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Chapter Nine

THE SOCIETAL CONSEQUENCES OF SPORT FANDOM

CHAP. 9

In the previous chapter our examination of the utility of sport fandom and spectating focused on the individual level of analysis. That is, our concern was with the impact and meaning of fandom for the psychological well-being and mental health of sport fans—the extent to which this is a harmful or beneficial activity for the participant. In the current chapter the focus of the analysis moves from the individual participant to society at large. For students of sport fanship there is perhaps no more compelling nor challenging question than, "What is the relationship between sport fandom and society?" The answer to this question is necessary for a fuller understanding of sport fandom and spectating. Indeed, pursuit of this answer forces us to address several related questions, including: Which societal needs, if any, are satisfied by sport fandom, and would society be any different if we were unable to root for our favorite athletes and teams? Stevenson (1974) was most persuasive in stating the importance of the first question when he observed, "The obvious enormity and the manifest importance of sport in society compels us to ask the question, 'Why?' Why has sport as an element of our society, of our culture, become so pervasive and so visibly central?" (p. 8).

Similar to the issues surrounding the psychological impacts of sport fandom, differences abound with respect to the societal values of sport fandom. Some critics are perfectly comfortable assigning sport fandom to the "toy department of human affairs," regarding it as nothing more than the "pots and pans" of everyday life. Others see sport fandom as a highly valuable activity, one that contributes to

society in a multitude of ways. In attempting to address the debate on the societal values of sport fandom, the student of sport spectating has a number of theoretical perspectives available to help guide the way, each with its own particular strengths, weaknesses, and biases. For example, structural-functionalism argues that sport fandom is highly beneficial to society. On the other hand, conflict theory and feminist theory view sport fandom and spectating in much more negative terms. In this chapter, we describe and critique several of these theories in an attempt to better understand the impact of sport on society at large. We begin with structural-functionalism and the argument that sport serves society well. We will then discuss several critiques of the functionalist point of view and conclude with several alternative explanations of the spectator sport-society nexus.

THE STRUCTURAL-FUNCTIONALIST PERSPECTIVE

The functionalist perspective takes the position that for any social institution to exist, it must contribute to the maintenance or survival of the society. If we accept, for argument's sake, that spectator sports satisfy the definition of an institution (see Goodger & Goodger, 1989; Zurcher & Meadow, 1967), then the functionalist challenge is to discover which specific societal objectives sport serves.

Typical of functionalist thinking is the specifying of several "prerequisites" or "imperatives" that every society must successfully address if it wishes to remain a viable entity (Aberle, Cohen, Davis, Levy, & Sutton, 1950; Parsons, 1951; Stevenson, 1974). In the sections that follow, several functions of sport fandom are identified, discussed, and critiqued. Both anecdotal and empirical evidence is cited where available and relevant. A brief description of each function can be found in table 9.1.

Sport Fandom and Affective Expression

The expression of affect is part and parcel of being human. To smile, to laugh, to dream, to experience eustress, and to be joyful is to be alive. While society must guard against the unrestricted expression of some affects lest the social order be seriously disrupted (e.g., anger and rage), other affects need to be encouraged and produced (e.g., excitement and joy). For the functionalist, society must provide its members with structures that produce positive affect in order to survive. Perhaps the ancient Roman satirist Juvenal said it best when he observed, "Duas tantum res anxius optat, panem et circenses," meaning, "Two things only the people anxiously desire—bread and cir-

TABLE 9.1

Potential "Functional Imperatives" Associated with Sport Fandom and Spectating

Spectator sports may:

1. Allow for emotional expression.
2. Provide quality entertainment.
3. Enhance communication.
4. Facilitate national identity.
5. Produce social capital.
6. Contribute to the socialization process.
7. Enhance integration at all levels.
8. Assist in social control.
9. Serve as a form of religion.

cuses" (cited in Preston, 1978, p. 207). In spectator sports we have an institutional structure with a Barnumesque quality, where marching bands, exploding scoreboards, deafening music, cheerleaders, mascots, and colorful pageantry overwhelm the senses. More importantly, sporting events provide an opportunity for spectators and fans to experience a range of euphoric and dysphoric emotions (Ferguson, 1981). Although the affective payoffs are directly mediated by the uncertainty of the outcome, the stakes involved, and the presence or absence of heroic performances (Coakley, 1994), there is always the possibility that each and every contest will provide the spectator with an intense emotional workout. Those events that score exceptionally high on the emotional workout scale (e.g., "buzzer-beaters" and "barnburners") are likely to be remembered for a lifetime.

The act of survival, whether it be at the individual or societal level, depends "not only on living and working, struggling and persevering, but also joking, laughing, cheering and celebrating" (Marcotte, 1989, p. 15A). Sporting events promise all of this and more. By serving as a catalyst for the expression of affect, they help combat the pernicious effects of apathy and the cessation of motivation, a condition that can prove fatal to any social system.

Sport Fandom as Performance-Entertainment

The affective expression engendered by observing sporting events, whether it be in person or watching on television, cannot be fully understood or appreciated without recognizing how it interfaces with

spectator behavior. Far from being a passive onlooker, spectators frequently become physically involved in the action on the field, court, or pitch. Even for television sport viewers, their ritualized actions reflect their vicarious participation in the event (Eastman & Riggs, 1994). The habits, traditions, and superstitions of sport spectators suggest that they are anything but passive. Rather, they become active participants, altering and constructing their own sport experiences.

Lancaster (1997) observed that the increasingly active role observed among sport spectators is reflective of a major redefinition taking place in popular culture today as seen in the communal relationships now found between spectators and performers. That is, the demarcation line between who is a performer and who is an audience member is becoming increasingly blurred. U.S. popular culture provides us with a host of "performance-entertainment" examples including movie theme parks, karaoke, television talk shows, participatory theater, and role playing games. According to Lancaster, "these kinds of events demand active participation by spectators, which blur the boundary between the performers' space and the spectators' space, as they create the performance event together" (p. 77).

By transforming sport spectators into performers (e.g., doing the wave, responding to the noise meter, participating in half-time promotions, etc.), the sporting event becomes for the fan a framed arena for his or her physical, social, and emotional involvement. Thus, spectator sports produce necessary and important affects as well as encourage considerable social interaction. Moreover, they offer a beckoning stage to those fans daring enough to seize its opportunities. As Gitlin observed, "A lot of people feel they don't really exist unless they've gone public. . . . A lot of people feel diminished if they haven't been anointed or discovered by the spotlight" (quoted in "Fan Behavior," 1993). Judged from a functionalist perspective, sport fandom can provide an antidote to feelings of apathy, marginalization, and neglect—serious threats to a society's well-being.

Sport Fandom and Communication

No society, however simple, can exist without shared, learned, symbolic modes of communication (Aberle et al., 1950). Communication is absolutely essential because it provides the basis for all social interaction, helps maintain a society's common-value structure, and is indispensable to the socialization and role differentiation processes. To have effective communication in a complex, postmodern society, three essential elements are necessary: (1) language, (2)

ways of communicating, and (3) communication channels. Language involves a system of shared, learned sound patterns having standardized meanings. Popular ways of communicating include the spoken, written, and signed word. Communication channels refer to the institutional structures by which information, ideas, meanings, experiences, and traditions are broadly disseminated, such as print and broadcast media, cinema, theater, the Internet, and so forth.

