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# The Changing Face of Baseball Fandom

by  
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During the post World War II era of major league baseball history that bewildering collectivity known as baseball fans has undergone increasing scrutiny by officials and historians. This is not to say that the current generation of fans is better understood behaviorally or structurally than those of past eras, but only that zealous efforts are being made. This working paper attempts to shed some light on the dynamic complexity which characterizes baseball fandom.

That 1976 saw the billionth fan in attendance at major league parks since 1903 testifies to their vast numbers. In the Plastic Age (1945-77) live attendance was stimulated by a park building boom, by night baseball, and by astute promotional gimmicks including free gifts, designed to lure families to games. On the other hand the high costs of attending games, the decline of the minor leagues, the popularity of TV, and the challenge from rival leisure and sports outlets raised the specter of a decline in baseball's popularity at the gates. However, owner fears of a decline in baseball's popularity are assuaged by the increasing popularity of the game on TV. Indeed, by the 1970's this dimension of fandom carries the game and pays the higher player salaries.

But the revolutionary significance of TV's presence has yet to be fully understood by promoters whose attention appears riveted on the ballpark crowds. For a variety of social reasons, including the democratization of American marriage bringing with it a family

togetherness ethic, or racial and ethnic unrest, or increasing individualism, live baseball crowds are seen as potentially destructive, “bad animal” forms. This image is exacerbated by a new style of sports reporting which focuses on bizarre behaviors. Because social science offers no clearcut theories of crowd control, alarmists fill the void with armchair explanations of unruly behavior based largely on the many incidents of misbehavior dramatized by the media. Such Cassandra-like outcries wrongheadedly proclaim the current generation of ballpark fans to be the worst ever. For example, Philadelphia fans are reputed to be the worst behaved grouping, while the kissing exploits of “Morganna the Wild One” stand out among the many acts of bizarre individual behavior. In reaction to such incidents of crowd unruliness, officials have adopted a paranoid stance which has them employing security staffs and devising schemes to gentle “bad animal” crowds, while in more rational moments they attempt to understand crowd phenomena. Recently this quest for understanding was assisted by a playwright whose play “The Bleacher Bums” analyzes an unruly segment of Cub fans.

That baseball’s fandom is a truly varied collectivity is the main point of this paper. Beyond the visible ballpark form or the shadowy TV viewers, are other forms of fans including newspaper fans, intellectual fans whose ranks include historians and novelists, collectors, APBA players and other varieties. The changing face of baseball fandom is one of ever increasing diversity and it is the recognition of this fact which is a beginning point for understanding the baseball phenomenon in our time.