Sociability in the Stands

Searching for Sociability in the Stands:
A Theory of Sports Spectating

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It is argued that the social forces of urbanization, individualism, interpersonal competition, technology, and geographical mobility have brought greater and greater numbers of strangers into people's everyday lives and have made the achievement of primary, social ties with relatives, friends, neighbors, and workmates more difficult. As a result, many are forced to satisfy their needs for sociability in less personal, less intimate, less private ways. It is proposed that sports spectating has emerged as a major urban structure where spectators come together not only to be entertained but to enrich their social psychological lives through the sociable, quasi-intimate relationships available. The changing nature of the sociability experience in America presents sport managers with interesting challenges and opportunities. A number of recommendations are offered for maximizing the gemeinschaft possibilities of sports spectating facilities. By giving greater attention to the individual and communal possibilities of their events, sport managers can increase spectator attendance while rendering an important public service.

Recent U.S. Census Bureau figures show that 75.2% of the American population now live in densely packed urban areas. That represents an increase of 12% of 20 million people since 1980. The American urban population, which now number 187.1 million, find themselves today concentrated on only 2.5% of the country's land mass (Puente, 1991).

The nature and quality of city life have long been of interest to social scientists in general and urban sociologists in particular. Images of urban dwellers have ranged the entire spectrum, from the very negative to the very positive. Park (1967) observed that "the growth of cities has been accompanied by the substitution of indirect, 'secondary,' for direct, face-to-face, 'primary' relations in the associations of individuals in the community" (p. 23). And Wirth noted that with increasing size, density, and heterogeneity of population, urban social relationships are rendered superficial and anonymous. He further suggested that social contacts are made more on the basis of civilities become less important; neighborhood rules and old, traditional, primary group cultures (Glazer, 1984).

Contrast this rather grim image with Gan can and does exist within the inner city, the outer cities still remain strong within family and kinship. A primary style of life, despite increasing urbanization (1961) was also quick to recognize that loneliness, alienation, and despair, that "one even with the silent passerby whom one sees the shortest of encounters can, as a limiting community, if a trace of those contacts is imparted.

Research on urban-nonurban differences on this issue. Franck (1980) was unable to fit isolation with respect to number of friends, relatives and friends. However, she did note that contacts at least initially, are more likely to engender feelings and stress. Korte (1980) also found no differences in urban and suburban settings, that is, less frequent and less positive.

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If, indeed, urban society is fragmented, it is no wonder that many Americans find companionship (Bernikow, 1986). Gordon's theory of deprivation caused by the lack of certain social contacts are made more on the basis of civilities become less important; neighborhood rules and old, traditional, primary group cultures (Glazer, 1984).
social contacts are made more on the basis of civility than genuine interest; family ties become less important; neighborhood relationships become more tenuous; and old, traditional, primary group cultures are severely weakened (cited in Glazer, 1984).

Contrast this rather grim image with Gans's observation that the "village" can and does exist within the inner city, the outer city, and suburbs, that emotional ties still remain strong within family and kinship networks, thereby allowing for a primary style of life, despite increasing urbanization (Glazer, 1984). Schmalenbach (1961) was also quick to recognize that the urban setting need not cause loneliness, alienation, and despair, that "one can sustain a kind of community even with the silent passersby whom one sees frequently on the street . . . even the shortest of encounters can, as a limiting case, become the basis of subsequent community, if a trace of those contacts is impressed on the mind" (p. 332).

Research on urban–nonurban differences in social behavior is instructive on this issue. Franck (1980) was unable to find support for the image of urban isolation with respect to number of friends, frequency of contact, or intimacy of relationships. However, she did note that contacts with strangers in urban settings, at least initially, are more likely to engender feelings of fear, distrust, uncertainty, and stress. Korte (1980) also found no differences in social behavior between relatives and friends in urban and suburban settings but did find significant differences, that is, less frequent and less positive contact, between strangers and neighbors in urban settings.

Although the earlier, more negative image of urban life has given way to a more positive view, one that recognizes the possibility of quasi-primary relationships and a shared sense of community in urban settings, there appears to be little disagreement with the observation that the increasing pressures of urbanization have brought greater and greater numbers of strangers into our everyday lives and have made the achievement of primary social ties with relatives, friends, and neighbors that much more difficult. Lofland (1973) described city life today in the following way:

> To live in a city is, among many other things, to live surrounded by large numbers of persons whom one does not know. To experience the city is, among many other things, to experience anonymity. To cope with the city is, among many other things, to cope with strangers. (pp. ix-x)

Irwin (1977) carried this same point forward:

> The modern city . . . has erected barriers between people. In the highly mobile city, most people one meets, passes, or finds oneself among are total strangers. One has little in common with them beyond the same physical location and most of the time, the same national tongue. Usually there is not enough trust or shared meanings to get beyond superficial "niceties" or necessary public propriety. Only very rarely is there enough trust or shared meanings to begin satisfying the need for collective activities. (p. 25)

If, indeed, urban society is fragmented, anonymous, and oftentimes hostile, it is no wonder that many Americans find themselves lonely and in search of companionship (Bernikow, 1986). Gordon (1976) defined loneliness as a feeling of deprivation caused by the lack of certain kinds of human contact: the feeling
that someone is missing” (p. 26). In trying to contextualize the problem of loneliness in America, Gordon wrote:

"Life in America has exploded, and loneliness is one main ingredient in the fallout. What was once a philosophical problem, spoken of mainly by poets and prophets, has now become an almost permanent condition for millions of Americans, not only for the old or divorced but also for the men and women filling singles bars and encounter groups, the adolescents running away from home or refusing to go to school, the corporate transients who move every two or three years, and the people calling suicide and crises hotlines in search of someone to talk to. Knowing no limits of class, race, or age, loneliness is today a great leveler, a new American tradition. (pp. 15-16)

Of particular interest to the subject of this paper is Gordon’s observation that loneliness results from the absence of two kinds of relationships in our lives. There are, of course, intimate, primary relationships characterized by considerable emotional involvement. But also important are the less personal but no less profound supportive social relationships we share with those we see every day. Gordon (1976) put it this way:

"We also expect other, less intimate relationships to accompany us through life, those with neighbors, acquaintances, distant relations, co-workers, shopkeepers—the people with whom we come in contact in our daily life, where we live, where we work, where we relax. (p. 26)"

It is these less intimate social relationships that the paper addresses in later sections.

