

Collegiate Fandom: A Psychic Community in an Amorphous Society

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The last half century in the United States has seen tremendous growth in fan support for college level sports teams, especially football and basketball, as measured in attendance figures, television viewership, and membership in and contributions to athletic foundations and booster clubs. Frequently, even among the latter, this involves large numbers of people who neither attended the school they support nor live in the “local” community around the campus. I contend that this psychic, as opposed to geographical, identification with college and university teams is a combined consequence of the breakdown of traditional institutions and of the increase in physical mobility which have left many Americans psychologically adrift and in search of new “community” identity. The intercollegiate program constitutes a unique level between the geographically restricted high school team and the distant, unstable, and overtly commercial professional team. Also, the ritual and festival surrounding college games permits fans to be part of the total institution as they share in the theoretically more innocent, amateur, and intellectual environment which the college, but not the pro team, provides; and colleges field sports teams all year, permitting an on-going emotional interchange. In Latin America, by comparison, the athletic clubs which sponsor professional soccer teams, whether tied to a neighborhood or not (most originally were), also offer their members a continuous variety of athletic, social, and educational activities which directly add to the community appeal that builds loyalty in ways that U.S. pro teams usually do not. In sum, U.S. university sports programs, much more than high school or professional teams, serve the optimum number of those fans in need of “community,” unlike in other societies where the pro teams have a geographical or institutional base which often still suffices. One additional consequence of this search for identity/community through college sports is to obscure the role of intercollegiate athletic—it is much more than entertainment or profit—making proposed reforms of the current system extremely difficult.