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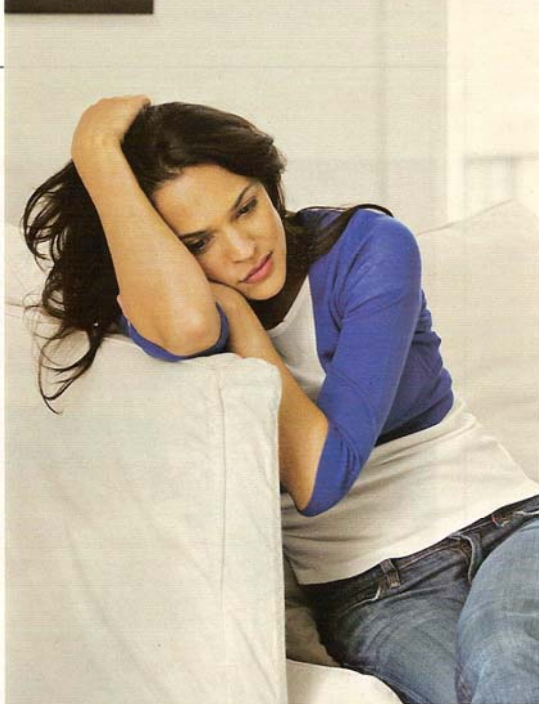
by CYNTHIA HANSON

“He Loves Sports More Than Me”

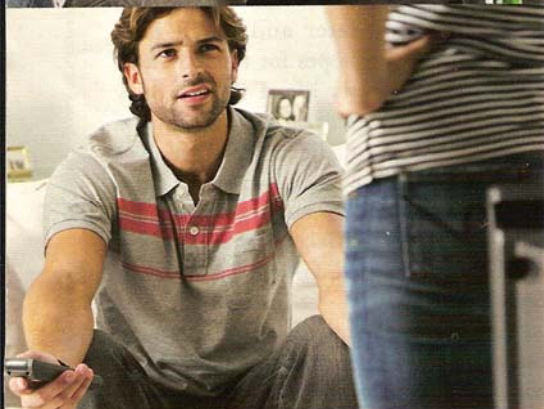
Her turn: “My husband is a sports fanatic and it’s destroying our marriage,” said Gloria, 28, an administrative assistant in New York City who has been married for 18 months. “Every night Carlos flops on the sofa, flips on the TV and watches a game until bedtime. He’s so crazy about our hometown teams—the Yankees, the Knicks, the Giants—that he screams obscenities if the referee makes a bad call, dances around the living room if his team makes a good play and calls his friends to rant and rave while the game is in progress. On weekends he’s either watching ESPN, playing pickup basketball in the park or at a Yankees game with his brother, a season ticket holder.

“If it were up to him, I’d cheer right along with him. But I really couldn’t care less about sports. I watched some games just to make him happy but then I dozed off out of sheer boredom and he got upset. Most nights, I watch the Food Network or HGTV in the bedroom.

“For the past 18 months I’ve been lonely and bored. I’m tired of crying myself to sleep, wondering what I can do to make Carlos understand how much I miss his companionship. I don’t expect him to quit watching sports or skip the World Series. I simply want him to watch fewer games so that we can go to an occasional movie or browse in bookstores—stuff we did before we got married. Is that so unreasonable? But Carlos always says, ‘I am here with you—I just happen to be watching baseball.’



“Clearly we have different concepts of togetherness. Yes, we are both present in this apartment, but we’re not emotionally connected. About four months ago I hit rock bottom and stopped having sex with Carlos. Since our sex life had always been great, I thought this would motivate him to



change. 'You sit in front of the TV all night ignoring me, and now you expect me to be affectionate?' I say when he crawls into bed and kisses me after I'm asleep. Carlos complains but he's not upset enough to stop watching sports. I've also stopped cooking his favorite foods. As far as I'm concerned,

he can eat chicken noodle soup! I still love him but I don't want to be in a marriage in which I'm invisible.

"I was born in Puerto Rico, the third daughter of a plumber and a seamstress, who moved our family to the Bronx when I was 9. From Dad I inherited my love of Latin dancing; I have fond memories of doing the salsa and mambo in our living room together when I was a little girl. From Mom I inherited my love of cooking and decorating. My parents pushed me to excel in school, so I worked hard, got good grades and went to junior college, where I studied office administration.

