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SPORT FANS AND FANDOMS

William W. Kelly

It is a key feature of modernity that fans emerge out of mass culture audiences in search of intensified meanings and pleasure. They consume mass culture, but in their rapacious and determined consumption, they produce social communities, personal identities, and cultural artefacts. They create and inhabit fandoms, small worlds of persistent practice. This is certainly as true for sports as for any other modern arena of leisure and entertainment.

Sports are almost always watched as they are played, whether by anxious parents following a child's swim meet or by 100,000 ardent supporters at a FIFA World Cup final. Beyond the immediacy of spectating in situ, the amount of time and resources devoted by all of the world's media to the print, broadcast, and digital transmission of sporting events and news creates and feeds an insatiable global thirst for sport.

There are many ways, of course, that we watch, listen to, and read about sport events, from the most occasional, casual, and distracted spectators to those who follow sport in a sustained, knowledgeable, and passionate cast of mind, body, and emotion. It is the latter who are the fans, and they have overwhelmingly been the focus of social science research on those who follow sport. This chapter selectively surveys the long-standing and highly developed sociology of sport fandom, which itself is a core field of sport sociology.

To date, sport fan studies have focused overwhelmingly on the centre sports of Great Britain, Europe, and the United States, especially football (soccer) and baseball. They tend to analyze these fans in terms of identity or consumption, and the more incisive are set within theorizations of modern and postmodern culture and political economy. There are still residual judgmental debates about fans as authentic or as pathological (the exchange, for instance between Smith 1988, 1989; and Meier 1989). Studies of sport fandom are based on quantitative and qualitative methodologies and draw on a vast array of sources beyond academic research, including memoirs, fanzines (print and digital), interviews, and journalism. While sociologists have contributed centrally to the academic study of fans, they have been in continuous and constructive dialogue with colleagues in history, anthropology, psychology, geography, cultural studies, and media and communication studies, and we must consider some of this work as well.

Who are the fans?

How are fans to be defined among the broad spectrum of modern audiences, from the casual spectator to the committed supporter (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998)? The distinctions are often taken as obvious – fans are those at the far end of vectors of frequency and intensity – but this in itself is not a nuanced basis of analysis. It may seem obviously productive to begin with the condition of sport fans framed more generally within fans across the many domains of mass culture, including music, television, film, fiction, fashion, gaming, and so forth. Surprisingly, however, there has been too little analysis that does this. Schimmel *et al.* (2007) are correct to bemoan this, although there are several notable exceptions (e.g. Gray *et al.* 2007, Redhead 1997).

In my own formulation, there are at least six features that sport fans share with other mass culture fans.

- 1 All fans are the most aggressive appropriators and the most brazen producers among mass culture consumers. Watching television, attending sport contests, listening to music, reading comics, and buying may always require some degree of active ‘recoding’. But fans really are the guerrilla vanguard of such consumption, turning their ‘reception’ of commercial entertainment into a resourceful, often irreverent, ‘production’.
- 2 Fans both know more and care more. It is not just the extent of what they know but the depth of how they feel that sets fans apart from the rest of the audience, yet this intersection of knowledge and passion is difficult to sustain. It is quite difficult, for instance, to follow a contest closely while participating fully in cheering at the same time. The chanting and clapping so necessary to sustain the mood can be quite a distraction to the concentration required of appreciating the finer points of the action. On the other hand, the pursuit and retention and display of ever more arcane knowledge can become a quite dispassionate objective. What and how much fans should know and what and how much fans should feel are nervous issues even for the fans themselves.
- 3 Fandom is serious play. Sports and music are consumed by a very large proportion of the national population, but usually for occasional entertainment. Professional baseball in the United States plays to tens of millions of stadium spectators each year, but very few of them come to an entire season of a team’s 80 home games. The fans among them are those who seek much more than entertainment and invest this ‘leisure’ with much more drive and dedication. It is about one’s personal identity, not entertainment desires.
- 4 Fans are also marked by seeking intimacy with the object of their attention – a personality, a programme, a genre, a team. Fans are not satisfied with the formal performances, with the mediated and staged glimpses of stars. They seek to get behind the curtain, to know more about the performers, to ‘possess’ them through tokens like autographs and bootleg tapes. Fandom is a gesture of intimacy toward commoditized culture, but such intimacy is not to be confused with identification. For several reasons, fans are often involved in an intense play between identifying and distancing. Keeping a certain social and physical distance can be an acknowledgement of propriety, it can be necessary for creative fantasy, and it can result from scepticism. By their very knowledge and passion, fans can be the most ardent of supporters but equally, the most arch of critics.
- 5 Being a fan can be a solitary, private pursuit and a richly collective sociality. Intimacy may be sought and gained as a fan with other fans as well as a solitary fan toward the object of adulation. In producing meanings and pleasures through acts of both social and aesthetic discriminations, fans often create and sustain communities of shared practices.

