Published in *The Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*
Please cite the published version, available at:
https://doi.org/10.1080/00948705.2019.1706050
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The I in Team: Sports Fandom and the Reproduction of Identity by Erin C. Tarver, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2017, 233pp., $30, ISBN: 978-0-226-47013-9 (paperback)

In *The I in Team*, Erin C. Tarver argues that fandom 'is a primary means of creating and reinforcing individual and community identities for Americans today' (2) and submits fandom to a critical eye. Through her focus on football in the American South, Tarver illuminates the racial, heteronormative, and gender-based issues that permeate fandom. This is an excellent book that should encourage us all to think far more deeply about the importance of fandom and the moral risks it brings.

Chapter 1 takes up the question 'who is a fan?' After recounting the history of the term 'fan' and surveying several contemporary discussions of fandom, Tarver argues that fans *feel* something and *act* in certain ways. (This includes *purists,* who care about a sport, but the arguments of the book apply mostly to *partisans,* who care about a particular team [21]). For instance, fans will be happy when their team wins, and they will participate in practices like wearing the team's jersey or cheering them on.

In chapter 2, Tarver tuns to why being a fan matters, arguing that fandom is 'a key means of cultivating and reproducing individual and community identities' (26). Tarver makes this point by reflecting on Foucault and subjectivization. (As a quick aside: Tarver draws on a range of sources from across the analytic-continental divide and from outside philosophy, but her discussions are always clear. This book is clearly aimed at academics, though it should also be suitable for undergraduate teaching.) To restate her point: by adopting particular roles, we become subject to certain norms, and these roles let us understand ourselves as certain kinds of people. The striker or quarterback subject themselves to certain rules inherent in those roles, but by conforming to those roles Tom becomes a quarterback, Harry a striker. Tom and Harry form their *identities* by adopting these roles. Fans form their own identities by being fans. As such, *what it means* to be a fan of a particular side matters because it affects the individual fan's own identity. It affects the identity of the community, too: fan practices are communal and thus central to the constitution of that community of fans. So, despite the commitments that fandom demands and the emotional lows fans

experience in victory or defeat, fandom is a meaningful part of fans' lives because by being fans they affirm their identities.

Tarver explores a particular practice prevalent amongst fans. Men ask women fans to prove that they really are fans by answering trivia-style questions or demanding the recitation of certain facts. This brings us to Tarver's first major moral point. Tarver makes a convincing case that this practice functions to exclude women *or* make their inclusion 'dependent upon masculine approval' (36). Why do this? Because men fear feminization and sports is *their* realm; by keeping women out, they keep their own space for male bonding, a space in which men can show off their superiority (by asserting their command of facts) and keep women subordinate (38-41). Chapter 2 also contains a second major moral insight: certain fan practices embody racial and class issues. Tarver examines the practices of 'Ole Miss' fans who see themselves as the embodiment of Mississippi's white elite, and she argues that their practices embody and perpetuate this racist identity. I'm in no place to judge Tarver's empirical claims, and I want to flag here that I suspect there are other explanations that could be put forward for practices and identities that are *not* morally problematic explanations. Nonetheless, Tarver's case is always plausible and her argument forceful.

Chapter 3 reinforces Tarver's point about identity whilst exploring the role of mascots. What is a mascot? Tarver doesn't just mean the guy bouncing around in a costume (Gunnersaurus or Gritty), she also seems to include nicknames and logos, depictions and symbolisations—practices of 'naming and physically representing a name' (59). Tarver focuses on the ways in which mascots can wrong groups of people, focussing on Native Americans. (I do wonder if there are many other examples of problematic mascots and suspect that this issue is more prevalent in America—there are few controversies about soccer mascots in the UK). She rejects the idea that Native American mascots are wrong *because* to use something as a mascot is to treat it as an animal: only some mascots are animals, and many mascots valorise the people they represent. Tarver does not reject the idea that such mascots are wrong because they appeal to stereotypes but argues there is a deeper wrong in the use of Native American mascots: 'it treats Native persons *simply* as a means to symbolic unification' (58).

