



Fans R Us (Almost) All You Ever Wanted to Know About Sport Fans and Spectators


BOOK REVIEWS


Sport Fans: The Psychology and Social Impact of Spectators, by Daniel L. Wann, Merrill J. Melnick, Gordon W. Russell, Dale G. Pease, New York: Routledge, 2001. 246 pp. ISBN 0-415-92464-2. \$22.95 paperback


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 Picture three hallowed shrines of sport: The 18th hole of the U.S. Open golf tournament; center court at Wimbledon; and the backstretch at the Daytona International Raceway. During the three-week span from mid-June to early July in 2002 while I wrote this review, these diverse venues each suffered indignity at the hands of on-site spectators. At Wimbledon, a streaker interrupted preparations for a men's semifinal match, bobbing and weaving among security personnel on both sides of the net. At Daytona, fans slung cushions, bottles, trash, (and their displeasure) on the backstretch of the famous tri-oval when officials determined to allow the Pepsi 400 to end under a caution flag. At Bethpage's Black Course on Friday and Saturday of the U.S. Open, fans heaped scorn, personal insult, and vulgarities at the young Spaniard, Sergio Garcia, who had dared to suggest that officials catered more to Tiger Woods than to him and others. Clearly, these fans had rejected a passive spectating role and transformed themselves into very active participants at the various events. Why is this happening now and what further oddities can we expect in the future?


 The average cost for a seat at a major league baseball game is almost \$20. The cheapest seat at Boston's venerable Fenway Park nears \$40 (Team Marketing Report, 2002). But even as they complain about high ticket prices and the outrageous salaries of ball players, Red Sox and other fans nightly fill the stadium. And still, talk of a players' strike circulates! What prompts such seemingly loyal fan support of institutions that continue to milk the public?


 Ted Williams died last summer. All he ever wanted in life was to play baseball. In his waning years he wanted only to be considered the greatest hitter ever to play the game. In his heyday, he was not particularly friendly to the fans, and his disdain of the media was legendary. He is considered by many to be a hero. Why?


 Having beaten brain cancer and won four successive Tours de France, Lance Armstrong sits as the top cyclist of our generation, possibly the greatest athlete in the world. Yet French fans scream nasty epithets as he rides by and accuse him of doping, and the American public yawns when cycling reports appear on sportscasts, and ask "Lance who?" Why *isn't* Armstrong their hero?


 A book titled *Sport Fans: The Psychology and Social Impact of Spectators* should help us to understand such behaviors and attitudes. We also might expect to find insight into why some soccer fans in Britain and elsewhere descend to such depths that the phrase "soccer hooligans" has entered the vocabulary


of sport; why fans in large U.S. cities riot not only when their teams lose, but also when they win a major championship; why spectators in some sports remain the picture of gentility whereas those occupying seats at other venues appear to be beasts; and why spectators actually would risk injuring the very participants they have come to cheer. And why and how new sport fans come to select their teams and heroes as they enter the cadre of fandom.


 Readers who are searching for information on fan-related questions will rarely be disappointed with this book. Both theoretical and empirical explanations for the conundrums introduced previously, plus many other discussions are presented. For example, we find that a considerable wealth of information is available that describes the central figures in spectator riots and crowd violence at sporting events (pp. 140–144). Such rioters typically exhibit physically aggressive tendencies—no surprise there. But discovering that soccer hooligans and their ilk often spring from low socioeconomic strata (SES), and that their destructive ways may reflect general outrage at society adds a new dimension of knowledge. Moreover, the authors' development of the role of sensation seeking as an important characteristic of many violent spectators from all SES levels stimulates an altered perspective on fan violence than the usual concept of drunken boors.