Sport fandom contributes to the communication process in two important ways. First, the language of sport finds its way into almost every aspect of life, be it the military, business, politics, advertising, or even sexual relations (Hardaway, 1976; Segrave, 1994). For example, Palmatier and Ray's (1989) *Sports Talk: A Dictionary of Sports Metaphors* lists a total of 1,700 popular words and expressions in American English derived from terms directly associated with sports, games, and recreation. Many of these terms have become an integral part of our language. Baseball, in particular, provides many popular metaphors. Several such metaphors are listed in table 9.2. As Segrave (1994) pointed out, metaphors are very powerful and important linguistic conventions because they help "explain difficult, complex, and even sensitive and mysterious concepts in familiar images" (p. 99). And, as Lakoff and Johnson (1980) observed, "metaphors structure how we perceive, how we think, and what we do" (p. 1).

Thus, the lexicon of spectator sports makes an important contribution to the communication process. Through the sport metaphor we are able to share our ideas, desires, meanings, and experiences using shared, learned sound patterns ("words") easily understood by others. When a friend asks, "Can you pinch hit for me tonight?" or when your boss instructs you to, "Take the ball and run with it," we know what these individuals mean and expect.

A second way sport fandom contributes to the communication process is by providing a topic for conversation. Although much of everyday conversation focuses on people, sport is also a popular topic, especially among those who follow sport on a regular basis. Because sport talk functions so well as small talk, it has become a very important vehicle for communication in modern society. Sport talk as small talk is a lot more important than people think. Not only does it make individuals feel more comfortable in social situations but it also helps them establish new relationships as well as maintain old ones.

Sport talk takes on even greater importance as societies become increasingly more complex and techno-specialized. As Shenk (1997) notes, we work and live most of our lives in rarefied niche environ-

TABLE 9.2

Metaphors in Contemporary Language Directly Traceable to Baseball

1. He was born with two strikes against him.
2. He couldn't get to first base with that girl.
3. He sure threw me a curve that time.
4. I'll take a rain check on it.
5. He went to bat for me.
6. I liked him right off the bat.
7. He was way out in left field on that one.
8. He's a foul ball.
9. I think you're way off base on that.
10. It was a smash hit.
11. Let's take a seventh-inning stretch.
12. I hope you touch all the bases on this report.
13. Could you pinch hit for me?
14. He doesn't even know who's on first base.
15. I just call 'em like I see 'em.
16. He's only a bush-leaguer.
17. Major league all the way.
18. He was safe by a mile.
19. He has a lot on the ball.
20. No game's over until the last man's out.

Note: Adapted from Spink (1978).

ments. As professions and personal interests become increasingly more specialized, modern society runs the risk of greater and greater fragmentation and factionalization. Sport fandom provides society with a common language ("Sportugese") that many know and understand (Tannenbaum & Noah, 1959; Wann et al., 1997). In those societies that continue to grow more technical and fragmented, sport talk allows members to more comfortably engage both friend and stranger alike. Perhaps this explains the immense popularity of sport talk radio shows (Goldberg, 1998; Mariscal, 1999).

Sport Fandom and National Identity

Because sport allows people to represent themselves or their social groups to others, national sports carry particular psychological and societal significance, even where there is considerable social and cul-

tural heterogeneity (Goodger & Goodger, 1989). The following examples come immediately to mind: baseball in the Dominican Republic, rugby in New Zealand, bull fighting in Mexico, ice hockey in Canada, basketball in the Philippines, skiing in Norway, golf in Scotland, ice skating in the Netherlands, and sumo wrestling in Japan. Goodger and Goodger (see also Zurcher & Meadow, 1967) have argued that national sports operate as social institutions, representing in symbolic form the social identity, nature, and relations of the collective in which they are generated and sustained.

Consider the sport of professional football in the United States. Arguably the most popular of all American spectator sports, the game commands the attention of millions of spectators throughout its sixteen-game season, the playoffs, and the most anticipated event on the sport calendar, the Super Bowl. M. Real's (1975) analysis provides an understanding of the widespread, emotional appeal of this sport and the manner in which it symbolizes American cultural values and ideology. He argues that as mythic spectacle, the Super Bowl strengthens and develops American social structures while at the same time reflecting the dominant tendencies of the culture (i.e., sport serves as a microcosm). Real identified twelve elements embedded in professional football that help sustain American social institutions and lifestyles. These elements are listed in table 9.3. Real concludes that

TABLE 9.3

Elements of Professional Football Sustaining American Social Institutions and Lifestyles

1. Personal identification through collective representation.
2. Heroic archetypes.
3. Collective participation with others.
4. Suspension of profane, everyday, secular time and space markers.
5. Veneration of material well-being.
6. Winning territory (property) through competition.
7. Recognition of the limited time for success.
8. Male-dominated labor.
9. Modern corporate management.
10. Physical action.
11. Attractiveness of "packaging."
12. Spectacle.

Note: Adapted from M. Real (1975).

the game of professional football resonates strongly with American spectators because it elaborates upon society's most elemental themes (e.g., heroic archetypes, material well-being, and corporate management), speaking to them in the terms of cultural myths that they clearly understand and embrace.

Such is also the case with the NCAA men's college basketball championships, otherwise known in the United States as March Madness. In trying to account for the extraordinary attention and excitement this sixty-four-team tournament engenders, Price (1991) suggested that the competition appeals to the American Dream—it's democratic (e.g., all teams start on equal footing), it appeals to the American underdog mentality, it's monotheistic (i.e., the idea of a single champion is attractive), and it celebrates capitalist competition (i.e., survival of the fittest).

The importance of national sports as collective representations is accentuated when great excitement surrounds a particular contest or event, as is the case with international competition. According to Goodger and Goodger (1989), excitement and collective representation are intrinsically related. Excitement intensifies the symbolic significance of a national sport, while the latter provides a venue for the shared experience of heightened emotionality and tension excitement (i.e., eustress). Thus, national spectator sports have the potential to satisfy two societal imperatives, namely, they strengthen the social fabric and assist in the production of positive affect.

While a strong case can be made for the close link between national sports and collective representation, Bairner (1996) made a very important point when he observed that this association is by no means straightforward. Rather, the exact nature of the relationship depends on the role of nationalism in each societal context. For example, in Scotland and the Republic of Ireland, because of the politics of nationalism, it has proved impossible to "construct a cohesive sportive nationalism" (p. 33). On the other hand, "in Sweden, where national identity is less of a political issue, the development of an inclusive sportive nationalism has been relatively smooth" (p. 332). While some national sports contribute to collective representation and nationalism, others accentuate group differences making it difficult to construct coherent and unified national identities (Bairner, 1996).

Attacks Against National Sport Identities An interesting dilemma is posed when a society's national sport comes under attack. Canadian ice hockey provides such an example. Consider that in 1969 approximately 99 percent of the players in the NHL were Canadian.

