

*Introduction*

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I WAS STANDING at the baggage carousel, listening to chants of “E-A-G-L-E-S” echo through the airport. It was the morning of February 5, 2018, the first morning to dawn with Philadelphia wearing the crown of Super Bowl champions. The celebration had been going on all night, and judging by the looks on people’s faces, no one had slept very much.

I had just stepped off a plane from Minneapolis, where I had watched the Eagles defeat the New England Patriots, 41–33, in a breathtaking title game that went down to the final play, a Hail Mary pass from Tom Brady that fell incomplete. It was a moment that seemed frozen in time, that felt dreamlike, leaving you to wonder in that instant, “Is this really happening?”

Then the confetti began to fall from the ceiling of the U.S. Bank Stadium. You looked closely. Yes, it was green and silver confetti. The Eagles logo was flashing on the scoreboard under the words “Super Bowl Champions.” Doug Pederson and Nick Foles were celebrating on the field, and Tom Brady was trudging, head down, toward the tunnel.

That’s when it hit you: The Eagles had done it. They finally had won the Super Bowl, and they had done it with a stunning victory over the Patriots. They had done it as underdogs, which seemed altogether



2 • Ray Didinger  
Excerpt • Temple University Press

appropriate for a team from Philadelphia, the city where people still run in the footsteps of Rocky Balboa.

Watching the trophy presentation on the field, I could only imagine what was happening on the streets of Philadelphia. The city had waited fifty-two years for this moment, waiting for the Eagles to finally win the big one and wash away the heartache of all those bitter losses. I almost wondered whether the city would still be standing when we landed at Philadelphia International Airport on Monday.

Thankfully, it was.

I was in the baggage area, waiting for my suitcase, when an airport worker approached.

“That must have been quite a flight,” he said, pointing to the other passengers, all of whom were dressed in Eagles green and still aglow from a long night of partying.

“I think they could’ve flown home without the plane,” I said.

The man smiled and said, “I have to tell you something.”

He paused, trying to find the words.

“That moment with your son, the hug,” he said.

He paused again. He looked like he was about to cry.

“That was beautiful,” he said.

He was a big man with a raspy voice and the thick, calloused hands of a blue-collar worker. He seemed embarrassed by his show of emotion.

“Next to the ‘Philly Special,’ that was the highlight of the night,” he said, referencing the outrageous trick play the Eagles used to score a touchdown, with Trey Burton lobbing the ball to a wide-open Foles in the end zone. “When you and your son hugged, it was like you were hugging for the whole city. That’s the damn truth.”

He laughed, and then he hugged me too. I thanked him before he disappeared into the crowd. We had never met before, and we haven’t met since, but that memory will stay with me. It made the Super Bowl victory personal in a way that surprised even me.

For one fan—and, as I would later discover, for many others—my son David and I had become avatars for Eagles fans everywhere. We didn’t know it at the time, but when we put our arms around each other, we were putting our arms around the entire region.

The Hug. I still hear about it to this day.

I should explain how it happened. David is an Emmy Award-winning cameraman for NFL Films. He has worked at more than twenty Super Bowls, but this one was special because the Eagles were in it. He grew up around the team. Not only did I cover the Eagles as a newspaper



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reporter; his mother was once an Eagles cheerleader. The family album is full of pictures of David as a boy posing with the coaches and players. Veterans Stadium was like his personal Astroturf playground.

I had moved from newspapers to radio and TV by 2017, but I was still identified with the Eagles, serving as an analyst for NBC Sports Philadelphia. We knew we would be in the stadium for the Super Bowl postgame show, but we didn't know where exactly.

David vowed that if the Eagles won the game, he would find me so we could celebrate. I said not to bother. It is total chaos at the end of a Super Bowl. It would be like trying to find someone in Times Square on New Year's Eve. He insisted.

"I'm gonna find you," he said, "and give you a hug."

We didn't know until the morning of the Super Bowl where we would be for the postgame show. As it turned out, it was a booth on the mezzanine level behind the end zone where Brady's final pass came down. It was located near a large contingent of Philadelphia fans, which made for a lively show after the Eagles' victory.

About forty minutes into the broadcast, I saw the door open and David appear. He had finished filming the postgame celebration and, as promised, found our location. I whispered to Michael Barkann, who was hosting the postgame show, "When's our next break?"