- 6 Finally, mass culture fans tread a fine line between the pleasure of fantasy and the pathology of fanaticism, between the excessive and the obsessive. It is never easy to determine when and how intimacy becomes idolatry and passion becomes pathological. The issue is rendered even more complex because society's official agents, the mainstream population, and the fans themselves may have incommensurable standards of normalcy and morality.

All of these conditions fit sport fans within a broader formulation of mass culture fandom, but our analyses also hinge on several distinctive features of sport as open-ended, physical contests. The outcomes are uncertain, the action is physical, and allegiance is partisan. Thus, in ways quite different than other mass culture fans, sport fans are shaped by suspense and by agonistic affiliation.

Fans in history and theory, from local identity to hyper-consumption

The debates in sport sociology and sport history about the utility of sharply demarcating modern sport from those sport-like physical contests in eras before (a line generally drawn somewhere in the nineteenth century) has generated similar debates about spectators and fans. Could there be such a category before strict rules governed play, delimited the players, and created special venues with stands and fences and admission charges? To be sure, in many of the cases of popular premodern proto-sport, it was impossible to draw a firm line between participants and observers, as with the in-and-out action of Native American lacrosse and the folk-ball games found in towns and villages across the British Isles. But as Allen Guttman surveyed in his useful history *Sports Spectators* (1986) and as much research has demonstrated, premodern sporting events in many eras and societies drew large spectator audiences and even the passionate intensity that is resonant of modern fandoms. From the blood-thirsty crowds at the Mesoamerican ball games (Whittington 2001) and the Blue and Green 'circus factions' at the Roman Coliseum (Cameron 1976) to the 20,000 who gathered on Newmarket Heath in June of 1809 to watch Captain Barclay successfully walk 1,000 miles in 1,000 hours to win a 1,000-guinea bet (Radford 2001), fan passions seem to have a trans-historical genealogy (Quinn 2009).

By the mid- to late nineteenth century, fandoms of emerging modern sports were forming in two constellations – around urban working-class men, whose affiliations were generated by local, ethnic, and class loyalties for emerging professional teams or individual athletes (e.g. football, baseball), and around broader metropolitan followings of elite amateur team sports (e.g. inter-collegiate American football, athletics) or individual tournament sport athletes (e.g. in golf, horse racing, and boxing). Neither of these was an unmediated response to the sport contest. Oriard's early study (1993) was an incisive demonstration of how coverage and commentary in late nineteenth-century urban newspapers and weeklies educated a US metropolitan readership about the new sport of American football, creating a mass spectatorship and passionate followers of favourite teams.

By and throughout the twentieth century, major sport fandoms were shaped by highly structured leagues, territorially based clubs, stadium experience, print and later television mediated loyalties, a commoditized material culture (trading cards, kits, hats), and increasingly participatory venues (fan clubs, supporter associations, talk radio, fantasy leagues, etc.). Notable in twenty-first-century sports fandom are emergent formations of internet and/or digital media and an ever sharper tension between intimacy and distance. That is the explosive growth of fan numbers, the communicative powers of new media, and the competitive proliferation of sport media have brought ever more intimate probing of athletes as well as ever more distant possibilities of passionate and knowledgeable attachments to teams and athletes around the world. Along

with the global flows of sport capital, media, and migratory athletes, we must add fan loyalties and fandom forms.