Today only 56 percent of the players are Canadian, the lowest national representation in league history; the rest are evenly divided between Americans and Europeans (Allen, 1999). The twenty-six-team league now has just six teams located in Canada. The adverse consequences of these trends were noted by Canadian radio host Roy Green when he observed, "Hockey is our national glue. It defines Canada and Canadians. We have so few people in such a large land. We are left out of the international political process. . . . But hockey holds us together" (quoted in Brady, 1998). Similarly, former Hall of Fame goalie Ken Dryden observed, "It is important for the Canadian people, for dreams and bonds and common stories for new generations, that Canadian teams win the Stanley Cup—at least some of the time" (quoted in Crary, 1998). Thus, a country's loss of its national sport may also result in the loss of its national identity.

Sport Fandom and Social Capital

One of the most controversial and hotly debated sociological essays published in recent years was Putnam's (1995) "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital." Putnam offers the provocative thesis that social capital in American society (i.e., features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual profit) has declined over the past several decades. To bolster his argument, Putnam points to the fact that the average number of associational memberships (e.g., church-related groups, labor unions, fraternal-veteran organizations, and school-service groups) has fallen about 25 percent over the last twenty-five years (see chapter 8 for a similar argument). Putnam notes that, to make matters worst, the two most fundamental forms of social capital—the family and the neighborhood—no longer provide the rich social interaction and bonding opportunities they once did. These disturbing trends in social connectedness and civic engagement, and their subsequent toll on social trust, cooperation, and communication, are blamed on several factors, including the movement of women into the labor force, geographical mobility, and technology. Putnam suggests that the latter has been responsible for "privatizing" or "individualizing" our use of leisure time and thus disrupting many opportunities for "social-capital formation" (p. 75). Although Putnam dismisses secondary and tertiary networks and associations (e.g., sport fandom) as effective venues for social capital formation, closer inspection of these "social worlds" (Unruh, 1983), "public scenes" (Irwin, 1977), and "third places" (Oldenburg & Brissett, 1982) reveals perhaps a hasty judgment on his part.

Although Putnam (1995) concedes that two fans may root for the same team, he argues that "they are unaware of each other's existence. Their ties, in short, are to common symbols, common leaders, and perhaps common ideals, but not to one another" (p. 71). But is that really the case? We suspect the two die-hard, season-ticket holding, New York Jets football fans seated in Section 111, Row C, seats 7 and 8 would strongly disagree! The fact is, traditional forms of sociability in American life have been changing for some time "from primary associations to secondary ones, from the more intimate to the less intimate, from the realm of stronger affect to weaker affect, and from less monetized forms of social interaction to more monetized ones" (Melnick, 1993, p. 48). What Americans (and similar cultures) have been witnessing is a gradual shift in locale for the satisfaction of their social needs. No longer do traditional institutions such as the family, workplace, and neighborhood fully satisfy our need for social interaction and engagement. Instead, Americans now turn to less intimate, more public locales for association and to connect with one another (e.g., singles bars, personal columns in newspapers and magazines, dating services, cruises, and the Internet). Does this mean that American social capital is declining? Maybe, maybe not. Rather than a decline in social capital, what we appear to be witnessing today is a new stage in its development; that is, it has taken on a different form.

In the sport stadium and sport arena, we have a public place where the play form of association is freely and safely available. What Putnam (1995) fails to fully appreciate is that sport locales are venues alive with communal, Gemeinschaft possibilities. To say that two NFL season-ticket holders seated thigh-to-thigh for eight home games are "unaware of each other's existence" (Putnam, 1995, p. 71), that they share no personal ties, is to underappreciate the quasi-intimacy and social connectedness that sport fans can and do share.

It would appear that the social forces of urbanization, individualism, interpersonal competition, technology, and geographical mobility have conspired to deny Americans their traditional forms of sociability (Denney, 1979). As a result, they are forced to satisfy their need for social interaction and civic engagement in less personal, less intimate, less private ways. This does not necessarily mean that a decline in American social capital is under way. The counterargument is offered that a tertiary social network provided by something like sport fandom satisfies an important social imperative in postmodern society by serving as a unique urban structure whereby strangers assemble not only to be entertained but to "engage the other" in meaningful dialogue.

Sport Fandom and Socialization

Perhaps no functional imperative is more important to a society's survival than successfully teaching its "structure of action" to each generation of new members, as well as individuals of any age who seek new social roles or societal intergration. Parsons, the father of structural functionalism, referred to this imperative as "pattern maintenance." Each individual must be taught the appropriate modes for dealing with everyday life circumstances and situations. This socialization process involves teaching each of the following: (1) shared cognitive orientations, (2) articulated sets of goals, and (3) the prescription of means for attaining those socially formulated goals (Aberle et al., 1950). It is absolutely essential for the members of any society to become effectively integrated into its core belief system and acquire the appropriate behavioral patterns (Stevenson, 1974).

For the current discussion, we are interested in what role, if any, spectator sports play in teaching members of a society the "structure of action" they should follow to successfully navigate their way through the vicissitudes of everyday living. That is, we are concerned here with the extent to which sport fandom contributes to the adoption of shared cognitions, articulated goals, and opportunities for receiving those goals. Edwards (1973) was of the opinion that sport effectively performs this socializing function. He observed that: "sport is a social institution which has primary functions in disseminating and reinforcing the values regulating behavior and goal attainment and determining acceptable solutions to problems in the secular spheres of life" (p. 90). Directing his attention specifically to sport fans, Edwards also noted, "As an institution having primarily socialization and value maintenance functions, sport affords the fan an opportunity to reaffirm the established values and beliefs defining acceptable means and solutions to central problems in the secular realm of everyday societal life" (p. 243).

Shared Cognitive Orientations Perhaps the most critical cognitions taught by the socialization process are cultural values. As discussed in chapter 8, a number of authors have suggested that following spectator sports may lead to adopting the value systems of favorite athletes (see Sloan, 1989; G. J. Smith, 1988). However, sport fandom may also encourage consumers to internalize those values that society most tenaciously embraces. This distinction between the adoption of an athlete's personal value system and socialization into the value complex of the larger society is admittedly subtle, but very important just the same. For example, consider a young, North American spec-

tator who, because his favorite player has exhibited poor sportspersonship and a sexist attitude, may be tempted to adopt these values for himself. Certainly, these are not the values encouraged by society at large. Thus, in addition to teaching these athlete-specific values, sport spectating may also teach the young fan prosocial values that constitute the sport ethos and mirror the American creed.

Indeed, although the hard-core realities of sport sometimes suggest otherwise, sport has the potential to model several values regarded as crucial to a democratic and humane society, such as legitimization of authority, honesty, justice, equality, respect for the rule of law, respect for the rights of others, cooperation, competition, and fair play, to name just a few. Clearly, sport is far from a perfect social institution, and exceptions to each of these values can be cited (e.g., when former Baltimore Orioles second baseman Roberto Alomar spit in the face of an umpire over a disputed call). However imperfect, sport typically offers spectators and fans demonstrable evidence of the ideological elements that constitute the dominant value structure in American society (Loy, 1978). In fact, even those watching sport on television can access the important value lessons sport teaches. For instance, Bailey and Sage (1988) conducted a content analysis of the sportscasters' commentary during a Super Bowl football game and found that the dominant values communicated were the prototypical American values of individualism and achievement. They concluded that "the salience of the sportscasters' specific comments provides a vehicle for value transmission" (p. 126).

