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The presidential pitch

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One of the "rules" of political campaigns is never have a politician play a public part in a sporting event. They will get booed. This is a particular instance of a greater rule: Know your audience.

Sports fans come to a stadium to watch sports. For some it is merely a fun pastime. For others sports is an escape from the quotidian, a literal "field of dreams" where people can indulge their fantasy of sports' greatness through the power of their imagination. For others, cheering for the home team is part and parcel of local loyalty, as anyone who has been in Red Sox Nation during the playoffs knows. No one, repeat no one, comes to a ball game to see, still less hear from, a politician.

President Obama broke that rule yesterday and paid no penalty. He stepped out of the dugout at Busch Stadium in St. Louis and the crowd cheered wildly. He was dressed for the occasion in jeans and a White Sox jacket. Obama threw a pitch -- it did not look like a strike -- to Albert Pujols who had a glove not a bat, permitting him to catch the first pitch rather than slam it into the left field bleachers.

Obama set up his entrance by stopping en route to St. Louis to pick up Willie Mays and bring him to the game. Everybody loves Willie Mays, so the president was cloaked in nostalgia for a time when the game's greats did not face accusations of steroid use. He also knew how not to overstay his welcome. He walked to the plate, shook hands with Pujols, and the two walked off the field with the president waving to the still cheering crowd.

In America, the positions of head of state and head of government are combined. In the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and other constitutional monarchies it is the queen (or king) who stands in for the nation in moments of national celebration, or national tragedy, not the prime minister. But, in America, the president wears both hats. This poses a risk. After all for the game last night, Obama was in a state he lost last November, albeit narrowly. Presumably, many of the people in the crowd last night did not vote for

him.

But, the man has magic. Even those who oppose his policies celebrate what he represents, not just the nation, but a nation that has largely overcome its horrific legacy of slavery. They know something about that, too, in Missouri, where the Civil War occasioned some of the most violent instances of fratricide in a war that was essentially fratricidal. The president, depending on your politics, may or may not represent what is best about America, but he evokes what is best about America from the rest of us. Those cheers last night were not only loud. They were heart-warming.

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