How? Firstly, we need to understand the function of mascots. Tarver starts by discussing Stephen Mumford's (2004) account of team identity and the fact that teams sometimes persist through various disruptions (63-64). Mumford suggests that fan behaviour is constitutive of a team's identity, and Tarver suggests that mascots 'facilitate the collective agreement and attachment of fans... these

markers draw together disparate persons, events, plays, losses, wins... into an artificial unity—a team' (67-68).

Tarver claims that 'a mascot is the principle [sic] means by which a "team" is unified and figured as a unitary point of origin' (63). Recall, Tarver links mascots to naming and representing the name of a team. But there are other things that unify a team. Matt Busby (a legendary manager) symbolises Manchester United and its history, just as much as Old Trafford (a legendary stadium) symbolises and unifies Manchester United as a team and serves as a focal point for the fans. It seems odd, then, to claim mascots are *the principle* unifying means. Yet perhaps Busby and Old Trafford are mascots, too. This would fit more closely with the notion of 'mascotting' that Tarver introduces in chapter 4, where individual players can serve this unifying purpose—perhaps mascots just *are* the objects or people, histories or places, that unify a team. Maybe a focus on names is a red herring: I'm not sure what a focus on naming in particular, as opposed to a variety of other practices, brings to the table.

Let's return to the issue of Native American Mascots. Mascots need to constitute the team *as* something worthwhile. When a mascot is a force or an agent (sometimes mascots are places or linked to the team's origin), it better be fearsome. No one wants to play or cheer for The Limp Handshakes. The mascots need to inspire 'power or aggression' so fans or players 'become fearsome or daring when identified with them' (72). Fans use mascots to help *themselves*—to help them constitute their teams, to help form their own identities. But this is achieved through a caricature of Native Americans, represented as dangerous figures, not as fully rounded human beings. So the problem isn't just that using Native Americans as mascots employs stereotypes, the particular wrong is twofold: mascotting *instrumentalizes* and *excludes* (74-78). Native Americans are instrumentalized for fans' own purposes. These purposes require the exclusion of Native Americans: they are mascots in virtue of their power, thus they are *scary*, so they need to be kept away.

Chapter 4 turns to our attitudes towards fan identification with individual players. Tarver takes on Claudio Tamburrini's (1998) claim that sports ease racial tensions, with white fans cheering for non-white players. Tarver challenges this, holding that when we identify with individual players, we adopt a lusory attitude that imbues things in a certain context—games, objects, players—with a significance they otherwise might not have. Fans identify with players through this attitude; what is important is how players perform on pitch given that fans know so little about players' lives

outside of the sporting arena. Fans identify not with actual people but with sportspeople *merely* as sportspeople.

Tarver distinguishes between a hero and a mascot. The hero is a 'representative' of the fans—'one of us'—whereas the mascot is 'instrumentalized' as a symbol (80), utilised by the fans to serve their own purposes. Tarver makes her point by drawing on Malcolm X and the idea that men of colour can be seen as 'nonthreatening "pets" or as vehicles for the vicarious experience of traits—stereotypically black traits—associated with aggression, sexuality, violence, or animality' (81). The white crowd cheers for the black player as the embodiment of strength. But he is respected only in a restricted—and non-threatening—environment: on pitch. Again, like the Native American, he is both respected and feared and best kept at arm's length, or at least in the safe space of a sporting arena.

Tarver contrasts mascotting with hero-worship. Tim Tebow is a hero, idolised by white Christian Americans not just for his sporting prowess, but for his embodiment of their values. He is one of them, but a bit better than them. He is idolised 'as a *representative* of the values and virtues of a particular community that explicitly exceeds the sporting context' (86). I had two issues with this discussion. Firstly, Tarver doesn't really explore the moral cost to hero-worship. Tebow is celebrated for more than his sporting prowess and seen as a rounded human being who represents the fans; this is an important moral distinction from the mascot. But as well as depth there is shallowness. Do fans really see Tebow as a person or is he just a collection of tropes? Is there any *Tim* left under the white Christian American? Tarver suggests he is 'celebrated as an individual' (101); but that isn't clear to me, and Tarver herself says that 'sports heroes are, for fans, not *people* at all, but objects whose meanings are dependent upon their roles in the game' (151). This suggests that the wrong of mascotting a player is not, as Tarver suggests, instrumentalization or caricaturing (101)—which exists in hero-worship, too—but is more precisely located in the other features Tarver cites: that players are instrumentalized whilst also being *excluded* and the *particular way* in which they are caricatured (100-101).

