

The I in Team: Sports Fandom and the Reproduction of Identity

Erin C. Tarver (2017), *The I in Team: Sports Fandom and the Reproduction of Identity*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press,
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Whether one enjoys it or not, sport is an important and prevalent part of human culture. In this book, Tarver turns her critical gaze to the hitherto underexplored area of sports fandom. The claim which Tarver stresses from the outset is that fandom is a normative practice which decrees how one ought to act: 'If you want to be a fan for this team, you must do *x*.' It is this claim which gives the text its urgency and importance, as it allows Tarver to identify and condemn the white, masculine, heteronormative standards which she compellingly argues determine contemporary fandom in the United States.

Her text is timely and important insofar as it adds another layer to the ongoing debate around both race relations and social inequality in the US. It exposes just how institutionalised the instrumentalisation of black and disadvantaged bodies still is and how, under the guise of increasing the subject's media visibility, economic opportunity and social impact, professional sport acts as a wolf in sheep's clothing for the white, heterosexual, masculine norm. Indeed, reading Tarver's book alongside watching the opening episode of the latest season of the Netflix documentary series *Last Chance U* (2018), where old white men gaze on from the stands and judge a team of young, dislocated black men fighting for their economic future by representing a community they will never be a part of, was both illuminating and harrowing.

More importantly, the degrading use of black and Latino athletes in sport is something that is touched upon in most contemporary sports films or TV series set in America, but it is rare that they point the finger directly at the fans, something which Tarver's text does with verve. As such, Tarver prompts and scaffolds self-reflection by those of us who are sports fans and we are given a lens through which to critique ourselves and ask whether the normative standards currently being promoted by fandom are the ones we want to ascribe to.

Tarver's hopeful note is found in what she believes to be outlying examples of female fandom which resist masculine, white, heteronormative practices. Instead, they create a different kind of relationship between fans and between the fan and the player. This she sees as stemming, at least in part, from a more feminist epistemology of fandom whereby the fan understands fandom as 'a means of social bonding, as a set of practices which increases feelings of love, connection, and community' (178). For example, Tarver analyses female fans of the Women's National Basketball Association and their practices which unite even opposing fans under a larger, lesbian identity. She also lauds the LeBron James Grandmothers' Fan Club, whose 'symbolic kinship relations [...] enables their care and concern for James as a human being' (185), not just an objectified and idealised symbol, and she is most positive about these forms of fandom which acknowledge the agency and individuality of the players.

While I think Tarver is right to identify and hold up these forms of fandom, I would suggest that they are more prolific than she gives them credit for. Tarver is almost entirely focused on either professional sports or amateur sports where the spectre of the need or drive to become a professional athlete looms large. What she does not delve into is the fandom of amateur sports that have no eye to the professional, and which are enjoyed in a community where the majority of the fans *are* the players. She also does not explore other dual roles. For example, family-as-fan, coach-as-fan or teammate-as-fan. In each of these cases, I would argue that the duality means that the non-fan role often adds the nurturing, respectful, agent-empowering connections which Tarver identifies in her subversive examples. The best fans on Tarver's model, then, are not just found in these isolated pockets but are also located in the friends, family, teammates and coaches who double up as fans and in those amateur leagues where the game's stakes are set alongside, if not below, the community feeling between even opposing players. Of course, none of this negates Tarver's central arguments insofar as both roles could be equally tainted by the norms she is rallying against and the privilege that underpins being able to be involved in such amateur leagues.

Ultimately, the book is relatively accessible and highlights important points about fandom that should prompt fans who read it to reflect deeply on themselves and their practices. However, its accessibility only goes so far. It is still an academic text and is marketed as such. It is unlikely to find its way into the hands of swathes of sports fans and one must ask whether this is the best vehicle for the messages and insights Tarver is trying to convey. The book can be easily read as a call for change, to resist certain models of fandom, and to engage only in activities which embody the ethics you subscribe to. However, it needs distilling, rendering more powerfully and positioning in a different outlet if the fight is to be taken directly to the fans.

