

If only we had found a 'Glee'

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By **Bill Hall of the Tribune**



Commentary

I don't know which I enjoyed more during my public school years, getting pounded into the dirt without a helmet during football practice or singing off key with one of the most hideously incompetent glee clubs in American history.

But if I had my druthers, I would rather sit in the safety of my living room watching NFL players pound each other into the dirt or listening to those uber-talented 28-year-old teenagers on the hit television show "Glee."

"Glee," bless its tuneful heart, is more than a television show full of Broadway-style musical numbers: it has inspired a liberating show-choir movement in public schools across the land. The kids in those choirs not only sing, but they have been freed to dance and romp and wear wild costumes while feeling a beat running from their cola-fired hearts to their pizza-stuffed souls.

Contrast that with my bleak time in a high school choir class. We did not dance. We did not romp. We didn't even quite sing, because it would be a travesty to call what we were doing music. We just stood there numbly shoulder to shoulder in black choir robes looking like some kind of scrawny-necked junior version of the Supreme Court's annual photo portrait.

(You can bet the Supreme Court members would sing better than we did, probably by a 5 to 4 margin.)

But we weren't there to sing. We were there because singing was the lesser of two unpleasant kinds of incompetence. That freshman year of high school, we had two miserable options - choir or physical education. And we weren't fit for either.

I believe nerd is the word. We were mostly slow bloomers physically, small for our age and ill-equipped to play basketball or football with larger students. The low point had come in the seventh grade when a P.E. teacher had us scrimmaging in full-contact

practice against members of the junior high football team - without helmets or pads. Surprisingly, the injuries were few.

And then the next year, we were given two alternatives - more time in P.E. class serving as cannon fodder for the football team or joining the tuneless trolls of the choir class.

Oh, we all had other talents - science, math, model airplanes, comic book collections, now and then a bit of baseball, a sport where size mattered less. Some of us shamelessly became writers for the school paper.

And a half-dozen members of the choir were actually talented musically. But even they were less than thrilled because, in that era, most choir teachers seemed to believe there was a rule against teaching young people songs written by anyone who hadn't been dead for decades.

To make matters worse, it was an all-male class - no girls. So the choir was not a passion for any of us. It was a refuge from P.E.

Mostly it was such a drab, empty experience simply because it's not much fun to do something you're not cut out for. Few of us were meant to be singers, not to mention that half of us were midway through hormonal voice changes - sopranos one moment, baritones the next. It's scary enough hearing alternating boy voice and man voice inside your own head without trying to get musical with it.

One day, the choir teacher joined us in defeat. For some bizarre reason, he had tried to interest us in music by starting us at the most difficult level - opera. He adored opera and generously wanted to share. But that was like serving champagne to chocolate milk drinkers. It tasted awful.

"You guys don't even read music, do you?" he said sadly one day, becoming our fellow victim of unimaginative school administrators who forced scrawny little shrimps into football and kids with cracked vocal chords into music.

Actually, the possibilities for enjoying music could have been far broader than merely singing well. How different things might have been if "Glee" had been around then. We might have been allowed to sing the pop songs of our time, everything from Sinatra to Elvis.

If we had been given sequined dinner jackets, encouraged to wave our happy arms, permitted to free our dancing feet, allowed to shake our skinny bodies and encouraged to sing our large ears off like liberated human beings rather than sing like musty medieval monks, we could have loved that choir class.

We could have been Gleeful all our lives.

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