The transformations of sport spectators and fans produced by these historical changes in sport have been most often theorized at the intersection of identity and commodification. In the earlier stages of metropolitan modernity, fan identities were shaped by local team support, the immediacy and intimacy of the stadium experience, and lifelong interactions among family, workplace, and community. The expanding scale of professionalization, growing commercialization of sport, commodification of fan performance, economic dislocations, social mobility, and television technology all conspired to dilute and undermine fan formation (e.g. Marjoribanks and Farquharson 2012). They are ‘debased’ in the double sense of being deracinated and being less than real supporters. There has been determined resistance, from hooligan violence to independent supporter activism (Redhead 1997), but globalization and hyper-commodification insure that, with centre sports in the vanguard, the era of the ‘post-fan’ is upon us. For football, one of the most nuanced modelings of changing spectatorships and the nature of fans among them was that of Giulianotti (2002), who characterized four ideal types of spectator identity based on shifts from traditional identification with clubs to more fickle consumers and from hot to cool forms of support.

Crawford (2004) uses a very suggestive concept of fan career (in social and moral terms) to get beyond any simple notion that inauthentic consumers are replacing real fans. His study of a Manchester ice hockey team’s supporters (2010) was an ethnographic demonstration that fandom may survive in an era of hyper-consumption. It is in this sense that fans remain the unstable core of commoditized culture (and its cultural commodities) because they are dangerously poised between the forces of production and the sites of reception, inclined both to disrupt with rude distortion and to comply with exemplary consumption. Fans represent the fondest hopes and worst fears of a sport capitalist.

Fan violence

The greatest attention in sport fan studies has been paid to organized fan violence, especially in football and most especially with English football. ‘Football hooligan’ studies have commanded some of the sharpest minds – and sharpest debates – for over four decades, since the provocative studies by Ian Taylor in the late 1960s. Over a decade ago, Dunning *et al.* (2002: 13) enumerated seven main academic approaches to the study of football fan violence, which have spanned the disciplines of history, sociology, anthropology, criminology, and social psychology (among the key contributions are Armstrong 1998, Dunning *et al.* 1988, Giulianotti *et al.* 1994, King 1997, Marsh *et al.* 1978, Taylor 1971, Williams 1991). Broadly, positions fall on one side or the other of the question of whether the logic of violence can be traced to more rational causes, particularly socioeconomic circumstances, or to more emotional motivations, especially the ‘rush’ of aggro. Among the many specific issues that have divided analysts are the degree of organization, the class background of hooligans, the extent to which hooligan violence takes place at the scene of the game and because of the sport or whether the sport and the game is a pretext for violence caused by other factors, distinctions between aggressive pose and violent actions, and the degree to which football hooliganism is trans-historical and transcultural.

Those outside this academic fray may tire of the scholarly battles, and non-British academics may be bewildered by the apparent squandering of intellectual resources on such a singular topic. Nonetheless, football is the ‘world game’, and violence, especially organized violence, has remained tenaciously present, simply changing in form and location. Hooliganism is often not just about class frustration, about shaping and displaying a particularly aggressive masculinity, and

about a struggle to defend and invade territory, but also not infrequently about racism, homophobia, and misogyny. This is not the place to review in detail this literature (e.g. Giulianotti *et al.* 1994, Dunning *et al.* 2002) but the English studies and debates do offer a valuable foundation for historical and comparative research and for theorizing fandom in extremis.

Football hooliganism has also been debated particularly for the cases of Scotland, Italy, and Argentina in the past; important recent scholarship is the comparative football research by Ramón Spaaij across a number of European countries (e.g. Spaaij 2006) and new work on Italian UltraS (Guschwan 2007, Scalia 2009, Testa and Armstrong 2010). Unfortunately, little attention has been paid to fan violence across sports comparatively because there appears to be little correlation between fan violence and on-field violence. Michael Messner (1995) and others have richly documented the ways that a hyper-masculinity drives 'centre sports' in the United States, yet even the most physically violent – American football and ice hockey – have never experienced the organized fan aggression of football.

Fan psychology

Aggression and anger, excitement and the 'flow' of getting in the game may be central modalities of fan emotion, but there is a wider interest in the range of emotions that motivate and are stimulated by fan engagement. Much of the research into sport and emotion has focused properly on athletes and sport performance (see the very useful review by Duquin 2000). That which attends to spectators and fans is often found in the football hooligan debates (Maguire 1991 is a perspective from figurational sociology). But this is a small part of the story. Following a sport team commands loyalty and incites enmity, but it also produces intense states of joy and suffering, gratification and grief, pride and shame, intimacy and relief (Wenner 1994).