"I spotted Carlos at the train station one morning about three years ago and thought he was the handsomest man I'd ever seen. For months I stared at him from afar, too shy to introduce myself. Then one morning we both missed our train. As we waited for the next one and then sat together on the ride downtown, Carlos told me he was 33, a divorced father and a paralegal at a law firm. Before I could figure out how to give him my phone number without seeming too eager, he asked me for it and called hours later to invite me to play miniature golf.

"I fell in love with Carlos's fun-loving personality and sense of romance; he was the first man to sing me love songs. We saw each other four nights a week, and there was never a dull moment as we went out dancing, saw movies and listened to music. We never ran out of things to talk about. Soon Carlos introduced me to his daughter, Lucy, then 6, and we hit it off. He has joint custody with his ex-wife, Sylvia, and on the weekends Lucy spent with Carlos, the three of us went on picnics, visited museums and baked cookies. It was so much fun! He barely mentioned sports. I had no idea he had this obsession.

"After we'd dated for a year, Carlos proposed. We got married six months later. Going from dating to living together was a huge adjustment—and, frankly, not what I expected. He changed overnight: Suddenly, the high-energy guy who liked salsa dancing and fine dining was more interested in staying home to watch the Knicks than in spending time with me. Unsure what to do, I tried to watch with him, figuring he'd also watch my favorite shows with me. But he refuses. He also takes no interest in my decorating projects. For example, I'm trying to choose fabrics for new kitchen and bedroom curtains, but the other night Carlos was too focused on the Yankees to give his opinion. 'Pick whatever you want—I trust your taste,' he said, turning up the volume.

"Worse yet, Carlos has turned Lucy, now 9, into a superfan, as well. When she's here they watch every game together, and he's teaching her how to play basketball. At first I thought that maybe Lucy was feigning interest just to please him. But gradually I realized it was genuine and felt her pull away from me. Before her dad and I got married Lucy loved to help me cook; now she only wants to hang out with him, which makes me feel like an outsider.

"Carlos's sports fixation is hurting our social CONTINUED

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life, too. Recently we planned to attend a surprise 30th birthday party for my best friend's husband, but at the last minute, Carlos said, 'The Yanks are playing the Braves—tell everyone I have the flu.' Furious, I went to the party and lied to my friend about his absence. I was too embarrassed to tell the truth: My husband is a selfish, insensitive oaf who puts baseball before his wife's happiness."

His turn: "What's wrong with liking sports?" Carlos, 36, asked. "Yes, I am a super-fan—and proud of it. I'm the guy at Yankee Stadium who wears the hat, jersey and jacket. I'm the fellow who yells to get the crowd cheering and who leads them in the wave. Sports are exciting: I love the competition, the infighting among the players, coaches and owners, the team rivalries, the thrill of the playoffs. I've never kept any of this a secret. When we were first dating I told Gloria I followed the Knicks—it was basketball season—and that I played basketball myself. I didn't feel obligated to account for my activities while we were apart, and I didn't expect her to, either.

"After we moved in together I tried to explain the rules of the various sports, but her eyes glazed over. She'd give me a blank look when I quizzed her on key plays. How hard is it to understand that a pitcher throws the ball into the strike zone? Gloria chose not to pay attention. Eventually I took the high road and stopped asking her to watch with me. If I can accept that she's not interested in sports, why can't she accept that I'm not interested in her cooking and decorating shows? I hate those programs as much as she hates mine.

"Meanwhile, over the past few months, my wife has taken the low road, cutting off our sex life and refusing to cook the foods I like. Gloria may think I didn't get her message, but I did—and I won't be bullied, especially since I'm not doing anything wrong. As I see it, if we're both home, we're together, even if I'm watching ESPN and she's watching Rachael Ray.

"I was born and raised in the Bronx, the younger son of a carpenter and a jewelry-store clerk. Dad had a violent temper and constantly flew into rages, so I was glad when Mom finally threw him out when I was 10. He disappeared from our lives, but I wasn't sorry. Mom had high standards, which I worked hard to meet: I was a good student, played varsity football and enlisted in the



Navy two weeks after high school graduation. After four years of active duty I got a college degree in legal studies.

