Scooter and Skipper at the Roman Colosseum

by Con Chapman

Italy is shopping for a corporate sponsor to shell out $33 million to refurbish the 2,000-year-old Colosseum.

Bloomberg News

We were bogged down in traffic as we approached the stadium, but we eventually found a lot where we could park our chariot—for 30 denarii!—while we took in the one game we can afford to attend each year.

"The Lions stop the Saints runner for no gain."

"The Lions are gonna *kill* the Saints!" Scooter, the older of my two boys said, taunting Skipper, the other. Skip is two years younger than his brother, and instinctively roots for the underdog because of all the *noogias* he has had to endure over the course of his childhood.

"I wouldn't be so sure," Skip says as he shuffles his holy cards and puts them back in his pocket. "St. Ignatius of Antioch gained 200 yards last time these two teams met." I'm proud of the way

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Skip uses cold, hard-headed statistical analysis to back up his emotional attachment to his team.

We make our way into the Colosseum—excuse me, its the *Prince Spaghetti* Colosseum now—and take in the beauty of Italy's national pastime; sadistic cruelty to wacko religious cults.

“Dad, can we get autographs?” Scooter asks.

St. Ignatius of Antioch, sacked by Lions' defenders.

“Sure, sure,” I say, happy that my boys are into sports and not drunken Bacchic orgies like so many of their friends. “Just be careful. If a lion grabs your program—let him have it.”

“Okay, dad.” He takes off for the Lions dugout, where along with hundreds of other kids he extends his scorecard or a statue of a saint for a pawprint that he will treasure for the rest of his youth, then sell for big bucks when his wife tells him to get rid of all his sports memorabilia when he gets married.

“Please Mr. Lion—sign mine!”

Skipper is his usual, quiet self. “Dad, I'm going down to the Saints dugout, okay?”

“Okay,” I say. The Saints have been on a terrible losing streak, but Skip never gives up on them. They're the Chicago Cubs of the Italian Martyrs League. Always the bridesmaids—in fact, always the mangled and mauled bridesmaids—and never the bride. I think it builds character to stick with an underperforming religious franchise that has little hope of ever displacing paganism.

I watch him hold out his Holy Cards, hoping to get a martyr's autograph. The Saints are strangely calm, given the fate that awaits them; another loss, and none of them with guaranteed contracts.

Scooter returns from his quest with just a few scratches on his arm, and two “pawtographs” of key Lions' players. There's Aslan Gryphon, a #1 draft pick who the martyr pages are calling a real animal, and Leo Kefir, a big cat who's in the twilight of a career that has him on the verge of breaking Lionel Simba's all-time record of 714 devoured Christians.

Skipper returns to our seats and the Saints begin their slow, dejected march to the center of the field.

“Monotheism sucks!” Scooter yells along with all the other Lions' fans.

“Scoot—watch your language,” I caution him.

“But everybody else says it,” he says, a bit confused.

“That doesn't mean your mother and I will let you talk that way.”

“How come we can't come to the games more often?” Skipper asks.

“Well, it's expensive. Lions fans want to have the best team, but that costs money. That's why they're taking on corporate sponsors and selling ads,” I say as I point to the walls festooned with banners pitching razor blades, wine and chariot tires.

“That's not fair,” Skipper says, sensing the injustice of a system that's skewed to favor big-market teams like the Lions over small but growing franchises whose fans hang on through millenia of lean times with cult-like tenacity. “They ought to have revenue-sharing.”

“Skip, in case I haven't told you before, it's time I broke the news to you,” I say with resignation. “Life is unfair.”

“Yeah, the Lions always win because they're *better,*” Scooter says with the contemptuous tone of a first-born front runner.

“Well, Scoots,” I say, putting my arm around him as I always do when I'm about to give him painful but true fatherly advice that he'll promptly ignore, “the race isn't always to the swift.”

“What do you mean?” he asks, a look of consternation in his eyes.

“I think it's a pretty safe bet that in 2,000 years the Lions will be on the endangered species list, while the Saints will be the third-largest landholder in the world after a company called Starbucks and a former cable TV magnate named Ted Turner.”

“Really?” Skip asks, a glimmer of hope breaking through the fog of despair that has hung over his favorite team for as long as he can remember.

“Yep, and the Saints will be led by an overpaid manager who wears a funny hat.”