Reference

'We Expect' (2018), *Last Chance U* [Netflix], 20 July 2018

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For those not interested in following sports, the devotion of those around them, the fandom, seems highly irrational – why are they so invested, watching, defending and criticising other people playing a sport they themselves cannot play to the same level? Erin Tarver's *The 'I' in Team: Sports Fandom and the Reproduction of Identity* attempts to answer this while gaining an understanding of why sports fans engage in the practices and disciplines of the sports fandom at all.

Tarver is an Associate Professor of Philosophy at Oxford College of Emory University (USA). Her previous published works on feminist interpretations show that she has diverse research interests. On occasion in this book, Tarver reflects on her own role as an avid football fan who was 'excluded from the boys' events at Sunday school' (7). This book is, more than anything, a collision of both Tarver's professional and personal interests.

Tarver embarks on a detailed analysis of sports fandom in the United States, unravelling the complex identity and sense of inclusion the fandom community can provide to individual people. *The 'I' in Team* attempts to understand the sports fandom in relation to personal and social identity. In so doing, Tarver highlights contemporary controversies in the sporting industry, for example using team names such as the 'Redskins' and the unusual investment of white fans in black male athletes.

The book is divided into seven chapters. The first three explore the concept of the 'fan'; the process of subjectivities, the 'we' discourse and normative fan practices. Later in the book, Tarver begins to cover deeper topics such as racism in mascotting, hypermasculinity, violence, white supremacy, exploitation and normative heterosexuality. In the final section, Tarver adopts a more optimistic approach, exploring the ways in which women's atypical role in sporting fandom could help deploy oppressive social hierarchies.

Throughout the book, Tarver tends to deploy an informative and investigative style. However, she occasionally embraces a more reflective and personal approach. Personal anecdotes of Tarver's experience as a Louisiana State University football fan, quotes and relevant case studies allow her to develop a flow and style which is not overly convoluted or difficult for readers to follow (as I imagine other academic works in this area could be).

Tarver manages to include and summarise relevant studies from sources such as Michel Foucault, Giulianotti and Kevin Quinn; this gives readers a clear understanding of complex fan, gender and race concepts, while still presenting her own ideas and arguments as the central focus. Although people who work in sport, race or gender studies seem to be the greatest immediate readers, *The 'I' in Team* is written in a way which is readable and enjoyable for people who have little or no academic expertise in this area.

In the second half of the book, Tarver starts to examine more critically the darker and somewhat more oppressive side of sports fandom, which she argues can fortify and reproduce racial, gender and sexual hierarchies. Tarver explores the artificial nature of the unity which mascots provide and how mascotting practices both reflect and create racial and gender inequality. She explores the subordination and exclusion of women from the sporting industry and how the racist association of blackness with hypermasculinity 'is instrumental in reinforcing heterosexism, homophobia and misogyny' (110).

While Tarver does implement a critical perspective, it is clear she has a great deal of admiration and appreciation for sporting fandom. She continuously reiterates the positive aspects; its 'emotional investment' (21), the 'frenzied pleasure' (25) and the 'euphoric experiences' (25). While there is definitely something noteworthy about sporting fandom (for non-sporting fans especially) it is not always easy to envisage the positive features of the sporting fandom which Tarver describes, when she also alludes to the violence, masculine domination, racism, exploitation and heterosexism that sports fandom can reproduce. Tarver's words evoke the feeling that she is making concessions – that she acknowledges the existence of these issues, but that they do not change her overall perception of the sport. While Tarver is critical in her analysis of sporting fandom, her perspective is still very much based on her own investment and bias of being a sporting fan.

Tarver shows how sports fandom has become extraordinarily important to our psyche, a matter of the very essence of who we are. While for those few among us on the outside, sports fandom tends to look like highly irrational and obsessive entertainment, Tarver's book provides an insightful read that demonstrates why we should take spectator sports and sports fandom far more seriously than we do.

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