilots at the helm of that doomed craft were underpaid, inexperienced and less than professional and skillful in their conduct during flight.

An arbitrator will examine the validity of outsourced 70-seat jets flying in and out of traditional Continental hubs in the short-term. Pilots have conducted informational picketing in Chicago, Houston and Newark in recent days. Long-term, the issue of outsourcing will be a front-and-center issue for pilots negotiating a new contract covering the combined pilot group.

I realize the flying public often fails to look beyond the cost of their ticket. But it's crazy what's going on now and it needs to be stopped. Pilots and airplanes shouldn't be operated on the cheap. The airline that sold the ticket bearing the name of said airline needs to keep the men and women flying their planes on its own payroll.

-WBAI's Bob Fass finally came back to host his great weekly radio program "Radio Unnameable" late

Thanksgiving night. Fass had been away from his show for months recovering from an illness. The return of his voice to the airwaves means a lot to this loyal listener. Welcome back Bob.

12-1-10 2345

Nine and a half months after a hard-fought, winning campaign to unionize, the 7500 or so ground workers at Continental Airlines have been presented their first-ever tentative contract proposal.

The 30-month deal includes a 10.5-percent across-the-board increase in the pay scale to be implemented in four installments. There's also a half-dollar hourly pay boost for those working shifts that start between noon and 3:59 AM.

The contract proposal was agreed to by union reps and company officials sometime during Thanksgiving week. The lead negotiator for the International Brotherhood of Teamsters announced details of the agreement to dozens of Continental workers from across the country on a chaotic and noisy conference call Monday morning.

Initial reaction from a cross-section of workers indicates the proposal will gain easy passage. Paper ballots and a copy of the 65-page tentative agreement and its addendums will be mailed to the homes of workers in the next week or so. Ballots will be counted in late December and the contract would go into effect the first of the year assuming it's ratified.

Perhaps most disappointing about the tentative agreement is a total failure to re-shape company policy on allocation of overtime. Currently, planned overtime hours are steered to ground workers with part-time status, essentially guaranteeing that those extra man-hours trigger straight-time pay. Unions have long held dear the notion that overtime hours return a premium of at least 1.5 times the regular rate.

Continental's large pool of part-time employees allows management to fill planned (and sometimes un-planned) holes in schedule coverage at a discounted, straight-time cost. Part-time workers become moveable markers on the corporation's checker board. The company saves dough by executing its sometimes unpredictable or irregular staffing needs through quick deployment of a portion of the work force that sees no spike in pay when called upon. It's great for the company and well within federal labor law, but it denies coveted premium pay to the full-time worker.

Overtime should trigger a higher rate of pay no matter who does it, really. When you're a worker who punches a clock, hours outside one's regular schedule should bring with it a spike in the rate of pay. The union's failure to change current company policy on allocation of OT hours is the most glaring deficiency I see in the new deal.

Also of concern is how the proposal was negotiated. Most workers were completely excluded from meaningful involvement in the process leading up to the negotiated agreement. A half-dozen or so rank-and-file workers from other cities had a seat at the negotiating table but it's not clear how they were selected nor did they have any direct communication with anybody at my place of employ. Worse, union updates on what was sought during bargaining were deliberately vague. There were a lot of "trust us" declarations from the union and no specific explanations of strategy, baseline demands and/or how the

membership's voices played a role in contract talks.

That said, there is a strong feeling of empowerment from the vote a worker gains on this contract proposal and ones to come. I feel a measure of strength, and I feel my co-workers feeling it. Yeah, most of us weren't at the table. Yeah, we were held at arm's length during the bargaining process by union professionals. But in the end, the worker has a say in the terms of his/her employment. And once that say is expressed by a majority of the members, there's binding terms to honor by both union membership and the company. That's a lot different than the one-sided worker/employer relationship that has existed these many years up to now.

11-30-10 2200

It was just three stops on a Manhattan-bound 7 train to reach this year's big Thanksgiving gathering in Sunnyside. No airports. No pat-downs or full-body imaging. No stress.

My pal Marc and his wife have been hosting an annual Turkey Day shin-dig dating back to their early-90's arrival in New York City. The gatherings have always been a boozy blast but now are way more memorable for the quality and thought put into the food portion of the menu.

There were fifteen on hand for this year's party. Five kids, ten adults.

Crazy, stinky cheese kicked off the party. Salmon tartare followed. There was Champagne. Fine wine. Sweet potatoes. Budweiser. Mashed potatoes with truffle shavings. Oh, and the birds. A fifteen-pound Bourbon Red turkey and a smaller capon.

Marc made a batch of really rich caramel-flavored ice cream for dessert. Our pal Dave got up at the crack of dawn Thursday and scored a limited edition chocolate pecan pie from the now famous pie-making sisters at Four and Twenty Blackbirds in Brooklyn. The pie was incredible.

On Friday, I went back to Sunnyside for leftovers, Thai food and a really stiff Manhattan.

11-28-10 0100

It was Ivy League vs. Patriot League on the Upper West Side Tuesday night. Columbia vs. Colgate. I took the 7 to the 1 which leaves you on the doorstep of Columbia's picturesque gated campus.

Cozy Levien Gym sits just west of Amsterdam Ave. at about 119th Street. To reach the venue, fans wind their way through university property along a narrow service road lined with loading docks. Admission is just ten bucks. A man with a light blue Columbia sweater took my ticket and didn't bother asking about the contents of my small backpack.

Both Columbia and Colgate were coming off blowout losses and neither have a prayer of dancing come March. But it was an entertaining D-1 game played on even terms for all but the last ten minutes.

Colgate's big man Nick Pascale (pictured above) was the hardest worker on the floor. The 6-10 junior from suburban Syracuse banged bodies, fought for boards and had a thundering dunk. He didn't have the softest of shooting touches but his persistent effort stood out. Pascale finished with 12 points, six

rebounds and a sweat-soaked uniform.

Colgate went cold halfway through the second half and lost by thirteen.

Columbia's quick and strong junior guard Noruwa Agho of New City, NY had 25 for the home team. Agho is the only player from the state of New York on Columbia's roster.

Columbia has a unique broadcast arrangement. The WFAN update guy Jerry Recco (pictured above right) does play-by-play but his voice is heard only on the web. The university charges listeners for access to Recco's account. Columbia students do a separate broadcast carried over the air on WKCR-FM. Recco and his rotating partner sat at the scorer's table and the students were positioned across the court opposite the visitor's bench.

Attendance was 742. I sat near the Columbia pep band. About two dozen band members were on hand on the eve of the school's final day of classes before a mini-break. The band's strongest number was a solid rendition of "Hava Nagila." When a free throw converted late in the contest made the score 69-53, pep band members jumped for joy and cheered loudly in unison about Columbia's point total.

11-24-10 1715

Health concerns have kept Bob Fass away from his wonderful weekly WBAI radio program "Radio Unnameable" for several weeks now, but the show's basic framework has carried on without him.

Robbie Barish and Bill Propp normally have a more behind-the-scenes support role on Unnameable but have stepped in as main men during the Fass absence.

On most nights, Radio Unnameable is a left-of-left discussion of New York City and the world. I miss Fass lots, but Barish is a unique voice as well. Barish is a renowned radiological physicist who talks about a variety of subjects. For a medium that doesn't really know the meaning of free form nowadays, it's amazing to sit there at 1 AM on a Friday and hear what you hear on WBAI from its position on the middle of the FM dial.

Last Friday, Barish and Propp opened the program with a discussion about airport security. In his real life, Barish has long studied the level of radiation exposure experienced by airline crews at cruising altitude. Barish has quantified average exposure levels for pilots and flight attendants and has led an effort to educate them on the matter.

When the issue of the new, controversial full-body scanners now deployed at many airport security checkpoints came up, Barish was able to provide an insightful piece of information I've not heard anywhere before. He said the level of radiation exposure one gets from the new scanner equals what one would experience in just two minutes of flight time. In other words, a flight from New York to Los Angeles would expose the flier to at least 150 times more radiation than a trip through the scanner.

This revelation does nothing to erase concerns people may have about the TSA's examination of a realistic image of their naked body, but it does seem to put to rest some of the hysteria about radiation in

connection with the new technology.

-The front page of Friday's Chicago Sun-Times carried a banner headline that said: "And Then There Were None" above a picture of Roland Burris. The accompanying story inside the paper discussed Burris' last big act as short-term US Senator from Illinois. Burris said goodbye in a speech on the senate floor. Few paid attention to it. Only a few senate colleagues bothered to show up and there was little coverage in the media. But credit the Sun-Times for putting the Burris exit message on the front page. Burris was named Barack Obama's replacement 22 months ago and chose not to run for re-election. He'll be succeeded by Republican Mark Kirk the Monday after Thanksgiving. It will leave the US Senate without a single black member. And then there were none, indeed. The highest legislative chamber in the land won't have a single African-American member. 100 Senators. None black. It's gonna be 2011. You'll turn on C-SPAN2 to watch debate on critical issues of the day and there will be no African-American voice in the mix. No wonder Congress is broken and distrusted. As Burris said, it's "unacceptable." And then there were none.

11-21-10 0115

Saturday night's Notre Dame/Army football game at the new Yankee Stadium will be the first Bronx encounter between these two teams since 1969.

The long-running series has been one-sided and there's no firm plan for future meetings. The Irish have won the last thirteen games in the series (1958 was the last Army win) and have only lost eight times in 49 all-time with the Cadets. You have to go all the way back to the 40's to find a competitive, meaningful multi-year portion of the ND/Army rivalry.

Still, there's a decent buzz about the 2010 matchup. It's the first ever football game at the new Yankee Stadium and it's quite possible the Irish defense will struggle with Army's option offense.

The line is ND minus 8.5. Army is dramatically outsized but has outplayed its poundage deficiency all season. On offense, Army linemen are constantly flirting with what appears to be deployment of illegal cut-blocks.

I don't know how the game will turn out. Betting against Army has subsidized a rent check or two in recent years but the Cadet ground game may keep it close on Saturday night.

The more important and unfortunate undercurrent tied to this game and the balance of the Notre Dame football season is the death of Declan Sullivan.

Three weeks ago, the 20-year-old ND junior was filming football practice from a hydraulic lift. Wind gusts were recorded in excess of 50 mph as Sullivan performed his duties with the lift's platform in an airborne position. The equipment toppled and Sullivan died.

Notre Dame is conducting an investigation as is a government workplace safety entity. The primary conclusion of both reports will likely contain an assertion that the lift's specifications don't allow for operation of the equipment when winds exceed a certain speed. There seems to be little debate the lift used by Sullivan isn't designed for deployment in winds of the speed recorded on the afternoon of the

tragedy.

That leads to logically-made claims Notre Dame was negligent in this instance. Blame has been assigned to Notre Dame's first-year coach Brian Kelly, athletic director Jack Swarbrick and university president John Jenkins.

Kelly has been solidly forthright in accepting responsibility. But that hasn't stopped calls for his resignation/termination.

My brother Tim obtained an undergraduate degree at Notre Dame and remains active in university affairs. I asked him to comment on the tragedy. I asked him whether he thought it was fair for alumni and/or the media to seek Kelly's ouster.

This was his response:

It is generally the case that matters involving Notre Dame are amplified by the media, good or bad. This approach drives web traffic and sells papers. But the reality is that those calling for some kind of retribution are off-base. The university will pay dearly for this tragedy, as they should, but not in the form of replacing one of their leaders (again, it is the Sullivan family that will pay the ultimate price daily as they remember their lost son).

There is no pattern of reckless behavior here. This is not Switzer's Sooners. It was, instead, a move that was stupid beyond belief. A move that was executed by one but tacitly supported by the hundred or so individuals on the field at the time. To me, stupid in the form of a single event should not override a consistent commitment to student welfare; a notion that is never overlooked at Notre Dame, or most universities for that matter.

The university, after some early fumbling, has done the right thing and taken responsibility for Declan's death. You can be sure that behind the scenes a massive amount of fiscal responsibility is being assumed. Of course, none of that matters. Sadly, a family is left to mourn privately for a life lost unnecessarily. And a group of individuals, Kelly, Swarbrick, Jenkins and every person at practice on that ridiculously windy day are left to think about how their behavior must be permanently altered. The extended Notre Dame community is rattled significantly, however it seems that most calls for a firing are coming from those that hyperbolize events in the form of journalism.

Thoughts & prayers to the family and friends of Declan Sullivan.

11-18-10 1930

Perhaps the most surprising 2010 general election result came from the state of Arizona, where all six winners of state-wide offices were Republicans.

That the GOP swept all of Arizona's executive branch slots (not to mention John McCain's coast job) isn't a shock. But after nearly two weeks of counting provisional ballots on a statewide proposition that would legalize medical marijuana, it was announced over the weekend that the measure had narrowly

passed.

Roughly 1.7 million voters cast ballots in Arizona's general. The hapless, anti-immigrant Republican Governor Jan Brewer won by double digits and McCain got another six years in the US Senate after winning his race by 25 points.

Many in the super-majority of voters who went red on Arizona politicians obviously crossed some kind of line to endorse marijuana access for at least a portion of its citizenry.

Arizona's medical marijuana prop is said to be loosely written, which could make buying and growing ganja a somewhat accessible notion to the recreational user. Despite this knowledge going in, a red state voted for marijuana.

I'm unable to find any relevant exit polling data in connection with this result. Arizona's decision to approve medical marijuana makes it the fifteenth US state to do so.

New Jersey's legislature passed a medical marijuana bill early this year. There's been little talk in New York state to date of such a measure. For Arizona to move quicker on this than New York, I find surprising.

11-16-10 0130

Considering the band's members have serious regular jobs and only sporadically go on tour these days, it's pretty amazing how immediately proficient Bottomless Pit of Chicago is when it plugs in and cranks out its live show.

Fronted by Ex-Silkworm greats Tim Midgett (pictured above) and Andy Cohen, Bottomless Pit played the Brooklyn venue Knitting Factory late Saturday night.

The Obits were the evening's headliner; not because the Brooklyn band is more accomplished or talented than the band it followed. To the contrary. But the Obits have made a bit of a stir in the last year or two, garnering significant critical acclaim.

The crowd swelled when the Obits hit the stage, validating the night's order of business. But it was the Bottomless Pit set that had me more interested.

You may know the story of Silkworm. The three young men who were Silkworm (Midgett, Cohen and Michael Dahlquist) settled in Chicago from points West at the turn of the current century. In the summer of 2005, Midgett and Cohen suffered a horrible loss when gregarious friend and bandmate Dahlquist was killed at a suburban Chicago intersection in a senseless crime perpetrated by a deranged woman.

Silkworm's sudden and horrible loss ended the band after nine great full-length records and several other releases.

Bottomless Pit formed a year or two later. Midgett and Cohen front a four-piece that often sounds very much like Silkworm. They'll never be able to replicate the very unique live show presence brought by Dahlquist, but have assembled a lineup that allows his spirit to live on in both the band's words and

intensity level.

Especially sweet to hear Saturday night were two great cuts from Pit's current release. "Summerwind" and "38 Souls" included finely blended guitar sounds from Midgett and Cohen and deep, well-enunciated vocals from Cohen.

Before the show, we had dinner and a couple rounds of fun at the Commodore across the street from the Knitting Factory. The Commodore occupies the space that previously housed the pretty famous neighborhood spot Black Betty.

I enjoyed the Commodore. The place feels like a basement rec room in the Midwest somewhere. Beers are cheap and it's a fun crowd. I hadn't been out on the town on a Saturday night in three months. The buzz in the air on that night of the week in particular is something I'm not used to experiencing on my usual mid-week nights off.

11-15-10 0100

You can't say the very rare NBA 30-30 put up by Kevin Love Friday night wasn't hard earned. But give partial credit to a soft-as-dough Knicks front line. Wilson Chandler and Amare Stoudemire alternately watched and got pushed around by Love as he piled up historic numbers. What is especially disturbing from a Knicks perspective was a total unwillingness in the fourth quarter by anybody wearing blue and orange to challenge Love physically when he had the ball or sought a board. Every Knick but Amare had plenty of fouls to give.

Love easily could have had 50 points in this game if his teammate Michael Beasley didn't do an Iverson impersonation down the stretch. After the game, MSG carried locker room coverage including a segment featuring a half-dozen New York reporters quizzing Chandler. As the guy most responsible for Love's walk in the park, Chandler was asked why he and the Knicks were shooting well before shot clock expiration up 21 in the third quarter. His mumbled response: "It happens."

11-13-10 1315

It has finally dawned on Bob Bradley that Red Bulls rookie defender Tim Ream is a guy who ought to be a part of the team USA rebuilding effort in advance of the 2014 World Cup in Brazil.

Ream was added to the men's national team roster on Thursday and will arrive in Cape Town, South Africa Saturday night in time to work out with the squad before Wednesday's friendly with Bafana Bafana.

It's not clear how much - or if - he'll play in his first game on the top national squad. But Ream's inclusion on the roster is a welcome acknowledgment of his great ability.

I was starting to wonder what Bradley was waiting for. Three post-2010 World Cup matches on home soil featured the play of re-treads with no eye to the future. The US failed to win any of the three.

Ream will be 26-years-old when the 2014 World Cup unfolds. He may not be international match ready at

the moment, but his rookie season on the banks of the Passaic showed more than enough promise to earn a long look in the World Cup run-up.

-I've noticed at least a few UK-based horse racing fans are referring to Zenyatta as "Zenny" in comments posted on thoroughbred news web sites the last week or two. In this country, Zenyatta is referred to mostly by her full name - or in some cases as "Z." Back home in California now, Zenny's expected retirement from racing still hasn't been formally announced in a definitive way by her owners.

-I forgot to mention one pretty dramatic change in Louisville's cityscape on last week's visit. The new "KFC Yum! Center" is up and open for business just south of the mighty Ohio River, four blocks west of Louisville's minor league baseball venue. The new, quarter-billion dollar downtown arena is the new home of University of Louisville hoops, which had played its home games for a half-century at Freedom Hall near the airport. The new building holds 22-thousand for basketball and has already been named a host of 2012 March Madness sub-regional games. There wasn't much wrong with Freedom Hall from my perspective, but the new joint is loaded with luxury suites, a potent revenue sweetener.

-One other detail from the return trip out of Cinci's airport: For the first time ever, I passed through one of those new body scanners used by the TSA to screen air travelers. The picture generated by my person's inclusive hardware prompted the agent to call for what he called the "new, enhanced pat-down." The male screener warned me his glove-covered hands would reach the upper leg "high and tight." Indeed they did. It wasn't fun. I don't want to say it was excessive or intrusive because that would perhaps ignore whatever threat prompted the "new" and "enhanced" procedure. But the search briefly went to a place that would make a reasonable person squirm. I actually have great sympathy for those conducting the new search. Screeners will no doubt face a backlash from those with less tolerance of such an aggressive probe.

-The new body scanners have also created a frustrating catch-22 for commercial airline pilots. Concerns about radiation and privacy have some pilots opting to decline an examination by the scanner. That leads to the mandatory "enhanced" pat-down referenced above. Pilots are discovering that the pat-down is probably a worse way to start a work day than exposure to detailed body imaging. But since both options are viewed as intrusive, there have been renewed calls to allow pilots to skip screening altogether. And why not? Many are licensed to carry a gun in the cockpit, and they all ultimately control the fate of the airplane anyway regardless of what's in their pockets. Check their ID, verify their identity and let 'em fly without treating 'em like a regular customer.

11-11-10 1900

Back home now after five days in Louisville and I've watched the replay of ESPN's Breeder's Cup telecast. Zenyatta's narrow margin of defeat in the Classic becomes easier to understand watching the tremendous stress and tension felt by both the giant mare and her primary groom Mario Espinoza in the thirty minutes before the race.

From my distant position up in the 300 section on Churchill's first turn, I didn't see anything all that unusual about Zenyatta's walk from barn to paddock. She entered the track wearing a 2008 Ladies Classic blanket and was showered with cheers from the crowd of 72-grand. Some in the crowd waited to appear

in their seats until the Classic. Several people near our seats wore pink clothing, a nod to the race's very popular lone female entrant.

My pal Marc was watching the telecast back in New York. He called me while Zenyatta was being saddled and said Espinoza struggled mightily to relax the undefeated mare pre-race. I didn't realize it on track, but now having seen the tape, it's clear Zenyatta was rattled and burned lots of nervous energy. Zenyatta's jockey Mike Smith told ESPN before the race that Z was "a little anxious...on edge." Smith caressed Zenyatta's long neck repeatedly before the race in an effort to calm her.