Secondly, Tarver thinks fans view Tebow with a lusory attitude and see him as a 'fantasy' (85). But it's not clear to me that this is the attitude we take towards sporting heroes. Tebow is adored for his character traits, *not* for his sporting prowess. He isn't treated as a *sporting* lusory object; he could be any famous good Christian man. Although Tarver's discussion highlights the important role that someone like Tebow might play in fan identities, her discussion seems to omit a particularly important part of fan

identification: the *sporting* hero. I idolise Paul Scholes—a picture of him adorns my living room wall—others idolise Tom Brady or Alex Morgan. We don't really *care* about what they are like as people, nor do we respect them only because, say, they embody strength or power in a way that we respect only if it is confined to the sporting arena (as in mascotting). What matters is that they are exceptional sportspeople. I suspect this can play a role in fan identity even if it doesn't implicate further facets of fan identity in the way that Tebow's Christianity does.

Chapters 5 and 6 extend Tarver's analyses in useful ways; for reasons of space, I will only summarise them briefly. Chapter 5 explores various ways in which mascotting takes place in college sports and the ways in which elite white culture has been reinforced, over time, in college sports. Tarver also includes a persuasive discussion on the ways masculinity is reinforced through homophobic and sexist practices. Chapter 6 explores our hatred of particular players and our dis-identification with them. We hate these players and disidentify with them, thus reproducing our own identities by pointing out that we are *not* like them (146). Tarver notes that several explanations of hatred might exist but focusses on a racially-driven form of hatred that extends her analysis of mascotting. When mascots no longer fit within norms, when they show that they are autonomous and will not be kept within the fans' boundaries, or when they show that they are dangerous outside the sporting arena, they become a genuine threat, they become 'too much of a full human being' (158) to be the objects of mascotting and instead become objects of fear in virtue of their traits that had previously been safely contained.

Chapter 7 offers a glimmer of hope, by looking at women's sports and fandom. Although many women fans will be involved in troubling practices, Tarver thinks that some of their practices resist misogyny, racism, and heteronormativity. These practices show us a way that sports fandom might rid itself of its rotten elements. She focusses on two examples, the WNBA and the LeBron James Grandmothers' Fan Club. The Grandmothers care not just about James the player, but James the man—as such, they go *beyond* hero-worship, they do not subsume him as 'one of us' but respect his individuality (185). The WNBA has a large number of lesbian fans and players, so is not beset by the heteronormative masculine norms of much sport; further, women's sports encourages women to see themselves as agents who can do things in the world.

Much as with her discussion of hero-worship, I think Tarver might understate some moral costs. I was a little troubled by a particular practice that Tarver cites occurs in WNBA fandom: 'speculating about the sexual identities of individual players, coaches, or other

fans' (194). Tarver presents this as creating a sense of community, where players on both sides are united with each other and with fans by being lesbians. She cites this practice as acknowledging 'the full human person beyond the lusory object', thus it is somehow deeper than hero-worship (193). But I have two issues here. Firstly, fans also give some depth to Tebow, but it's not clear to me how seeing a player as a lesbian moves seeing her beyond a lusory object any more than seeing Tebow as a Christian does. Secondly, it strikes me that there is something creepy about speculating about a player's sexuality, especially if they have not made the choice to disclose it.

None of this is to downplay Tarver's point about the WNBA being a ballast against hetero-masculinity; rather, it is to extend a central part of her message: fandom is fraught with moral issues. Perhaps sometimes there are alternative explanations other than the morally problematic ones that Tarver cites, nonetheless, Tarver's book is a brilliant exploration of fandom. Not all of Tarver's particular analyses will generalise to other regions or sports, but her carefully argued book shows us how deep these issues might run and should encourage us to submit fandom in other sports and in other places to a critical eye. After all, Tarver makes clear why this is important: fandom is a constituent of our very identities.

References

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