Fan emotions are generated by several circumstances. As Sugimoto (2007) shows, the charged atmosphere of a stadium or other venue during a contest – the continual suspense of uncertain outcomes, moment to moment, the collective effervescence of the crowd, and the vivid sensory world of sounds, sights, smells, and touch (Armstrong and Young 2000, Back 2001, Kytö 2011, Magazine 2007: 72–107, Schoonderwoerd 2011). For most fans, the intensity of the moment is deepened by their longstanding familiarity of the stadium experience – standing (and singing) in the same place in Liverpool's Anfield Kop (Williams *et al.* 2001), sitting in the same bleacher section of Chicago's Wrigley Field (Swyers 2010), or of Osaka's Kōshien Stadium (Kelly 2004), game after game. The sociality of continuing attendance is further enriched by the narrativity and nostalgia of games past and player memories recounted (Bairner 2014). Trujillo and Krizek found that 'true fans seem to have an emotional attachment to baseball that is resilient to ticket prices, labor disputes, and media spectacles. . . . Indeed, as they expressed their feelings and emotions, these fans revealed . . . powerful senses of identity, community, continuity, narrativity, therapy, spirituality, and self-discovery' (1994: 321).

And beyond those horizons, the fan experience is shaped by one's location in a local, regional, and even national context. As Robson (2000) describes for Millwall, the depth of passion on match day in the Lion's Den comes from the supporters' lived experience in that area of south-east London. Likewise, the emotions that underlie sport derbies around the world are generated by broader antagonisms between the two neighbourhoods, cities, or regions (Armstrong and Giulianotti 2001). Fan emotion is generated even by national ideology as well, as Archetti has argued for the Argentine 'cult of Maradona', who was celebrated as an exemplar of a particular form of class-based but nationalized masculinity: 'Maradona's performances were remembered in a kind of ritualised, commemorative bodily communion and as a genuine expression of joy' (1997: 34).

Issues of emotion in sport have brought sport sociology (and anthropology) to an uneasy relationship with psychology – uneasy because our social and cultural accounts are often sceptical of the claims of universal psychodynamics and/or neurobiological hardware that constitute much of sport psychology (Simons 2013 is a recent and somewhat popular synopsis of this work; see also Wann *et al.* 2000 and Wang 2006). And yet there is still potential collaboration here, especially on the issue of failure and loss. Only one player wins a Wimbledon championship; only one team wins the World Series. All others lose. The common lot of fans is that the sublime elation of success is so elusive and the sense of loss and failure is so perennial. How and why do fans remain loyal and tolerant and even hopeful in the face of continual disappointment? Klugman (2009) offered a Freudian account of the two loves that lie at the heart of fans' attachment to Australian Football League teams that is intriguing but which sounds almost masochistic. How might we address this question more comparatively and across the social and psychological disciplinary divides?

Stadium spectating and mediated spectating

Sports are played and watched in a vast range of spaces, artificial and natural, dedicated and borrowed – backyards, schoolyards, playgrounds, urban streets, and mountain slopes – but the enclosed stadium is our preeminent 'theatre of sport'. It is both the quintessentially modern monument to mass leisure and entertainment and an enduring echo of the spectacular sports of the ancient world – the stadium at Olympus, the Coliseum in Rome, the royal ball courts of Mesoamerica. A stadium at game time can attract tens of thousands of people, providing entertainment, food, shelter, clothing, law enforcement, and ongoing social relations. Deep and diverse emotions are invested not only in the experiences of watching a team but in the place itself where the spectating takes place. Romance, domestic quarrels, parent-child bonding, friendships, work, weddings, and fights – all take place in stadiums, thickening the sociality of fan identity.

