

Fanaticism: Sports and Subjectivity

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*Sport is a wondrously puzzling thing:
it spellbinds audiences with activities that
have no apparent rhyme, less still reason.*

(Cashmore 1990)

As summer begins to give way to fall each year, millions of Americans turn their attention to the football fields across the country. High school football games on Friday nights, college games on Saturday, and the professionals on Sundays and Monday nights. Clearly, the popularity of this game is widespread, and while some fans are casual in their approach to football, many others have integrated the game into their lives in a more substantive way. The concern of this research is with the latter group — those who are attracted to the game and follow it in a serious fashion.

Professional football has its roots in Northeastern Ohio, as the National Football League was founded in Canton. High school football (particularly as it developed in Massillon, Ohio) has special significance in the region, as do the many local colleges and universities that field teams, to area fans. This study explores the attitudes of self-identified Cleveland Browns fans, with particular attention to what aspects of the game direct them toward their passion. In addition to general issues related to football as it is played anywhere (e.g., the aesthetic quality of the game, the potential appeal of its violent nature, the appreciation of techniques and strategy, the admiration of the athletes who play the game, the appropriate role of the fan, etc.), this study also probes the subjective understanding of Browns fans as it applies to issues related to the team's 1995 move to Baltimore (and its lingering impact), as well as the effect of the Browns' recent history of heartbreaking defeats in championship games.

The Role of Sports

In the past generation or so, there has been a growing awareness that sports play an important social role in America. The 1960s and 1970s saw a tremendous growth in the volume of research dedicated to this topic, and this research has continued to the present. As scholars have investigated the social

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Operant Subjectivity, 2000 (July), 23 (4), 210-221.

and psychological significance of sports, both participants and observers have been the foci of study. However, as this research is devoted to the motivations and concerns of sports fans, attention will be given in this section to previous fan-centered research.

Ellis Cashmore (1990) notes that if asked why they are attracted to sports, fans invariably say that they "enjoy" them. Yet, Cashmore and others who conduct similar research know that other, deeper motivations are at work as well. Walter E. Schafer (1969) argues that sports fans had 3 essential motivations for their support: the basic popularity of sports, a feeling of attachment beyond the immediate family, and an identification with a team that could symbolize an extension of the self. Schafer contends that some fans are drawn to sports in the same way that they are drawn to popular television shows or best-selling novels — they feel the need to be associated with whatever is popular. Others are motivated by a sense of belonging that sports provide, as fans feel a part of the team through their participation. Finally, according to Schafer, some fans are motivated to be sports fans of particular teams for issues that transcend the game, but are directly related to psychological issues of self-conception.

The well-known sports sociologist Harry Edwards has written extensively on the role of sports in society. Among other issues, Edwards has stressed the importance some attach to the physical qualities necessary to succeed in athletics, and how some fans respond with admiration to the fact that athletes are often engaged in activity that few others can do.

It is this, the relatively extraordinary quality of the physical requirements involved in sports activities that is the first key to the functions of sports as an institution. (Edwards 1993, 14)

Edwards also points to the quasi-religious overtones that are often associated with modern sports. He notes that "If there is a universal popular religion in America it is to be found within the institution of sport" (1990, 15). Susan Birell (1981) also makes the point forcefully that sport draws its social significance in large measure due to its ritualistic nature.

Although Marx did not write directly about sports, some Marxists theorists have said that sports play the same pacifying role as religion in drugging the masses, so that they remain blissfully ignorant of the oppressive economic conditions in which they toil.

In line with sport as a religious metaphor, Michael Novak (1988) points to the role that fatalism seems to play with many sports fans. Novak describes the sports fan who ascribes how the team fares to forces beyond the control of the participants. Whether or not the gods have smiled on the team leads to events that determine the outcome in a "game of inches" such as football, or baseball, according to these fans. In the minds of these fans, teams that have historically fare well seemed to be blessed, such as the University of Notre Dame's

"Luck of the Irish," while other teams such as the Boston Red Sox suffer from "the curse of Babe Ruth," as the Red Sox have not won a championship since trading the legendary slugger to the New York Yankees.

