It is a timeless tale that speaks of our passion for sports in America, of the depths of the emotions we attach to our pastimes. Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus – and he was once booed by fans in Philadelphia.

In the aftermath of the "Claus Caper," no one suggested that Americans hated Christmas. Or that they had disrespected the cherished beliefs of a nation of capitalist consumers. But after a recent flap in Detroit, in which fans there booed the Canadian national anthem prior to a home playoff contest against the NBA's Toronto Raptors, media types are rushing to make a national case out of simple, everyday reactions in the sporting world.

The case, as presented, goes something like this. A Canadian basketball team was visiting an American city on the same day that Canada buried four Canadian soldiers who were killed by U.S. 'friendly fire' in Afghanistan. Fans in the American city booed the Canadian national anthem, clearly indicating a lack of respect for the lives of those lost. Just another example of "American ignorance" at work.

In Canada, this passes for a credible front-page story. On this side of the border, forgive me if I pass by the rack and refuse to buy it.

The case is predicated upon a rather simple assumption: that a link between the two events exists simply because the events took place at the same time. But that wailing seems even more simplistic than the booing of the fans in Detroit.

For starters, this is a natural occurrence at a sporting event – on both sides of the border. The opposing team is introduced...and the fans boo. The announcer makes a call of the enemy's latest goal...and the fans boo. The home team is down by five at halftime...well, you know the rest. Especially if you're from Philadelphia.

Of course, those same fans would find themselves cheering if they moved to the enemy city. And they'd cheer that goal-scorer if he came to "their team" in a trade. And so long as the home team wins, they're always heroes.

This sort of emotional swing is commonplace in sports. For better or worse, we invest a lot of ourselves in "our teams." Attendance at a sporting event is a license to let yourself go, to chant in unison with the mob. It's an invitation to scream a phrase for which your mother would wash your mouth out with soap – and to do it at the top of your lungs, in front of tens of thousands of people, before a nationally televised audience.

Is it any surprise, then, that a few louts would take advantage of yet another chance to boo the other team?

Of course, the media has a different spin on the day. They want to draw a parallel between an isolated event and American callousness. The problem is, it just doesn't work. There was less connection between the two events than there was between the dysfunctional synapses in the brains of the booing knuckleheads. And I'm sure those synapses were firing about as often as the Flyers have lit the lamp this post-season.

I'll be honest. I don't think national anthems belong at a sporting event that doesn't feature five interlocked rings on the front cover of its program. It's another rote rite that diminishes the significance of these powerful national symbols – and, as we've seen this past week, it's another excuse for controversy.
But if the announcers there had truly meant to attach any significance to the day's events – if they had meant to honor the lives of the four Canadians who were lost – then they should have done away with the Canadian national anthem altogether that night. Instead, they should have made the following announcement.

"In lieu of singing the Canadian national anthem tonight, we ask that you please stand and remove your hats as we observe a moment of silence for the four Canadian soldiers who were killed earlier this week in Afghanistan."

The Palace would have gone stone silent. And that silence would have been followed by the most stirring rendition of the American national anthem you've heard since...well, since the last sporting event you attended after September 11.

Instead, the announcers went through their familiar motions, and some sewer dwellers woke up from their beer-induced torpor long enough to boo the Toronto Raptors. Which is rather silly, given that the starting five for the Raptors were all born in the United States.

Sporting events are often depicted in terms of war. Hockey players "battle along the boards." Football players "go to war in the trenches." Athletes throw around words like "heroism" and "courage" so often that we start to believe them when they speak glowingly of their "fellow soldiers."

But the hollow hearts of these metaphors are exposed with every peal of every bell that tolls for a soldier who has given his life in a real war.

The irony here is not that a few louts at a sporting event in America booed the Canadian national anthem on the same day that Canada buried four of its own. Those four died in defense of values – life, liberty, freedom – espoused by both countries. No, the real irony is that certain people saw sports put in its proper place on this day – and then proceeded to elevate it again into something it's not.

And those people ought to know better.

I know a Canadian who has rather strong views about those boos and what they mean on a national scale. He compares this "disrespect" to someone laughing at the color of his shirt. That's rather apt, because sports, like nationalist sentiments, are largely about codes and colors, banners and battles, "us and them."

But he'd be better off wearing that shirt as it was intended, instead of wearing it as a blindfold. Because he really ought to know better.