This sociality of place, together with the potent immediacy of the event, has supported a general sense that watching sport in situ is the authentic experience, and those who come to watch and support are the 'true' local fans. John Bale, for instance, our premier geographer of sport, has written of sport venues as emotionally and symbolically imbued by fans as church, school, home, and heritage (1994), and he has also described the passionate love (topophilia) and fear (topophobia) that fans as well as players feel about their home venues and those of their most frequent rivals. This attachment is enacted through routinized rituals of attendance: assembling at the adjacent pub, holding tailgate parties in the stadium parking lot, wearing team clothing and kit, marching together into the stadium, collective cheering, the small rituals of particular seating sections, the after-game drinking, and so forth. All of this has been compellingly characterized by a number of ethnographic studies (e.g. Robson 2000 for Millwall; Kelly 2004 for Kōshien Stadium in Osaka; Magazine 2007 for Mexico City; Swyers 2010 for Wrigley Field in Chicago; and Keys 2013 for a rare historical exploration of sensory regimes in sport venues).

Other research, however, cautions us against presuming that sport-at-a-distance cannot also affirm fans and sustain fandoms. Many fans only experience the object of their commitment at home and in bars, via the television (Eastman and Riggs 1994; Gantz and Wenner 1995). The conviviality and excitement of media watching in sports bars is of a different order than, albeit of equal intensity to, being in the stadium. Eastman and Land (1997), Rowe (2004), and Boyle and Haynes (2009) have written persuasively of the very particular intimacy created by the visual technologies, verbal commentaries, and program strategies of sport television. As Weed (2007) argued about sports bars, perhaps it is less proximity to the event underway than proximity to others watching the same event that creates fan intimacy. And even television is unnecessary.

Grant Farred (2002), for instance, has written about his long-distance love of Liverpool FC from early childhood in South Africa, nurtured 'only' by occasional press reports and a fervent imagination; he never saw the team play, live or on television. This of course is now quite common; clubs in major sports around the world market themselves beyond even satellite broadcasting via internet pages and social media; there are Manchester United, Tiger Woods, and New York Yankees fan clubs on all continents, and Bale (1998) and King (2000) have theorized our need to 're-imagine locality' under these conditions, a theme I will take up below.

Fans and gender

Organized sports participation and spectatorship are still overwhelmingly male, at least in the aggregate. Sport has long been presumed to be 'naturally' about physical contests of aggressive physicality and masculine virtues and therefore largely played and watched by males. Sport has been defended as a 'male preserve', although the defensiveness of this phrase betrays an undertone of anxiety. Women's sports are deemed less interesting to watch, less profitable to broadcast, and less lucrative to sponsor because they are thought not to be on same level of skill and/or power as their male counterparts. LPGA pros noticeably lag in driving distance behind PGA pros; a majority of NBA players routinely dunk the ball while there is but a single current player in the WNBA (Brittney Griner) who will occasionally dunk; the litany is familiar, and the belief fuels the global sports economy. But this is such a transparently faulty logic of discrimination. If that principle really held, we men would all only watch and follow a sport at its most elite level. Why bother with Little League baseball or minor league baseball when we could be watching major league baseball? And even among MLB teams, why would anyone watch and support the hapless Chicago Cubs when one could be following perennial champions like the New York Yankees? But lost causes, lower leagues, and local school teams have never been deterrents to fan formation and often instill even more fan-aticism (Mainwaring and Clark 2012). There is a desperate and deep-rooted gender bias that still works against women's sport, female athletes, and female fans (Gosling 2007).

The central issues of gender and sport are treated elsewhere in this volume. Here it is worth noting that where scholars have looked, they have indeed found female fans, drawn by the same needs and desires as male fans, albeit facing greater obstacles to acceptance. (Women may be tolerated as fans on the pretext that they are 'really' watching as mothers, wives, and girlfriends, which is of course to dismiss them as not really fans at all!) But accounts such as those by Damousi and Cash (2009) and Mewett and Toffoletti (2011) on Australian rules football fans and Kelly Nelson (2000) on WNBA fans in the United States are testimony that the attractions and distractions of supporter passions can quickly cross gender divides.