ESPN's coverage of Zenyatta's walk from barn to paddock was excellent. It was a mostly un-narrated live feed accompanied by excellent audio. What seemed to bother Zenyatta most were high-pitched female screams. Each time a piercing screech was aimed at Zenyatta, Espinoza raised an index finger to his mouth and sternly shooshed the crowd. He looked pissed. Given the very close relationship between human and horse in this instance, it's likely Espinoza's outward expression of frustration mirrored the same agitation felt by Zenyatta.

It was such a contrast to the way both Zenyatta and Espinoza (pictured above) appeared earlier in the week. On early afternoon trips covering the same route on Wednesday and Thursday, there were no drunken yells or screechy woo-hoos. There were plenty of cheers, but not the erratic shrieks. Espinoza had no trouble whatsoever handling his friend during long schooling sessions and Zenyatta was a model of good behavior.

You saw what happened in the race. Zenyatta conceded such a huge early gap behind the competition, you wondered if she was ok. "What is Smith doing?" yelled a young fan seated near me.

Smith didn't do anything wrong. He was on a horse who decides unilaterally to go slow early, conserve energy and unleash a massive late run. In this instance, she lost by such a slim margin it invites second-guessing by humans. The British turf writer Marcus Armytage called it a "rope-a-dope gone too far." Armytage also reported a stunning bit of news. He said Smith considered pulling Zenyatta out of the race just a quarter-mile after it started because the jockey was concerned something might be wrong.

A dead rail path on the dirt course may also have contributed to Zenyatta's margin of defeat. Smith steered Zenyatta well off the rail the entire race. Usually, a jockey riding a back-of-the-packer hugs the rail to shorten the trip. But because four days of prior racing clearly showed dead inner paths, most everybody was seeking to operate their runners over the middle of the track.

Zenyatta has never been interested in riding the rail, but the track bias Saturday was so pronounced, Smith may have sacrificed a bit too much ground out of excessive worry about the inside.

The one subject I don't find interesting is the silly debate about what Zenyatta's second-place finish means to her legacy. She barely lost, but she lost. Her winning streak was padded by a well-planned, conservative schedule of appearances that generated a level of excitement the sport hasn't seen in a long time.

The run she made with the variables going against her Saturday night was a racing moment that will be

remembered forever. She's great but not the greatest. Her loss was almost as good as a win. I take a middle position that basically goes like this: She fired a great race but not good enough. It's disappointing but I'm not disappointed. Her absorption of the hoopla before the race may have contributed negatively to an otherwise awesome performance. The naysayers who feel validated by her loss should be quiet.

The sport of horse racing received a huge jolt of massive fan energy by Zenyatta's appearance. Simple as that. Zenyatta's human connections also should be applauded. Trainer John Shirreffs ignored East Coast racing scribes seeking stiffer challenges for his mare. He made an exception when pressure was exerted to match Zenyatta against Rachel Alexandra. That battle never happened, but it was Rachel who had to back out.

Perhaps other trainers would have been more ambitious with such a talented runner, but Shirreffs always did right by Zenyatta. He ultimately got her to the biggest of dances. In the days leading up to this year's Classic, a warm and humble Shirreffs went out of his way to allow fans to strengthen their bond with the sport's biggest current star.

Lost a bit in the Zenyatta coverage was the amazing performance by Goldikova in the Turf Mile. She won (pictured above) the biggest US grass mile event for an unprecedented third straight year and will mount a campaign to return to Louisville next fall and do it a fourth time. Amazing.

The other highlight from Saturday was an impressive run by big two-year-old colt Uncle Mo (pictured above). The Beyer speed rating (108) applied to the winning performance in the Cup Juvie is an imposing number. It's rare for successful two-year-old colts to do well in the Kentucky Derby, much less make the race, but Uncle Mo will try. He'll probably run two more races between now and the first Saturday in May and will do so as the early, clear-cut Derby favorite.

Our pal Carsoni got us access to a sixth floor track lounge after the races Saturday. For Breeder's Cup weekend, the space was used by a hundred or so high rollers participating in a handicapping contest. We met the winner of the contest. He took home 175 K, thanks in large part to a big contest win bet on Classic winner Blame.

I had never been to this part of the Churchill plant in all my years going there. Known as the "Gold Room," the carpeted space has a spectacular sky-high view of the track. We stood for a few minutes on an outdoor deck and watched clean-up crews pick up empty beer cans way down below. A few stragglers reluctant to leave the track sat in the cold and likely discussed an amazing end to the card.

Saturday night's clock turn-back offered an extra hour to visit Louisville nightspots. We went back to the Granville for dinner and then knocked a few back at the Mag Bar. Timmy from St. Lou joined us well after midnight and it was crazy late when we finally left Freddie's.

I hitched a ride with Carsoni to Cincinnati on Sunday and finally got a seat on a Newark flight a little before 9 PM.

I try not to lament gambling plays lost, but I'm a touch aggravated at not hitting the weekend's final pick four for at least a buck. I liked the Midge but allowed my radar to intercept "no chance" chatter on the eve

of the big day. I hit the triple in the Classic for two bucks and had 50 to show on Fly Down, softening the size of the deficit.

This Cup however won't be remembered for the plus-minus betting total.

Thanks to my Cup roommate and pal Jeff D for his great company and skillful navigation of the Louisville roadways. And thanks to Carsoni for the frequent laughs he generated in the middle of all the high-stress bets he was putting down.

11-8-10 1800

It was pitch dark outside for the final two races of this year's Breeder's Cup day one card. I found it weird from the standpoint the lights seemed to barely illuminate the racing surface, making it less than optimum for watching the races from a fan's perspective.

I'm told it looked OK on TV, but it felt amateurish to watch from the stands. When the turf feature went off a little before 7 PM, horses could barely be seen as the field came down the stretch for the first time.

We were oblivious and in the dark about the Borel/Castellano paddock donnybrook after the marathon and had no idea Life at Ten was out of sorts (in full view of the national TV audience) before the feature.

Unrivaled Belle (pictured above - with jockey Kent Desormeaux raising right hand after winning the Ladies' Classic) rallied from mid-pack into a slow pace and completed a pick four that paid 68 K.

Attendance was announced 41,614 but I'm not sure there were that many people in the house.

I'll back off my prediction of a 90-K attendance number for Zenyatta this evening. Perhaps the chill in the air has something to do with it. Really, the blame for all these low crowd numbers on big horse racing days rests with the lousy economy.

Jeff and I are mulling a nominal pick six play on top of our regular plays for Saturday. There's 817 K of carryover dough in an otherwise sick pick six pool, so what the heck.

11-6-10 0055

We had a productive handicapping session at the Granville Inn in Old Louisville Thursday evening on the eve of the two day lineup of Breeder's Cup races.

Perhaps the most informative voice among those registering opinions was my pal Jeff's friend Dave from the UK who helped us sift through the qualifications of the Euro-shippers at this event.

Dave's strongest position was a stand against Master of Hounds in the Juvie Turf.

A wicked north wind blew through Churchill during the card on Thursday. The sun came and went and made the difference between feeling comfortable and freeze your ass off.

We're camped out way east of Louisville at a Holiday Inn Express. The box spring is double firm and the

place seems nice.

The picture above is a day late. After the non-geeks at the Outer Loop Best Buy sold me a thirty dollar card reader, I can now present a shot of the Breeder's Cup Classic favorite in the paddock schooling stall from Wednesday.

My Red Bulls got knocked out of the MLS playoffs in Harrison, NJ Thursday night and I didn't see a minute of it. We watched the highlights here in the hotel room and it wasn't pretty. Still it was a memorable season in the new arena by the Passaic River.

If you're betting the Classic, look out for Fly Down. He'll take your two bucks and turn it in to 42. Zenyatta, I'm afraid will make her dramatic charge a bit too late.

11-5-10 0030

Greetings from Louisville, KY. I caught a 620 AM bird to Cleveland out of LaGuardia Wednesday and then jumped on a connecting flight to the airport formerly known as Standiford Field. All went smooth. I arrived in Derby City a little after 10 AM and rented a vehicle roughly the size of a one-man tent.

I enjoyed a cheeseburger at the long lunch counter at Wagner's near the track and then parked the fuel efficient pup tent in a residential neighborhood a few blocks from the main gate on Central Avenue.

I'm now sitting here at the hotel after a fun day at the races and just realized I forgot the small black cable that connects my camera to my laptop. Uh doy.

I took a bunch of pictures capturing the excitement on track and have no way of sharing them. Oh well. I spoke to the Geek Squad here in Louisville and the non-geek I talked to said TSR should be back in the photo business this time tomorrow.

The 19 for 19 synth specialist and 60 Minutes star Zenyatta strutted into the paddock after today's first race and lounged in a "schooling stall" for about 45 minutes. A good portion of the Churchill Downs crowd assembled on the perimeter of the saddling area to see the sport's biggest current star. It was quite a scene.

Those with inside paddock access formed a large cluster near where Zenyatta stood and several people without horse sense drifted into the walking ring as a full field for the second race prepared to enter the race track. Although a law enforcement representative stood next to Zenyatta, there was little crowd control inside the paddock and very little respect for other horses preparing to race.

Zenyatta's primary connections (trainer John Shirreffs and owners Jerry and Ann Moss) stood by the towering mare as the crowd stared and took pictures. Shirreffs has been criticized by some for not exposing the sport's most popular figure to fans in the Midwest and East by keeping Zenyatta on the West Coast for much of her career. Wednesday, it was clear that Mr. and Mrs. Moss and Shirreffs were trying to make up for lost time. They didn't put Zenyatta in that schooling stall for 45 minutes because the horse needs any education on acclimating to new surroundings. They did it because they wanted everybody and anybody at that race track to have an opportunity to look at Zenyatta up close. Shirreffs waited until

people quit looking at Zenyatta - and then signaled it was time for her to return to the barn.

The entire time Zenyatta stood in that stall, she returned glances to those gazing at her. Her ears pointed straight up - and occasionally forward - like a Martian. She wasn't fidgety and she wasn't restless. It was almost as if she knew it was a public appearance she was required to participate in and she may as well do it with an earnest, dignified enthusiasm.

The skies were cloudy and the chill in the air is supposed to get more crisp in the next day or two.

The great jockey Rafael Bejarano won his 400th career race at Churchill Downs after a wire job in the seventh aboard a three-year-old son of El Prado. Only fifteen riders before him have won 400-plus at Churchill. Bejarano is only 28 years old.

I'd say there were 10-thousand on hand. Churchill doesn't release official attendance numbers.

Perhaps the biggest story leading up to this Cup aside from Zenyatta's unlikely quest for continued perfection is concern about the condition of Churchill's turf course. The lawn looks to be in immaculate shape but the European trainer of the favorite in the main grass event at this Cup is unhappy with its firmness. Sir Michael Stoute trains the insanely talented three-year-old British colt Workforce and said he'll pack up and go home with his horse if the turf is too dry. Workforce prefers some give to the grass, but it seems a stretch/bluff/lobbying effort by Stoute to threaten the scratch of his horse. Stoute may simply be angling to get Churchill Downs to leave the sprinklers on a little longer beyond the standard ten minutes per evening.

11-3-10 2200

A crucial fact was left out of most reporting on the agreement that ended a two-week blackout of FOX programming in few million cable TV homes in the New York City area.

Cablevision moved off its hard line resistance over the weekend and agreed contractually to pay News Corp. for the right to carry the FOX network signal.

When Cablevision caved, News Corp. flipped a switch in just enough time to allow three-million plus Cablevision homes in New York and Philly to get game three of the World Series.

What wasn't reported anywhere was how much Cablevision agreed to pay News Corp. going forward. Many of the dozen or so news stories I read Sunday stated little beyond confirmation of an agreement and a word-for-word transcription of a stubbornly acrimonious statement out of Cablevision's PR office.

I fail to understand why FOX wouldn't simply say for the record how much it wanted - and how much it ultimately got per Cablevision subscriber. It ain't much on a per-subscriber basis, all things considered.

If Cablevision's customers knew the dimes and quarters involved per cable home, it would have probably would have forced the Dolan family to end the two-week stalemate a lot quicker.

LA Times media blogger Joe Flint got as close as anybody covering the story to unearthing the basic fact required for any cable customer to understand the dispute. Said Flint in his piece on the new

Cablevision/FOX deal: “It was no secret that FOX was seeking a long-term arrangement that would require Cablevision to pay about 50 cents a subscriber for its Fox TV stations in year one; that would gradually increase to \$1 dollar per-subscriber, per-month.”

-Not to sound Mushnickian, but Jets coach Rex Ryan made statements mid-week that the NFL should discourage. When a reporter suggested there would be a large contingent of visiting Packer fans for Green Bay’s game with the Jets at new Meadowlands Stadium, Ryan said the following: “We’ll see. It better be a big one. I don’t know. This is a place where I wouldn’t want to wear Green Bay stuff coming to our stadium. No way [smiling]. These are our fans, our team. I don’t know if a Packer fan would want to waste his time coming to this kind of environment. If they travel well, they travel well. We’ll see, as long as they travel home mad, disappointed and everything else with the outcome of the game. That would be fine with me [smiling].” What I absolutely don’t like is Ryan’s suggestion that fans of a visiting team shouldn’t wear their team’s apparel. The NFL crowd in many cities is already unreasonably hostile enough without Ryan ramping up tension even further. Attending road games in your team’s colors should be a mutually beneficial experience for both the road-tripper and the natives seated near the visiting fan. It shouldn’t be unpleasant or threatening. Ryan’s comments encourage the meathead Jet-fan element to heckle opposing fans and that’s really un-cool.

11-1-10 0130

A portrait of former mayor Rudy Giuliani was unveiled at City Hall this week and

[it looks nothing like him](#). 84-year-old artist Everett Raymond Kinstler created a painting you’d likely not recognize unless you had help.

Kinstler’s depiction of Giuliani conveys both youthfulness and a warm facial expression. Neither were visible with any regularity during the ex-mayor’s two-term tenure. Worse, the painting misses the upward curl of Rudy’s upper lip and sanitizes the distinctive (and distinguished, I believe) patch of black hair he had while serving eight years as the city’s chief executive.

Giuliani is made to like Irish, not Italian.

Kinstler’s

[own web site](#) says he’s done more than 1200 portraits in his life. Many examples of his work are on display at the web site - and most of them are impressive, accurate depictions of his subjects.

The native New Yorker’s portraits of former US Presidents Ford and Reagan hang in the White House and both do total justice to the subjects.

But Kinstler blew the Giuliani portrait, making the mayor at the helm of New York City on 9-11 look like somebody he wasn’t - or isn’t.

City Hall has more than a hundred portraits of famous historical leaders on display. Some have been displayed there for more than 200 years. The Giuliani portrait should be re-done by an artist who can

better visualize what the ex-mayor looked like as he forcefully imposed his vision on this city.

10-28-10 2015

With election day less than a week away, I thought I'd throw some non-political voting information at you pertaining to the neighborhood I've cast ballots in since 2003. This Tuesday's vote will be the 19th election I'll have participated in here in Jackson Heights, Queens.

I've missed just one opportunity to vote during that stretch. I was out of town for the 2009 New York City run-off election that determined the Democratic Party nominees for comptroller and public advocate. I knew in advance that I'd be out of town but failed without good reason to cast an absentee ballot in advance.

In New York, most analyses of election statistics use Assembly District boundaries as a frame of reference. There are 150 assembly districts in the state of New York, each with a population of about 125-thousand.

I live in the 39th Assembly District which includes much of Jackson Heights, almost all of Corona and a little chunk of Elmhurst (including an area near my neighborhood's big public hospital).

It's a gerrymandered district that is shaped somewhat like a F-117 fighter jet with jagged edges. Its boundaries were drawn to improve Hispanic representation in the state legislature. 65-percent of the residents in the 39th are Hispanic. 20-percent are Asian and a little under 10-percent are white.

What makes the 39th Assembly District so unusual is that there are only 35,244 registered voters. That's by far the lowest number of registered voters of any assembly district in the state (about half the average). Since a large number of the district's residents are not US citizens, you have an absurdly small fraction of residents deciding local representation.

In the September 2010 primary to determine the Democratic Party nominee for the 39th's vacant assembly seat, just 4221 voters cast ballots among 23,870 active Democratic Party registrants. That's a 17.6-percent turnout; not horrible relatively speaking for a primary election but a very small slice of the total population (most of it aligned with the Democratic Party).

Since there are just 3656 voters with GOP registration, it's flat-out impossible for a Republican to expect serious consideration which makes general election contests hum-drum affairs.

I'm not suggesting Assembly districts should be based on voter registration counts, but it staggers me how few people it takes to win a seat in the state legislature from my district. Assuming primary election turnout is somewhat constant over the years, you basically only need about 2500 Democratic primary votes to win an assembly seat here. That's two-percent of the population!

Since you won't find them anywhere but the NYC Board of Elections website, here are the certified totals from my Assembly District for two key races contested this past September (I've included selected write-in's):

DEMOCRATIC PARTY PRIMARY - Assemblyman - District 39

Francisco Moya - 2788 votes

Hiram Monserrate - 1417 votes

Amy Goodman - 1 vote

Bugs Bunny - 1 vote

Mickey Mouse - 1 vote

Mr. Real Change - 2 votes

REPUBLICAN PARTY PRIMARY - Governor - District 39

Rick Lazio - 137 votes

Carl Paladino - 110 votes

10-26-10 2245

I suppose I should abandon any hope my Missouri Tigers will appear in the first-ever Pinstripe Bowl at Yankee Stadium this December. These 2010 Tigers are simply too good for a pre-New Year's bowl date in cold weather.

I've been watching my beloved alma mater play football against Oklahoma going back 25 years. It's always been pretty much the same story each time. The Sooners push us around and run up the score. Boomer Sooner blows out of the horn section so often, you hear it in your sleep for weeks after each encounter.

But this year was different. Mizzou's linemen on both sides of the ball now appear to eat as much beef as the guys in crimson helmets and the trenches were fought for on even terms. I couldn't believe what I was watching Saturday night. Mizzou linemen totally held their own.

Mizzou's great sophomore edge rusher Aldon Smith returned from a broken leg and made the game's key, momentum-shifting play. With the score tied at 7 nearing the end of the first quarter, OU was moving chains and had the ball on Mizzou's 12. Smith faked a move to the pocket and dropped back into coverage. He made a pick and rumbled 58 yards the other way. It was effectively a 14-point swing.

Smith is a guaranteed NFL first-rounder when he comes out and his big play off five weeks on the shelf changed the game.

Mizzou had lost 19 of the last 20 to Oklahoma. Now you can argue the Tigers have full control over their BCS championship destiny. The computer will be Mizzou's friend if they can run the table. I just don't

see that happening, unfortunately.

Oklahoma may have been undeserving of its #3 ranking in the human polls entering the Mizzou game. The Sooners narrowly escaped a game at Cinci and may have gained its lofty ranking on reputation alone. Mizzou has Nebraska on the road next week and then a few minefield games against inferior opponents. A Big 12 title game will bring either a rematch with OU – or perhaps a tough Okie State team. Even if Mizzou gets past the Huskers next week, I just don't see them getting through the balance of the schedule without a loss.

The winner of Utah/TCU in two weeks would be a worthy undefeated opponent for Boise State in a national title game, but that's not happening. None of those three teams are deemed legitimate by the college football establishment.

Mizzou will leap-frog all of them if the Tigers win out.

I believe you'll see at least one one-loss team (maybe two) in the title game in January. It's unwritten, binding precedent to limit the championship game to teams from power conferences. It'll be controversial and embarrassing to exclude Boise State but it seems there's no BCS blowup too big to move us closer to a playoff system.

10-25-10 0130

Six-foot, seven-inch tough guy Derek Boogaard of the New York Rangers has the most feared set of knuckles in the NHL but he's so scary, nobody wants to fight him.

In six games this year, only Colton Orr of the Leafs and Shawn Thornton of the Bruins have bothered to drop the gloves and engage Boogaard.

The Post's Larry Brooks wrote an excellent column last week saying the Rangers misjudged Boogaard's value as an enforcer when they gave him a 4-year, \$6.5 million contract this past off-season.

Brooks notes that Boogaard plays just a few shifts per game on the fourth line and lacks opportunities to deter cheap shots against his teammates. Brooks says hockey heavyweights no longer have much of an impact on an opponent's level of physicality. "Today, the deterrent comes in the form of team toughness and a pack mentality. That's it. It comes in the form of immediate reprisal by players consistently finishing their checks against the opposition's most talented players," says Brooks.