Shared and Articulated Sets of Goals With respect to shared and articulated sets of goals, Loy (1978) makes the case that the most compelling lesson sport teaches both the participant and spectator alike is the importance of success. For example, the cultural system of American sport contributes to the propagation of a success ideology by extolling the value of high aspiration (e.g., "Show me a good loser, and I'll show you a loser") and stigmatizing athletes as lazy and worthless if they do not accept the goal of high aspiration with unquestioned commitment (e.g., "He/she just doesn't want it badly enough"). In many instances, it is the drive to succeed and the material well-being it brings that American spectator sports most dramatically symbolize for those sitting in the stands rooting for their favorite teams and players (e.g., Stiles, Gibbons, Sebben, & Wiley, 1999).

Other goals reflected on the field of play that are likely to have a lasting impression on spectators include striving to improve one's skills and abilities, performing up to one's full potential, and always

giving a maximum effort. These are the goals embraced by football, basketball, ice hockey, and baseball players, to be sure, but they are also the goal expectations many sport fans encounter every day in the workplace.

Prescription of Means for Attaining the Goals Having identified success as an important goal to be aggressively pursued within the American sociocultural context, let us now turn our attention to the prescription of means for attaining it. Here, the playing field provides the sport spectator with several unambiguous messages, most prominent of which is the importance of hard work (e.g., "Success is 90 percent perspiration, 10 percent inspiration"). The lesson couldn't be more clear—work hard and you will succeed! For example, when Americans are asked what they consider the most effective ways to get rich, working hard typically heads the list. When one compares standard workloads and minimum vacation time cross-culturally, the United States finishes relatively high on both counts among industrialized nations. For example, the modal U.S. workweek of 40 hours with 2 weeks vacation time per year clearly exceeds Belgium's 38 hours and 4 weeks, Denmark's 37 hours and 5 weeks, and Germany's 35 hours and 6 weeks ("Work and Play," 1996).

Not only does sport subliminally manipulate the spectator to associate hard work with success, but several other approved means for achieving success are transmitted as well. For example, other behaviors that are likely to be modeled by one's favorite players include acts of courage, self-discipline, self-control, confidence, altruism, confidence, competitiveness, ambition, sacrifice, and loyalty.

A Final Comment on Sport Fandom as an Agent of Socialization One would have to be incredibly naive to believe that all is right with sport today. Even someone who doesn't follow sport closely is probably aware of several serious problems that need to be addressed (e.g., player violence, gender inequity, racial discrimination, poor sportspersonship). Interestingly, although the general public still endorses the belief that sport contributes to the well-being of society, it is beginning to question whether sport can alleviate social problems, help participants become good citizens, or promote fair play (Martin & Dodder, 1993). Nonetheless, there is still reason to believe (to hope?) that by mirroring and reinforcing dominant cultural values, by articulating a set of desired goals, and by identifying the appropriate means for achieving them, spectator sports can and do support the important work of the family, school, and church in teaching society's "structure of action."

Sport Fandom and Integration

Commonly referred to as unification, solidarity, or social cohesion, integration of the collectivity presents every society with a formidable challenge, namely, how to generate common interests, loyalties, and enthusiasms among its members. Lever (1983) suggests that integration is a critically important social imperative because it serves as a counterpoint to the potentially disruptive conflicts, cleavages, and antagonistic factions that are the inevitable consequences of scarce means, unfulfilled expectations, and imperfections in the socialization process.

In spectator sports we have a popular form of mass entertainment with the power to create order amid diversity. According to Lever (1983), the most important and universal social consequence of spectator sports is their ability to help complex modern societies adhere. She argues that the integrative function of spectator sports is due in no small measure to their ability to establish and promote connections between and among people. Evidence of this can be found at each of the following levels of social organization: interpersonal, community, metropolitan, state, national, and global.

Integration at the Interpersonal Level At the interpersonal level, attending a sporting event can facilitate encounters with strangers and provide opportunities for casual sociability. In analyzing encounters between two strangers at a sporting event, we find a number of potentially positive elements present. For instance, both parties are likely to know and understand the expectations associated with the role of sport fan. Also, the temporal boundaries of the encounter are clear-cut and implicitly understood, thereby guaranteeing the safety of any exchange. Further, both parties are probably willing to share relevant information about players and home teams. And finally, the safety, comfort, and ambience of the ecological setting facilitates attempts at social interaction (Melnick, 1993).

Integration at the Community Level The notion that sport fandom helps promote connections at the community level has empirical support. Wilkerson and Dodder (1987) tested the proposition that "sport holds the potential to activate collective conscience and group affirmation by linking the identity of individuals to a common community orientation" (p. 36). They surveyed public school teachers in nine different communities and found a significant relationship between attendance at high school football games and scores on a collective conscience scale. Interestingly, the better the team's winning per-

centage, the higher the scores. The researchers concluded that participation and winning can interact to "provide a basis for shared identity, common focus, and, consequently, collective conscience" (p. 40).

Integration at the Metropolitan Level At the metropolitan level, there are considerable anecdotal and empirical data to support the proposition that successful teams can unite a city. For example, the success of the Youngstown State (Ohio) Division I-AA football team has had a dramatic impact on the city, currently in the grips of a serious economic slump. As the mayor noted, "The program is vital to our community. Losing the mills took a tremendous psychological toll. We're starting to regain confidence, and YSU football has been a big part of that" (Walters, 1994). Similarly, success of the NFL's Atlanta Falcons during the late 1990s unified that city. According to the team's director of public relations, the team gave the city "a reason to dream" (Bragg, 1998).

Zhang, Pease, and Hui (1996) developed a Community Impact Scale (CIS) to quantify the community impact of a Western Conference NBA team. The eight value dimensions of the scale were positively related to spectator attendance. That is, those spectators who attended games most frequently were more likely to perceive the value of the team to the community. Of special interest was the finding that the team's contribution to promoting community integration was recognized as important and significant.

Integration at the State Level The Indiana state high school boy's basketball championship tournament provides an excellent example of how sport fandom can unify an entire state. Because high school basketball in Indiana is a central component in the identities of most persons living in the state (K. Johnson, 1996), virtually all Hoosiers turn their attention to basketball at tournament time. Immortalized in the movie classic *Hoosiers* (perhaps the most favorite of all U.S. sport movies) (Brady, 1998), the tournament has, until recently, been open to every school in the state, regardless of enrollment or record. However, beginning with the 1997–98 season, school administrators voted to do away with the one-class tournament in favor of four boys' and four girls' tournaments based on school size. Not surprisingly, in its first year of operation, total attendance was down 22 percent from the previous year. Similarly, profits were down almost 42 percent ("Hoosier Rebellion," 1998). Remarked the Indiana University sports information director, "They are ruining one of the great traditions in the history of Indiana athletics" (cited in C. White, 1996).

Integration at the National Level The "Do you believe in miracles" U.S.A. men's ice hockey team's gold medal victory in the 1980 Winter Olympic Games clearly demonstrates the integrative powers of sport fandom on the national level. Most Americans can recall what they were doing or where they were on that special day. The one hundred million or more television viewers who tune into the Super Bowl every year provide us with another example of how a major sporting event can integrate an entire country. Scotland provides us with another dramatic example of this point. As the country was about to face off against Brazil in a 1998 World Cup match, the Edinburgh *Evening News* headlined, "Country Grinds to Dead Halt as Game in a Billion Kicks Off" (McCallum & O'Brien, 1998b).

