

Daniel A. Nathan
Miami University

“Loving a Team is for Keeps”: Notes on American Sports Fandom

In *Sports Illusion, Sports Reality*, sportswriter Leonard Koppett writes that for athletes, coaches, team administrators and owners the outcome of athletic events obviously matter a great deal. It is, after all, their livelihood. Koppett adds: “For the fan, however, the choice of caring is always available.” “Emotional involvement can be disconnected at any moment, for any reason and just as easily reestablished-entirely as a matter of whim.” With all due respect to Koppett, I think sports fandom is more complicated than he suggests. For many people, fandom is an integral part of their identity, a deeply ingrained component of who they are. For these people, and there are millions of them, fandom is not frivolous, nor is it easily turned on and off. As journalist William Gildea recently put it, “Loving a team is for keeps. It can grow even stronger over time, like a marriage with a single soul.” Even a cursory glance at the contemporary sports landscape corroborates this claim.

Sports fanaticism is everywhere and takes on a myriad of forms. Moreover, this is historically true. As Allen Guttman demonstrates in *Sports Spectators*, many people have long identified themselves with the games they play, but also with the games they watch and read about. In addition, like family lore and religious traditions, sports fandom is often passed down from one generation to the next. This paper works from the presupposition that the relationship among fans, communities, and sport is complex, powerful, and relatively under-examined. In 1990, historian Elliott Gorn argued: “Sports history has concentrated on the ‘supply side’; now we need more work on the demand side, on audience response (precisely who are those fans?) and on the interplay between producers and consumers of sports.” Building on Guttman’s work, this paper takes Gorn’s call to scholarship seriously. It considers what fandom means and how we can best study it. In addition to critiquing some recent books on the subject, such as Scott Huler’s *On Being Brown: What It Means to Be a Cleveland Browns Fan* and Dennis Perrin’s *American Fan*.

Sports Mania and the Culture That Feeds It, I use post-World War II Baltimore, Maryland as an extended case study for sports fandom. More specifically, I examine how the city's (or at least many Baltimoreans') sense of self has been associated with sports icons (like Johnny Unitas), events (the Colts' move to Indianapolis), and places (Oriole Park at Camden Yards). Finally, I argue that numerous European and Australian scholars-including some of those who presented papers at the 1999 Teams and Fans international conference in Queensland, Australia, have provided useful models for studying American sports fans and fandom.



Two smiles worth a million dollars
Nancy Bouchier & Rita Liberti