Novak also stresses that some fans are attracted to sports because of the artistry and grace involved. In addition to admiring the athletes for their skill, Novak reports that some fans "respond to beauty" in the athleticism that is displayed. For example, he describes football as a "ballet for knights, for warriors" (p. 81).

George B. Leonard has written on the negative consequences for society of the "win at all costs" philosophy that imbues modern sports, and is of primary concern to many fans. Similarly, many have become concerned with fan violence, from soccer hooliganism to fights at Little League baseball games. Jeffrey H. Goldstein and Robert L. Arms (1971) provided convincing evidence of the effects of watching violent sports (such as football) on levels of hostility. Related to this theme is that sports allow fans to satisfy their desire to see acts of violence without fear of bodily harm to themselves.

Arnold Beisser (1977) noted several motivations for people to follow sports intensely. He noted the cathartic value for some of a sense of vicarious participation. Like Edwards, Beisser draws the distinction between those who *do* and those who *watch*, writing: "The fan can participate vicariously through identification with the players and the action on the field while, at the same time, remaining entirely passive" (p. 193). This vicarious participation can manifest itself, according to Beisser, through attention to and appreciation for the intricate details and strategies of the game. Fans become "expert" in the terminology and the common strategies employed by coaches and athletes. This "armchair quarterbacking" becomes a principal motivation for some fans.

Still other fans see themselves as participants in the outcome of the game. They believe their cheering presence can positively impact the results of the game for their team. Sophisticated football fans know not to cheer as their team's quarterback is barking out signals, but to create tremendous noise when the opposition is trying to run a play. Similarly, basketball fans know to wave and cheer to distract an opponent's shot at the basket, but to remain quiet and inactive when their team is trying to score. These "fan rules" grow out of the feeling that the fans can play a direct role in the game.

Beisser, among others, has made the claim that sports fans are attracted to athletics because they provide an excitement that is missing from day-to-day living. As sport has matured in the 20th century, it has become more directly related to the issues of contemporary society. Sport has become big business for the players, teams, and fans, and some fans have had trouble adjusting to the new realities. These fans feel alienated to a large degree and lament the changes that have become a part of this new landscape: franchise relocation, player movement, rising costs, etc. For some fans, the escapism that was at the

root of sports' appeal is no more: as sports mirrors real-life, it becomes *only* a game, not some transcending experience. In short, the literature points to many different motivations that sports fans may have to explain their intense interest. It is of little doubt that fans are stimulated by many of these motivations simultaneously, yet, it is also surely the case that some are more salient than others in the dynamic patterns that form in the minds of those who put such emphasis on sports in their lives.

"Are you ready for some football?"

Fans of the Cleveland Browns have gone through a tumultuous period since 1995 when team owner Art Modell relocated their beloved team to Baltimore. Unlike previous franchise relocations (e.g., the Los Angeles Rams to St. Louis, or the Baltimore Colts to Indianapolis) where the teams were struggling financially while trying to appeal to relatively indifferent fans, the Cleveland Browns were regularly playing in front of sell-out (80,000+) crowds. In addition, few teams could claim the storied tradition of the Cleveland Browns. Joining the National Football League in 1950 after having dominated a rival league, the Browns won the NFL championship in their first season and went on to win several more titles in the 1950s under legendary coach Paul Brown. "From 1946 to 1971, the Browns had only one season in which their losses exceeded their wins, a record streak" (Faludi 1999, 184).

Art Modell, who purchased the Browns in 1961, proceeded to fire Paul Brown after the 1962-63 season in order to exert his control more fully over the team. Many fans felt alienated by this decision. The Browns won a championship the following season, but the dynasty was beginning to unravel.

During the 1970s the Browns fell on hard times, and the fans had to grow accustomed to being left out of the championship race. However, the Browns emerged again in the 1980s to compete for titles, only to suffer defeats that were heartbreaking for the fans. Ask any Browns fan about "Red Right 88," or "The Drive," or "The Fumble," and they will surely be able to relate in frustrating detail the circumstances of Brian Sipe's interception in the closing minutes against Oakland which sealed a Browns loss in 1980; or the two improbable victories that Denver posted against Cleveland in championship games in the late 1980s. So devastating were these losses to some Browns fans that a sense of fatalism began to creep into their psyche.