For better or worse, the integrative powers of national sport teams and heroes far exceed those of the most exceptional militarists, politicians, explorers, entertainers, educators, scientists, and clergy men. As "cultural consolidators" (Hoffer, 1998), national sport heroes and heroines, such as Austrian alpine skier Hermann Maier, Norwegian speed skater Johann Koss, French runner Marie-Jose Perec, and Hungarian backstroker Krisztina Egerszegi, exert a profound impact on their societies.

As an example of the manner in which sport heroes can rally and unify a nation, consider the hoopla generated by the Mark McGuire–Sammy Sosa home run race in 1998. As both players chased Roger Maris's all-time, single-season record of sixty-one home runs, Americans followed along with rapt attention. Indeed, as political columnist Sandy Grady (1998) observed, "Just when we were sinking into a national funk, wallowing dismally under White House porn, tapes and impeachment gloom, along came two genuine heroes in a glitzy, gaudy spectacle that has made us laugh, argue and root. Thank you, Mac. Thank you, Sammy. Thank you, Abner Doubleday" (p. 17A).

Integration at the Global Level Finally, at the global level, it's hard to think of any event, short of a major war, that can capture the world stage like soccer's World Cup. For instance, consider that in 1994, 184 countries were members of the United Nations while during that same year a larger number of countries (191) were members of FIFA, soccer's international governing body. France's 3–0 upset of defending champion Brazil on July 12, 1998, before a stadium crowd of 80,000 in Saint-Denis was watched by a worldwide television audience of 1.7 billion, or approximately 30 percent of the people living on planet Earth!

Given the integrative powers of popular spectator sporting events, it is understandable why scheduled games go on even during times of national crisis. Two U.S. examples come immediately to mind. First, after President John F. Kennedy was pronounced dead from an assassin's bullet on Friday afternoon, November 22, 1963, the NFL had to decide whether to play its Sunday games. Because the general feeling was that the country needed some measure of normalcy, the games were played as scheduled, a decision supported by the Kennedy family. Second, MLB Commissioner Fay Vincent faced a difficult decision after the 1989 World Series was halted when a devastating earthquake struck the Bay Area. He had to consider whether to postpone the series, cancel it, or resume play in another city. He chose the delay option and the games were resumed ten days later. The reasons given were to restore continuity and to not disappoint the one hundred million viewers who were following the games.

Sport Fandom, Integration, and Suicide One of the most intriguing lines of inquiry regarding the integrative possibilities of sport fandom involves the potential relationship between sport fandom and suicide. Durkheim (1951) was one of the first social scientists to propose a relationship between participation in ritualized, ceremonial activities and suicide rates. His thinking is captured in the following syllogism (a syllogism is a logical formula used to test the validity of reasoning and consists of a major premise, a minor premise, and a conclusion):

> *Major Premise:* Participation in collective ceremonies is related to a high degree of integration of the social group.
>
> *Minor Premise:* A high degree of integration of the social group is related to lower suicide rates.
>
> *Conclusion:* Participation in collective ceremonies is releated to lower suicide rates.

This line of deductive reasoning has served as the theoretical basis for most of the research on spectator sports and suicide. That is, it has been hypothesized that the consumption of popular sporting events leads to a sense of greater connectedness and belongingness, which is likely to discourage thoughts of self-destruction, at least in the short term. Curtis et al. (1986) compared two sport ceremonial days, the last day of the World Series and the Super Bowl, and two civil holidays, July 4th and Thanksgiving Day, on suicide incidence rates three days before and after the ceremonial day for the years

1972–78. While net declines in suicides were found for the three days leading up to the two sport days (57.04 fewer suicides), the effect was much stronger for the two civil holidays (131.88 fewer suicides). The researchers concluded that the integrative effects of sport ceremonial days were considerably weaker than those of civil holidays. Lester (1988) replicated the above study but examined a time period (1972–84) twice as long as the one used by Curtis et al. He found, as they did, no significant deviation in suicide rates from chance expectations for the two sport ceremonial days.

Trovato (1998) conducted the most recent examination of the relationship between sport fandom and suicide. This researcher studied the impact of professional ice hockey's Stanley Cup on suicide rates in the Province of Quebec for the years 1951–92. He hypothesized that there would be a reduction in the number of suicides when the Montreal Canadians were engaged in play-off competition and a temporary increase in suicide rates on those occasions when the Canadians lost the Stanley Cup finals. While it appeared to matter little whether the Canadians won or lost the Stanley Cup, there was a rise in self-inflicted deaths for 15- to 34-year-old men if Montreal was eliminated early from the play-offs. The researcher concluded that, after controlling for age, gender, and marital status, there was no convincing evidence "that major sporting events in and of themselves inhibit suicide risk in populations exposed to such occasions" (p. 118). Thus, based on the published research available, ceremonial sport occasions appear to have little if any impact on suicide incidence rates.

A Final Note on the Integrative Function of Sport Fandom Before concluding our discussion of the integrative power of sport fandom, a few caveats are in order. First, functionalism can be criticized for assuming sport serves the needs of all groups in society equally, regardless of age, gender, race, ethnicity, or social class (this point is discussed in greater detail below). If sport fandom does in fact serve an integrative function in society, we need to ask whether it does so for all individuals and all groups. Common sense suggests that it does not. Because males are more voracious sport consumers than females (see chapter 1), sport may integrate males more effectively into a society's core belief system than it does females. The same can also be said about younger members of society as well as those who are more affluent (G. J. Smith, 1978). The latter is certainly the case when discussing attendance at sporting events. For instance, as noted in an earlier chapter, statistics show that while the average annual

rate of inflation for consumer goods in the United States since 1991 has been 2.8 percent, the average annual percentage increase in ticket prices for the four major sport leagues has been 7.2 percent (McCallum & O'Brien, 1998d). With ticket prices for professional ice hockey, football, and basketball games averaging $45.00 to $48.00, the fact is, "the high cost of going to sporting events has denied the underclass and even the lower-middle class from attending them" (Eitzen, 1996, p. 98). Addressing the same point, Danielson (1997) observed, "happy images of everyone coming together behind the home team gloss over the role of socioeconomic factors in separating sports fans along class, income, ethnic, and racial lines" (p. 111).

A final point casting some doubt on the integrative role of sport fandom concerns the simple fact that when the contribution of sport team to community cohesion is discussed, it usually occurs in the context of the home team's success. But what about those cities that host perennial losing teams? While the occasional city will rally around a losing team (e.g., the City of Chicago and its Cubs), it seems that "most mediocre teams are communal embarrassments rather than community assets" (Danielson, 1997, p. 111).

Sport Fandom and Social Control

One of the more popular theories advanced to explain the popularity of spectator sports in society is to view them as an opportunity for spectators to vent the full range of their emotions with little fear of retribution. It is argued by some that the net effect of this collective, emotional workout is cathartic; that is, by allowing spectators to release their emotions through the verbalizing or acting out of their frustrations, a lot of potentially dangerous affect is harmlessly dissipated, and society is made safer (Coser, 1956). For instance, although it is doubtful that the Commissioner of MLB is a functionalist, he probably thought he was making a public service announcement when he placed a full-page advertisement in *USA Today* on April 1, 1996, reading, "Today, 597,369 Screaming Lunatics Will Be Off The Streets." He was, of course, referring to the opening day of the season.