"Why? You need to use the bathroom?" he asked.

"No. David's here, and I promised him a hug," I said.

"That's great," Michael said. "Let's do it on camera."

My immediate reaction was to say no, not on camera, but it was too late. Michael was already letting the audience know we had "a special guest." With that, he introduced David, who walked onto the set, and we embraced.

Prior to that, I had held my emotions in check. I was happy the Eagles had won. I was happy for the city and the fans who had not celebrated an NFL championship since 1960. Now they could finally pop the cork on that musty bottle of champagne.

I felt the pride of every native Philadelphian and every fan who suffered through all those bleak, bone-chilling Sundays at Franklin Field. But as a reporter, I learned to suppress my emotions. I believed that it was my job to remain professional, even on the day the team pulled off the biggest win in franchise history.

But when I wrapped my arms around my son, objectivity collapsed under the weight of the moment. I thought about my own father and how much I wished he could be there. He talked all the time about how



4 • Ray Didinger  
Excerpt • Temple University Press

much he wanted to see the Eagles win a Super Bowl. He talked about it until the day he died in 2009.

When I hugged David, I said, “That was for Grandpop.”

I started to cry, right there on camera.

Ed Rendell, the former mayor of Philadelphia and governor of Pennsylvania, was with us. A native of New York, he became an Eagles fan during his undergraduate days at the University of Pennsylvania. When the NBC Sports Philadelphia network was launched as Comcast SportsNet in 1996, he became part of the show.

In what other city does the mayor spend his Sundays talking football on TV? Only in Philadelphia.

When I returned to my seat, I felt embarrassed, not with the emotion itself—if we had hugged off camera, I would’ve been fine with it—but knowing it was broadcast to a huge TV audience back home made me uncomfortable. The governor said not to worry.

“That same thing is happening all over Philadelphia,” he said. “They’re Eagles fans. They’ll get it.”

As a politician, he understands such things. He understands television, and he understands messaging, but most of all, he understands Philadelphia. That understanding is what made him such an effective mayor. His finger is always on the pulse of the city. He knows what people are feeling, because he feels it himself.

When I returned home, my email inbox was overflowing with messages, many from total strangers saying exactly what the governor had said earlier.

“An amazing game and an amazing moment with you and David.”

“I was very moved by your emotions on the postgame show. Seeing you celebrate with your son was one of the best moments of the night.”

“I was watching when David came on the set, and I was moved to tears by your response.”

“Your broadcast after the Super Bowl was so heartfelt. I wanted to let you know we were right there with you.”

“To watch you and your son hug and share the joy was truly awesome.”

“It made me think about my father and how I wish he was here to see this.”

The messages poured in for days, all of them expressing the same sentiments. The Eagles’ victory was about more than football—it was also about family. It was about how generations of fans invested their



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emotions in a team, how they built their lives around tailgate parties and road trips, how they shared it all as family.

When the Eagles won the Super Bowl, it was for all those people, even those who weren't here anymore. Our hug made it all seem real somehow.

One particular letter stood out. It was from a man named Mike, who described himself as a life-long Philly sports fan. He grew up watching ball games on the twelve-inch TV in his father's tailor shop. He rooted for his favorite player, Richie Allen, to hit one over the left-field roof at Connie Mack Stadium. Being a fan was something he and his father shared throughout their lives.

He hoped to have the same experience with his own son, but his son became addicted to heroin. He was in and out of rehab seven times. He was back in rehab when the Eagles won the Super Bowl, so Mike and his son were not able to watch the game together. When Mike saw David and me celebrate the victory, it made him think of his own son and how he wished he had the same opportunity.

"When I saw you hug your son and shed those tears, I cried right along with you," he wrote. "The only thing better than watching another Super Bowl win would be to enjoy it with my son at my side. God willing, we'll get to experience that."

It was while reading those messages that this book began to take shape. I was coming up on my fiftieth year in the sports-media business, all of it in Philadelphia, and to finally see the Eagles hoist the Lombardi Trophy brought me a feeling of closure, like it was OK now to reflect.

That's what this book is: a reflection of a life lived on deadline, images that remain vivid and precious—like a father and son hug—after all these years.