

# Garrison Keillor on sports

## Homespun humorist says our love of athletic teams teaches us loyalty and other important life lessons

The following is a speech by humorist Garrison Keillor, former for his homespun radio show "Prairie Home Companion." It was delivered Aug. 1 during the 100th anniversary celebration of the Big Ten Conference at the Palmer House in Chicago.

It's a great pleasure to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the Big Ten, a gorgeous institution organized in 1896 as the Western Conference, a league of football teams of equivalent size wearing very thin padding who played both ways — offense and defense — and their sense, and then they went into graduate school.

My parents were working people. They believed that work was necessary and a privilege. The University of Minnesota was a tremendous conclusion for people in my family. My parents knew that if you did a job and did it to the best of your ability, you were as good as anybody else and you could look anyone in the eye without being ashamed. So when they told me that I would have to work my way through the University of Minnesota, they did not feel that they were setting me down or disgracing me. They felt they were giving me the gift of work.

I went off to the University of Minnesota in the fall of 1948. I worked in a parking lot high on a hill above the Mississippi River. It was about 12 miles from the house. I had lines marked on it. When I got out and the snow blew in from Canada, you started to have a feeling that you had been called for crimes against the state.

But it was a part of our education. To work your way through the university was not unusual. Most other people were in the same boat.

When you stood down at the end of that parking lot at 6:30 on a winter morning, wearing reflective gloves, making eye contact with the driver of each car as it came through, you learned something about the exercise of power and authority for the public good. You learned how to be tough with people and direct with people without any ill feeling at all. It was simply a necessary part of your job. You did not use your authority to abuse but to help.

It had nothing to do with it. You were simply doing your job with the best of your ability. You were as good as anybody else, to better.

This is one of the University of Minnesota that was a part of our education. It was at the University of Minnesota that I was fortunate to come into contact with magnificent teachers, with wonderful students, who encouraged me to think that I could earn my living by doing something that I had thought I was a child. This is a long leap for a young person to take — probably similar to what a baby roller took before his first job. And the university helped me to take that leap and to get away with it. It showed me a way to earn my living, for which I will always be grateful.

I worked very hard to be a writer at the university, and then the university got my attention by threatening to kick me out in my junior year.

The scholastic committee put me on probation, which was another great thing I got from the institution. You learned that you would come to the end of your God-given chance and your God-given ability to do well in multiple-choice tests. And it was a good lesson for a young person to come to.

So my deficit to the university, and indeed by the Big Ten, is a very great debt that I could spend the rest of my life trying to work off.

**Big Ten taught him the gift of athletics'**

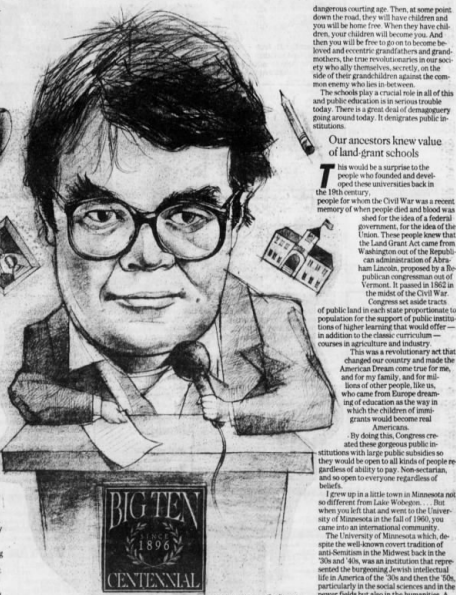
Of course, growing up in Minnesota, I know all about the Big Ten from the time I was a child. The Big Ten was of the basic organizing principles in the universe. There was the Trinity, and there were the four seasons, and the seven days of the week. There were the nine planets in the solar system, and there was the Big Ten. This was before they added the extra school.

I'm grateful I lived at a time when there were only 11 schools, because the idea of enrolling 116 in the Big Ten is a painful thought. And those were not the glory years for the Golden Gophers. There were the 1950s when Minnesota was trying to get beyond the single-wing offense and the two-handed set back, which had been so productive for us in the '20s, and play modern football and basketball.