Do spectator sports provide society with a "safety-valve" institution, and do they successfully "drain off" hostile and aggressive sentiments? Do umpires, referees, and opposing teams and fans serve as substitute objects for the displacement of hostile affect? Are society's institutions safer and more secure because of spectator sports? As discussed in chapter 6, the general answer to these questions is a resounding "No." Simply put, there is virtually no empirical evidence

validating the existence of catharsis in sport (Gilbert & Twyman, 1984; Goranson, 1980; Russell, 1993). The "blowing off steam" theory of sport spectating may be attractive, but it is quite inaccurate.

Although the scientific literature strongly indicates that the catharsis theory is without merit, does this mean that spectator sports make no contribution to social order and control? In the same way that our muscles require regular exercise, so too do human beings need to express and exercise their emotions. Mental health experts tell us that tension resulting from emotional repression can have serious, deleterious health effects (e.g., Gross & Levenson, 1997). Conversely, emotional expression leads to stress reduction and healthier psychosocial functioning. Perhaps one of the underappreciated societal values of spectator sports is their limitless emotional possibilities. Because of the drama, ritual, and excitement of sport, spectators are motivated to give unfettered expression to their feelings. In this sense, spectator sports have much in common with theater. Aristotle observed in 350 BC that theater had a salutary effect on the audience because it helped purge their emotions. Might not the same be true for spectator sports?

The ebb and flow of game action, the point/counterpoint of team success and failure, the spectators' empathic identification with heroes and vilification of villains, the thin line spectators walk between tragedy and ecstasy, all combine to engage them in a type of emotional aerobics, not unlike, and perhaps superior, to classical Greek theater. The pleasant emotional stress that spectator sports offer provides welcome relief from the otherwise routine, dull life patterns many spectators and fans are forced to endure. The point is that although frustration and anger may not be eliminated at the ballpark, other emotions can and do get a vigorous workout. To the extent sport fans choose to express their emotions, freely and openly, they and society are the better for it.

Sport Fandom and Religiosity

The thought that spectator sports are genuinely sacred in nature and share the same societal functions provided by religious institutions is likely to border on blasphemy for some. In spectator sports we have mass entertainment, a fixture of popular culture, that sometimes appears crude, vulgar, and profane. And yet, at least by analogy, the similarities between sport fandom and organized religion are striking. Consider the vocabulary associated with both: faith, devotion, worship, ritual, dedication, sacrifice, commitment, spirit, prayer, suffering, festival, and celebration. Linguistically speaking, we are

encouraged to go forward with the comparison. Fortunately, a number of works have been published in recent years that can help inform our efforts (e.g., Higgs, 1995; Hoffman, 1992; Prebish, 1993).

If we begin with a textbook definition of a religious institution, we may be discouraged from exploring the points of articulation between the two. Consider the following:

> A religious institution is a system of social norms and roles organized about the need to answer ultimate questions concerning the purpose of life and the meaning of death, suffering, and fortuitous occurrences. The religious institution answers these questions by defining the supernatural and the nature of man's relationship to the supernatural. In so doing it defines what is sacred and what the proper relationship is between the sacred and the secular. (Theodorson & Theodorson, 1969, p. 345)

Judged strictly by this definition, it is difficult to see how and in what sense sport is "religious." For instance, how does sport answer questions about life and death, assist in defining what is supernatural, address the relationship between the sacred and the secular, or awaken individuals to their social and moral responsibilities?

Faced with these questions, it is difficult to see how spectator sports perform the same functions as organized religion. The analogy appears to be patently false. What is important to remember, however, is that the functions assigned to religious institutions are generally personal in nature and speak to the problems, issues, and states of individuals, not the survival needs of societies (McGee, 1975). When we introduce a societal perspective into the discourse, the relationship between sport and religion comes into sharper focus. According to McGee, the key societal function of the religious institution is to assist in defining, rationalizing, and coping with the crises that people experience (e.g., birth, childbearing, death, etc.). These crises represent organizational problems for society because they threaten to disorganize interpersonal relationships. Thus, one of the key functions of the religious institution from a sociological perspective is to help maintain social cohesion, a critical imperative facing any society. To put it more simply, what the religious institution does for society is bind people together through ritual and belief by offering common values and goals toward which they may strive.

Cannot a similar case be made for the binding, integrating, and organizing functions of sport fandom? When one considers all the major sporting events with which one could identify, the social cohesion function of sport fandom becomes much less problematic. It may not be

coincidental that record attendance at U.S. sporting events in recent years has coincided with the lowest levels of attendance at U.S. houses of worship since before World War II. In 1996, 38 percent of U.S. adults reported that they had attended a church or synagogue within the last seven days, the lowest figure since the 37 percent reported in 1940 ("Poll on Weekly Worship," 1997). It may well be that new "houses of worship," sport stadia and arenas, are beginning to challenge the drawing power of traditional houses of worship in American society.

Novak (1976) argues that sport fandom constitutes a type of "natural religion," flowing outward from a deep natural impulse that is radically religious. Dunning (1986) sees sport as a "humanistic religion" in which spectators worship other human beings, their achievements, and the groups to which they belong. Prebish (1993) claims that what sport offers is a type of primitive polytheism in which fans worship favorite players in each of the sports they follow. Similarly, Lever (1983) likens sport stadia and arenas to cathedrals where followers gather to worship their heroes and pray for their success.

Even at the psychological level of analysis, Lever believes that spectator sports and the sporting drama allow fans to transcend their existential existence and experience a type of spiritual transformation. Such thinking is supported by Price (1988), who assigns great meaning to the face painting, hair tinting, and iconographic costuming that have become so commonplace at sporting events throughout the world. He argues that these masking behaviors satisfy three specific religious drives: (1) securing identification with a favorite team, (2) helping the fan escape the structures of confinement and oppression that occur in everyday life, and (3) establishing a sense of community with other faithful fans.

Whether referred to as a civil, secular, natural, or humanistic religion, both analogy and functional analysis suggest that there is much that is religious about sport fandom. As societies grow increasingly more secular and theological beliefs become less salient and all-pervasive (Dunning, 1986), we should expect to see sport fandom assuming greater religious importance at both the individual and societal levels.

SELECTED CRITIQUES OF SPORT FANDOM

While the structural-functionalist view can help us gain insight about the role of sport fandom and spectating in contemporary society, the perspective is not without limitations. Coakley (1998), for example, has articulated three major problems with functionalist theory. First, functionalist theory "leads to exaggerated statements about the posi-

tive effects of sports" (p. 34). The fact that an aspect of culture (e.g., sport) is popular doesn't mean, ipso facto, that it is valuable or useful. Just because spectator sports have been around a long time doesn't necessarily mean that they are "functional" or satisfy important societal imperatives.