"I was 26 when I married my first wife, Sylvia, a dental hygienist. Lucy was born a year later and I had high hopes for a happy family life. I was so busy working and being a dad that I didn't have as

much time to follow sports as when I was single. Unfortunately our four-year marriage ended when Sylvia left me for a dentist. I was devastated, but we get along for Lucy's sake.

"As a single dad, my life revolved around Lucy and giving her opportunities I didn't have as a child, such as swimming and music classes. On the nights and weekends that she was with my ex-wife I turned to sports to fill the void. I lifted weights, played basketball and watched games on TV.

"I'd been divorced for two years when I met Gloria at the train station. I still can't believe I'd never noticed her before: She's a gorgeous brunette with soulful brown eyes and an adorable high-pitched laugh. We clicked from the start, and I quickly fell in love with her intelligence and kindness. Also, I knew she'd be a devoted stepmother and a positive role model for Lucy.

"As Gloria said, our relationship changed after we moved in together. Maybe because I'm eight years older and divorced, my expectations of marriage were different from hers. I didn't want to continue going out four nights a week, especially since we'd agreed to save money for our future, which I hope will include a house and a baby. Besides, we do still go out every now and then.

"As for my encouraging Lucy's interest in sports, Gloria is way out of line **CONTINUED**

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to criticize that. I want my daughter to be physically fit and learn the life lessons that come from playing team sports.

"The other night, when Gloria pushed me away in bed, I told her we had to do something. She's not the only one who's unhappy in this marriage: I miss our sex life, her company and her fabulous cooking. 'Maybe counseling can help,' I said. 'I love you—and I don't want to lose you.'"

The counselor's turn: "Gloria and Carlos were dealing with a common problem among married couples: An outside interest had come between them, destroying their intimacy and threatening their relationship," the counselor said. "Typically, a hobby doesn't surface as a problem until a couple is living together. There are several reasons for this. First, when people are dating they may censor what they reveal about themselves, not out of deliberate deception but to gain the other person's approval. Second, they usually don't see each other every day, so they're free to pursue their hobbies with no questions asked. It's not a big deal for a single man to spend three nights a week watching sports. But it can be a big problem for a married man to be unavailable to his wife because he's absorbed in a baseball game.

"Gloria and Carlos each had legitimate grievances. His involvement in sports was excessive by any measure, and his indifference to his wife's emotional needs was selfish. She, in turn, was closed-minded about sports, and her strategy of punishing her husband by denying him sex and food was misguided and counterproductive. Still, despite their mutual anger and feelings of neglect, the couple had much in their favor: They were still in love, were committed to repairing their marriage and had no lingering issues from childhood or previous relationships.

"My first step was to help them understand that their hobbies were expressions of the very qualities they loved about each other. Gloria was attracted to her husband's exuberance and passion, yet she deplored those traits as they related to sports—specifically, his being overly zealous about his teams. Carlos, meanwhile, enjoyed his wife's cooking and domestic creativity, yet was dismissive of her desire to watch cooking or decorating shows. 'You must change your negative attitudes,' I advised them in the first session. 'See these interests for what they are: an expression of your positive qualities.'

"Next, we addressed the couple's poor communication. Gloria needed to learn to express her feelings directly, honestly and calmly. 'Carlos may interpret your withholding sex and hot meals differently from what you intended,' I told her. 'Indirect commu-

nication leads to ambiguity and perpetual misunderstanding.'

"I advised Gloria to use non-accusatory 'I' statements, to make direct requests before Carlos settled on the sofa to watch a game and to frame her comments in a positive way: 'There's a new movie I'd love to see with you. What's the best night to go?' In addition, I suggested they have ongoing discussions about their relationship to clarify their goals, values, expectations, beliefs and challenges.

"Carlos needed to understand that his sports fixation made Gloria question his loyalty, and that to rebuild their relationship he needed to limit his involvement. 'You're entitled to watch and play sports, but you can't let them dominate your life to the extent that your wife feels neglected,' I explained. 'You act as if it's irrational of her to want to spend quality time with you. Marriage is about compromise so that both partners' needs are met.'