This period also coincided with a decline in the city's position. Hit hard by the economic recessions of the 1970s and 1980s, Cleveland began to decline in population, and the fortunes of the Browns seemed to mirror those of the region.

While some older fans had a lingering resentment toward Modell for firing Brown, nothing prepared Clevelanders for the announcement on November 5, 1995, that Modell was moving the franchise to Baltimore. The reaction was

immediate and Browns fans quickly mobilized to voice their displeasure. After a protracted period of negotiation between the league and city officials, Cleveland was awarded an expansion franchise to begin play in 1999. Furthermore, the team's colors and records would remain in Cleveland — an unprecedented concession to the fans.

With a new team, and a new stadium, would Cleveland fans embrace football with the same gusto that was evident with the old Browns? How do these events, unique to Cleveland, play into the subjective understandings of their fans as to the nature and origin of their "fandom?"

An Application of Q Methodology

A research strategy was designed, and it was decided to exploit the advantages of Q methodology to explore these questions. Ultimately, a Q-sample of 47 statements was compiled from the literature, as well as the popular press. These statements were selected to give representation to the potential motivations for being a fan, as well as statements that dealt with issues surrounding the relocation of the team. The Q sample was sorted by 12 self-identifying Browns fans, ages 33-71 (including at least 5 persons who are or have been season-ticket holders, thus demonstrating their support in tangible terms). The data were correlated and factor-analyzed and produced the following rotated factor structure:

Table 1: Factor Loadings in the Cleveland Browns Study

<i>Q-Sort</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>B</i>
1	(0.73)	0.06
2	(0.76)	0.16
3	(0.86)	0.22
4	(0.64)	0.33
5	(0.60)	0.19
6	0.00	(0.67)
7	0.17	(0.62)
8	0.27	(0.75)
9	0.23	(0.50)
10	0.09	(0.78)
11	0.01	0.20
12	0.14	0.39

Factor A: Community-Oriented Fans

Factor A sorters demonstrated that their love affair with the game of football and the Cleveland Browns is tied to their desire to experience an attachment with other fans. Factor A was defined by 5 people, 3 of whom are or have been season-ticket holders to the Browns games. They expressed an association with the city of Cleveland, its team, and her fans. The statements they most agreed with are both tributes to the determination of Cleveland Browns fans:

+5 Statements

- 22. I'm proud of the fact that Browns fans are the only group of people in the nation who ever demanded their team back – and got it back.
- 42. Around Cleveland we went for decades without a winner in anything. Our fan loyalty is a testimony to what these teams mean to us.

Continuing the theme, the statements that were next most agreed with all revolve around the community-oriented theme:

+4 Statements

- 21. A big part of my love for the Browns is the team's history – Paul Brown, Jim Brown, Otto Graham. We were the "New York Yankees" of football.
- 8. Cleveland fans know better than most a team is not only *assembled* in one place, it also *represents* a place.
- 28. Even though it's been several years now, and we have a new team, I'm still angry at Art Modell for moving my team to Baltimore.

The theme is reinforced as well when examining the +3 statements. Factor A responds positively to the "atmosphere" at the games, being at the "big game," and the importance of being with family and friends. Additionally, despite the frustrations of following a team that has come up short so often, Factor A believes that "our day will come."

+3 Statements

- 46. I enjoy the atmosphere at the games
- 33. Being a Browns fan, I sometimes feel like Charlie Brown trying to kick that football. Despite all the heartbreaks, I still have faith our day will come.
- 14. As a football fan, I like to be able to say that I saw the "big game."
- 20. I enjoy watching football with family and friends. The time spent together is much more important to me than the game itself.

Factor A types reject the notion that part of football's appeal for them is the inherent violence of the game. They also reject the idea that their involvement is so intense that the joy of the game is diminished.

-5 Statements

45. Part of football's appeal to me is that you can watch violence without the dire consequences of real violence.
5. After a Browns game, I am exhausted. Entertainment? It's more like an ordeal, an exercise, a struggle lived through.