Boogaard looks to be a colossal waste of money, another in a long string of player personnel mistakes by Rangers GM Glen Sather. Boogaard's two fights this year were inconsequential and uninspiring. If you want an example of "immediate reprisal" as suggested by Brooks, watch Sean Avery play. Avery gets important minutes and protects teammates less inclined to initiate legal physical contact. What the Rangers need is more players like Avery – not a token, over-paid enforcer who rarely steps on the ice.

-New York City Transit has applied warning stickers next to the space-wasting luggage racks on Q33 buses serving LaGuardia Airport. They say: "**No Sitting/Riding/Climbing on the Luggage Rack.**" Only a MTA bureaucrat without knowledge of bus travel would be concerned about people "climbing" on bus

luggage racks. Of more real concern is the reduction in passenger capacity caused by the mostly unused luggage racks.

10-24-10 0100

My brother Tim came out for an action-packed, 40-hour visit this week and among the highlights was the celebration of an improbable MLS conference title for the Red Bulls in Harrison, NJ.

It's really cool my brother (pictured above left - with Toro Rosso) was in the house on such a big night at Red Bull Arena. He first got me interested in the beautiful game. I've been anxious for him to see the new, soccer-specific building on the banks of the Passaic River. He was as impressed as I thought he'd be and got a kick out of the great Newark tavern Bello's (the go-to place for soccer fans before and after the match).

The Red Bulls were atrocious last season, winning just five of thirty matches. Their worst-to-first 2010 campaign in a new home ended with 15 regular season wins and home field advantage up until the league title game in Toronto.

After beating New England on a cool night Thursday before an announced crowd of nearly sixteen-thousand, Red Bull midfielder Rafa Marquez (pictured above - #4) spent several minutes leading a team victory lap in front of an appreciative crowd.

Marquez is the biggest reason this Red Bull squad can win the MLS championship. He controls the offense from the middle of the field with a precision and skill that is dazzling at times.

Marquez doesn't run hard for every ball and he'll drop in a flop if a fly lands on his nose, but he threads needles unlike anybody in the league when he gains possession. What Marquez does helps you understand why soccer is called the beautiful game.

Two other players on this team also deserve special mention. Rookie defender Tim Ream played every minute of all thirty Red Bull matches in the MLS regular season. It'll be a shock if Ream isn't playing World Cup soccer four years from now. The recently-acquired Moroccan midfielder Mehdi Ballouchy never stops moving. He plays an energetic, complementary role next to Marquez and ventures deep into the offensive zone.

The CMJ Music Marathon was in full swing for my brother's visit and we hit a couple of shows on Wednesday. We saw the NYC-based singer Holly Miranda perform in the lobby of the Ace Hotel in Manhattan. Miranda's thirty-minute late-afternoon set (backed by a full band) was broadcast live on KEXP. My brother said Miranda's voice bore resemblance to Cat Power - and he's right. The Ace Hotel lobby was a fun place to hang out although the high ceilings made it a less than ideal place for enjoyment of sound. We sat at the lobby bar and enjoyed \$7 Tecate's.

Late that evening, we ventured down to Brooklyn for an excellent 60-minute performance by Two Cow Garage at Union Hall.

Two Cow Garage has been doing long tour runs in cities big and small for much of the last decade. Their

fifth full-length record is due next week. A nice crowd was assembled for this show despite it's 12:20 AM start time.

Micah Schnabel (above left) and Shane Sweeney (above right) are the band's two founding members. Their strong stage chemistry leads to lots of physical contact and rock and roll jostling between the two. I've long loved this band and am glad they've persevered.

I had never attended a show at Union Hall. The small, basement-level performance space is cozy and equipped with a full service bar.

Two Cow called on opener Dave Hause during its encore to perform a rousing cover of The Replacements tune "Can't Hardly Wait."

My brother and I ate well during his short visit. We had excellent sit-downs at Prime Meats in Brooklyn and Momofuku on First Avenue. We ate slices at Artichoke on 14th Wednesday afternoon. My brother liked Artichoke's plain squares so much he insisted we stop into Artichoke's new west side shop after walking the High Line the next day.

10-22-10 1800

Two FOX-owned TV stations (WNYW and WWOR) have gone dark in the homes of a couple million Cablevision subscribers in the New York City-area and few people in the impact zone really know why.

Bombastic print ads paid for by FOX and Cablevision contain few confirmed facts and journalists covering the dispute seem unable to go beyond talking points provided by the two feuding conglomerates.

I'm a Time-Warner subscriber here in Queens, so I'm not impacted by FOX's decision to withhold its WNYW and WWOR signals from Cablevision. The final week of 2009 brought the threat of a similar scenario in my wired apartment, but Time-Warner and FOX cut a deal on New Year's weekend to avert a blackout.

FOX wants to be paid for the content it produces and transmits on its over-the-air stations. This is a new concept fueled by a sinking advertising market. It's also a fair idea considering the dough it takes to acquire, develop and execute programming. Time-Warner now pays to carry FOX's over-the-air signal. It's been reported by a few outlets covering broadcast issues that the cost to Time Warner is somewhere in the neighborhood of 75-cents per subscriber. FOX wants to collect the same fee from Cablevision, a more stubborn cable company run by the Dolan family (which owns the Garden and the teams that play in it). Last weekend, FOX withheld its (WNYW/WWOR) signals from Cablevision because negotiations on the effort to extract roughly 75-cents per subscriber from the Dolan's were going nowhere.

The first significant flash point of the dispute came at 1 PM Sunday, when football Giants fans with Cablevision were unable to watch their team beat the Lions. Earlier that day, the blackout was topic number one on Mike Francesa's radio program (simulcast on YES). Francesa helps shape public opinion on matters of this type. Without really knowing the facts, Francesa took Cablevision's side purely because the cable company offered to allow a "neutral" government arbitrator final say on a resolution.

The problem with arbitration from FOX's perspective is that it may produce a middle-ground sum. FOX doesn't want that. It wants parity with the Time-Warner deal and the Dolan's want to pay much less. The FOX fear is that an arbitrator would go halfway and the hard-fought negotiation with Time-Warner would be undercut by a renegade family willing to play hardball.

As a cable television consumer with a monthly cable/internet bill of about \$175 monthly, I appreciate efforts to hold the line on increasing costs to subscribers. But Cablevision's PR tactics in the matter at hand have been deceptive and disingenuous. Cablevision owns the MSG channels (which carry Rangers, Knicks and Red Bull games). It charges cable and dish companies significantly more than what FOX is seeking.

The fact TBS has ALCS rights this year means doomsday for Cablevision customers won't come until next week, should the Yanks make the World Series. Between now and then, I'd expect FOX to sharpen its public argument.

The broadcast network fired its first real true informational salvo on Tuesday afternoon when FOX TV stations president Dennis Swanson called in to Francesa.

It didn't go well. It was a near-shouting match. Francesa postured as an advocate for the sports fan without a FOX signal but didn't care a bit about what's at stake in terms of the network's content-related costs and efforts to recoup them. Swanson stammered a lot and had a hard time getting beyond his opposition to arbitration. He refused to cite numbers but talked about "fair value" and said FOX wants a deal with Cablevision that's the "same" as what Time Warner pays.

The argument turned ridiculously circular when Francesa kept going back to the idea that Cablevision is acting more fair because it supports arbitration and FOX doesn't. Francesa continually equated arbitration with "reasonableness." Swanson got rightly flustered by Francesa's narrow view. "Arbitration would reward Cablevision for not seriously negotiating with us," said Swanson.

10-19-10 2035

The announcement was low-key and got limited play but the great Seattle rock duo Dutchess and the Duke has called it quits after recording two brilliant records. The news was casually delivered by Jesse Lortz (the Duke) at the end of a Q and A published in The Stranger, a Seattle weekly. Lortz told musician and Stranger contributor Lars Finberg in mid-September that the Dutchess and the Duke were "done" after they play two gigs later this year. That statement lingered for weeks without further explanation until a rep for the band's label Hardly Art confirmed the break-up to the Stranger's competitor Seattle Weekly. Lortz subsequently told the Weekly that the Dutchess and the Duke are ending because "it wasn't fun anymore." The views of talented bandmate Kimberly Morrison haven't appeared in the music media since Lortz spoke out but the hope here is that she'll continue making music.

10-17-10 0130

The great Portland, OR trio The Thermals lit it up pretty good Wednesday night at Irving Plaza near Manhattan's Union Square.

Slow ticket sales prompted entertainment giant Live Nation to shift from greed mode to generosity. It offered two admissions for the price of one. Even so, the venue was only half full. The offer came months after I bought my single ticket for the show (\$18 plus \$10.50 in add-on charges).

At a capacity of about 1100, Irving Plaza may be too big for The Thermals. I don't know. CMJ is next week, so some rock and rollers are probably resting up. Perhaps the less-than-great new Thermals record "Personal Life" is partly to blame, too.

The highlight for me came early in the 60-minute set when the band played the 2010 B-side "There's Nothing You Can't Learn." As on all Thermals songs (five records in the books), front man Hutch Harris clearly enunciates the words and packs a catchy, fist-pumping tale into a three-minute hole. Kathy Foster's bass finds your low-note sweet spot and promotes consistent movement a few notches below mosh. Foster is fun to watch. Her long blond-colored bangs flopped into her face with the beat. She unscrewed tops from small bottles of water between songs and gulped 'em down faster than I drank my 24-ounce can of Bud.

The Thermals moved to the Kill Rock Stars label from Sub Pop in 2009. Foster told a Fresno, CA radio station that the band left Sub Pop because it wanted to own their master recordings.

I timed my arrival at Irving Plaza to miss two lackluster-sounding opening acts. Those aforementioned 24-ounce Bud cans are sold at Irving's bar for \$10. They're served at a temperature so cold you have to repeatedly switch hands when you first begin sipping 'em.

-In articulating his support for expanded replay in MLB, Yanks GM Brian Cashman told Francesa Wednesday that fans in the ballpark currently have significantly more clarity on close calls than umpires on the field. Cashman said he was armed with an I-Pad at the two Yankee playoff games in Minnesota and watched replays on a game feed from MLB.com at his seat behind the Yankee on-deck circle. Cashman says he's observed a growing percentage of fans at games with near immediate access to replay, producing palpable groans from the seats when a call is blown. "Forty-thousand people sitting there have technology and the people who need it the most don't have it," said Cashman.

-The plus-220 being offered on a Giants NLCS win was too much for this from-a-distance Frisco fan to pass up. I'm hoping it's quiet at work Saturday night when I watch The Freak out-pitch Doc on the tube in the series opener.

10-14-10 1515

The crook who presided over New York's \$125 billion state pension fund from 2003 to 2006 confessed in court last week that he got sweet kickbacks for steering investment dough to a California venture capitalist.

A six-figure salary wasn't enough for then state comptroller Alan Hevesi. He admits allocating a quarter-billion dollars of state pension money to Elliott Broidy of Markstone Capital Partners. In return, Hevesi and a crony got free international pleasure trips, campaign donations and bogus "consulting" fees worth a total of almost a million bucks.

There are a couple outrageous aspects of the Hevesi guilty plea. First, Hevesi is expected to avoid jail time. The judge in the case said Hevesi is a cooperating witness and is expected to help prosecutors bring down a Hevesi sidekick who allegedly thought up the scheme. That's ridiculous. Hevesi was the comptroller. He controlled the purse strings. Hevesi shouldn't have taken a dime on top of his handsome government salary. He should be the big fish in this case yet prosecutors are treating him as if he's down the chain a notch or two.

Guess who's running the government's case? That's right, it's state attorney general and gubernatorial candidate Andy Cuomo who conveniently got splashy headlines from Hevesi's pre-election guilty plea. Too bad most New York voters won't find out until after the election that Hevesi will duck the clink. You gotta wonder if plea bargain talks between Cuomo and Hevesi came down to political timing in exchange for a soft sentence?

What's worse is that Hevesi will keep pulling down two fat state pensions. He gets \$105-thousand a year for his state government service (executive and legislative branch) and another 62-grand annual as a retiree from the state university system (he was a professor). All of it's tax-free.

He has a felony record for cashing in on his stewardship of the state pension system yet will continue to draw tons of money from that very system.

When you look at the consequences of getting busted for perpetrating a pay for play scheme in this state, why wouldn't anybody go the crook route?

10-12-10 2100

New York GOP gubernatorial candidate Carl Paladino couldn't have picked a worse time to share his caveman views on homosexuality.

Just days after ugly anti-gay incidents at Rutgers and in the Bronx, Paladino told a Hasidic gathering in Brooklyn that homosexuality wasn't a "valid option." He said young people were getting "brainwashed" into thinking homosexuality was o-k and he said young people would end up much more successful if they went the happy hetero route.

Paladino didn't espouse violence against gays but he did a fine job of marginalizing and ostracizing them.

By doing so, Paladino shot a gaping hole in his sinking campaign for governor. Publicly objecting to state-sanctioned gay marriage is arguably a bad choice for a candidate running for New York governor. Paladino went much further. He made a categorical, on-the-record condemnation of homosexuals in 2010 - and that, my friends, is an automatic disqualifier if the plan is to occupy the governor's mansion in Albany.

Paladino's campaign manager Michael Caputo gets blame here. When stunned newspaper reporters tried to get a handle on Paladino's rant, Caputo wholeheartedly defended the comments saying they were in synch with the views of the Catholic church and a "majority of New Yorkers."

Caputo should never be asked to spearhead a major political campaign again. Yeah, his candidate had

flaws entering the run against Andrew Cuomo. But Caputo took a guy with an outside shot and allowed his boss to swashbuckle and swerve so badly there's no way now Paladino can shake the widening perception he's a nut. Even the Post ridicules him.

Paladino could have hung in this race had he limited his message to fixing dysfunction in the state legislature. Paladino is so outside the political power structure that he was seen as capable of busting up the crooked, top heavy, behind-closed-doors stagnation that has ruled Albany going back at least two decades. But Caputo has let Carl be Carl and it's been a political disaster.

All Cuomo has had to do in this campaign is sit back, stay quiet and watch his once insurgent opponent self-destruct.

10-12-10 0215

Air traffic controllers at LaGuardia Airport moved into their brand new perch in the sky Sunday morning after years of waiting for an improved view.

The new, federally-financed tower (above right) is 235-feet tall, putting controllers about 85 feet higher than they were in the old tower (above left). Their new work space is said to be about twice as big.

Construction of the new tower was surprisingly non-intrusive to LaGuardia's operations despite its proximity to the central terminal building. It went up in less than three years and sits just twenty-five yards or so south of where American Airlines passengers wait for yellow taxis.

The massive concrete and steel column that holds the top of the new tower's work space has been in place since late 2009. It's taken the better part of this year to complete installation of the new tower's vast amount of technology.

Many aviation buffs have expressed concern about the fate of the old tower (used since 1964), citing its historic relevance and distinctive architecture. I'm told demolition crews will remove the upper half of the old tower to eliminate a blind spot it creates for those standing in the new tower. What's left of the old structure will stay in place at least until a planned overhaul of the airport's central terminal building is undertaken.

10-10-10 0130

News coverage of CNN's decision to fire afternoon anchor Rick Sanchez made it sound like he got axed purely for his bizarre rant about Jews on satellite radio Thursday. But really, Sanchez had become a laughingstock well before his radio comments made it impossible for CNN to keep him on the air. Sanchez was hard to take seriously. His lack of news judgment and projection of self-importance made him an easy target for anybody who thinks CNN should be a place for consumption of serious news. Jon Stewart wouldn't have consistently used Sanchez clips for laughs on his show if Sanchez wasn't such an egregiously bad newsman.

-I'd hope Chicago puts up some resistance to a Rahm Emanuel run for mayor. Fair or not, Emanuel feels like an extension of the Daley regime. I don't have a candidate for you, but it seems like Chicago needs

somebody capable of unification rather than polarization.

-Air traffic controllers in this country are using a new phrase to guide commercial aviation pilots taxiing to the runway prior to take-off. As of last Thursday, controllers began issuing the radio instruction “line up and wait” rather than “taxi into position and hold” when it’s a particular airplane’s turn to move onto the beginning of the departure runway. The old instruction is a far more accurate description of what’s expected but the FAA is mandating usage of the new phrase to conform to international practices. “Line up and wait” is clumsy and doesn’t really make sense. When an airplane goes onto a departure runway, it’s not “lining up.” It’s on the runway by itself, waiting to take off. The long-time instruction “clear for takeoff” remains unchanged.

10-3-10 0120

I hit the movie theatre Wednesday afternoon to see Philip Seymour Hoffman’s directorial film debut and really enjoyed it. Everybody already knows the guy can act (he’s also directed plays) but it was clear watching “Jack Goes Boating” that he has unique talent behind the camera too.

Hoffman does double duty here. He plays the lead part of Jack, a 40-something bachelor driving a limo in New York City. The movie starts with Jack’s limo-driving pal Clyde and Clyde’s wife Lucy hosting a casual get-together. Lucy invites her co-worker Connie and Clyde presses Jack to attend. Clyde and Lucy play matchmaker and the evening goes pretty well for everybody.

The movie is basically about Jack’s determination to learn two basic skills (swimming and cooking) to help advance his romantic prospects with Connie.

New York actors dominate the small cast and the film is shot entirely in New York City.

Hoffman lives in the West Village, which probably explains why the film does such a wonderful job illustrating both the constraints and only-here pleasures of life in this city.

The film’s climax at Clyde and Lucy’s apartment will drive you nuts. Drugs are involved. I guess that’s all I’ll say.

If you see it, you may detect a couple moments when Hoffman goes into an accent native to these parts. For most of the movie, it’s not there. That’s kinda weird, especially for such a precise performer. There’s also a sappy sing-along scene that involves an unrealistic effort by Jack’s friends to coax him out of a bathroom. The other beef is trying to buy the notion that swimming skills are a prerequisite for boating. No big deal, really, considering how good the movie is overall.

I really liked how Hoffman allowed so many scenes to drift without dialogue. Looks on faces and lush urban sights (including a dazzling few minutes inside the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel) were plenty deep to convey message. There were also a couple of abbreviated dream sequences that were visually impressive but not conventional.

The soundtrack is solid. Fleet Foxes contributed two songs. Grizzly Bear’s ‘09 tune “All We Ask” fits

better than any of 'em.

I'm not sure whether this film will get much distribution. It's only playing at a few theatres here. There were about two dozen folks assembled at the 2:20 PM screening in the room at the 14-screen multiplex below Union Square. Admission was \$13.

I don't see enough movies to know whether Hoffman will contend for end-of-year awards but if he does, it should be in the director's category.

9-29-10 2200

The Times did its first full-blown profile of New York GOP gubernatorial candidate Carl Paladino Monday and gave the tea-bagger even-handed treatment.

The piece amounted to almost a full page of text and included lots of detail about Paladino's career as a Buffalo real estate developer. Written by David Halbfinger and Michael Barbaro, the story started on page one (it jumped to page 21) and described formative events that helped produce Paladino's "rash style and undeniable passion."

The general election is just five weeks away and few in the state's electorate outside Buffalo knew much about Paladino before his upset victory in the September 14 primary. The fact he has even a nominal chance of becoming New York's next governor makes it crucial he face thorough scrutiny before voters decide between him and attorney general Andy Cuomo.

I'd expect we'll start seeing all the major media outlets helping in this process. The Times story was a good start. One detail about Paladino I hadn't heard before is that he blames the Internal Revenue Service for the death of his father-in-law. Paladino says a baseless IRS investigation (and ensuing wage garnishments) in the late 60's led to his father-in-law's fatal stroke. After the death, Paladino claims he examined all the documents in the matter and discovered a case without merit. Paladino says he was able to extract a full refund from the government and contrition from the IRS agent who handled the case.

The Times was unable to obtain verification from the IRS that the story is true as Paladino tells it, but the anecdote illustrates Paladino's deep distrust in the government, a Tea Party trademark.

