

If Belgium Were a Sports Team, It Would be the Boston Red Sox

June 29, 2011

Ambassador Howard Gutman

Fenway Park

Your Royal Highness, my good friend Minister Vanackere, my new friends Ministers Marcour and Cerexhe, my compatriot in bridge building between Belgium and America Ambassador Matthysen, Belgian friends and Boston friends.

One of my favorite parts of serving as the U.S. Ambassador to Belgium is the opportunity to write my own talks and speeches. Show me a group of 5 bored Belgians in a café and a microphone, and I will figure out something to talk about.

But some assignments are more challenging than others. I thought I had finally met my match when I read the description of today's assignment in a memo from my Commercial Officer. It read: "Mr. Ambassador, you have been asked to give a few minutes of remarks linking baseball and Fenway Park to the trade mission and Belgium. A light-hearted speech is recommended. "

It seemed like a daunting task. A game of connect the dots to be played with a spoon instead of a pencil.

But then it occurred to me. It was so clear. So easy. It has been staring me in the face since I arrived in Belgium nearly two years ago. It has been rumbling in my heart. I have long felt it. I felt it at the Carnival in Aalst. With the Gilles in Binche and fighting the dragon at the Doudou. At the Ommegang in Brussels. At the coast in Koksido or Knokke. Celebrating Father Damien in Tremelo and throwing nuts from the balcony in Bastogne. In the Christmas Village in Liège, visiting monuments in Bulligen and Buchenbach. I felt it when becoming a Chevalier des Blanc Moussis in Stavelot. I felt it in meetings with Ministers who cared whether I was enjoying their country, and with citizens in Charleroi who lined up for hours to tell me the challenges they face but the hope they feel from my President. It has been in classrooms in Leuven and Louvain la Neuve and a dozen other schools and in Molenbeek, where girls in headscarves and boys named Mohammed sang the Star Spangled banner. I have felt it in homes all over Belgium and in town squares in the 284 cities, villages and communes I have visited to date.

It had thus long been in my heart, I just had to recognize it. And thus the title of the talk, as always, posted on our Embassy website:

If Belgium Were a Sports Team, It Would be the Boston Red Sox

I told it to the Foreign Minister and he looked uncertain. Was this good? Was comparing Belgium to the Red Sox a compliment? Did being the Boston Red Sox mean something different than being the New York Yankees or the Los Angeles Lakers?

So I looked around for perspective members of what insiders call Red Sox nation to validate the comparison. Seeing the National Security Advisor to Vice-President Biden, I told him. Seeing Senator Kerry, I told him. And they nodded knowingly beginning to have that always present smile of a true

Red Sox fan . . . Belgium, they immediately recognized, must be something special.

You see, as in Ypres and Bastogne, we are now on hallowed ground. The Boston Red Sox and Fenway Park represent the finest in tradition and dedication. People in Boston live their entire lives within a particular radius from Yawkey Way and the Green Monster, much like folks in Mechelen and all over Belgium live their entire lives within eyesight of the church in which they grew up. From Babe Ruth to Carl Yastremski to Big Papi, the finest have walked these alleys and run these basepaths; Belgian too has known the consistency of fathers yielding to sons and turning to granddaughters in the finest of traditions.

Whether in baseball or in world geography, there are indeed others who are louder; others who are more showy; others who speak first and deliver much less later, if at all. Some sports fans might say the Yankees or the Dodgers; some in Belgium might say France or Germany. But as the others clamor and seek the spotlight, Belgium and the Red Sox know better. Admiration is a reward earned on the high road by deeds and not by demands; by how the road is travelled and not just how often you blow the horn as you drive.

The Red Sox have a small stadium, but like modest Belgium, the Sox have power that extends far past its walls. Belgium is but 11 million people, but its economic and cultural influence knows no limits of size. With a 30th of the population of the U.S., Belgium exports one third as much – per capita a huge footprint around the globe. And from within these small walls including the large green one known at the Monster, the Red Sox have become America's team – the phrase Red Sox nation echoes throughout the United States.

The Red Sox are thought leaders. Where they go, people follow and often even don't know they are following. The Red Sox too sets trends daily -- focusing on pitching, defense and sabermetrics. Belgians develop patterns and let others think they led the way. And quality counts – without ego.

And the Red Sox, like Belgium, is ultimately about people. Like Belgians, Red Sox fans will buy you a beer when the team loses, and two when they win. And it may well be a Stella. The people wedded to the Red Sox are tied by a bond that has known challenges and overcome adversity -- but strength and dedication emerge where adversity planted the seeds.

So welcome to Fenway Park. Welcome to Red Sox nation. And, for today, Red Sox nation is a nation called Belgium.

Enjoy, thanks so much and all the best.