-4 Statements

41. Much of football's popularity is due to the fact that it makes respectable the most primitive feelings about violence
35. Watching football is more and more like watching wealthy mercenaries do what they get paid for doing.
38. I like that football is bang-bang, clashing mini-wars. The players don't get killed, but they practically do.

Factor A types are more interested in their identification with the community of fans than appreciation of football for its aesthetic elements, or seeing the game as something larger than providing a vehicle for people to come together. Also, they did not give up football when the Browns moved to Baltimore. In fact, one person defining Factor A began a "fantasy football league" during the years the Browns were not active, not only to help keep his interest in the game, but to provide a reason for Browns fans to gather each Sunday to watch the games and enjoy each other's company.

-3 Statements

36. Some people say football is escapism. However, sports affect people, and their lives, far more deeply and for a longer time than mere diversion would.
32. When the Browns moved, I essentially gave up football. I rarely even watched a game on TV.
29. One of the things I like most about football is that it is all about results. There is a definite outcome on each play, in each game. In our own lives we have too little of that clarity.
27. Football is a ballet for knights, for warriors.

For Factor A types, their love of football and the Browns is inextricably bound to the social aspects of the event. This is not to say, that they do not appreciate the techniques, tactics, and aesthetic nature of the game. The *primary* motivation for their passion is the opportunity to belong to a community that has a common bond.

Factor B: Disillusioned Traditionalists

Factor B was defined by 5 persons, only 1 of whom was a season-ticket holder. The overriding theme of Factor B is the negative impact of the modern

realities of sports on their support of football and the Browns. In short, their love of football has been diminished by free agency, franchise relocation, escalating salaries, etc. It is also clear that Factor B types are traditionalists in terms of their football fanaticism. They like that the Browns play outdoors, and lament that being a football fan today is different in nature than in days gone by:

+5 Statements

32. When the Browns moved, I essentially gave up football. I rarely even watched a game on TV.
7. I like that the Browns play outdoors. Indoor stadiums take away the excitement. There's no wind to deal with, and no rain, so the ball doesn't slip out of the players' hands. It's too predictable.

This theme is reinforced in the next most agreed statements, which revolve around the idea that they enjoyed the game more in earlier times.

+4 statements

31. It was different being a football fan years ago. Fans could really relate to the players. Today's player salaries have created too much distance between the fans and the players.
18. In this era of teams relocating and players moving from team-to-team, I am not as big a football fan as I used to be.
13. Even though I like the new Browns, I don't feel the same way about the team as I did before the move to Baltimore.

As with Factor A, persons associated with a Factor B view are proud of the efforts to regain a team, and they also share a certain fatalism as reflected in Statement #33. Unlike Factor A, Factor B types are more likely to see football as a respite from the pressures of everyday living.

+3 Statements

22. I'm proud of the fact that Browns fans are the only group of people in the nation who ever demanded their team back – and got it back.
33. Being a Browns fan, I sometimes feel like Charlie Brown trying to kick that football. Despite all the heartbreaks, I still have faith our day will come.
44. I enjoy watching the Browns because I can set aside, even temporarily, the problems of everyday life.

Like Factor A, Factor B rejects the idea that violence is an appealing aspect of football.

-5 Statements

45. Part of football's appeal to me is that you can watch violence without the dire consequences of violence.

41. Much of football's popularity is due to the fact that it makes respectable the most primitive feelings about violence.

Factor B rejects the notion that fans have to be active at the games and they do not voice admiration for the football players for their athleticism. In the -3 statements, Factor B types do not seem to relate to the aesthetic elements of the game, and do not accept the premise that sports affect fans in a lasting way.

-4 Statements

1. The mode of observation proper to a football game is to *participate* – that is to take a risk, to root.
38. I like that football is bang-bang, clashing mini-wars. The players don't get killed, but they practically do.
47. I enjoy watching others play something which I am not able to play. In other words, I admire the athletes for their skill and determination.

-3 Statements

27. Football is a ballet for knights, for warriors.
19. Being a Browns fan is a great way of reconnecting with my youth.
37. I believe that true lovers of football respond to the grace and the beauty of the game.
38. Some people say football is escapism. However, sports affect people, and their lives, far more deeply and for a longer time than mere diversion would.