Second, there is the tendency when using functional analysis to "overlook cases where sports benefit some groups more than others within a community or society" (Coakley, 1998, pp. 34–35). For example, while a case was previously made that sport fandom makes important contributions to affective expression, communication, and integration in American society, a class analysis suggests that it benefits some socioeconomic groups more than others. One cannot ignore evidence of classism in any discussion of sport fandom (Eitzen, 1996). For example, the cost of attending professional sporting events in the United States today strongly discourages the lower and lower-middle socioeconomic classes from participating. If sport fandom is an important contributor to small talk, affect production, and social cohesion, then clearly these positive consequences are not equally distributed among all strata in society.

Third, because functionalists are not especially concerned with how sport might be "created and defined by members of society to promote their own interests and the interests of the groups to which they belong," advocates are likely to overlook how sport "might promote the interests of those with power and wealth, and thereby contribute to disruptive forms of social inequality in societies" (Coakley, 1998, p. 35). Instead of serving the basic needs of society, Coakley argues that sport may actually perpetuate social inequalities based on race/ethnicity, class, and gender.

Thus, although functionalism is helpful in directing our attention to potential benefits of sport fandom for society, its weaknesses and flaws need to be acknowledged (K. V. Meier, 1989). Clearly, alternative explanations for the role of sport in society need to be explored. Below, five critiques of sport fandom are examined, perspectives that, in contrast to the functional analysis previously reviewed, do not paint such a positive picture of the societal impacts of sport fandom. The five critiques are listed and briefly defined in table 9.4.

The Conflict Critique

Viewed from a conflict perspective, sport fandom is seen as maintaining the interests of the power elite of society (Danielson, 1997; Hoch, 1972). Shaped by the needs of capitalist systems, spectator sports serve vested interests as a type of "cultural anesthesia," a form

TABLE 9.4

Critiques of Sport Fandom and Spectating

CRITIQUE	DESCRIPTION
Conflict theorist	Perceives spectator sports as maintaining and consolidating the interests of society's power elite.
Feminist	Sees institutions such as spectator sports supporting the gender order and masculine hegemony.
Cultural elitist	Views sport fandom as a superficial, inferior, brutal, low-brow form of mass entertainment.
Moralist	Suggests that the moral fiber of society is in decline as evidenced by current television programming, movies, popular music, and spectator sports.
Humanist	Dislikes sport fandom and spectating because they are experienced passively, and passivity is viewed as inherently impoverishing.

of "spiritual masturbation" or "opiate" that distracts, diverts, and deflects attention from the pressing social problems and issues of the day (G. E. Howard, 1912; Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1948; K. V. Meier, 1989; Nash, 1938; Quirk, 1997; see Guttmann, 1980; G. J. Smith, 1988). This perspective argues that by exploiting spectator sports, members of the ruling elite are better able to consolidate their power and privilege. For instance, consider the position taken by K. V. Meier (1989), who argues that sport spectating "depletes the available resources and reservoirs of money, time, and critical thought which could be utilized . . . to attempt to effect productive political and positive, meaningful social transformation" (pp. 113–114).

The "sport spectating as opiate" thesis was strongly articulated by S. J. Harris (1981) when he wrote:

> If Karl Marx, who died 100 years ago, were still alive today, he might be sorely tempted to revise his famous slur, "Religion is the opium of the people." It is no longer true, if it ever was, for something else has taken its place, at least in our country. Today, sport has become the opium of the people. . . . While it may be true that religion, in the past, narcotized many, it also awakened many

> others to their social and moral responsibilities. Sport has no such redeeming aspects in our society. . . . It has turned into a passion, a mania, a drug far more potent and widespread than any mere chemical substance. (p. 3B)

Those who agree with this line of reasoning can certainly find instances where sport appeared to be more important to members of the society than their other civic responsibilities. For instance, slightly more than 38,000 voters turned out for the May 1, 1999, mayoral election in Dallas, although later that night well over 45,000 persons attended the Texas Rangers baseball game in Arlington, Texas, a suburb of Dallas (Cook & Mravic, 1999a).

As a second example, consider the media coverage of Micheal Jordan's (second) retirement, which occurred during the same time period as the impeachment trial of President Clinton. The television ratings for CNN's coverage of Jordan's retirement press conference received a rating of 1.6. The next day, during the same time slot, CNN's rating for the impeachment hearings was only 1.3 (Walters, 1999a). Similarly, when the *Chicago Sun-Times* asked local residents to name the greatest Chicagoans of the twentieth century, Jordan placed number one on the list, ahead of several mayors, three governors, and five Nobel Prize winners (Cook & Mravic, 1999b).

If, as the conflict critique purports, spectator sports function as an opiate, fans should be generally apathetic and less involved in the business of society. However, to the contrary, research shows that fans have broader general interests and more active lifestyles than nonfans. Perhaps Lieberman (1991) uncovered what may be the strongest evidence to refute the popular notion that sport fans are passive, single-product consumers. In his national survey on sport fandom, he found that sport fans were more likely than nonfans to report an interest in politics, music, being successful, and being a leader. Additional evidence is provided by the strong positive correlation between sport fandom and athletic particiation (see chapters 1 and 8). Further, in his critique of the neo-Marxist indictment of sport, Guttmann (1980) concluded that there is no evidence to support the notion that sport fans are apolitical; to the contrary, sport fandom may actually heighten class consciousness and intensify class conflict. And Maguire (1986) has observed that soccer hooliganism in England is best understood as a class cultural conflict.

It is one thing to speculate about a power elite exploiting sport for its own ends, but it is quite another matter to identify who they are and provide proof of their conspiratorial activity. Studies of profes-

sional sport team ownership show that the wealthiest owners are not linked to any national elite network. Typically, they "represent an approach to business more closely identified with the rugged individualist capitalist entrepreneur" (Flint & Eitzen, 1987, p. 21).

The Feminist Critique

Shuster (1994) made an interesting observation when she noted that "it is fascinatingly coincidental how football has overtaken baseball as the preeminent TV sport for men at the same time women have begun asserting their rights in the arena of sports" (p. 3C). The suggestion that sporting events provide male viewers with something more than diversion and entertainment is worth serious consideration (Nelson, 1994). Judged from a feminist point of view, it is through institutions like sport fandom that male hegemony is constructed and reconstructed (Bryson, 1987). Far from an innocent and innocuous pastime, sport spectating is viewed as reproducing traditional ideas about masculinity and femininity, thereby helping maintain patriarchal rule in the larger society.

According to Bryson (1987), homosocial, hypermasculine cultural rituals (e.g., wrestling, boxing, ice hockey, football) link males with the positively sanctioned use of force and aggression. The net effect of these rituals is to inferiorize females and their activities. Implicit in the feminist analysis is the notion that the celebration of hypermasculinity perpetuates gender inequality, reinforces sexual stereotypes, ensures patriarchal control, and ultimately acts as an agent of women's oppression (Theberge, 1985).

Certainly, the feminist critique of male spectator sports deserves the reader's attention. However, its major weakness is its failure to provide specific guidelines for determining how, when, and where sport reproduce gender relations. For instance, we are left to wonder which sports teach males to embrace notions of domination, suppression, and control of the opposite sex. Are feminists talking about all sports or just a select few? Do they have in mind all male spectators or a smaller group especially vulnerable to sexist messages? And, if so, how can we identify those males who are most susceptible to gender ideology? Given the increasing numbers of female spectators attending professional football (Meyers, 1997) and ice hockey (Mihoces, 1998) games in the United States today (both the NFL and NHL estimate that females constitute approximately 45 percent of their fan base), the future impact of sport fandom on gender relations appears unclear. In fact, one could argue that as more females fill sport stadia and arenas, sport fandom and spectating will serve to weaken the gender order, rather than reinforce it.