"At first, Carlos was reluctant to admit that his behavior was inappropriate. But he finally got the message when Gloria threatened to leave him unless he changed. Though I believed that Carlos was being selfish, I avoided that term because I didn't want to make him more defensive than he already was. Rather, I wanted him to conclude that Gloria's concerns were legitimate. Eventually, he did. 'I took you for granted and I'm sorry,' Carlos admitted in a breakthrough session. 'I never meant to hurt you.'

"From there, the couple agreed that Carlos may devote two nights a week to sports; on weekends he may watch one game or play pickup basketball on each of the two days. So far, he has stuck to that agreement, because he understands the consequences if he doesn't. Carlos is what is known as a 'threshold changer,' meaning that only when he got to the point where his marriage was in jeopardy did he feel compelled to modify his behavior.

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"Meanwhile, I encouraged Gloria to be more productive while Carlos was watching sports. 'You've poured so much energy into being mad at Carlos and trying to make him change that you've stopped doing things that bring you pleasure,' I told her. Now Gloria spends the time that Carlos devotes to sports trying new recipes and working on home-improvement projects.

"Carlos held out hope that Gloria would start to like sports, but as I noted, if you're not a fan and don't understand the game, watching on TV is about as exciting as watching paint dry. I believed Gloria was more likely to develop an appreciation if she experienced the energy of a live event. Carlos took her to see the Yankees at Yankee Stadium and the Knicks at Madison Square Garden. By explaining the rules and offering commentary throughout the games, he helped her understand strategy and key plays. This real-life activity, combined with Gloria's soul-searching during our sessions, successfully reshaped her attitude. Wrapped up in the excitement, Gloria cheered with Carlos and joined in the wave in the stands. She also discovered that she liked baseball enough to watch it on TV. 'I yell when the umpire makes a bad call, just like Carlos,' Gloria said. 'I now participate in all the activities I thought were silly.'

"Thrilled with Gloria's newfound enthusiasm for sports, Carlos agreed, in the spirit of compromise, to watch some of her favorite programs. This pleased Gloria and helped restore their intimacy. 'I'm not mad at Carlos anymore,' Gloria admitted. 'I never refuse when he makes a move in bed, and I cook all his favorite dishes again.'

"Next, I encouraged the couple to host casual parties during big games as a way to blend Carlos's passion for sports with Gloria's enthusiasm for cooking and to give their social life a boost. In the past year they've invited several couples for buffet-style dinners during the World Series, Super Bowl and NBA Playoffs. It's truly a team effort: Carlos and Gloria plan and prepare the meals together, with Carlos in charge of chopping the fruit and vegetables and mixing the margaritas. 'It's so much fun having a project to work on together,' Gloria said. Much to his surprise, Carlos enjoys the prep work, cooking and bartending for these parties, and he is rightly proud of Gloria's entertaining skills. 'One friend said she's the best hostess and cook he's ever met,' he said. 'I liked hearing that.'

"To help Gloria and Carlos rediscover the excitement of their courtship together, they scheduled a weekly date night, where the activity would be mutually interesting but not sports-related, such as seeing a movie or going dancing. Finally, I advised Gloria to support Carlos's efforts to involve his daughter in athletics. 'Rather than criticize, you should commend him for taking

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on your own, a therapist can help. Find one near you in our online therapist directory, which includes therapists' résumés, photos, specialties and personal statements: [HTTP://THERAPISTS.LHJ.COM](http://therapists.lhj.com)

Lucy to a WNBA game and for encouraging her to play sports,' I explained. 'He's teaching her the importance of being fit and a good competitor, and he's using professional women athletes as role models.' Gloria agreed to try to play basketball, and now she and Lucy team up against Carlos in shooting contests. Sharing this new interest has helped bond the family and to restore the closeness that Gloria and Lucy once enjoyed.

"This couple worked hard in counseling to overcome attitudes and behaviors that had driven a wedge between them. As they await their second wedding anniversary, they are planning a trip to the Caribbean to celebrate and hope to add to their family in the coming year. 'We've never been closer,' Carlos told me recently.

"'Carlos is a new man, and I'm a new woman,' added Gloria. 'We're like two lovebirds—happy all the time.'"



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