-My affinity for punters and kickers left me feeling bad for a couple guys at the conclusion of NFL week three. Both Garrett Hartley of the Saints and Sebastian Janikowski of the Raiders missed easy, game-winning trey attempts. Hartley's boot wide-left from 29 in OT against ATL followed a bad miss from 32 in the Saints' opener and a near-miss from 37 to end week two. It's hard to imagine Sean Payton tolerating much more inaccuracy from Hartley. In Oakland, Janikowski's job is safe despite a 32-yard miss Sunday that would have won the game for the Raiders in Arizona. Janikowski is asked to make a lot of long field goals - and he often drills 'em. He's made sixteen attempts from fifty-plus in the last three seasons and is 144 for 156 from under 40 in his career. The fact he's one of the league's best kickers on such a bad, disorganized team is all the more amazing. During Sunday's game in Arizona, Janikowski was forced to contend with Raider personnel confusion as he lined up for two of his kicks. He often gets dispatched onto the field with a stale play clock, leaving little time to prepare.

-The Red Bulls announced Tuesday that season ticket holders will not be asked to pay extra for any home playoff dates this postseason. In an e-mail sent to those with a full season plan, the Red Bulls said the same seats used during the regular season are “included” for any post-season match the team may play. This policy runs contrary to what other professional sports team do. If you have season tickets to any of the other major sports, you’re asked to pony up (often at a marked-up per-date price) for postseason contests.

-Met manager Jerry Manuel hasn’t been formally terminated yet, but if you listened to his weekly chat on WFAN Tuesday you know for sure he’s a goner. Jerry spoke in a starkly somber and regretful tone about his reign and all but said he’s out the door come next week.

-The addition of two Obama appointees to the US Supreme Court brought hope we’d get live TV coverage of the high court’s proceedings. But the Court’s announcement Tuesday of a new policy on release of in-house produced audio coverage would indicate full public access to the court’s oral arguments is a long ways off. In a three-paragraph press release, the Court said it will begin offering free, archived audio of all arguments beginning with the October term. Problem is, the stuff won’t go up on the Supreme Court web site until the end of each week the court conducts oral arguments. It’s better than nothing, but there’s no good reason in 2010 to sit on those recordings for up to five days. C-Span has been pressing the Court for a long time to televise oral arguments with the same professionalism and dignity it uses to cover the legislative branch. Said C-Span’s president Susan Swain on the C-Span web site: “We continue to hope that the Court’s next step will be same-day release of all oral arguments, and ultimately, television coverage of its public sessions.”

9-28-10 2245

Pavement’s four-night Central Park run ended Friday night with a performance that failed to put the expected exclamation point on the band’s otherwise smashing return to New York City.

Because it was a Friday night – and because it was the final NYC date on the band’s reunion tour – there was wide expectation of something special. Perhaps we’d even get some clarity about whether Pavement may decide to remain an active touring act beyond this year.

Fans attending the NYC dates prior to Friday had transmitted such overwhelmingly positive buzz and elation about what they saw, it felt going into Friday night as if it would all explode into a peak experience.

Instead, Friday night’s show was choppy, out of synch and ultimately a bit disappointing in its failure to throw a big strike. That’s not saying it was bad. It was wonderful. It just didn’t have the same magic as the other two shows I saw earlier in the week.

Pavement didn’t even take it right up to the 10 PM curfew, opting to call it a night about ten minutes early. When the band’s members waved goodbye, there was no hint about whether it was goodbye forever. It was more a business-like salute before heading out for suburban DC and a tour stop sponsored by a cell phone company based in the UK.

Brooklyn-based recording engineer Bryce Goggin was called on to play keys for a sequence late in Friday's gig. It was the only on stage "special guest" appearance at the New York shows.

We had a group of twelve friends at this show. All but me have kids now which meant a productive night for the amalgamated babysitters union. It was up near 80 degrees and very humid throughout the evening.

Perhaps some of how I perceived Friday's show was clouded by where I stood. I was close but I got stuck behind a barrel-chested guy who showed his great enthusiasm for Pavement by lunging to the beat in a forward-and-back motion. He appeared to be in control. His feet remained planted and his movement came entirely from bending at the knees and waist. When he long-lurched backward, the rear of his head would come within an inch of my face. That's no exaggeration. The guy never made contact but he was invading my space.

This went on for the first 45 minutes of the Pavement set. At first I tried to convince myself that the guy was totally harmless and I should not let the back of his head concern me.

But because he was such a sturdy-looking fellow with a body-builder frame, I started imagining what would happen if he lost precision on his movements and bounced the back of his head off the front of mine.

I started obsessing about getting a broken face and couldn't at all concentrate on Pavement.

Because the crowd was so tightly bunched, there was nowhere for me to go. I was shoe-horned in behind lunging-man with people packed around me in every direction. At just about the point it became unbearable, the crowd seemed to re-align itself and suddenly I had a new pocket of healthy space near my friends. It was at this point that two wild-eyed young men came barreling into the crowd from behind simply to wreak havoc. They appeared to have nothing on their agenda other than making trouble. Soon, they were challenged by a couple of angry fans causing yet another distraction that lasted perhaps ten minutes.

Silence Kit and Trigger Cut came at about the time I finally settled into my spot. Both tunes sounded great.

I'm not able to piece together what happened when we all exited the venue but Beantown Perl and I got lost together in the Park and blew about thirty minutes trying to find Fifth Avenue.

The future of Pavement is now essentially in the hands of Malkmus. He decides whether the band keeps it going for another round of dates in 2011 or beyond. The virtuosity Malkmus displayed this past week certainly validates the reunion. Fans have reacted with universally positive praise. The decade lost didn't in any way damage the band's ability to perform a wide range of its recorded material. Whatever happens, we were the unexpected beneficiary of a memorable week of rock and roll here in New York City. Thank you Pavement for such a great jolt of music and a welcome new batch of great memories.

9-26-10 0030

When the Jets meet the Fins Sunday night in Miami, you'll be seeing two head coaches who are carrying

a whole lot less physical weight than they were burdened with the last time these two teams met.

Dolphins coach Tony Sparano told Francesa Thursday afternoon that a strict diet and exercise regimen initiated in the off-season has lowered his weight to 208 pounds from 277. Sparano said he hasn't had a single serving of pasta since beginning his effort to lose weight.

Rex Ryan had lap-band surgery in March. He told the Post two weeks ago he was tipping the scales at 288, down from the 348 he was sloshing around with last season.

-Viewers didn't know it as it happened, but Houston Texans kicker Neil Rackers was nearly forced to attempt his game-winning OT field goal against the Skins last Sunday with a bare right foot. Rackers told the Houston Chronicle that his kicking shoe broke apart during practice kicks into a net just minutes before he was asked to make a 35-yarder to end the game. A Texans equipment man rushed into the team's locker to find a backup shoe and rushed it out to Rackers. Had it not been for a long replay review of a Joel Dreesen reception to set up the kick, Rackers said he may have been forced to attempt the kick bare-footed. The last NFL kicker to attempt a field goal without a shoe and sock was Jeff Wilkins of the Rams.

-Yanks radio play-by-play man John Sterling has a catch-phrase for all Yankee players when they hit a home run and so listeners were curious to know what he'd do when Lance Berkman went deep. Berkman's first homer as a Yankee came Wednesday night. Sterling's call: "Sir Lancelot Rides to the Rescue. C'est lui! C'est lui!" Sterling is a theatre buff and so it's not unusual for him to incorporate that love into his home run calls. His Berkman call is inspired by the musical Camelot which had a long Broadway run in the early 60's and several revivals since.

-Some Pavement fans posting anonymously have stated they've seen tension between band members during the band's gigs in New York this week. One said Malkmus appeared annoyed Tuesday night during some of Bob's random comments between songs. I haven't detected any chemistry issues whatsoever although Malkmus did get perturbed Wednesday night when a couple fans near me continually yelled for the song "Texas Never Whispers" off Watery, Domestic. Spiral and Ibold have appeared especially chummy. They hung out together to watch a portion of Wednesday's opener Times New Viking and have exchanged numerous happy smiles with each other on stage during the two performances I saw.

9-23-10 2030

A strong thunderstorm packing lightning prompted organizers of Pavement's Wednesday night gig in Central Park to pull the band off the stage halfway through their two-hour show.

Heavy rain fell much of the evening but when the storm hit its peak at about 845 PM, a woman appeared on stage and asked the band to stop playing. She also asked attendees sitting on aluminum bleachers in the outdoor venue's rear to vacate their positions.

The delay lasted about 25 minutes. Pavement front man Steve Malkmus (pictured above) apologized for the interruption and appeared to feel discomfort about the promoter's decision. The 3000 fans or so on

hand didn't mind. They stood in a pouring rain throughout and waited out the delay with great patience.

The rain failed to extinguish the many lit marijuana platforms dominating the audience. Few people seemed bothered. When Pavement returned to the stage a few minutes after 9 PM, the drenched fandom was giddy.

Knowing the park's 10 PM curfew remained firm, Pavement accelerated the set list and made a point to squeeze in the planned material by eliminating pauses between encores.

The band was under cover. The crowd was fully exposed to the elements. The band seemed to enjoy the watching the crowd's disregard for the pelting rain.

Summer Babe got played. Bobby had A-game and Westy stood on top of his drum kit on two occasions demonstrating agility not seen the night before.

Before the show, roadies poured six bottles of craft beer into red cups near Bobby's performance area.

You know where to find the set list. These shows are getting detailed coverage at the usual rock and roll web sites. Malkmus is rotating multiple guitars into these sets but the one getting the most mileage appears to be an old one with several layers of tape on the main connection point between strap and instrument.

I returned to Iggy's on Second Avenue and 76th Street for pre-show pints. After the show, Mike and Dionne took me over to the new PJ Clarke's outpost near Lincoln Square.

I'll take a night off to recover and miss Thursday's show but will attend the final night of the New York Pavement run on Friday. Beantown Perl is rolling into town for that one and most of the gang plans to attend so it should be a big night.

Times New Viking opened on Wednesday. A woman claiming to be the mother of Viking's keyboard player warmed up the opener with a comedy act that was booed profusely.

My camera, wallet and wad of cash was packed in sandwich bags during the heavy rain. I had brought along a two-dollar rain poncho expecting inclement weather but decided against donning it to show solidarity with the soaked-to-the-bone masses.

9-23-10 0155

The great rock and roll band Pavement opened a four-night run at Rumsey Playfield in Central Park Tuesday night with the tune Shady Lane. Malkmus held a long pause at a minute into the song to get the crowd of 3000-plus rolling. He and the band proceeded to rip it up for two hours.

"Perfect Depth" off Westing was the unexpected surprise tune that sparked enthusiasm.

"Fight This Generation" turned out to be the half-assed dud. "Summer Babe" was left off the setlist but will no doubt get played tonight.

That Pavement chose to play in the Park versus let's say the Beacon turned out to be a good decision. The weather for all the shows will be basically 68 degrees and probably dry. It could have been anything. It could've been rainy and cold. Instead, optimum summer-ish conditions will prevail (a slight chance of showers is in the forecast for Wednesday night).

The stage is a few hundred yards west of Fifth Avenue at about 71th Street. It's a beautiful wooded space. For the band to obtain multiple dates in the middle of Manhattan's crown jewel of park land is a notable career achievement. It's good for the New York fans, too.

Any visit to Central Park is uplifting but to see a great rock and roll band in the middle of it feels like you're getting away with something. The city's 10 PM park curfew necessitates an earlier-than-usual rock and roll start time but allows the 35-50 crowd going to these shows a chance to sleep off the night a bit before returning to their Range Life.

Tickets for the Central Park shows went on sale a year ago and people gobbled them up immediately. This week, Stub Hub has had a glut of 'em for sale at less than face value. On Tuesday night, scalpers were going as low as ten bucks a pop with an hour before show time. Malkmus made reference to the lack of re-sale demand in a self-deprecating way but stopped short of acknowledging that fans could basically just show up with meal money and walk into the gig.

Pavement may have been a bit over-ambitious about true sell-outs for five New York shows (they added a Brooklyn outdoor gig late) but who cares. Everybody who wanted/wants to go to one or more of them can go without a problem at a more than reasonable price.

And the band will have a pretty good stack of dough when the tour ends in Vegas in ten days, anyway. They'll have done 70-some dates in 18 countries at mostly decent-sized venues over seven months. The average per-gig haul is a number high enough that likely made any apprehension about tarnishing legacy easy to dismiss. The way things ended with the band a decade ago combined with the fact there's zero new material since tells you all you need to know about what motivated the reunion.

That's not criticism. The five guys on stage who will get paid well for this tour got paid way short when they were a real band. In this instance, it's totally fair to cash in.

My only small reservation a year ago when the tour was announced was feeling a little weirdness with over-the-top exuberance from the music fandom about a reunion tour. Even for Pavement, reunion tours should be scoffed at to some degree. There are so many great new bands making music and touring in support of what they make at what is typically their own expense. Those are tours to be excited about. You get turned on to a new record and play it to death and can't wait to see it performed live. When Pavement quit in what was kind of a huff and stopped making records, fans were left to rely on Malkmus solo material. I loved his stuff and supported it with the expectation that's all we'd ever get.

For me, the biggest gratification from these Pavement reunion dates will be seeing friends who were there in the hey-day. They'll all be there in the Park this week. We likely won't push the mind-altering limit that was such a memorable sub-plot to Pavement shows in Louisville, Chicago and New York in the 90's but

we'll stand there with merlot in hand and be really glad we're still around able to re-live it a bit.

I have an extra ticket if anybody needs one tonight.

See you at the Park.

9-22-10 0200

I was fiddling around with the NFL "app" on my cellphone on the way into work Sunday to get some scores and made the surprising discovery that this rarely-used "app" includes a live stream of the NFL Red Zone channel for free.

I had no idea.

So, there I was on my bus ride into the job watching NFL football.

I had heard about Red Zone from friends but never personally observed its magic.

Imagine what CBS tries to do each March as the network switches in and out of the endings of NCAA basketball tournament contests. It's kind of like that. The Red Zone gives the viewer with broad, league-wide interest a slice of as much action as possible. It's exhilarating. Especially if your team isn't playing.

Since the 1 PM window on Sunday had nine games on the schedule (not including the Jets), the Red Zone had lots of action to cover. The quality of the video stream was decent and I wasn't even using a wi-fi connection (which is recommended by the app).

The Red Zone's most valuable moment came a minute or two before 4:15 PM. The local CBS station was forced to cut out of Steelers/Titans bonus coverage to start the Jets/Pats telecast.

I activated Red Zone on my phone in time to see Kerry Collins dump a nonsensical screen pass well outside of the red zone to Chris Johnson as time expired. Young should have thrown into the end zone. Johnson was quickly apprehended in bounds to end the game. It wasn't dramatic, but Red Zone allowed me to see a play the local viewer wasn't able to watch live. I dug that. The local CBS station was in commercial and there I was watching the non-dramatic but potentially exciting conclusion of Titans/Steelers.

-There were two plays Sunday I saw on regular TV that appeared to merit an overturn but were allowed to stand. The crucial Favre fumble deep in his own territory that led to the Koa Misi recovery for a touchdown appeared to be a forward pass. There was no Viking challenge but it looked like Favre had extension and release. The other play was more conclusive I thought. Hester got credited for a TD in the second quarter of Bears/Cowboys but didn't appear to have control of the ball before he left the end zone on the play. A replay review upheld the score.

-The fifteen-yard taunting flag that flew after Braylon Edwards of the Jets hauled in a second quarter TD catch was just punishment for a foolish act but it didn't teach him a lesson. He taunted again after a two-point conversion a quarter later. It prompted this observation from Jim Nantz on CBS: "Somebody

needs to talk to him,” he said. That’s the problem with the Jets. The guy responsible for policing detrimental on-field conduct lacks credibility when it comes to such foolishness. Rex Ryan is the master of the taunt. It’s impossible for those he oversees to gain clarity on a line that separates exuberance and enthusiasm from boorishness.

-It’s always great fun to observe Bill Belichick’s post-game handshake with whoever the Jet coach is after the two rivals play. After Sunday’s game, Belichick accepted an embrace from Rex and appeared gentlemanly all the way.

-I’ll give Field Turf credit for one thing: the black rubber that kicks up when feet make contact with it has proven to be a useful marker or tracer on hi-def replays when analyzing close calls on sideline plays.

9-20-10 0130

New double-decker luggage racks installed inside the middle of all the new buses on the Q33 route to LaGuardia have suddenly made for a less desirable commute for airline workers using the popular mode of public transit.

Three rows of two seats each have been removed to make way for the luggage rack.

The MTA has essentially decided it’s more important for luggage to have a seat than the workers who use that bus every day to reach the airport. What’s especially flawed (and perhaps not anticipated by the MTA) about the whole thing is a blatant reluctance by luggage-toting travelers to use the rack.

In a week’s worth of watching reactions to the new racks, I’ve noticed most people with bags prefer to keep them by their side. Perhaps they’re afraid of leaving the bag unattended on a rack, where it may be susceptible to theft.

It’s been interesting to see the response of regular Q33 riders. Many are noticeably perturbed about the loss of seats. The bus fills up quicker and the rack isn’t being used.

The Q33 is a very popular bus route. It’s almost always crowded. Day and night. I’d guess at least half the riders are airport workers. The other half are split roughly even between passengers with luggage and regular local residents who jump on and off along the route.

I’m usually supportive of the MTA. I believe the entity that runs public transit in this city is generally responsive to service needs and has an astute handle on the efficient operation of a vast system of buses and trains. The luggage racks are a bad move, however.

Bring the seats back and let those with bags slide ‘em under the seat. The majority of Q33 ridership gets on the bus without luggage and wants to sit down. The air traveler who takes the Q33 to and from LaGuardia doesn’t trust the luggage rack. Get rid of it. Bring back the seats.

-Times reporter Joe Nocera wrote a story for Saturday’s newspaper saying the biggest high-rise office building going up on the World Trade Center site will take a financial bath when it opens for business. Nocera said One World Trade will need to charge \$130 per square foot to break even but will have a hard

time finding tenants to pay half that. On the hook is the Port Authority of NY/NJ. Nocera got a denial from the Port on his numbers. Time will tell, I guess. Nocera's main point is that One World Trade is being built more for the sake of filling the downtown skyline rather than because it's a viable commercial real estate enterprise. If Nocera's math is right, the disturbing thing to watch for will be whether the Port robs other properties it manages (tunnels, bridges, airports, Path train) to cover the shortfall.

-Notre Dame's stunning OT loss to Michigan State shouldn't mask the fact Brian Kelly's oversight of the Irish team has clearly resulted in a better football product than what Charlie Weis put out there with equal or better talent. Yeah, Kelly has made some baffling in-game decisions but you can already see he has the ship pointed in the right direction organizationally. I'm not sure any coach would have sniffed out the daring fake field goal attempt by the Spartans to end Saturday night's thriller. What preceded that play was a thrilling college football game with tremendous effort by the Irish.

9-19-10 0130

The local cable news channel NY1 carried extensive live coverage of Charlie Rangel's election night victory celebration in Harlem Tuesday night. Two prominent public officials who enthusiastically appeared on stage with Rangel put dents in their reputations by doing so. Former Manhattan D-A Bob Morgenthau stood next to Rangel as the disgraced congressman tried to drum up victim pity during remarks to supporters. The 91-year-old Morgenthau is a retired prosecutor with a spotless, high-integrity record. His pro-Rangel revelry is difficult to understand. City Comptroller John Liu also whooped it up with Rangel two nights ago. Liu is a former councilman from Queens. His current post demands at least some minimal distance from meat and potato politics. Liu is the city's chief financial officer. He certainly shouldn't be formally yucking it up with a guy who ducks taxes. I couldn't help but laugh when Rangel introduced Liu to his supporters. The congressman twice mispronounced Liu's name (sounds like Lou), calling him "John Jew" and "Bob Lou."

-I'd like to wait and see what happens Sunday against the Pats before I panic about this Jets season but it's safe to say the most questionable move past spring was getting rid of Alan Faneca. The Jets wanted out from under a deal that had about \$25 million remaining and perhaps made the assessment the all-pro was in decline. What's clear now is Faneca's removal from the left side of the offensive line has weakened efforts to run the ball. "It looks like the Jets have left themselves naked at left guard," said Francesa. Outspoken and respected Jet ambassador Joe Willie took it even further, taking more personal aim at Faneca's replacement Matt Slauson. "They need to get some spinach into Popeye at left guard and make him a stronger and better player. Otherwise, it's gonna be a long season offensively."

-The web site Covers.com says 102 of 147 college football games that had posted odds so far this season have finished with final scores exceeding the listed total. Known as the "over-under," gamblers can bet on whether a game's final score will fall above or below a certain number. Over the course of an entire season, there's typically no glaring sport-wide trend as it relates to over-unders. For the over to be clicking at a rate of nearly 70-percent is unusual. The discrepancy will almost certainly even out as conference schedules begin and matchups become more balanced.