So if you were a child, you belonged to the radio every Saturday in the fall as the Golden Gophers went on their quest around the far points of the known world — to Lafayette and Bloomington, and to Champaign-Urbana, Evanston and Madison, Iowa City — and engaged in mauling struggle with other teams. And you listened to them go to Columbus and to Ann Arbor and to East Lansing, and you learned to be in those places.

But it's not the worst thing for a child to grow up being a loud team. As much as your team may be booed or ridiculed by other people, it only deepens your loyalty and love for it. Children are profoundly loyal people. They want to be very true to their hearts. And it's important to learn loyalty when you are small.

This is the gift of athletics: to teach us loyalty as a powerful emotion and to learn



MARK HARTMILL/LEO BARNETT

charism when we're small so that we can grow beyond it as we get older.

It's important to learn loyalty and to be a part of a team, and it's simply a poky game in somebody's driveway and you are chosen to be on the team with all of the nerds on it, and all of the cool people, the people you want to be your friends, are on the other team. I don't care. You are on this team and you will be loyal to this team. This is your team. You will love these people for now.

And you will trust the other people with a kind of good contempt. And if they mess a shot, you will snarl at them spitefully. And if they make a shot, you will pick up the ball as if nothing happened, you didn't see anything happen.

When the game is over and you've lost it — you've been drilled — and they snarl at you, you'll look right through them as if they're invisible and you'll walk to your teammates and put your arms around their shoulders and you'll say, "Good game! You did that. You learn that as a child. You learn to be loyal. It's a good lesson to learn when you're young.

So, may, my you get older, disapprove your friends. You may make them angry and make them angry to you for good reason, but you don't have to disapprove them. You may never see them again but you need not pretend that what was once between you and them is nothing to you. We need not betray people to whom we've been loyal. This is the gift of athletics.

**We admire athletes because they stand for something**

We admire and adore athletes for their individual grace, and their daring, and their courage, but we also admire them because they stand for something. They stand for our school. That's their connection to us. And when you go into a football stadium at a Big Ten school on a Saturday afternoon with all of the people patting on their cheeks and trooping into the stadium and into that blaze of bright music and all that camaraderie, and all of that feeling and those colors and all of that excitement, it's a great, gorgeous sight.

It's a beautiful pageant, and through it may seem to be a long way from that to the classroom and to the library, there is a direct connection in the hearts of those of us who are in the stands. It's there when we feel a connection with those athletes on the field and feel that they represent us — when we feel that they are loyal to the same things that we are loyal to — that that pigment has remained. And if we lose that connection, then it becomes just another one of those synthetic events in American public life.

Many people don't understand this. There are aging adolescents who write about

sports for newspapers who still don't understand completely what it is university presidents do other than hire and fire coaches. But this is understood to the rest of us. And to us, the Big Ten represents more than athletes. It represents the people who come from and live values that they identified that have to do with the land-grant state university.

This is a profound value in the life of people who are dear to me. My people are working people. My parents worked hard. My father worked for the post office. He had six children. My mother had no time to home school us. She barely had time to home check and home feed us. My father worked extra jobs to support his family. He was a carpenter, and he did cabinetry. And he fixed other people's cars, and he delivered phone books once a year. My parents had no trust public institutions. They did not have the time to go around to investigate the public schools of Anoka, Minn., or the University of Minnesota, and to find out what was going on. They had to trust them.

Parents today don't trust public education, so they feel that they have to get the equivalent of a master's degree in education just to have a couple of kids. If you invite parents of small children to a dinner party in America today, it's a joy you can do keep them from going off into a corner and having the most boring conversation for three or four hours about schools. Parents have become the most boring guests you could ever hope for and it's all because they have become slaves to the love of their children because they don't trust public institutions.

This is a great, great shame for those people. Two parents cannot bring up a child. You can bring them along for it, and you have to let it go of them and do as your parents did. My parents put us on a school bus, gave us lunch money, told us to mind our manners, to listen to the teacher, and made sure we understood that if we got in trouble at school and word of that got back to them, we would really, really be in trouble.

