THE RUMPUS
Mean people suck, but we're all mean sometimes.

Tragedy is Fast, Knowledge is Slow

By Allison Wright

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A friend of mine died when the Texas A&M bonfire collapsed in 1999. I remember my college roommate and my then-boyfriend coming to find me and deliver the message, reported to them by a concerned friend who had called our dorm room from the accident site 180 miles away. There were no smartphones then. I ran back to my room, returned my friend's phone call, awaited news. I still have the newspaper with the photo of Bryan's casket on the front page.

Almost two years later, another phone call alerted me to the news out of New York City: "Turn on your television. A plane has hit the Twin Towers." I was in my final semester of college then. I watched MSNBC while I dried my hair, and then I went to a biology class where, for 75 minutes that Tuesday morning, students and teacher alike speculated on things like motivation and responsibility before the administration canceled the day's remaining classes and we all left in a haze of patriotism and unexpected free time.

These two events are unrelated—one was an accident and one was decidedly not—except that I experienced them before social media. I learned of the explosions at the Boston Marathon from a colleague who called from her office ("Did you hear about Boston?") and then emailed a link. The next thing I did was check in with my social networks, Facebook and Twitter. The Internet was my go-to source for information the rest of Monday and all of Tuesday, until 5:30 PM, when I left the office to teach a class called "Sports, Media, and Society."

We were to discuss sport and globalization using Franklin Foer's *How Soccer Explains the World*. We were screening *Zidane*, a French documentary that challenges students with its non-narrative structure and lack of dialogue. I considered jettisoning the film and directly addressing the bombings, but I worried there wasn't enough to say. We didn't have much information. Yet we had a lot of news, too many images.

For months, I had worked to help students make connections between sports and society, to help them analyze and interrogate media representations of sport and of athletes, but I had done so from behind the desk, by preparing lessons, shaping responses, providing context, and offering answers. In the immediate aftermath of the Boston bombings, I had no answers and very little context. I couldn't offer them facts or historical perspective quite yet, not in the same way I did when we talked about imperialism and the Spalding World Baseball Tour, cheerleading and emphasized femininity, the 1968 Olympic Games, the commercialization of the NFL, or even women's basketball. But what I could offer them was my time and attention, a place offline to discuss the events in real time.

I thought back to that Tuesday morning biology class almost twelve years earlier. For the first time, it occurred to me how brave my professor was to stand at the front of the room and field questions before noon on September 11th. What could he possibly have known? Not much, I suspected in hindsight. Was I that brave even 24 hours after the bombings?

Ultimately, instead of forcing them into a discussion that might trigger PTSD and that had the potential to derail in the absence of facts, I offered to stay after class and discuss the events with interested students. One student had friends at Northeastern University. He had spent much of the previous day confirming their whereabouts. He wanted to know my thoughts. I may not have placed myself at the front of the room for 75 minutes, and it had been a long twelve years from undergraduate student to college instructor, but in that instant, it felt like it had happened overnight. I had gone from the student seeking answers to the teacher expected to have them.

We talked about the Israeli athletes taken hostage and eventually killed at the Olympic games in Munich in 1972 and about the Centennial Olympic Park bombing in Atlanta in 1996, how this is not the first time athletes or a crowd gathering at a sporting event have been targeted. "These things have long tails," I said. "Sociohistoric context is important," I said. "There is so much information and even more misinformation that it's hard to process it all right now." And, "It's okay to walk away from the screen every now and then."

I said all of these things and more. I reminded the students that we are a resilient society, most often united in our fandom following tragedy. If there's one thing we know, it's that in these times of confusion and fear, sports bring people together. Sports, more than anything else perhaps, have the ability to unite. We were all New York Yankees in September of 2001. We were all New Orleans Saints when they won that first game back in the Superdome post-Katrina.

And then came this question: "Dr. Wright, why do people target sporting events?"

It was beginning to feel a little bit like my Ph.D. qualifying exams all over again. I felt an urge to look over my shoulder, to check if my committee was standing by to rescind my degree in the event of an incorrect answer. Why do people target sporting events? I wanted to say, "I don't know. Because they're crazy?" Instead, I explained that the Israeli athletes were singled out in Munich in '72 for political reasons and the Centennial Olympic Park bomber claimed to have been protesting our government's stance on abortion. "To some people," I said, "the idea of America as 'the land of the free and the home of the brave,' this American ideal of exceptionalism—a concept that's been up for debate all semester—is offensive."

And so we discussed the individualism inherent in running a marathon, how very American that can be. And at the same time, how equally American it is to gather around the course and cheer on the runners. And therein lies the danger. "Maybe it wasn't about sports at all," I said. "It's tempting to read into the event. But maybe the high attendance rate of such a public event—on a holiday—was a bigger factor than the event itself. We mustn't forget we don't yet have these answers."

When I got home that night, I saw that the New York Yankees had played "Sweet Caroline," a Fenway Park tradition, in honor of Boston. But I felt inadequate nonetheless, unequal to the task of explaining to students who are growing up in an instant-gratification society that knowledge is not always power. While the Internet can allow for access to an unprecedented breadth and depth of information, it also breeds expectation. What do we know? When will we know more? How can we find out? Sometimes the truth doesn't always come as quickly as we'd like. Maybe that's the lesson.

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Rumpus original art by Mark Armstrong.

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