-I'm usually at least mildly amused by the witty, long-running ad campaign of Continental Airlines. The company's ads include dozens of different slogans incorporating local references. They're all over this

city. Bus stops. Taxis. Newspapers. Subway stations. I think most of the ad copy is effective but I saw a sign yesterday at the Willets Point subway stop that stretched the limits of credibility. With Continental's name and logo as the basis for comparison, the sign said: "More International Than The 7 Train." The person who wrote this obviously hasn't taken the 7 train. Continental currently has 132 international destinations. The 7 train has a ridership way more international than that.

9-16-10 2100

It was an absolutely perfect afternoon for public high school soccer in Queens on Wednesday. I chose a contest that appeared competitive on paper and indeed it was.

Forest Hills scored a goal with less than a minute to go and beat Flushing 3-2.

I had never traveled to this part of Queens before. The game was held at Flushing Memorial Field at the corner of 149th Street and Bayside Avenue. To get there, I took the 7 train to downtown Flushing and then jumped on a Q34 bus at Main Street. The bus took me straight to the field.

The immediate neighborhood adjoining Memorial Field had an almost suburban feel. Some houses in the neighborhood have small yards. The field's surface is a synthetic carpet. It appeared to be in better shape than most of the artificial fields I've seen in the city.

About fifty fans attended the match under clear blue skies. There were two refs. Forest Hills and Flushing traded goals and were knotted at two as the contest neared a conclusion. The ref working the far sideline (wearing two watches) yelled out "one minute." With that, Israel Bermudez of Forest Hills broke loose with the ball and launched a 25-yarder that beat Flushing keeper Malik Murray. It was the second goal of the match for Bermudez.

The best player on the field without question was Forest Hills senior Shokhrukhm Zakhidjonov (pictured above - right hand in air). Zakhidjonov is a lanky and agile senior serving multiple roles on the squad. He started the match as a last-man-back defender, primary ball-handler and crisis manager. He also took all the goal kicks. A few minutes into the second half, Zakhidjonov switched to striker and promptly scored a goal.

He issued both verbal and hand-signal instructions to teammates. In the first half, Zakhidjonov scolded teammate Alexis Orrego when the sophomore keeper taunted the opponent by letting the soccer ball sit untouched near his own goal, only to scoop it up when the opposition rushed near it.

When Zakhidjonov got his second half goal to make the score 2-1, he turned toward his teammates, stretched his arms horizontally and cracked a small smile.

After the match ended, both teams lined up in front of their benches and proceeded to shake the hands of their opponent.

9-15-10 2145

New York City unveiled its new vote-counting technology at polling places across the city Tuesday. There

were widespread reports of problems related to deployment of the new electronic ballot-readers but my voting experience was seamless.

Gone are the ancient knob and lever machines that left zero physical trace of a voter's choice should the mechanism become inoperative or faulty.

The new machines are much better. They look like automated teller machines. You feed your completed paper ballot into a slot and it sucks it in for processing. It doesn't matter if you insert the ballot face up - or down. A cheery and helpful poll worker stood near the machine I used. She offered instructions about how to insert the ballot but insisted I actually do it.

The voting machine's screen tells the voter that the ballot is being processed. A few seconds later, it declares the process complete.

The paper ballot fed into the machine is retained as backup should the machine fail.

I walked into my regular polling place at about 1:15 PM Tuesday. I vote on the second floor of a K-12 public charter school in the neighborhood. Poll workers sit at card tables and cross-reference names and signatures with same in a large catalog filled with records of hundreds of registered voters (arranged alphabetically).

As a registered member of the Democratic Party, I was handed a primary ballot with just three contested races.

Kirsten Gillibrand will walk over her no-name opponent in the US Senate primary. I voted for the extreme underdog Gail Goode in large part to penalize Gilly for her awful Sotomayor nomination speech.

New York has a five-way state A-G's race which I discussed a couple days ago (I voted for Coffey). And finally, we had a two-way local race for the state assembly post vacated by Jose Peralta. Francisco Moya will no doubt crush Hiram Monserrate. It's just a matter of by how much. Moya is a long-time party machine foot soldier with full support from the people who wield great power in determining election outcome.

Monserrate doesn't stand a chance but a heavy-duty landslide loss might make him go away. Monserrate is fresh off a humiliating expulsion from the State Senate for roughing up his girlfriend. I don't love Moya, but I believe it's important for Monserrate to get a clear message from voters that he needs to get a real, private-sector job like the rest of us.

The actual paper ballot is kinda weird. It's a large sheet of paper but the font size is ridiculously small. The letters are smaller than the font you see here on this site. I had to really focus to see who I was picking. You fill in a circle next to your preferred candidate with a black pen. The pen is attached to a string at the small work station used by voters to fill out the ballot. Several magnifying glasses were available throughout the polling place. I'd think a legal challenge regarding minimum font size is a certainty. Hopefully, future ballots are easier to read.

Of the couple dozen people who were voting when I was there, all but me and one other guy appeared to

be older than 60.

One pervasive complaint I heard from reading the dozens of comments posted on the Times web site Tuesday concerned what many believe is a lack of privacy using the new voting technology.

The old machines had a curtain. You were definitely shielded from view. The new setup is less private I suppose. The voter's ballot-completion station isn't totally concealed but jeez, it would be near impossible for anybody to see what you're doing unless they put their chin on your shoulder. Poll workers ask each voter if they'd like to carry their ballot in a "privacy sleeve" as they traverse the polling place. The privacy sleeve looked to be your basic manila folder. Most people opted for the privacy sleeve. I did not.

I personally believe the process I witnessed Tuesday afforded more than enough privacy.

I was at the polling place no more than five minutes. Outside, a motley-looking crew of middle-aged women wearing Monserrate t-shirts passed out fliers on the outer boundary of the no-electioneering zone.

Both the Moya and Monserrate campaigns deployed special vehicles equipped with loudspeakers. Small box trucks covered with campaign posters roamed up and down neighborhood streets blaring the sounds of Spanish-language music with vote pleas mixed in.

9-14-10 1630

Big day in Queens Sunday. My good pal Brent married Jane in Queens. The ceremony was held just a few blocks from the East River.

The whole thing went down beautifully with just one hitch. It rained throughout the afternoon and evening and the reception facility's beautiful back porch didn't get used as hoped.

Things stayed indoors. The room was filled with journalists and assorted other interesting family/friends and lots of good food/drink were consumed.

Way to go Brent. Good luck. Good life, my friend.

9-13-10 0100

The real reason current New York A-G and gubernatorial hopeful Andy Cuomo announced he'll stay neutral in the five-way democratic party primary for attorney general is simple. He has no idea who's gonna win.

What was once assumed to be a shoo-in victory for Nassau County D -A Kathleen Rice has now become too close to call. Just two days before the election, State senator Eric Schneiderman of Manhattan (with big help from the New York Times) is suddenly the assumed front-runner. There's no current published polling data verifying that, but it was clear from watching the A-G debate a few nights ago that Schneiderman's four rivals are gunning for him.

Don't take Cuomo's official silence on the race as a sign he doesn't have a vested interest in the outcome. The NY Observer reported last week that Cuomo has pumped significant time, money and organizational

effort into the Rice campaign.

Rice is a ball-buster. As D-A, she's thrown the book at and sought max jail time for any and all who enter her courtrooms. She has grandstanded effectively against drunk drivers in the form of extended prison terms for those involved in fatal crashes.

Schneiderman is super sharp but he's a bit slippery. He's knee-deep in the Albany mud. The Times still likes him for consistent liberal stands. The newspaper has gone beyond its editorial page to help him.

Last week's debate included excellent presentations from all five candidates. It really helped that NY1's Pat Kiernan was the moderator, but it was an excellent 90 minutes of political discourse nonetheless. New York hasn't seen a race as deep and talented as this one in a long time.

The winner may advance with as little as 30-percent of the total vote. I'll punch my ballot for Sean Coffey, a Westchester County trial lawyer and former federal prosecutor. He's probably not gonna win, but he has no Albany taint. During the debate, he was most convincing as an able outsider with legal chops.

Normally, New York primaries are settled by the parties way in advance. This race is up for grabs. That's fun and it'll be exciting to hit the polling place Tuesday with something big on the line.

9-12-10 0059

The latest controversy involving the Mets may be more interesting for how it developed than what actually went down.

Three Met players skipped a planned team visit to Walter Reed Medical Center Tuesday afternoon to say hello to seriously injured US troops. The names of the players who failed to attend were printed by Anthony McCarron of the News. McCarron was covering the Met series in DC as a sub for the regular beat writer Andy Martino. McCarron alone went with the info in Wednesday's newspaper.

Did the rest of the writers covering the club consciously pass on the story because it would make their jobs harder? Did they believe the information wasn't newsworthy? Did McCarron's role as a more irregular, roving baseball writer make it easier to reveal news bound to anger those exposed?

Whatever the case, the story got full treatment from the rest of the print corps covering the Mets in Thursday's newspapers. There were explanations from Luis Castillo and Carlos Beltran about why they didn't go to Walter Reed. Oliver Perez gave a blunt no comment. A fourth player (Dillon Gee) was not asked or expected to attend because he was Tuesday's starting pitcher.

McCarron's original story on the matter said the Walter Reed visit was "non-mandatory" but he wrote that the trio's decision may have "offered perspective" on their relationship with the organization. It's no secret Castillo and Perez are unhappy with their roles and Beltran has long seemed detached from the team.

McCarron's follow-up printed Thursday said "team brass seethed" about the trio's no-show. McCarron

said Met boss Jeff Wilpon traveled to DC specifically for the Walter Reed visit which would shed light on who the writer means by “team brass.”

I don’t know what to think, really. What a player does (or doesn’t do) away from the ballpark on the day of a game is probably best left to the player. Castillo said he didn’t go to Walter Reed because he’s uncomfortable looking at guys without limbs. That’s a fair human response.

I just wonder if anybody would have learned about this whole thing had it not been for a baseball writer who decided to go it alone.

-It would have been better for President Obama to ignore the kooky Florida religious leader threatening to burn copies of the Koran on 9-11. In an interview with George Stephanopoulos carried nationally on Thursday, Obama surprisingly gave the fringe-dwelling hate-peddler Terry Jones the time of day. The President of the United States nibbled from the palm of a dope and escalated a week-long drama associated with a stunt that should be ignored. The biggest numbskulls in this country get legal protection to do numbskull stunts. That doesn’t mean they’re worthy of a stage. What Jones says he’ll do certainly doesn’t merit an assessment from the President.

-Newsday’s Neil Best predicts Hard Knocks will follow the 49’ers next year.

9-9-10 1730

Our pal Saints Fan Jim appeared on the public radio station in New Orleans this morning to offer commentary on the championship banner that will rise in the Dome before kickoff tonight.

To hear his segment, just

[click here.](#)

9-9-10 1005

More on the Revis contract because the big three newspapers here didn’t bother to break it down:

On paper, it’s a seven-year contract. It’s labeled for ease of discussion as a four-year deal because the final three years go away if Revis doesn’t hold out through the first four years. That aspect of the deal protects both sides. Revis can’t hold out again without suffering severe consequences (no right to escape player purgatory until 2017). At the same time, language in the contract assures him of unrestricted free agent status after year four (no tag/no nothing) regardless of what a new collective bargaining agreement may look like.

We’re starting to understand now that the amount of guaranteed money isn’t the iron-clad \$32 million widely reported in the last few days. The web site Pro Football Talk with confirmation from Jets beat writer Jenny Vrentas of the Star-Ledger says Revis will get on average a \$7 mil base each of the next four years. He’ll get a flat \$18 mil bonus check on March 1 next year assuming the league has a CBA. Should Revis get hurt this season and never play again, he’d collect only his 2010 base plus a \$13.8 mil injury protection payment and that would be it.

Bottom line is Revis is guaranteed about \$21 mil but will collect much more should he get through the current season. Already there's speculation the Jets will seek to re-negotiate another set of terms at season's end to spread out the \$18 mil bonus and structure a deal that would push the all-pro corner's unrestricted status beyond 2014.

-New York City public school kids had their first day of classes Wednesday. It was odd scheduling. Schools are open just one day this week. Thursday and Friday are off days for the Jewish holidays so next week Monday is day two of the school year. Absenteeism was expected to be higher than usual for day one.

-Oddsmakers have posted a really bad line for Saturday's Hawaii/Army contest. The Island is getting 2.5 from the Academy which I find impossible to understand. Yeah, the game is being played on 9-11 and Hawaii has a long plane ride but this game will be a blowout. Hawaii will make Army's defense dizzy and rack up serious pass yardage. We'll call it 48-14 Hawaii.

9-8-10 1700

The eleventh-hour deal bringing Darrelle Revis back into the Jet fold went down just about as I thought it would.

Revis signed what's described as a four-year contract worth \$46 mil. His current deal (which had three years remaining at \$21 mil) gets ripped up.

Since NFL teams have unilateral power to nullify contracts of players who get hurt or underperform simply by cutting them, the Revis holdout was an important (and non-greedy I believe) effort to gain security by a player who is a consensus superstar.

Ignore news stories focusing on contract length and total dollar amount for any NFL player. The key provision of any pro football contract is the amount of guaranteed money. Revis gets \$32 million guaranteed in the new deal forged with urgency late Sunday night. If he destroys a knee – or absorbs damage to his head in the violent fray on Sundays – Revis will still have a nest egg that fairly belongs to the league's best pass cover guy no matter when he becomes debilitated and discarded by a rich NFL club. The Jets can and would cut loose any seriously injured player to avoid paying off the balance of a contract. Revis now knows he can play a dangerous game without worrying whether he'll collect a payday commensurate with a player so wildly talented.

Publicly, Revis and the Jets handled the holdout without much real rancor. The two sides came off as tame and civilized as far as these things go. Yeah, the Ryan/Tannenbaum/Johnson buffoonery on Hard Knocks made you wonder at times whether the brass would somehow botch something so important. But I got the impression Revis and his reps went out of their way not to incite or inflame public sentiment as camp wound down. I believe Revis owned the leverage advantage the whole way, yet he didn't exploit it.

In the end, Revis backed off a demand he become the highest-paid corner. He got a guaranteed bundle a bit more than what Mark Sanchez got a year ago as a rookie. 32 mil is crazy money to you and me but it's a totally fair number for a guy who impacts a game like Revis does. I'd argue he's even more important

than Sanchez.

Contract now settled, Revis allowed Rex and Woody to get Labor Day glory for sealing the deal and he actually offered an apology to the fan base immediately upon rejoining the team. Saying sorry wasn't necessary. Revis was in the right with his holdout and missing camp won't be a big deal for him. He'll simply line up opposite Anquan Boldin next Monday and shut him down.

-The only serious reflection I had on this Labor Day came when I made my pre-work stop at a popular chain donut shop for an extra-large coffee with milk. The woman who filled my order was her usual witty and efficient self. The whole crew at her workplace is consistently spot-on, friendly and makes me feel like they're glad to see me. I don't know what their hourly wage is, but it can't be a sum that would inspire such performance.

9-7-10 0145

It wasn't treated as such by the media, but the biggest college football story of the weekend by far was the multi-faceted scandal that gutted UNC's football team for its opener vs. LSU. Thirteen Carolina players were held out of the game and almost all of them are key playmakers.

The vaunted North Carolina defense was left with just four regular starters. In addition, the team's primary pass-catcher and top two running backs weren't allowed to make the trip. Some are accused of improper contact with agents, others are mixed up in claims of academic mischief. Some may yet be cleared of wrong-doing. It's too early to know whether the football team will suffer severe punishment from the NCAA but you're already hearing expressions of disgust from high level educators and alumni in Chapel Hill. North Carolina is an institution that has long steered clear of trouble. At least until Butch Davis got there.

Remarkably, UNC played on even terms with LSU for much of the game. A controversial non-call as time expired left the Heels six points short. The game was televised on ABC here in New York Saturday.

As you'd expect, there was sharp movement of the betting line when news of UNC's troubles broke on Friday. The game opened at even, ballooned to LSU minus-10 on Friday before settling at -7 at kickoff.

-C-Span has made the full-length video of last week's Arizona gubernatorial debate available on its web site. Incumbent Jan Brewer's much-discussed meltdown during opening statements is as bad as advertised. Normally, I'd sympathize with a politician who loses his/her way in such a big spot but I took delight from Brewer's debacle. The discomfort she projected for sixty seconds while struggling to describe her accomplishments is due karma for her narrow and harsh view on immigration.

-United Parcel Service has been flying a big fleet of airplanes for more than two decades and had never had a fatal crash until Friday. It didn't get much coverage in this country, but a UPS 747-400 carrying nothing but freight went down and burned in the United Arab Emirates an hour after taking off from Dubai's main international airport. There was just a crew of two US-based pilots on board and they both died. The airplane was relatively new. The company says the plane went into service in September 2007. To speculate on the crash's cause off the facts that have been released would be unwise but you can bet

there will be attempts to examine any hazardous material shipments that were loaded on that flight to Cologne , Germany.

9-5-10 0128

My pal Marc and his family introduced me to a beautiful Queens spot Wednesday afternoon that may be the best kept secret in the borough.

Gantry Plaza State Park occupies a large amount of prime property along the East River at 48th Avenue. Dozens of benches and permanent lounge chairs are scattered along a sturdy, brand-new boardwalk with spectacular views of midtown Manhattan.

Marc mixed up a batch of spiked lime cocktail in advance. We sat along the river in a hot sun, sipped the icy drink and absorbed city sights from a fantastic vantage point. I had never been to Gantry before and wondered why. Judging from the sparseness of the crowd on our visit, word on the park's greatness may not be out yet.

The famous Pepsi sign on the Queens side of the East River marks the approximate northern edge of the park, although it appears work is being done to expand the boardwalk hundreds of yards toward the 59th Street bridge.

Gantry's landscaping bears strong resemblance to what you find at the High Line elevated park on Manhattan's west side. What gives Gantry a clear edge as a relaxation destination is the expansive view and proximity to the water. Small waves from the river slap against the park's retaining wall. Every direction you look, there's something to see. Best yet, you're not surrounded by big crowds.

-The high definition versions of C-Span's three channels were added to my cable provider's lineup in late August. It was only a few months ago C-Span launched its high-def feeds so I find it impressive that Time Warner moved so quickly to carry them. Much of the programming on the three C-Span HD channels is captured and delivered in standard def. It seems only legislative branch coverage within the confines of the US capitol gets high-def treatment.

-Several Chicago pals attended the 14-7 Cub loss to Pittsburgh at Wrigley Tuesday night and Guz reports just two fans were seated in the center-field bleachers when the game started. Two. Attendance was announced at 31,369 which includes tickets sold, but not necessarily used. Guz says the actual crowd was somewhere between 20 and 25-thousand. Guz said he'd have to go back to pre-1984 days to recall seeing such a small audience at Wrigley. I realize both the opponent and current state of the Cubs merit a drop in attendance but it still comes as a surprise to hear Guz's description of empty bleacher seats.

9-2-10 1930

I didn't watch the Emmy Awards but was glad to see Edie Falco take away a trophy for her brilliant depiction of a nurse from Queens . Rarely do I watch anything on television besides news and sports, but I'm an avid fan of Nurse Jackie which airs on the Showtime cable channel.

Falco plays Jackie, a high-functioning drug addict and mother of two. Jackie works at a busy Manhattan

emergency room. She does her job with great effectiveness and compassion. The cast assembled around her is excellent, especially Merritt Wever who plays a young nurse-in-training named Zoey.

Season two of the program ended three months ago with an enthralling episode that saw Jackie repel an intervention by two loved ones.

The Emmy award handed to Falco Sunday night was for “Actress in a Comedy Series.” While accepting the trophy, Falco said respectfully that it was “ridiculous” for her work to be classified as comedy. She’s right. Assuming there’s a return to Emmy consideration for Nurse Jackie after season three, the show and its cast should compete in the drama category.

-I hope Harvey Araton watched opening night of the US Open and felt bad about the hatchet job he penned for the Times last week. Araton leveled criticism at the Williams sisters that was way off the mark. He believes Venus and Serena fail to offer sufficient explanations for their frequent withdrawals from tournaments. Araton was especially bothered with Serena’s decision to miss this year’s US Open without providing specifics about how her right foot got hurt. How bout’ this Harvey ? Serena and Venus have combined to win twenty grand slam tournaments over the last eleven years (not including twelve doubles titles). On Monday night, Venus played under the Ashe lights and won with a knee that’s obviously bothering her. After a straight-set win, Venus disco-danced on the stadium court before hitting tennis balls into the crowd. She did it with the most beautiful smile you may ever see. On the ESPN2 set after the match, Venus said with great authenticity that she missed her sis. I don’t know what Harvey really wants from the Williams sisters. I’d say we’ve gotten an awful lot from them over the years. They’re entitled to play when they want and explain their comings and goings however they want.