You bring up children, and you bring them up for us. You turn 14 or 15 or whatever age it happens, and they become members. And suddenly they're longer want to be seen with you in public. This happens in all sorts of wonderful forms.

These children need to be sent off to a school. They need to come under the teaching of brilliant men and women who will take that anger and that contempt and channel it into social criticism and make out of your children some kind of radicals. Socialists. Vegetarians. Whatever they want. Make them into intense little ideologues who will believe that their generation, knowing what it knows, is going to correct all of the faults of your generation.

By this means, you hope to get them through the car-crash age and then into the

disagreeing courtship age. Then, at some point down the road, they will have children and you will be gone. When they have children, your children will become you. And then you will be free to go on to income tax and to estate tax and to grandchild and grandnephew, the true revolutionaries in our society who ally themselves, secretly, on the side of their grandchildren against the common enemy who is to be removed.

The school plays a crucial role in all of this and public education is a serious trouble today. There is a great deal of demagoguery being spread today. It demagogues public institutions.

**Our ancestors knew value of land-grant schools**

It would be a surprise to the people who founded and devoted those institutions back in the 19th century.

People for whom the Civil War was a recent memory of when people died and blood was shed. The idea of a federal government, for the idea of the Union. The people knew that the Land Grant Act came from Washington out of the Republican administration of Abraham Lincoln, proposed by a Republican congressman out of Vermont. It passed in 1862 in the midst of the Civil War.

Congress set aside tracts of public land in state proportionate to population for the support of public institutions of higher learning that would be in addition to the classic curriculum — studies in agriculture and industry.

This was a revolutionary act that changed our country and our American Dream came true for me, and for my family, and for the millions of other people, like us, who had speech and wild writings occupied by the children of postal workers and farmers and auto mechanics and department store clerks from all over Minnesota and the Midwest.

By doing this, Congress created these generous public institutions to keep public education so they would be open to all kinds of people regardless of ability to pay. Some sectors and so open to everyone regardless of beliefs.

I grew up in a little town in Minnesota not so different from Lake Wisconsin, but when you left that and went to the University of Minnesota in the fall of 1960, you came into an international community.

The University of Minnesota which designs the well-known cover tradition of gold-embroidered in the Midwest in the '30s and '40s, was an institution that represented the beginning of a new industrial life in America of the '30s and then the '60s, particularly in the social sciences and in the newer fields but also in the humanities. A particularly that defied freedom of speech and freedom of inquiry even at considerable cost.

Thanks to the inclusion of agriculture and engineering in our curriculum, we were a non-political institution. The thousands of people in the late '50s and '60s came from Africa, India, Pakistan, Asia, all over the world, to study plant agronomy and chemical engineering. This was a magnificent cosmopolitan community, full of ferment, full of wild speech and wild writings, occupied by the children of postal workers and farmers and auto mechanics and department store clerks from all over Minnesota and the Midwest.

You went to school. You studied. You argued. You wore plain clothes. You wore Army surplus clothes. You went to parties in dingy apartments. You drank beer. You argued about Vietnam. You argued about race, about literature, about sports. If you were the child of wealthy parents, you did your best to disguise it because to be a child of wealth at the University of Minnesota was a queer thing to be. It did not bestow status on you.

**We need to stand up for public education**

We're going through a wave of demagoguery in this country in which politicians embrace as a first, and last, and last principle the idea that Americans want their taxes cut. Yes, certainly, the American people want their taxes reduced. The American people also want to live weightier than to be nickel and dime ways to be deserted as they drive to work in the morning. But this is not going to be. To cut taxes and to postpone our obligations to our future generations and the unfortunate success of these politicians is cynical.

What's going to get hurt all of it is a public education. It needs those of us who own our lives to it to stand up for it and to speak for what we had thought was an obvious good.

It is a magnificent institution, the state university, the land-grant university, that's remembered here in the Big Ten, and we must never get tired of reminding people that for all the radicals and revolutionaries who have passed through our universities, none of them on their register had was as proud as the university itself. The public university.

The idea of giving the very best to people who haven't the means to pay for it. The idea of offering the very best education to people who are poor, based only on their desire and their ability, is what the American dream is all about. It began there. We come from good institutions, and we should be proud of them.