Distinguishing Factor A from Factor B

In looking at the statements that distinguish Factor A, the theme of community in that factor can be seen clearly. All of the following statements are connected by their reflection of a community-centered ethos:

Distinguishing Statements for Factor A

14. As a football fan, I like being able to say that I saw the "big game." (3, 0)
15. Cleveland is just a working-class community. Football is what binds people together through the winter. (2, -1)
20. I enjoy watching football with family and friends. The time spent together is much more important to me than the game itself. (3, -1)
21. A big part of my love for the Browns is the team's history — Paul Brown, Jim Brown, Otto Graham. We were the "New York Yankees" of football. (4, 1)

28. Even though it's been several years now, and we have a new team, I'm still angry at Art Modell for moving my team to Baltimore. (4, 1)
42. Around Cleveland we went for decades without a winner in anything. Our fan loyalty is a testimony to what these teams mean to us. (5, 2)

The statements that distinguish Factor B provide further evidence for the earlier characterization of that viewpoint. The cynicism with which Factor B sees modern sports is apparent in the following statements:

Distinguishing Statements for Factor B

7. I like that the Browns play outdoors. Indoor stadiums take away the excitement. There's no wind to deal with, and no rain, so the ball doesn't slip out of the player's hands. It is too predictable. (1, 5)
13. Even though I like the new Browns, I don't feel the same way about the team as I did before the move to Baltimore. (-2, 4)
31. It was different being a football fan years ago. Fans could really relate to the players. Today's player salaries have created too much distance between the fans and the players. (-1, 4)
32. When the Browns moved, I essentially gave up football. I rarely even watched a game on TV. (-3, 5)
39. I'm still a big fan, but I know the NFL (its teams and players) take the fans for granted. (-1, 2)
44. I enjoy watching the Browns because I can set aside, even temporarily, the problems of everyday life. (-2, 3)

Conclusions

The analysis demonstrates that both of the factors see their attachment to the Browns through the prism of the trauma they felt when the Browns moved in 1995. Among Factor A types, the hurt associated with Modell's move of the Browns seems related to its effect on the community. The move did not lessen Factor A types' enthusiasm for football (as seen in their rejection of statements that suggested that the Browns move made them lose interest in football), but it was seen as a betrayal by Modell of the city and its community of Browns' fans.

On the other hand, Factor B has a less sanguine attitude about football and the Browns. While clearly still interested in the fortunes of the team, they also feel a distance from the sport that stands in contradiction to Factor A. However, it may well be that Factor A is also feeling a bit more distant in the wake of the relocation of the franchise. This may manifest itself in a reorientation toward the social aspects of football. While Factor B types have directed some energy into a more cynical view of sports, Factor A may have redirected some of its energy from the team to the community of fans. Only intensive analysis can shed light on this speculation.

Clearly, Factor B has the view that fans have been alienated from the game that they love through the realities of the modern sports world. However, this alienation that some modern sports fans feel is not as new as one might think. Beisser reminds us of an eerie comparison of some of the issues involved in today with those of ancient Rome:

In chariot races, each entrant was supported by a group of partisan followers who knew him generally and identified with him. As Rome's power grew and sport became concentrated in the Coliseum, the crowd was clearly separated from the athlete-entertainers, who, like the gladiators, formed a special group paid to perform for the crowd. The crowd demanded increasingly bloody and violent entertainment and regarded the participants on the stadium floor impersonally. The crowd would become violent when dissatisfied, and stadium riots became commonplace. As a gesture of appeasement, the spectators were offered free gifts, food, drink, money, and memorial tokens. But the crowd was still not satisfied, for it was deprived of something more fundamental — common purpose and a sense of community — so the people grew increasingly restless. (1977, 199)

It may well be a while before Cleveland Browns fans can appreciate their new team without a strong focus on the events of the mid-1990s. The fundamental aspects of the game have taken second place to the scarring impact of Modell's decision to move the Browns from Cleveland, and the return of a team to a community that has a long-time love affair with football.

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