Fans and fantasy

The digital frontier in sports is for some the cutting edge of fandom and for others the death knell of authentic sport followership. Whatever the future, it is important to appreciate that 'digital' and 'virtual' have multiple meanings in defining the fan experience. Early on, they referred to the long-distance fandoms encouraged by satellite, cable, and internet broadcasting of sport programming, including the sport television talk shows and 'sports talk radio' that were the forerunners of internet chat rooms, online blogs, and social media, which facilitate interactive communication and communal spaces for virtual fandoms (Bale 1998). This was carried forward through the medium of fantasy sport leagues (especially in the United States, using MLB baseball; Walker 2006), which allow fan-players to construct and manage 'teams' of players from

many actual teams, the effect of which can be to cross-cut real team loyalties with one's fantasy team performance. The enormous popularity of 'Football Manager' marks the digitalization of this illusory blending of owner, manager, and fan. It also is an example of digital sport games more generally; in game-box and online formats and single-player and multi-player versions, sport games are among the best-selling and most played in the world (Witkowski 2012). In blurring the distinction between watching and doing, they not only attract and abet fans of 'live' sport, but they are now even used by coaches and athletes as part of their preparation and practice (Glanz and Schwartz 2010). No doubt the debates will sharpen about the effects of these multiple virtualizations of fan experience and their consequences for enhancing or displacing existing forms of sport fandom – and the sports and athletes that they follow. Plymire (2009) and Jonasson and Thiborg (2010) offer judicious speculations on the possible trajectories of e-sport, but it is still early in the technologies and in our capacities to appreciate their potentially transformative powers.

Future directions

Sport fan studies began with the centre sports of football in Britain and baseball in the United States and have taken up how these sports and their offspring have been followed elsewhere in the world (especially football fans in Europe and South America, Australian rules football fans, and baseball fans in Central America and Japan). Special attention has been paid to patterns of fan violence in football. Particular analytical weight has been given to assessing the effects of globalization and commodification on transformations – and, for some, erosion – of sport fans, their practices, and the dynamics of their identity construction.

These studies have produced rich insights, not only about the nature of fandom but more generally of sport. No doubt such lines of research will continue; for instance, just in 2013, FIFA has sanctioned clubs in Germany, Italy, France, the Netherlands, Scotland, Turkey, Cyprus, Russia, Poland, and Romania for the violent actions of their supporters, so clearly it remains a critical topic for sport sociologists. At the same time, though, sport fan sociology can fruitfully expand its horizons of inquiry in a number of directions. There are at least five that one might recommend:

- 1 Much more comparative work is required to appreciate the differences of fandom in centre sports, minor sports, and lifestyle sports. To what extent do our understandings from baseball, football, basketball, and other major sports apply to sports of limited exposure and alternative sports that avoid spectatorship and demand full-time commitment? Can there be fans of rock climbing and climbers?
- 2 What different forms of fandom are evoked by team sports versus individual sports? Features of boxing, tennis, golf, and other individual sports construct distinct experiences for fans, who may be drawn to the sport as a whole or who may follow a favourite boxer or golfer. However, the competitions are usually more occasional than team sports and the lack of league play also makes it difficult to generate the same oppositional fervour that is key to central sport fandoms.
- 3 We also yet have few comparative studies of gender, class, and world regional differences in fan identity and fandom practices.
- 4 We know that there are multiple sources and resources for fan self-fashioning – local identity, family allegiance, commercial appeal, spiritual quest, aesthetic pleasure, and so on.
- 5 Finally, much more is needed to understand the ways in which being a sport fan is embedded and enacted in everyday life. We need not only to locate fans within the broad spectrum

of sports but also to locate fans' sport practices within their everyday lives – apart from the overt moments of direct connection with the object of their attention, adoration, and affiliation – away from the stadium and the pub and the computer screen. How is one being a fan when one is not performing as a fan? The academic literature is not silent on this (Crawford 2004, Crawford 2010, and Stone 2007 are particularly suggestive), but it is much more developed in fan memoirs and fan fiction.

Sport fans and their worlds exhibit the common features of modern fandoms. They stand out from the audience for the depth of their knowledge and passion. They engage in serious play, not casual spectatorship. They test the limits of aggressive appropriation and the line between the pleasurable fantasy and pathological fanaticism. The suspense, the power, the expertise, and the partisanship at the heart of all sport forge the passionate and sustained commitments of their supporters. Fans are essential constituents of sport, not merely passive and peripheral receptors.

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