

## PhysicallyFIT

## Shaun Young: A Fan For All Seasons

By Elizabeth Eisenstadt-Evans

Some fans are fair-weather to join the media frenzy when a local team is winning, but ready to pile on the players when they are racking up the losses.

Not so with Shaun Young. In a town of faithful but fatalistic fans, the thirty nine-year old Springfield, PA, native has become famous locally for his loyalty, enthusiasm and selfless devotion to the Eagles in sickness and in health, for better and for worse.

Dressed in full team regalia, Young is a fixture at Eagles home games. Face painted in the signature green and silver, he is an example of selfless devotion to a team that so often comes close to being champions, and just as often falls short.



Shaun with Helen & Gwen "The Bachelor" TV Show



Shaun with Donovan McNabb

Young has always loved to play team sports; and he's always been an Eagle's fan. "I didn't realize how much until I was a teenager and understood more about the game and how much it means to our city. Having the greatest fans in the country made it easy for me to love the town and the city more and more as I grew up."

Exceptionally lucky in having inherited Eagle's season tickets from a man who moved to Florida, Young hasn't missed a home game since 1993, and has sat in the end zone since 1995. In 2003, the year Lincoln Financial Field replaced the old Veteran's Stadium, Young was one of eight picked as Fans of the Year in an online contest.

Emotionally entangled in the thrill of almost-victory and the agony of defeat, as are so many Eagle's fans, Young

is also fascinated by the complexity of the game. "It's very cerebral, some teams more so than others," says Young, at a friendly and polite man who works the Springfield Township Sanitation and Highway Work Department. As a Fan of the Year, he was invited to sit in on a strategy class and look at the Eagles playbooks. "When I saw the playbook, the vernacular was just insane. One play was almost a paragraph, and they have to remember hundreds of these things."

Philadelphia fans are a special breed, according to *New York Times* sports writer Jere Longman, a Havertown resident who has written a book about a group of Eagle's fans he got to know a few years ago, when the team made it to the Super Bowl. Revealingly, the title of the book is *"If Football's a Religion, Why Don't We Have a Prayer? Philadelphia, Its Faithful, and the Eternal Quest for Sports Salvation."* No other city with teams in the four, major, professional sports has gone this long without a championship in one of them (the Sixers won the NBA Championship in 1983), says Longman.



Shaun with Gervase Peterson "Survivor 1" TV Show

Mentioning the fans he has gotten to know in the course of many years of reporting on Philadelphia sports, Longman commented that he found a "great longing for victory" in spite of, and perhaps because of, the numbers of "defeats, and excruciating defeats." To outsiders, Philadelphia fans are a consumed lot, with a reputation for being boorish and surly, says the sportswriter. In fact there is a kind of innocence about them, "One of the reasons they are so badly behaved is because it is expected of them."

Young, who doesn't drink and very rarely boos, is not necessarily emblematic of the Eagles fan, according to Longman. "He's actually a fairly down to earth guy—a true fan, not overly critical, but consumed by the sport. He definitely takes it to heart." Takes it to heart to the extent that he risked the possibility of injury and perhaps death in the 2001 season, when his appendix burst and he refused to go to have it checked out until after the NFC Wildcard game with Tampa Bay. When Young eventually did go chat with a doctor, he spent a week in the hospital, and two months at home recovering from septic shock.

When the Eagles made it to the 2004 Super Bowl, Young believed (in spite of the innate Philadelphia conviction that disaster must follow success), "They were going to win", says Longman. In spite of the fact that the Eagles continue to woo and break his heart every season to date, one gets the feeling that Young, who radiates good humor, is actually enjoying himself.

He's been featured on commercials for the NFL Network and Channel Six, and specials for other TV stations, as well as HBO and ESPN. More than a hometown celebrity, he has been mentioned in numerous newspapers, and various magazines, including Sports Illustrated, Philadelphia Magazine and Longman's book. He is continually asked to show up for charity events—whenever he can go, he says yes. "A lot of people know who I am, even when not in my get-up," he says. "When I'm dressed in Eagles gear, people honk horns and wave."

He has gotten to know his favorite Eagles players, Brian Dawkins and Jeremiah Trotter, at charity events. When asked about former Eagles, now Dallas Cowboys player Terrell Owens he says tactfully, "For the most part, all I care about is what happens on the football field." Vacation days are dedicated to traveling to "away" games and seeing the Eagles practice at Lehigh training camp. Rarely will you find him at home watching the game. But when he views it with friends, don't try to talk to him while the game is on—he won't exchange small talk or answer the phone. "A lot of Eagles fans feel the same way," says Young. "We live and breathe the sport, it's our lifestyle and our religion." Fortunately for his friends, and for his fans, the football season is relatively short, allowing Young to work, see his friends, and even have a social life without the specter that always hangs over a true Philly fan's head—that great victories will always lead to unmitigated disaster.

For Young and his fellow fans, the best thing about the end of a football season, of so many seasons around here, is the thought that there is always next year—and a chance for a very different ending to the same old story.



Elizabeth Eisenstadt Evans is also an ordained Episcopal priest. Currently a free-lance writer whose opinion pieces on religion and other topics appear periodically in the Philadelphia Inquirer, Evans also does marketing and development writing for local commercial and nonprofit institutions. While by no means a gym rat, she runs regularly in her Glenmoore neighborhood, trying to live down the stereotype that clergy always have their head in the clouds.