-I’m not sure how ESPN is rotating its booth talent during the US Open, but try to sit down and watch some tennis while the McEnroe brothers are calling action together. It’s very entertaining. Coming out of a Pam Shriver interview with Anna Wintour Monday night, John and Patrick discussed fashion while Federer routed his first-round opponent. It was hilarious.

8-31-10 0100

Readers here likely know by now I have longstanding admiration for Mike Francesa and the afternoon radio program he does on WFAN in New York . I often reference his opinions on this site in addition to some of the news broken on his show.

What makes his program stand above most of the rest of sports talk radio is Francesa’s insistence flimsy flirtations with cheap humor that can careen into racism or homophobia is ruled out.

Mike never messes around with any of that.

On the rare occasion a caller tries to inject it into his program, Francesa skillfully acknowledges that discussion of race and homosexuality in sports is important, but not as a joke. For five and a half hours every weekday, Francesa does a straight sports show. He does it with a sensibility that matches the diverse audience his voice reaches.

Unfortunately, that changed for a moment Friday afternoon when Francesa did his annual end-of-summer

remote broadcast from a beach bar in Belmar , NJ . With a beer-swilling, nearly all-white live audience in attendance, a black contest participant seated next to Mike was subjected to a racial crack on air by the actor Nick Turturro.

Roselle, NJ lawyer Otis Harper had just completed a sports monologue as part of his effort to win a contest that will award a weekly radio program on 'FAN to an amateur broadcaster. Five men were vying for the prize and Harper was the lone black contestant.

Turturro was one of three judges (Joe Benigno and Tracy Burgess were the other two) assessing the broadcasting ability of all five contestants. When Harper finished his routine, Turturro told Harper his race should have brought with it greater energy from the performance. "You need a little more passion. You're a brother, so you should put a little more oomph on it," said Turturro.

Harper appeared stung but bit his tongue. What I couldn't believe was Francesa's decision to let the whole thing slide. Mike moved on without skipping a beat and he allowed Turturro to participate in the balance of the program.

It may not sound bad reading a written account of the Turturro remark but I gotta say it was jarring to hear and see it in real time (Francesa's show is simulcast on the YES network). It was the totality of the circumstances. It was a black man in a nearly all-white crowd getting criticized in a way that highlighted his race. It was bad and I was surprised Francesa didn't intervene. I'm disappointed he didn't.

8-30-10 0130

I didn't expect it. The United/Continental airline combo received quick and easy treatment from the US government's anti-trust entity. Less than four months after launching a review of a merger that would create the largest airline in the world, the US Justice Department announced Friday night it would let the deal go through and would attach only one minimally painful condition.

Continental and United clearly have made effective use of their lobbying and legal teams. Mergers of this magnitude typically take much more time to pass regulatory muster. This one zipped through.

Curiously, the government's decision was announced late on a Friday. That's a time typically reserved for announcements designed to draw the least amount of public attention.

Most surprising was the fact the new airline's only concession to government regulators was an agreement to lease 18 round-trip slots and corresponding gate space to Southwest Airlines at Newark airport.

Continental/United would love to keep Southwest out of Newark altogether, but the 18 departures it relinquished to the budget carrier still leave the combined Continental/United with 424 daily departures out of the busy and lucrative New Jersey hub. It's still a stranglehold.

Aviation analysts speaking in news stories I saw expressed consensus opinion that the merger proposal was met with kid glove treatment by the government. It certainly appears that way to me.

It's almost as if Continental's boss (and the guy who will run the new combined airline) Jeff Smisek knew

the outcome of regulatory scrutiny in advance. He's been saying with great confidence since May that government approval would come easily. He announced a week ago that the two airline boards would meet on September 17 to formally approve the merger. Now it's a fast track transaction that's all but done.

From a distance, it appears Smisek knows what he's doing. He got government bureaucrats to turn the light green before even a single tap of the brakes was applied.

If he can work the same magic integrating two huge labor forces and get through a myriad of very difficult union contract negotiations, the new airline may quickly become the dominant carrier he envisions.

(above photo is a company-circulated artist depiction of what the new combined airline's airplanes will look like)

-The lead analyst on CBS coverage of SEC football told the Post he sees a college football playoff format within the next five years. Gary Danielson believes it'll be a modest four-team playoff that would work within the existing bowl framework.

8-29-10 0130

It was a little under six hours in the car from Door County, WI to my parents' house in Huntley, IL on Monday.

I'm not a great automobile passenger but this was a smooth ride on wide-open roadway under clear skies. My Dad kept the ship straight and ran it at a good clip.

After unpacking, my Dad and I hit Huntley High's varsity soccer opener. School doesn't start at Huntley until Wednesday but there was still plenty of activity on campus grounds.

The varsity football team ran drills on the field of the school's main stadium and both the marching band and cheerleaders practiced in the parking lot. Football season starts Friday night.

But we're talking soccer here. Soccer is still very much a second-class sport in Illinois relative to football. That was plain to see from Huntley's home pitch. It's basically a regulation-sized patch of grass in front of the school. Many of the hundred or so fans on hand opted to sit in lawn chairs rather than on the two small sets of temporary aluminum bleachers. There was no public address announcer and the scoreboard didn't work properly. There was no working journalist covering this event.

That's not to say this match pitting Huntley versus Burlington Central lacked anything necessary for a true, fair and fun high school competition. There were three uniformed game officials who were generally competent. Each team wore professional-looking uniforms and played a high level brand of exciting soccer. The benches were protected by covered overhangs seen at European matches and ball boys worked both sidelines to insure that play was uninterrupted by balls that went out of bounds.

Despite its second-class status relative to football, this soccer match was played under conditions far superior to any I've seen in New York City at the public high school level.

Huntley's classrooms sit off huge parcels of well-maintained natural grass with beautiful views of old barns. Cornfields across from the school's main entrance stretch for a long distance. The tacky development boom in these parts has yet to taint the acreage seen from the high school which has to be a positive for those trying to learn, teach and participate in extra-circular activities. Parents are clearly interested and of the means to attend athletic events in pretty big numbers.

What was notable about this match was that Burlington Central (referred to by its supporters as "Central") defeated Huntley 4-2 despite a significant enrollment disadvantage.

Huntley's 2010 enrollment is 2111 and Central's is 1076. During a rousing half-time speech to his squad, Central coach Mike Gecan pointed to the sprawling Huntley school building to motivate his squad. "That's a big-ass 3A school over there and we're better than them," he said.

Central's midfield strength was a clear edge in this contest with the tall senior Kyle Reopelle controlling much of the action. He looped in a soft shot from 25 yards for the game's first goal and otherwise acted as Central's commander in a multi-touch ball control mode that would strike suddenly when speedy and dangerous scorer Alexis Camarena got fed. Camarena, also a senior, scored twice in this one. I'd expect both Camarena and Reopelle to play at the next level, whatever that may be.

When the game ended, it was nice to see both squads approach their respective cheering sections and clap their hands above their heads. This is a nice European tradition that I had not seen before at the high school level in this country.

-Times reporter Michael Grynbaum did a solid job explaining what caused Monday's Long Island Rail Road meltdown. In a story that included facts gathered by four Times reporters, Grynbaum described in detail how antiquated equipment at a LIRR control tower in Jamaica, Queens was taken out of commission when wet electrical cables "shorted out" and started a fire that damaged the tower. Grynbaum's story said all but one of the railroad's eleven branches rely on machinery at Jamaica's control tower to execute a trip. "With no way to direct trains onto their proper routes, railroad workers scrambled onto the tracks, spikes and mallets in hand, to lock the switches into place manually so that trains could travel by, a practice known in railroad parlance as 'block and spike.'" Since the fire didn't start until 11 AM Monday, day shifters had already completed their morning commute. Grynbaum said 120-thousand riders were impacted. Most of those people presumably were trying to get home. LIRR President Helena Williams put the number of impacted riders at 100-thousand.

8-24-10 1600

The last update I punched up came on day two of the big, ten-day vacay. Now, all of a sudden, it's day six and this trip is all but over.

Monday (day seven) will feature a long car ride (262 miles) from Sister Bay, WI to Huntley, IL. I wind things down from there with a dental appointment before heading back to New York.

As I write this, I'm sitting in the third-floor bedroom of a condo overlooking Sister Bay. My folks rented

three units in the complex. I stayed in one unit with my parents and each of my two brothers and their families stayed in the other two.

The condo complex adjoins a noisy marina on Sister Bay, a small body of water that cuts into the jagged-edged Door County peninsula. The water that flows into Sister Bay comes from Green Bay - not the city - but the body of water which runs up and down the western coast of the 75-mile long finger surrounded by fresh-water on three sides.

My folks scouted this place out on prior visits to Door County. They like it up here. It's a popular place, especially among the Chicago summer get-away crowd.

The objective on this trip was to pull the whole family into one spot for a good stretch of uninterrupted together-time.

Sister Bay is about ten miles short of the northern tip of the peninsula. Because the little town sits at the narrowest point (east to west) on the peninsula, it's just five miles to get to the other side. We drove over to it on Friday and there sits mighty Lake Michigan.

The Lake Michigan side has a totally different feel. The water is much more turbulent and the coast appears more rugged and less developed commercially.

Just about everywhere you go on the peninsula, you see cherry trees. This year's crop has already been harvested. Many cherry tree farmers attach metallic streamers to the trees to ward off nibbling birds. When you drive down the main county road on a sunny day, you're bound to pass flickering streamers. It's kinda trippy.

Since I'm not much of a beach guy, the highlight of this trip was a twelve-mile bike adventure through nearby Peninsula State Park.

On Saturday, we rented bicycles and rode the full length of the Sunset trail. The mostly-gravel loop takes you deep inside what's considered the crown jewel of Wisconsin's state park system. Peninsula's greatness is largely due to its eight miles of Green Bay shoreline and an intensely dense amount of very tall and fragrant trees.

The beauty along the trail makes it difficult to concentrate on what is a somewhat challenging set of turns, hills and crossings. It's tempting to let the steep downhill portions of the ride lead to super-fast cruising speed, but large tree roots above the trail's surface at random points force you to keep things in check.

If you're a tent camper, this appears to be a great place to do it. The sites can be had for about \$25 per night.

The best meal of the trip came Friday night when we all gathered at Sister Bay Bowl. The lake perch dinner was perfect and the beer was ice cold. My youngest brother and I went back to the bowling alley the next night to knock a few back and munch on a Wisconsin favorite. You couldn't eat fried cheese curds every day, but man, what a great late-night snack.

The bartender that served us at Sister Bay Bowl said business was off sharply this summer. "Maybe it's the economy?" she said in a speculative tone.

On the television, it was Rodgers throwing long to Jennings, producing loud yells from the crowd at the bar. It almost sounded like people were watching a regular season game.

8-22-10 1630

Greetings from Oxford, Wisconsin where it's day two of a ten-day vacation. It's my first extended break away from work since the Derby. I'm at my parents' "cabin" about fifty miles north of Madison.

It's really quiet here. There's almost zero vehicle traffic and very few humans. You don't hear any jet planes overhead. It gets really cool at night so the sleep is of a fantastically high quality if you don't consume alcohol before you turn in.

I put the word cabin in quote marks because it looks like a cabin but has all the comforts of a regular home except for television service. It's outfitted like a nice suburban house.

The dwelling sits about twenty-five yards off a small lake that prohibits motorized boats. Last night, my Dad and I threw pieces of stale bread into the lake from a short pier my parents share with a few of their neighbors. There was significant entertainment value in watching a school of bluegills swarm the pieces of bread and wrestle for the right to consume them.

I flew into Madison on a Tuesday afternoon non-stop from Newark. The flight left an hour late for mechanical reasons. Just before we pushed back from the gate in Newark, the captain got on the P-A and said a temperature sensor near the engine had been replaced and he thanked us for our patience. I love it when the pilot and/or gate personnel explain the precise nature of the maintenance problem. As a passenger, I much prefer being included in the discussion on whatever problem produced the delay rather than having it be a mystery.

We had breakfast at a diner called Maggie Mae's in Oxford Wednesday morning. What was interesting about this busy place is that Maggie Mae is a singer/guitar player who performs traditional country songs sporadically while patrons eat. Both Maggie Mae and the wait staff promote Maggie Mae's outside appearances throughout your meal. I couldn't decide if I was annoyed by Maggie Mae - or should perhaps embrace the sideshow. I may be wrong, but a large portrait hanging above where Maggie Mae performed appeared to be Maggie Mae in her younger days. Or was it Patsy Cline? I don't know. The coffee was solid as was the corned beef hash.

On Thursday, my folks and I drive 200 miles northeast to Sister Bay, WI for four nights in a popular tourist destination called Door County. We'll meet up with my brothers and their families there.

-On the Blago verdict: Yeah, the feds obviously would have preferred a clean sweep on all counts but a second trial is a chance for the government to twist the knife a little. The reason Blago's wife put her head down and grimaced at news the jury deadlocked on all but one count is because the former first couple of Illinois doesn't want to go through all that again. Seven weeks of walking into that same courthouse every morning can be grueling for a defendant. The government will simply re-load. The Blago shtick passing

by the metal detector will wear the clown down the second time through. Prosecutors will incorporate advice from exit interviews done with members of the first jury, some of whom said all but one voted for conviction on many of the 24 counts. It was interesting to hear the Blago team lobby the public after the verdict was rendered. Blago's strategy is to turn the public cynical about the expense associated with a second trial. I'm not sure that will work. Even if it takes five trials, the government will replay the tapes and Blago's attorneys will say it's the typical rhetoric of a loudmouth politician. Eventually the government will find 12 jurors who hear the tapes the same. Don't call an 11-1 deadlock a victory for Blago. In fact, it simply prolongs his agony.

8-18-10 1630

It'll take a few matches for the newly-assembled trio of internationally successful Red Bull hot-shots to get on the same page but it'll happen soon enough.

When it does, Rafa Marquez (pictured above) will be setting up Thierry Henry and Juan Pablo Angel for goals galore.

It was immediately apparent Saturday night at Red Bull Arena that Marquez is a dynamic playmaker. He will toy with MLS opponents when he gets a full tank of fitness. With Henry and Angel streaking into the attack zone, it's gonna be fun watching Marquez distribute to a couple guys who are among the best in the world at putting soccer balls into the backs of nets.

There were no Red Bull goals in the big tilt against LA but they will come when Marquez gels with Henry and Angel. For now, the fan's joy in watching these talented three is limited to glimpses and glimmers of greatness with a certain feeling it will progressively get better.

The announced attendance Saturday night for the home debut of Marquez was 25,000. It's the first official sellout in Red Bull Arena's history. There were a decent number of empty seats but I think we've learned by now that the Red Bulls inflate their attendance numbers. That's ok. On a beautiful summer evening, the place was jumping.

Unfortunately, the only goal the big crowd got to see was on an Edson Buddle breakaway ten minutes in. It was Buddle's 13th score of the season for LA.

In the upper bowl of Red Bull Arena, many fans visiting for the first time had difficulty locating their seats. Ushers are hard to find upstairs leaving most fans to their own devices to match information on their ticket with their assigned seat. It's not that hard really, but it seems as if many sports fans these days are unwilling to exert the mental energy required to find one's seat without help from an usher.

Landon Donovan (pictured above – covering Red Bull Dane Richards) played a quietly effective 90 minutes for the Galaxy. Interestingly, he was cheered loudly when the starting lineups were announced. It's an indication the Red Bull crowd puts a premium on national team success and discounts the relevance of MLS rivalries.

In the second half, three fans ran onto the field during play. It was the first field intrusion I've witnessed at Red Bull Arena this season. I'd be curious to know what kind of punishment was leveled against the young men. I would personally think twice about breaking the law in Harrison, NJ out of concern for what I'd face as I was processed by law enforcement. I picture the lockup in Harrison as something resembling what you'd see in Turkey.

I did pre and post-match hob-knobbing at Bello's in downtown Newark. I also joined the Montclair chapter of the Rafa fan club for app-i-teasers and cocktails at the joint next to Bello's after the game.

The \$2 cups of PBR at Bello's were purchased in bulk, making the train ride home a blurry hassle. I mean, once I'm on the train I'm ok. But it can be daunting to initiate the long return voyage after consuming a few too many. You walk out of the bar and realize you're in downtown Newark and you wonder what you got yourself into.

It's about an hour forty bar to home. When I finally reached Jackson Heights, I stopped by my neighborhood's new pizzeria for a slice. It's called Pizza Don Pizza and it's operated by a young man who has been working long, open-to-close hours to launch his business from a small space near the Roosevelt Avenue subway station.

-My cable TV provider has added the HD version of Fox Soccer Channel to the channel lineup. It came on just in time for the start of the English Premier League season. The secondary – or backup offering - Fox Soccer Plus in HD has been on my Time Warner channel grid for at least six months. I don't understand why Plus would precede the regular channel on my HD tier, but now that I have both, I'm not asking any questions.

-Rules are rules, yes. But the PGA officials who penalized Dustin Johnson for grounding his club before shooting out of a sandy patch of hard dirt on 18 Sunday should have let the infraction slide. As David Feherty made abundantly clear with his reporting, that was trampled, spectator-filled ground that bore no resemblance to a sand trap. Forget the warning that went out before the first round about any and all sand being considered a trap. Johnson was in contention for a major golf championship and shouldn't get burned by a course quirk. Johnson needed to be in that playoff and the PGA needed to accept the golfer's explanation on his thinking in that situation.

-Updating an earlier item about the length of the K-Rod suspension. It was reported Saturday that the Mets may well have handed down something more severe than two games if it weren't for intervention by the union. That likely explains why Jerry Manuel took exception to Eddie Coleman's statement on WFAN that the Mets went soft on K-Rod. In fact, the hands of the Mets were tied on the matter.

8-16-10 0200

Very rarely does Eddie Coleman criticize organizational decisions, but the veteran Met radio pre/post game host took team management to task on the air Friday night for its handling of the K-Rod situation. While conducting his regular chat with Met skipper Jerry Manuel before the first of three with the Phils, Coleman said he thought K-Rod's two-game suspension was too short. Coleman's assessment seemed to

catch Manuel off guard.

The Met manager asked Coleman to repeat his opinion. Coleman did. Manuel stammered a bit and then suggested the veteran reporter didn't know all the facts associated with what's been described by police as a one-sided physical attack by K-Rod on the grandfather of his two children.

Manuel has been fiercely defensive of K-Rod since the ugly incident Wednesday night at Citi Field. The altercation and tirade that led to it was witnessed by several Met family members.

Oddly, Manuel told reporters before Thursday's game he'd use his closer if he got out of police custody by the time the ninth inning rolled around. When that game started, a written statement from Jeff Wilpon announced a two-game suspension which is effectively a one-game punishment because K-Rod was still in cuffs for the first game.

I don't know what the team's punishment should be, really. It's been reported that K-Rod's aggression and language shook up the wife of Carlos Beltran. What made me perk up on this was when I heard Coleman criticize the length of the suspension on air. Coleman rarely takes positions on matters such as these.

8-13-10 1945

My Dad came to New York this week to add Red Bull Arena and Citi Field to a long list of sporting venues he's now visited.

We were treated to consecutive 1-0 victories by the home teams. It was the Mets over the Rockies on Tuesday night and the Red Bulls edging Toronto on Wednesday night.

Thierry Henry (pictured above) made his much-anticipated home debut in a MLS contest. The newly-acquired French striker is the all-time leading Arsenal goal scorer.

Henry turns 33 next week. He's plenty young when you look at his physique and the way he moves on the field.

I don't really understand why Henry would pick the Red Bulls to play out the final few prime years of his career. He loves New York and he's getting paid well. But he could make much more dough in Europe and wouldn't see what he saw when he stepped on the field for Wednesday night's match.

Imagine the scene: A thick, foul stench from the Passaic River blanketed the otherwise pleasant smell of smoke from Italian sausages grilling on the concourse. Two-thirds of the 25-thousand seats at RBA were vacant at kickoff. It was his first league game at home and Henry's star power was greeted by essentially the same 15-thousand soccer fans who attend every Red Bulls match with or without one of the sport's biggest stars in the world.