The Elitist (Mass Culture) Critique

Higgs (1982) noted, "it is difficult to imagine Socrates, Jesus, Augustine, Leonardo, Newton, Beethoven, Tolstoy or Einstein in the stands cheering a team, which may tell us something about the phenomenon of mass spectacle" (p. 150). Similarly, Pasternak once observed, "Gregariousness is always the refuge of mediocrities; only individuals seek the truth" (cited in Babbage, 1969).

The cultural elitism implicit in these quotes has its roots in Thorsten Veblen's famous put-down of sport spectators. Noted Veblen, spectating "marks an arrested development of man's moral nature" (cited in G. J. Smith, 1988). It goes without saying that sport spectating, as cultural practice, has been traditionally viewed as inferior, brutal, and lowbrow because, according to Smith, "it is for the masses and therefore lacking in refinement. It follows then, that watching a sporting event is several notches below so-called more discriminatory leisure pursuits like visiting an art gallery, attending an opera, or listening to a symphonic concert" (p. 63).

The elitist critique argues that the masses lack taste and refinement. If their tastes are to be satisfied, everything has to be reduced to the lowest common denominator (Strinati, 1995). Judged from this perspective, sport fandom is viewed as a standardized, repetitive, and superficial activity that celebrates the trivial. Because they lack intellectual challenge and stimulation, spectator sports are forced to cater to fantasy and escapism and the denial of thinking.

Elitists can certainly be challenged on their "holier than thou" attitude. However, more telling is the fact that, upon closer inspection, sport spectating is not the trivial, infantile, and superficial activity its critics claim. Rather, sport fans often turn out to be more knowing, active, and discriminating than they are given credit for. Many fans take special pride in their knowledge of individual and team statistics and their ability to strategize. Far from being cultural dolts, the typical sport fan is cognitively engaged in the activity—analyzing individual performances, sharing sport esoteria with others, mulling over game strategies, and critiquing coaching decisions. The intricacies and complexities of the game action allow fans to give expression to their creative and critical thinking skills.

The Moralist Critique

Those identifying with the moralist critique warn that the moral alarm clock is ticking away in the United States and that the nation better pay attention before we are all plunged into a moral abyss. While television programming, movies, and popular music are fre-

quently singled out for specific criticism, spectator sports have not escaped the moralist's critical eye. Boxing, football, ice hockey, and ultimate fighting are viewed as especially barbaric. For example, Mumford (1937) observed, "Sport, in the sense of a mass spectacle, with death to add to the underlying excitement, comes into existence when a population has been drilled and regimented and depressed to such an extent that it needs at least a vicarious participation in difficult feats of skill or heroism to sustain its waning life-sense" (p. 80).

While moralists have been predicting the end of Western civilization for some time, American society continues to defy the predictions of gloom and doom. However, it would be irresponsible to make light of the moralist critique insofar as it is directed at "blood sports" (e.g., Beck, 1995). For example, between 1962 and 1995, twenty-three boxers were killed in fights and hundreds of others have suffered at least some degree of brain damage (e.g., Muhammad Ali). And, what about no-holds-barred ultimate fighting where fans fill arenas or pay $29.95 to their local cable operators for the opportunity to see the mayhem? More like dog and cock fights than anything else, these spectacles are banned in a number of states. Although it may be extreme to argue that sport spectacles such as the Super Bowl, Kentucky Derby, March Madness, and the World Series are debased and immoral, some spectator sports are difficult to defend given their violence and total disregard of basic human values.

The Humanist Critique

Those supporting the humanist critique dislike sport fandom and spectating because they are experienced passively, and passivity is viewed as inherently impoverishing. According to Reich (1970), passivity and its material expression, consumerism, prevent privacy, liberty, sovereignty, performance, taste, self-knowledge, and the ability to create one's own aesthetic standards. Spectator sports are seen as impoverishing because they deny activity and initiative; they teach spectators to rely for their satisfactions on what society provides, rather than help them find their own personal sources of fun and enlightenment. Because passive culture almost completely denies individual performance, the humanist fears that there will come a time when we will be unable to fulfill our own genuine needs.

While one might be inclined to accept the notion that much of U.S. popular culture is designed to be experienced passively, whether sport fandom should be included in the critique can be debated. Whether it is because sport fans are younger, more upscale, or have higher energy levels, research shows that they are more likely to

have dinner out, rent a movie cassette, entertain at home, read a paperback, listen to music, and be physically active. Remember, there is no hard evidence that spectator sports socialize fans for consumption, encourage passivity, or rob them of personal initiative (Lieberman, 1991). Rather, as a group, sport fans and spectators tend to embrace highly active, proactive lifestyles.

SOME FINAL THOUGHTS

As one can see from the discussions in this chapter, social scientists have very different views as to the societal impact of sport fandom. The functionalist viewpoint perceives the activity as highly beneficial to society at large. In fact, nine different "imperatives" were identified for sport fandom, each addressing a particular societal function. On the other hand, different opinions about the value of sport fandom were noted in the five critiques of this popular leisure activity. Conflict, feminist, elitist, moralist, and humanist perspectives each challenge the basic assumptions of the functionalist perspective and arrive at very different conclusions about the spectator sports–society relationship. Each critique argues that spectator sports are "dysfunctional," not "functional," although the reasons given vary by perspective.

Although each of the theories and perspectives identified and discussed were supported with the most relevant research available, the fact remains that the formal study of sport spectatorship from institutional and popular-culture perspectives has not received nearly the attention it deserves. Consequently, several of the observations offered must remain informed speculations until such time as more qualitative and quantitative data become available. In the absence of a significant research literature bearing on the question proposed at the beginning of this chapter, the reader is challenged to weigh the strengths and weaknesses of each of the theories and critiques discussed and arrive at his or her own answers to the question, "What is the relationship between sport fandom and society?"

And finally, it seems appropriate to note that there is always the danger of engaging in overanalysis in trying to make sense of something very ordinary, like sport fandom. After all, we're not talking about rocket science! Maybe the importance of sport fandom to a society is more obvious than researchers and theorists would have us believe. The growing popularity and increasing importance of spectator sports throughout the world may simply reflect a collective need on the part of spectators and fans to add a bit of zest to their everyday, lives (Shames, 1989). Sporting events provide followers

with an opportunity to take a break from their daily routines and responsibilities, whether to watch a daughter participate in a youth soccer game, attend a minor league baseball game, or take up a comfortable position on the living room couch for a Sunday date with the NFL. Maybe we should view sport fandom as a nutritional supplement, a tropical spice, a spiritual, emotional substitute. In the same way that herbs and spices can improve the taste of a bland main dish, sport fandom can add a dash of eustress, excitement, thrill, and wonder to our lives and society as a whole. Despite all the "socio-babble" the subject attracts, it would truly be ironic if we discover, when all is said and done, that the major societal function of sport fandom is to provide spectators and fans alike with a time-out institution, one that allows them, on occasion, to temporarily reinvigorate their emotional, spiritual, and social lives.