 Divided into three parts, this book by Daniel Wann, Merrill Melnick, Gordon Russell, and Dale Pease describes first the major characteristics that identify fans and spectators. In Part 2, the epidemiology and causes of sport-related aggression are developed. Finally, in Part 3, the role and function of sport fandom for the individual and for society receive attention. The value-added benefit of this book as a comprehensive resource for referenced information on fans and spectators is that the authors have themselves made considerable contributions to the research literature in the three categories that form the divisions of the book. Wann has been cited considerably both for his work on spectator and fan characteristics, as well as on factors leading to fan aggression. His comprehensive text, *Sport Psychology* (Wann, 1997), is one of the main standards in the field. Melnick has written widely on the role of the on-site spectator in aggressive actions. Russell also has researched extensively on fan characteristics that predispose toward violence, as well as on the violent milieu of individual sports such as ice hockey.

 The book excels at breadth of treatment of spectator and fan issues, but depth treatment is spotty throughout Parts 2 and 3. For example, my biggest disappointment in this book is the very short and incomplete section on the relationship between alcohol use and fan violence (pp. 130–132). However, the disappointment cannot be leveled solely at the authors. They report accurately that few empirical studies have actually investigated this relationship. When studies have been undertaken, a positive relationship has been found. The authors suggest that the belief in the causal role of alcohol in fan violence is so strong that many see no need to prove the obvious. However, in their concluding remarks they suggest that inebriated individuals are “perfectly able to process information” and “can foresee the consequences of their actions and readily show restraint in response to social cues” (p. 132). This represents an unfortunate summation of literature that relates alcohol, aggression and violence, and response inhibition. In their meta-analysis, Ito, Miller, and Pollack (1996) showed clearly that the force of evidence is that inebriated persons lack the cognitive processing abilities to inhibit aggressive responses to perceived provocations. The present statements regarding alcohol overconsumption followed a section where the authors push aside critical discussion of the profit-making motives of team owners and stadia operators who have continued to market and sell alcoholic beverages during events, and instead imply that rationing of alcohol might have unremarkable effects on fan aggression.

 Both psychological and sociological theories of spectator and fan violence and aggression are evaluated objectively. A critical issue—why do not all spectators within the same venue become violent and aggressive—tends to ensure that the role of psychological factors predominates. Many old references suggest that many areas of fan and spectator study have not been the topic of continued research interest.

 The role of aggression and violence within the context of the sport, as in ice hockey or professional wrestling, is discussed in terms of causes and correlates. The economic value of aggression and violence as magnets that draw fans to the arenas is mostly ignored. Even within the confines of a scholarly piece, some editorializing would have been both acceptable and even appreciated. Indeed, these authors are quite capable of extending their own research and review into political and social arenas, as they accomplish in the final section of the book. There, the book explores various contexts from which sport can be and has been viewed, criticized, or both including feminist, sociopolitical, cultural, humanistic, and moralistic schema. In addition to a lack of depth in this section, the authors come across more as sport apologists than as unbiased scholars. For example, the Marxist proposition that modern sport intentionally diverts attention from the capitalistic exploitation of the populace never is fully developed, and the counterpositions are weakly referenced. Similarly, the feminist complaint that sport has fostered an antifeminist ethos receives short shrift. Moreover, the field of sport psychology, from which these authors emerge, may itself be subject to antifeminist bias (Semerjian & Waldron, 2001). All of the critical schemata are entertaining and sufficiently cogent to have deserved better treatment.


 Testimony to the breadth of this book, only one major missing topic or chapter is apparent. That chapter would address the evolution of fan behavior over time, across groups, or within individuals. For example, has sport violence changed significantly over the years? Have the number of fans (within an age cohort or within genders) changed? What key events appear to have shaped the present characteristics of fan and spectator behavior? Although some of these topics are covered briefly within the other chapters, there is no systematic development.

 Is this book a worthy addition to your library in sport psychology? Absolutely. It provides a comprehensive sampling of the empirical and theoretical knowledge base dealing with fans and spectators. Particularly the opening chapters on the making of the sport fan read more like an extended *Psychological Bulletin* article than a typical book. The middle chapters on aggression and violence are more spotty than one would expect given the pedigree of the authors, but they also are generally well done and informative. The last chapter might best be ignored because it introduces interesting criticisms of sport and then proceeds to override the criticism with scant empirical or logical evidence.

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