Yeah, I know the Red Bulls announced attendance at 19,035. That's a stretch and even if it's accurate, it wasn't until the second half when everyone arrived. By that time Henry was on the bench. He played the first 45 and called it a night. Why risk pressing his achy hammy when the Galaxy come to town in a few days and the full house on that night will expect a full 90 from Game Thierry?

Don't get me wrong. I love the fact Henry is here. He's a treat to watch. In the pre-game warm-ups, he did things with the ball I've never seen before. His ball control skills are ten times better than his MLS peers. During the match, he's constantly instructing teammates on proper positioning. For Henry, open space is the top priority and his on-field voice is loud on that subject.

I guess my concern is that construction of a beautiful new arena - and the expensive marketing campaign to sell Henry, Marquez and Angel to a huge market – appears to be failing to produce results.

The Red Bull franchise is very much doing its part to gain greater traction and the New York soccer fandom doesn't seem to be buying in. Yet somehow, the MLS continues to talk about adding a second team in the area when the one we have now can't pack its conveniently located building near public transit unless Donovan and the Galaxy are the opponent.

More than seventy-thousand people paid top dollar to watch a meaningless friendly between the US and Brazil a night earlier, yet soccer fans won't shell out twenty bucks for a real soccer game at a real soccer venue. I don't get it. The power of the World Cup seems confined in this country to nationalistic pride rather than appreciation of the sport in its true day-to-day form.

The night before, my Dad paid for a pair of \$19 nosebleed seats at the Citi Field box office. Just before game-time, we slipped into a nice aisle location on the Pepsi Porch. The Cy Young-to-be Ubaldo Jimenez (pictured above) dueled beautifully with Big Pelf. It was a muggy night on the bay, but we caught a nice odor-free breeze high above right field.

Before the game, we ate casual Italian in Corona and paid a visit to the Lemon Ice King. We slurped flavored ice on a bench. My Dad went with the rum raisin. I got lime. It was good ol' Queens fun.

K-Rod got the save on Tuesday night, one night before his in-park assault arrest. We entered Citi when the gates opened two and a half hours before first pitch and watched the Mets take BP down the left field line. We then had time to tour the park before settling into the porch seats.

Breakfast at Greenpoint's Brooklyn Label was enjoyable Wednesday morning. The egg/black bean burrito was great. Our G train ride after the meal was noteworthy because Tad Kubler rode steady in the same car. I told Dad that Kubler was a significant rock star. "Is he big locally – or big nationally?" said Dad. I argued the latter.

The daytime heat and oppressive humidity slowed our ambition to navigate the city between sporting events. The tunnels were a sauna. My 74-year-old Dad's physical resiliency was greater than mine throughout. He went back early Thursday morning on a non-stop out of Newark.

8-12-10 1500

It happens every election cycle without fail. Newspapers dig up voter participation records and find major political candidates who want votes from the electorate but don't bother to cast ballots themselves when given the right to exercise the sacred privilege.

The 2010 poster-woman for this hypocrisy is the leading Democratic candidate for New York Attorney

General Kathleen Rice. The current Nassau County D-A is 45-years-old but didn't find her way into a ballot booth until she was 37.

Rice enrolled as a Republican when she turned voting age but didn't actually punch a ballot for a period of 18 years subsequent to the filing of her initial registration. She missed five presidential elections. Now she wants to be the top elected legal officer in the state. And oh yeah, now's she a Democrat.

It was Newsday that originally reported Rice's long failure to vote. I thought the official Rice response was actually pretty good. It went in part: "My lifelong fight for social justice logically evolved into political participation, and that's a path I believe many people share. Now I spend my time trying to teach those early in life not to make the same mistake I did."

I'm disqualifying Rice from my primary ballot consideration because of this issue among others. She'll win the nomination easily anyway, and is better than odds-on to be the next New York A-G.

-You might want to circle October 12 on your calendar. That's the date California's two major gubernatorial candidates Jerry Brown and Meg Whitman face off in the last of three debates. I'd expect it'll garner live coverage on C-Span. Brown is a famously great debater and the moderator on that night will be Mr. Tom Brokaw.

-I forgot to mention a piece of news from the Mike Westhoff interview with Beningo on 'FAN last week. The Jets special teams coach has already locked in his return men for the regular season with camp barely underway. Westhoff says Mizzou's own Brad Smith will return all kickoffs and the flashy rookie corner Kyle Wilson will handle punts with some help initially from Jim Leonhard.

-On a roster stocked with good wideouts, it seems unlikely Nyan Boateng will stick through the end of Giants camp, but man, talk about full circle. I saw Boateng plenty as a Lincoln HS hoopster. Five years after dominating the PSAL in football and basketball, Boateng is back in New York trying to make Big Blue. His college career included two-year stints each at Florida and Cal.

-The popular private bus line Bolt Bus has initiated non-stop round-trip Saturday service to Saratoga Race Course all this month. It's a great idea. I'm hoping it succeeds at a level that would justify the service on all racing days. The bus departs from a spot near the Garden at 10 AM and drops back off in Manhattan at about 10 PM. Bolt is charging \$49.95 for the round-trip, \$59.95 on Travers Day. That charge includes a grandstand seat and a program which makes it a real bargain. In deference to the thirst of many horse racing fans, Bolt allows beer to be stored and consumed on the bus as long as it's not in a glass container. Bolt is also touting free wi-fi on the bus. It would be a long day, no doubt. You'd be on the bus (seven hours or so) longer than you'd be on track (four and a half hours). But because the hotels up there are so insanely expensive, it would be a way to get a reasonably-priced taste of the greatest horse racing venue in North America. Good luck Bolt Bus.

8-8-10 0005

I hit suburban Chicago on the off days this week for round two of the dentist's drill. As I sat there near-horizontal in the chair with numb gums Wednesday morning, the dentist, hygienist and dental

assistant were chatting about the upcoming wedding of the office receptionist. The celebration will be held outdoors this weekend and there was concern mosquitoes might adversely impact the otherwise happy proceedings.

Chicago has had the rainiest two-month summer stretch on record. Come sunset, the buzzing blood-suckers swarm you.

As the women at the dental office talked strategy about fending off the biting bugs at the wedding, they each agreed to wear apparel that would survive heavy application of spray-on repellent.

“I went for a walk last night, and they were flying into my nose,” said the dental assistant as she handed the dentist a tool.

On the packed return flight to New York, I was assigned a middle seat at about the mid-point of the coach cabin. When I reached my row, I asked the woman on the aisle if I could slip past her to reach the middle seat.

“Would you mind if I sat in the middle – next to my mother?” she said.

“Sure. Of course,” I said. Lucky for me, I thought.

A 30-something couple sitting in the row in front of me made out and only took breaks for the woman to read a bible with impossibly small font. The guy didn’t read. He just waited for more make out time and stuck his shoeless foot into the aisle as if to dare the flight attendants to run over it with the beverage cart.

Ten minutes after takeoff we hit severe turbulence. The plane got rocked and there were lots of screams. I sweated but didn’t say anything. It didn’t last more than twenty seconds but it was scary enough to make it impossible to get comfortable for most of the rest of the flight.

In a lifetime of flying experiences, I’ve only had two other situations when true fear engulfed the cabin. I’ve already documented here the climb-out from Vegas to Seattle last year on a Southwest flight. That was horrible and lasted a lot longer than this episode Wednesday afternoon. The only other time I felt intense panic was about ten years ago on a flight into Little Rock. I was aboard an ATR-42 and the descent ran through a doozy of a thunderstorm. The bottom dropped out a few times and there was pretty violent side-to-side movement. I kept looking out the window to make sure the propellers were spinning and the wing was intact.

In each of the three instances, the cockpit made no reference on the P-A to what transpired. I find that a little disconcerting, but perhaps this kind of stuff is routine to them.

-In a Thursday interview, Jets special teams coach Mike Westhoff didn’t hide his displeasure with the loss of free agent placekicker Jay Feely. Former Cowboy Nick Folk is assigned the Jet field goal chores for now. Feely will kick for Arizona. On the mid-day program on WFAN, Joe Beningo asked Westhoff if he was concerned about a drop-off in the Jet kicking game with Folk in and Feely out. Said Westhoff: “I’m cooking the meal. I’m not buying the groceries.”

-I was all set to dislike the new Arcade Fire record but several spins have turned into several more. It's in my head pretty good now. I'm especially drawn to consecutive tracks early in the sequence. "Modern Man" is stylistically different than what the band gave us on the first two records. It sounds to me like an attempt at making a Roxy Music hit with simple, repetitive lyrics and it totally works. The song that follows is the best tune on the record. It's called "Rococo." It has lyrical bite with really lush, well-produced acoustic guitar and electric sounds. You get the Intense Win on vocals: "Let's go downtown and watch the modern kids. Let's go downtown and talk to the modern kids. They will eat right out of your hand. Using great big words that they don't understand. They say: Row-co-co-co-co...Ro-co-cohh-co-co...."

8-5-10 1750

The Darrelle Revis holdout from Jets training camp is getting a whole lot of one-sided coverage in the newspapers here. The theme is consistent. Just give the guy what he wants.

What's not getting much discussion is the six-year contract Revis signed after getting picked 14th overall in the 2007 draft.

Revis was paid more front-loaded dough than several players selected ahead of him. He pulled down fifteen mil total the first three years of his deal. Not bad for a defensive back that went mid-first round.

The current season (his fourth), Revis is slated to earn just \$1 million. Years four and five had guarantees of five and fifteen million respectively until his hold-out triggered a disqualification of the guarantee.

The biggest rub here of course from Revis' perspective is the current year's \$1 million salary. There's near universal agreement Revis is the best corner in the NFL and playing for \$1 million isn't fair if you view that in isolation.

Problem is, Revis agreed to a six-year contract that was sweet when he signed it. He held out three weeks as a rookie before getting above-market front-loaded pay with one season of de-escalation in year four.

There's no question Revis has far out-performed the contract no matter how you look at it. Six years, \$36 mil for a guy who shuts down every wideout thrown at him is a steal. Where this gets tricky is his insistence he now be paid more than Nnamdi Asomugha of the Raiders.

Asomugha averages more than \$15 million annually. There is Al Davis tomfoolery behind that contract and it's not a realistic for Revis to use that deal as his bar.

So, what the Jets have now is a serious holdout by their best player. It won't get settled anytime soon. Negotiations haven't even really started yet. Revis is said to be ticked because he claims Jets GM Mike Tannenbaum promised to give him Asomugha money only to change his tune.

Revis has a leverage advantage. His plight is backed by virtually every football writer in town and his value to the team is as high as can be. Personally, I don't sympathize with the Revis demand to top the Asomugha deal. But I can guarantee the Jets management will blink first in this stalemate. Revis alone makes or breaks the upcoming season which has been treated as go-for-broke going in with the win-now

Tannenbaum moves.

What'll probably end up happening is a month's worth of back page back-and-forth between the Revis reps and Tannenbaum followed by an eleventh-hour resolution that gives Revis a ton of guaranteed dough.

If ever a young athlete deserves to have a contract ripped up, it's Revis. But what the Jets would like to have at least mentioned in the conversation is that the money given to Revis the rookie was generous at the time.

8-3-10 0005

The morning after his Major League Soccer debut in Houston, newly-acquired Red Bull striker Thierry Henry sat in a coach class seat with the rest of his teammates for a commercial flight back to New Jersey.

Details of Henry's freshly-inked Red Bull contract haven't been disclosed, but he came to New York off a four-year deal with Barcelona that paid him 6.8 million Euros annually. No doubt his Red Bull deal will exceed well over \$10 million over its four and a half season duration.

Henry is compensated at a level that's on par with what professional athletes earn playing in this country's big four sports leagues. What's unusual is that Henry is on a roster in a league dominated by players making significantly less than six figures. It's a massive discrepancy and it has to be weird when the team goes on the road.

I suppose braving the discomfort of a coach class seat in the name of team is the least Henry can do at the outset of his Red Bull career.

Heck, Hans Backe and Juan Pablo Angel were in the back of the plane, too, on Sunday morning.

As if the three-hour flight from Houston to Newark wasn't long enough, the Red Bulls and 120 other regular customers on the 9 AM departure diverted to Baltimore because of bad weather near Newark at arrival time. The diversion added two and a half hours to the journey.

Henry is playing in a league that's struggling to turn a profit but sees value in paying a few stars big dough to bring it legitimacy.

David Beckham was the first really big MLS effort to import legitimacy. We've learned from Landon Donovan that Beckham's actions as a member of the Galaxy haven't meshed well with his lower paid teammates.

It'll be interesting to see whether Henry's MLS stint is different. Riding with the team in coach is a good start.

8-2-10 0145

The decisions that will settle whether construction of a new mosque and Islamic cultural center two

blocks north of Ground Zero can move forward are being made by the people who live in this great city.

Thank goodness for that.

Folks weighing in from elsewhere are taking intolerant, ignorant stands against the new mosque. Their words have incited irrational fear about a proposed place of worship that would host celebrations of a faith practiced all over New York City. Sarah Palin and Newt Gingrich have now been joined by the Anti-Defamation League in publicly opposing the mosque near World Trade. Their voices in this fray are loud but will ultimately have little to do with whether it's built.

Since the proposal to construct the new mosque and sizable adjoining vertical space for community gatherings includes plans to demolish an old building on Park Place between Church and West Broadway, the backers of the project face multiple bureaucratic hurdles. The local Community Board in that neighborhood has already given a thumbs-up. The Landmarks Preservation Commission is next. A Tuesday morning meeting of the Landmarks body is expected to consider only the existing building's preservation worthiness – and not the politics or passion associated with what would replace it.

I can't speak to the existing structure's value as a landmark. I can only say that there's almost total consensus among those familiar with the mosque plans that it'll mirror what's being done generally at the 92nd Street Y.

Much of the mosque facility's day-to-day schedule would host interfaith groups under an Islamic nameplate. The people behind the new building say it will be called Cordoba House. On its web site, Cordoba House spells out its mission. "(It) will provide a place where individuals, regardless of their backgrounds, will find a center of learning, art and culture; and most importantly, a center guided by Islamic values in their truest form - compassion, generosity, and respect for all."

How could that be an affront to those who lost loved ones on 9-11? In New York City especially, Cordoba House will blend in from day one.

Those giving the mosque a crooked look must reflect on the ugliness immediately after 9-11 when an entire religion – and anybody associated with it – became a suspect – or a bad guy – in the eyes of those who wanted revenge.

Let's see what happens with the landmark status of the old building on Tuesday. After that, you have Mayor Mike and the city council speaker in full support of the project. Lawsuits seem likely but on what grounds? The rumblings from Palin and the Tea Party won't matter much in a city so dense with diversity of religion and otherwise. The local decision-makers who will settle this issue walk past mosques in their own neighborhoods and won't be spooked by another one pledging to open its doors to the whole community.

8-1-10 0200

NHL clubs have been circumventing the league's hard salary cap from the moment it was instituted in

2005 but the player contract signed by Ilya Kovalchuk with the Devils two weeks ago has taken things to a new extreme.

I'm pro-player and I wish good hockey teams with the means to spend could retain all of their top talent. Unfortunately, the wide disparity in fiscal health among big and small market teams forced NHL commissioner Gary Bettman to fight for and gain a restrictive cap after a bitter work stoppage that scrapped the '04-'05 season. The hard cap removes the Yankees vs. Royals problem from hockey and has turned out to be a good thing for the league overall. The downside is that teams loaded with talent find it hard to stay under the cap. Exhibit A is what's happening with the Blackhawks this off-season. The Hawks have too many good hockey players expecting pay raises and have been forced to unload several of them for less than market value to stay beneath the cap.

The Kovalchuk deal in Jersey is clearly an attempt to avoid unloading players in the name of cap space. It's a 17-year contract worth \$102 million. Spread out over 17 years, the Kovalchuk annual cap hit to New Jersey would amount to \$6 million. What makes the arrangement fishy is the heavy front-loading of money. All but \$3.5 mil gets paid out in the first eleven years. The final six years of the contract with chump change payouts are tacked on to lower the annual cap number. It's extremely unlikely Kovalchuk will be playing hockey when the contract expires. He'll be 45 years old at that point.

Larry Brooks wrote a column in the Post over the weekend saying the Devils acted properly. Brooks argues the NHL is acting "capriciously" in disallowing the deal. "Successful teams and general managers have a choice. They can shrug their shoulders and allow the CBA to break up their rosters. Or they can act creatively within the confines of the CBA to keep their teams intact as much as possible."

The CBA (collective bargaining agreement) has all sorts of provisions pertaining to enforcement of the cap but doesn't clearly address whether the method used by New Jersey is allowable. The NHL says no. New Jersey (backed by the Player's Association) is challenging the NHL's intervention. The parties will take their case to an arbitrator soon.

Despite a lack of specific language in the CBA dealing with the deliberately unrealistic addition of strung-out contract years to lower the annual cap number, I think the NHL is justified in taking a stand against the Kovalchuk deal.

The league stood by and did nothing last year at this time when the Hawks gave a 12-year contract to Marian Hossa. The front-loading in that deal was a sneaky evasion of Hossa's true cap impact. The Kovalchuk contract this year is even more extreme.

What's ironic about the current dilemma is that it was NHL owners who caused a whole season of hockey to get lost so they could gain a hard salary cap. Five years later, several team owners are doing everything in their power to get around the cap.

-It'll take some time to get a true feel for what kind of drawing power Thierry Henry has in New York, but there are two concrete indicators right off the bat. The Red Bulls sent out an e-mail Tuesday saying the August 14 home match against the LA Galaxy at their new arena in Harrison has sold out. Henry's addition to the roster was formally announced July 14th. His debut came at home eight days later against

Tottenham. Brian Lewis of the Post says only 4500 tickets were sold for the Tottenham match before Thierry's signing. More than 20-thousand showed up.

7-27-10 1730

Just three weeks after a Queens judge modified an order of protection allowing my former state senator Hiram Monserrate to reunite with his girlfriend, the two marched hand-in-hand Sunday in the annual Colombian Day Parade.

Monserrate chanted "Viva Colombia" and waved a small flag to the big crowd assembled along twenty blocks of Northern Boulevard. By his side was Karla Giraldo, the woman who accused Monserrate of slashing her face with a broken glass after a 2008 Christmas party

Giraldo recanted her original account of the attack when Monserrate went on trial for felony assault last year but a video introduced during the D-A's presentation showed Monserrate manhandling Giraldo in his apartment building the same night cuts near her left eye required more than 30 stitches to close. That video piece of evidence was enough for a judge at Monserrate's bench trial to hand down a misdemeanor assault verdict in the case.

Soon after, Monserrate was removed from the state senate by his colleagues. Rather than fade from the public eye and seek private sector employment, Monserrate is attempting a return to elected office.

Immediately after his ouster, he ran for the senate seat he was booted from and was defeated soundly in a special election earlier this year. Now Monserrate is running for the state assembly office vacated when Jose Peralta slid into Monserrate's senate seat.

The people Monserrate passed on the parade route near me seemed mostly indifferent to his presence. I couldn't sense whether the dull reception was from unfamiliarity with Monserrate's past – or whether folks are stunned he'd continue courting voters with Giraldo in tow.

The musically-inclined and dancing parade participants generated perhaps the most excitement during this neighborhood event. Also getting big cheers was the locally famous drag queen Oswaldo Gomez, a smiling Colombian often seen late at night riding his bicycle down Roosevelt Avenue with a parrot perched on his head.

Temperatures were in the low 90's for the parade. Up and down the route, men and women sold water and juice stored in coolers with wheels.

7-26-10 0130

United and Continental Airlines announced second quarter financial results this past week and both reported big profits and big stacks of cash on hand.

Just three months ago, the two carriers disclosed plans to merge operations and turn the new, combined entity into the biggest airline in the world. The primary reason cited for the proposed merger was what the architects of the deal said was an inability to consistently turn a profit as stand-alone carriers.

Well, it's just a quarter, but United and Continental made a combined profit of \$663 million in the three months ending June 30. They did it as stand-alone carriers. Their combined cash stash now sits at \$8.4 billion.

A number of factors have helped produce improved financial performance for the airlines this summer. Perhaps the most fruitful strategy has been a concerted effort to reduce the number of seats that are sold by the big airlines. "Capacity discipline" is the buzz phrase used by airline CEO's. Less supply (fewer flights) creates greater demand and an ability to raise fares.

You're also seeing what the airline bosses call a new treasure of "ancillary revenue" which is slowly taking hold in the form of bag fees and various other day-of-flight offerings that allow customers to purchase better seating locations. Before the merger, United did calculations suggesting it could add a billion dollars annual from bag fees.

Continental CEO Jeff Smisek said Thursday he believes the merger of Continental and United will be a done deal before year's end. In the meantime, United and Continental will roll in large profits for at least another quarter on their own. It probably can't be said given the latest results that sustained profit is unattainable without the merger. It would be more honest perhaps to acknowledge the new behemoth is about an effort to better dominate markets and control capacity netting even larger profits than what the two carriers obtained individually in the second quarter.

7-25-10 0145

You may have noticed less regular updates here the last few weeks. I've been spending significant amounts of free time transferring pictures, music and words from the aging hard drive on my desktop computer to an external storage device.

I sense the end may be near for my desktop machine. Some of the stuff I've accumulated on it over a period of more than nine years would be nice to preserve for later perusal. So, that's what I'm doing. It'll make the death of my current computer much easier to handle when it's had enough.

-I didn't know it until today, but I was surprised to discover the M train is operating two cars short of a full string. All but a few NYC subway lines run with ten cars. The M is using just eight, which will take some getting used to. It's typically my subway custom to enter either the front car - or the rear car - because they seem to be the least populated. When the M entered the Roosevelt Ave. station this afternoon, the train rolled right by me. The last car was a good ten yards away from where I was standing, prompting a quick scamper to beat the closing doors. Same thing happened on my return trip as the eight-car string left large gaps at both the start and end of the platform. For future reference, I'll remember this quirk by associating the letter M with the word "middle."

-The return of Carlos Beltran to the Mets after a year on the shelf should have been happy, celebrated occasion. It may yet turn out that way, but you're hearing Met fans on the radio grumble about Beltran's impact on team chemistry. The introverted center-fielder re-joined the team after the all-star break and the Mets have gone 1-6 since. Right fielder Jeff Francoeur is the odd man out from Beltran's return (Angel Pagan shifted from center to right). The Post reported Thursday that the Mets are seeking to deal

Francoeur and a Post source says Francoeur supports getting moved. Francoeur has just six hits in his last 52 at-bats, so on paper it's a hard case to suggest he deserves to play over the red-hot Pagan. But Francoeur (affectionately known as "Frenchie") was the front-and-center clubhouse leader before his benching. His cannon for an arm is missed and his dissatisfaction as a backup may very well be a contagious negative on a team that always seems to be dogged with a fog of indifference. Beltran has a year left on his bloated \$119 million deal and isn't going anywhere. I'm starting to get the feeling that the current Met 6-14 slide is destined to turn into the same type of fade job we've seen in each of the last three prior seasons.

-The Lou Piniella announcement that he's done as Cubbie skipper at season's end has suddenly given Yanks manager Joe Girardi serious leverage as he approaches expiration of his deal with the Yankees. Girardi wasn't given even a sniff of an opportunity to ink an extension by Hal Steinbrenner after last year's World Series win. Girardi's lame-duck status combined with his fondness for Chicago could end up forcing the Yankees to depart from organizational tradition of playing hard-ball with the incumbent manager. Speaking with Francesa on Thursday afternoon, Girardi was careful to sidestep talk of a possible courtship with the Cubs but he definitely didn't close the door on it.

7-22-10 1830

My neighborhood's only full-fledged park/playground has temporarily annexed more space through closure of a busy street that adjoins it.

Thanks to pressure from a coalition of neighborhood activists, the city has shut off 78th Street to vehicular traffic between 34th Avenue and Northern Boulevard through the end of August.

The affected street runs parallel to the popular two-acre Travers Park. The street's closure essentially gives the park a safe, open, buffer zone along one side of it. When I walked down 78th on Saturday en route to the bus stop, dozens of families had set up lounge chairs and shade umbrellas right there in the middle of the street.

One wouldn't think sitting or playing in a shut-off street next to a park would be desirable, but in a place so densely populated and busy, any open space gets consumed. It's a magnet for the masses.

The current mayor actually deserves credit for seizing even longer stretches of roadway in Manhattan for conversion to space reserved solely for pedestrians – and pedestrian activity. When Mike Bloomberg moved to close off several blocks of Broadway in Times Square and Herald Square last year, his idea was met with significant skepticism. Those in vehicles who feel like they own the road complained about the crimp on their route.

The mayor didn't care. He got beat on congestion pricing so he shut down streets. He made a small but significant overture to alter the balance of power between pedestrian and driver.

People have gobbled up that open space on Broadway. They read newspapers, drink coffee and make otherwise great use of a street formerly clogged with taxis. Bloomberg announced earlier this year that his Broadway experiment was so popular, it would be made permanent.

-My preferred neighborhood produce market has been stocking some incredible South Carolina peaches in the last week or so. All of them are coming from the Yonce and Sons operation in Edgefield County, SC. Each peach carries a small sticker that says "Big Smile." I'm getting them for 99-cents a pound. Every one of them hits maximum sweetness a day or two after purchase. I slice them in half starting at the top - all the way around - and the pit pops out with barely a nudge. The flesh stays firm. It's candy. I hope the Big Smiles keep coming this way.

7-18-10 1200

The famously difficult par-four 17th hole at the Old Course at St. Andrews is more of a bogey threat at this year's Open Championship than ever before. It runs 495 yards, which is forty yards longer than the last time (2005) the world's best gathered at St. Andrews for the season's third major. Known as the "Road Hole," the feel of the new tee location at 17 was well captured by ESPN Thursday morning. From the tee box facing the hole, golfers are staring at a large lodging structure, an empty parking lot converted into what looks like hospitality tents and the second hole's fairway. It takes a precise, looping 260-yard knock over the close-range obstructions to set up any kind of tolerable second shot. A deep and devilish pot bunker sits to the left of the 17th green. A paved two-lane road that's officially in play borders the right side of the entire hole. Tournament officials said they would scrap the new, further-from-the-hole tee box should rain and wind unleash maximum wrath, but on Thursday the first round started with relatively tame conditions and the new tee box was used. At the end of first round play, 17 was far and away the most difficult hole statistically. Almost half the competitors failed to make par on the hole. It took the field 4.58 strokes on average to get through it.

-The Steinbrenner patch affixed to the Yankee jersey starting with Friday night's game is horribly ill-conceived. A total of 35 letters and characters using a bland font appear in a very small space, making it near impossible for a fan to decipher it from a distance. Whoever designed and approved the patch should look at the advertising signage displayed at Yankee Stadium and gain a lesson on the effectiveness of brevity. The Steinbrenner uniform patch should simply say "BOSS." Instead, it throws the kitchen sink at you. The patch will be stitched above the interlocking NY on the home jersey and above the "YORK" portion of New York on the road uniform. Another more attractive patch honoring Bob Sheppard (featuring a microphone) will appear on the uniform's left sleeve.

-I caught a five-buck on-demand showing of the movie Greenberg this week and can't recommend it. The 2010 Noah Baumbach release received decent reviews. It stars Ben Stiller as a 40-year-old barely-together carpenter "living the life (he) didn't plan on." A house-sitting stint for his rich jerk brother leads to an implausible romance between the Stiller character (Roger Greenberg) and his brother's errand girl. Hurt-people hurt people is the recurring theme, with most of the hurt being doled out by Greenberg. The only character deserving sympathy in this flick is the ailing dog. When young party-goers feed the sick dog beer and pizza in a maddening but effective sequence late in the movie, it's the only time I got stirred up and felt some connection with Greenberg.

7-15-10 2245

Not everybody shares my disdain for the hot, humid weather we've been having in the big city this

summer, but I've grown tired of it.

It slows me down. It turns the crank on cranky. It spins the electric meter as fast as it'll go. It adds a near-steady layer of noise from the air conditioner to an otherwise quiet apartment.

You walk to the subway entrance and descend into a tunnel that's bottled up two months of heat and humidity. It makes you dizzy and drenched if you don't have your A-game going in.

I checked the data from the National Weather Service station at LaGuardia to confirm what I've been feeling this summer and this is what I came up with:

In the 41 days since June 3, the thermometer has hit 90 or above twenty times.

In the last seven days, we've had relative humidity numbers of 85, 85, 74, 84, 79, 82 and 85.

For the months of June and July, we're about 5.5 degrees above the combined average high.

It's funny. We had a beautiful stretch of weather for about a week before Independence Day. There were plenty of hot days but the humidity was down near 25 percent. One night I got home from work at 1 AM and it was 84 degrees. Because the dew point was so low, it was very pleasant sleeping with the windows open. Since then, it's been a sauna. It's been really miserable. A cold beer doesn't even really taste that great.

I wouldn't complain if it weren't for the fact we still have six, seven weeks of full-on summer remaining. The forecast for the next seven days or so is more of the same.

I have a week off in late August and plan on joining my family in the upper reaches of Wisconsin. I imagine the prospect of cool nights and wouldn't mind if the days of hot, hot heat between now and then pass quick.

7-14-10 2145

Many of the dozens of people who made public statements assessing the legacy of George Steinbrenner on Tuesday referenced a late-in-life mellowing or softening in the man's approach to his employees.

Steinbrenner's numerous well-documented displays of nastiness with people who reported to him before his mind went to mush were mostly omitted from remembrances on the day of his death. That's as it should be I guess.

The line of demarcation in Steinbrenner's demeanor isolating perhaps his final five years or so was an unspoken acknowledgment by pundits and former players that the Boss was a serious jerk before he lost his marbles. Said Yankee TV play-by-play man Michael Kay on Steinbrenner's YES network Tuesday night: "Toward the end, he was a different guy." Yeah. He was a different guy because he was off the

Yankee power grid – out of reach – and unable to push the tyrannical buttons that impacted so many pummeled by his reign.

Steinbrenner deserves huge credit for that gleaming shrine in the Bronx and seven of the world championship flags that fly on top of it. Yes. To say he was a “different guy” late in life is undue deference on a day when the inclination is to filter out the deceased’s flaws.

7-13-10 1915

Disappointment, sure. But I don’t get the hostile and sharply negative reaction coming from cities that lost their bid to gain the services of LeBron James.

Here in New York, James was roundly criticized in the media for choosing Miami. The dominant beef was that James somehow chose the path of least resistance, ducking the bright lights and stiff challenge of playing at the World’s Most Famous Arena.

New York thought its great basketball venue alone was enough to court the King. It had little else to offer. Imagine the scene as Knicks officials had their recruiting session with James when the free agency period opened ten days ago. The sloppy owner Jim Dolan and the physically frail GM Donnie Walsh highlight their pitch with the boast they possess two max-contract slots and a thin existing roster topped by Danilo Gallinari. When it came time for Knicks coach Mike D’Antoni to wax poetic about his defensive vision (which we know is important to LeBron), how is it a serious conversation?

How great could playing on the floor of Madison Square Garden be when the facts get laid out and you’re sitting across the table from Dolan, Walsh and D’Antoni?

A few days after that first meeting with James, the Knicks preemptively nailed down Amare Stoudemire for near-max money. To me, that was a sign the Knicks were hedging their bets on James. It can’t rally the larger cause to commit to a guy who plays zero defense when you know James puts a high premium on it.

What disturbed me most about the James recruitment was when I heard the Knicks used Isiah Thomas in last-ditch efforts to pull in the King. I guess it’s possible some players outside New York don’t know the full scope of damage Thomas leveled on the Knick organization. Perhaps he’s seen by some as the smiling Pistons star who was among the best of his generation. But his decisions ruined the Knicks. Thomas made so many horrible personnel moves and agreed to so many mind-boggling bad contracts, his return as an emissary in this process makes you cringe.

The Knicks in their current state of dysfunction really have no right to be upset about getting rejected by such a great free agent.

As far as Dan Gilbert goes, I think he’s nuts. His reaction exposes something deeper than losing a star through free agency. Something is festering from the Gilbert/James working relationship for the owner to spew such hate. Yeah, James failed to execute a tidy separation. The TV special was horribly awkward when viewed from the perspective of a Cavs fan. But James gave a lot to that franchise and played a lot of honest, full-effort basketball in that city. He saw a better opportunity and wanted a change of scenery. His

contract was up. He had the right to leave without being called a traitor.

-It's been barely discussed, but James, Bosh and Wade can start this process anew in 2014. The new, six-year contracts for all three players include termination clauses after year number four and opt-outs after the fifth year. That information was reported late Saturday night by Ira Winderman of the South Florida Sun-Sentinel. The new arena in Brooklyn should be open by 2014 and James will be 29 years old when the 2014-15 season starts.

-The airplane that hauled out ten Russian snoops Thursday night launched from busy LaGuardia Airport of all places. The little-known charter carrier Vision Airlines operated the non-stop flight to Vienna, Austria using a Boeing 767 adorned with Vision's red, gold and white color scheme. The spy swap mission is likely Vision Airlines' most high-profile moment since initiating operations in 1994. Photographs of the Vision airplane sitting on a tarmac next to a smaller Russian aircraft in Vienna Friday have been widely circulated. The front page of Saturday's Times carried a large Reuters photo that prominently displays the tail of the Vision airplane. What struck me as odd was that the US government would contract to use a wide-body airplane configured for more than 200 people to carry just ten spies plus perhaps another ten CIA and other government employees on a long international flight. Why not use a smaller, more fuel efficient aircraft?

7-11-10 0145

After two decades of dental indifference and neglect, I've launched a serious commitment to get my teeth the professional attention they belatedly deserve.

It took about a year to locate a trusted and recommended dentist that accepts my insurance. I finally settled on a woman who went to dental school with a high school pal. She works at an office near where my parents live in suburban Chicago.

It probably sounds crazy to travel 700 miles to reach a dental chair, but of the dozen or so dentists that gained endorsements from friends here in New York City, none of them would accept my card emblazoned with the words Aetna DMO.

Knowing I needed a big overhaul, and knowing I'm super skittish near the drill, I didn't want to see just anybody who took my plan.

So, Wednesday was the first day of four trips to the Chicago burbs for extensive drilling, bite realignment and replacement of the degrading amalgam (silver) fillings that had served me well until I hit 40.

The doctor issued me a prescription for a 2 mg valium pill in advance of this week's visit. I took it about fifteen minutes before I arrived at her office. The low dosage was less than what you'd like if you wanted to have fun, but it did generate a hint of a carefree feeling.

Once in the chair, there was a full two hours worth of drilling followed by insertion of a white-colored composite substance to fill the holes that were dug. Multiple injections of novocaine masked all but a few

twinges of pain.

Wearing thin blue disposable gloves as they worked, the dental assistant and dentist discussed current events and their Fourth of July barbeques as if I wasn't there. Not that I was able to contribute anything to the conversation, anyway.

It all went a little better than I expected. It wasn't pleasant, but it wasn't torture. My Dad picked me up when it was over and took me to a place that serves old school strawberry milkshakes. The numb half of my mouth didn't know what hit it, but the other side really enjoyed the fresh, mashed berries blended with ice cream and whole milk.

I go back in a month for phase two of what will end up being three or four visits to get my bite right.

I'll smile when it's all over.

7-8-10 1730

I wonder what kind of logistical leaps of faith were made by the planners of the free Drake/Hanson concert at the South Street Seaport a few weeks ago. If you didn't hear, 25-thousand people showed up on a Tuesday night for that widely-promoted event.

Nervous about the potential for chaos, police cancelled the concert before Drake or Hanson took the stage.

The scenic East River pier gets crowded when five-thousand assemble there. According to multiple accounts (including several You Tube clips uploaded by attendees), it got pretty rowdy. Just about any gathering would go that way when turnout exceeds capacity five times over and there's jostling for a view of the performance. Throw in the sale of beer and the public's accessibility to a multi-level deck overlooking the pier and it was lucky there wasn't full-on chaos when the show was abruptly scrapped.

Paper Magazine was the gig's primary sponsor. It had to know Drake is way bigger than the Seaport. The corporation that runs the Seaport had to know, too, right?

A few days before the concert, the Times ran a feature on Drake calling him the "New Face of Hip-Hop." This is an artist who can sell a half-million records in a week. So, really what else would the Seaport expect from a free Drake show on a nice night in the big city?

I'd love to hear what the show's organizers said among themselves when they met to discuss their big gig in the days and weeks leading up to it.

Smartly, the Seaport has shelved a scheduled performance by Kesha on the same stage after likely doing a little math showing how big that crowd might be.

Still a go at the Seaport are gigs by Avi Buffalo and Thee Oh Sees. It's been a decade's worth of free shows by bands of that stature that has made going to the Seaport a real treat.

When somebody with a wildly out of whack understanding of Drake's star power blows it this bad, you

hope it doesn't un-do all the good things that have happened at that venue over the years. Stick with the Avi Buffalo's of the world and things we'll be just fine.

-Ronan Tynan sang "God Bless America" during the seventh inning stretch of Red Sox/O's at Fenway on the Fourth of July. It was Tynan's first Fenway performance since relocating to Beantown from New York City. The talented tenor was banished from singing at Yankee Stadium after it was revealed he made anti-Semitic comments to a realtor in his Manhattan apartment building last year.

7-6-10 0005

A few minutes after the latest batch of bleak labor stats came out Friday morning, President Obama boarded a flight for the Bob Byrd funeral in West Virginia. Before he left, Obama did one of those quickie assessments (without inquiries by the media) of the data for TV. His statement on the nation's jobless numbers sounded a lot more positive than what economists were saying. "Make no mistake – we are headed in the right direction," said Obama.

9.5-percent is the official national unemployment rate in the June 2010 report compiled by the US Bureau of Labor Statistics. That's a sham number. People without a job are dropping off the countable total by the hundreds of thousands each year this miserable economy drags forward. The Times on Saturday put the unemployment rate at 16.5-percent using a formula that more fairly measures the total pool of people looking for work.

Who needs the stats anyway? Everybody has friends out of work right now who don't want to hear the President saying things are headed in the right direction until things actually are truly pointed that way.

Saying things are better than they are won't make them better.

What would help is direct intervention in places like Evansville, IN where the Whirlpool refrigerator factory shut down a week ago Friday. The 1100 jobs at that plant will be moved to Mexico. The 19 bucks an hour workers made in Evansville is no doubt a whole lot more than what the workers in Mexico will command. Whirlpool said the exportation of its refrigerator plant will improve "operating efficiencies." To hell with the notion we should make our own stuff in this country so we have communities that can survive and flourish. Instead, we're watching them turn into shells of their former existences.

The 19 bucks an hour those 1100 Whirlpool workers made in Evansville wasn't making 'em rich. But it gave them a life. What else but corporate greed walks away from the idea that communities are built on these types of factory jobs?

If politicians and policy-makers want to keep yapping about Main Street, they should stare down the types of decisions made by the likes of Whirlpool in all our cities. Since it seems to do no good to appeal to the moral compass of the large employer, maybe it's time to un-do the trade agreements that make it so easy for Whirlpool to hop the border for cheap, international labor.

The Times says six million factory jobs have been lost in the last twelve years. The cities that lost them are easy to see. Obama should quit talking about how things are getting better or headed in the right

direction until this part of the employment picture gets a fuller explanation.

-Apple's disclosure that all versions of its I-Phone display an inaccurate signal strength measurement brought this observation from Times reporter Miguel Helft in his story on the subject: "For a company that obsesses over every detail of its products, the failure to detect this longstanding problem earlier is astonishing."

-It didn't garner any newspaper coverage or analysis on the SNY broadcast, but I thought Mets third basemen David Wright acted uncharacteristically unsportsmanlike on a play in the first inning of Friday night's game in Washington. Nationals leadoff man Nyjer Morgan attempted to steal second base and had no trouble beating the throw of Met catcher Rod Barajas. With lefty slugger Adam Dunn batting, the Mets were in a pronounced shift, leaving Wright to receive the Barajas throw and apply the belated tag. As Morgan slid head-first into second, his momentum carried him past the bag. When he finally skidded to a stop, Morgan's left foot was all that came in contact with the base. Wright must have sensed Morgan's tenuous attachment to the bag. In a sweeping motion after catching the ball, Wright used his glove (with ball inside) to push the runner's foot off the base. Wright made a funny face directed at second base ump Bill Welke as if to suggest Morgan's foot came off the base on its own. Welke called the runner out. Morgan was livid. Wright's action was beyond the typical gamesmanship I would think is acceptable. He basically used force – and a corny contortion of his face – to turn an opponent's clean stolen base into an out. Had Alex Rodriguez done the same thing, he would have been heavily criticized.

7-4-10 0140