Related to the issues of the quality of life in urban settings and the loneliness problem that can and often does attend city living, the following question begs to be addressed: How do urban dwellers cope with their existential reality? From a sociological perspective, one is compelled to ask, have cities created specific urban structures for the exchange of intimacies among strangers (Anderson & Stone, 1981)? This paper will argue that sports spectating or "sportsfanship" not only allows large numbers of urbanites to come together to be entertained but also enriches their social psychological lives by helping them experience the pure sociability, quasi-intimate relationships, and sense of belonging that are so indigenous to the stands.

The following sections of the paper will address, in order, these topics: roots of the loneliness problem, sociability defined, changing forms of sociability in American life, venues for casual sociability, anatomy of a sports encounter, initiating conversations at sports events, potential problems for sport managers, and recommendations for sport managers.

**Roots of the Loneliness Problem**

In *The Pursuit of Loneliness*, Philip Slater’s (1990) brilliant critique of American culture, Slater argued that three basic needs of humankind—community, engagement, and dependency—are suppressed by an almost fanatical commitment to individualism, that is, the belief that everyone should pursue his or her own destiny autonomously. Not only does the inordinate importance Americans place on individualism deny "the reality of human interdependence," but it conspires, according to Slater, to drive cooperation into a secret, underground existence.
Helping to raise the worship of individualism to dangerous heights is competition, which Slater sees as the root cause of the problem. Slater noted the toll that competition takes on interpersonal relationships:

Most important, our encounters with others tend increasingly to be competitive as we search for more privacy. We less and less often meet our fellow humans to share and exchange, and more and more often encounter them as an impediment or a nuisance. (p. 12)

As a result, cooperative institutions such as the extended family and the local neighborhood, to which we turned for community, camaraderie, and interdependence in the past, are no longer available. Slater (1990) framed the problem this way: "Technological change, mobility, and individualistic ways of thinking all rupture the bonds that tie a man to a family, a community, a kinship network, a geographical location—bonds that give him a comfortable sense of himself" (pp. 9-10).

This loss of community and the social relationships it once engendered is a theme that Oldenburg and Wasbutter (1982) took up in their discussion of "third places." They argued that the growth of specialization at work and the increasing insularity of the home have eliminated the conditions of social life that traditional community life once allowed. As a result, the range of available arenas for social participation has narrowed to the point that for many people life has come to offer a very restrictive two-stop model of daily existence. The office or shop and the home. . . . Neither place, nor even the two together, seems to provide satisfying experiences and relationships for people. (p. 266)

Despite the social ravages of technology and the inordinate importance Americans place on individualism, privacy, and competition, the human desire for community cannot be suppressed; it only increases in intensity (Slater, 1990). It is to this primal need for social relationships with others and the "third places" in which we seek them out that we now turn.

**Sociability Defined**

Sociability has been defined as a drive state (Kenau, 1982) or an inherent need for collective involvement (Irwin, 1977). Simmel (1949) saw it as the "play-form of association," as a pressing impulse that compels humans to seek out association for its own sake. For Simmel, "sociability in its pure form has no ulterior end, no context, and no result outside itself, it is oriented completely about personalities" (p. 255). He viewed the sociable act as a free exchange between equals. Elaborating further on this point, Simmel wrote that "riches and social position, learning and fame, exceptional capacities and merits of the individual have no role in sociability" (p. 256).

The relationship between sociability and mental health was suggested by Wiseman (1979) when she observed that "people, regardless of where they live, need a certain amount of close interpersonal interaction to develop socially and will determinedly seek out such relationships for their continuing psychic survival" (p. 23). This innate preference for affiliation (Cheek & Buss, 1981) is not found in all varieties of human association. According to Oldenburg and
Brissett (1982), the presence of one or more of the following characteristics disqualifies an exchange from being a sociable encounter.

1. There is some sort of job to be done.
2. Role requirements are inherent in the association.
3. Individuality is subordinated to matters of objective importance and rational consideration.
4. Personal values are predicated largely upon organizational criteria.
5. The association is assessed with yardsticks of value, merit and performance.

To summarize, sociability refers to nonevaluative, noninstrumental, casual, frequently fortuitous social interaction that is freely entered into by equals. It implies no private commitments by the parties involved and is spoiled if its content grows too significant or serious or its emotional impact too strong (Kenen, 1982).

**Changing Forms of Sociability in American Life**

Denney (1979) developed an interesting taxonomy for sorting out a variety of persistent forms of sociability in the American experience. Using the literature of history, sociology, anthropology, and psychology as guides, he based his classification system on the identification of an array of successive locales and institutionalized bases of sociability. Although the persistent forms of sociability Denney identified do not constitute a continuum in the traditional sense, they do resemble, in his words, the “successive phases of American social development in general” (p. 256). The nine forms of sociability identified by Denney include familial sociability (relative to relative), local sociability (neighbor to neighbor), amicable sociability (friend to friend), affable sociability (host to guest), corporational sociability (clubmate to clubmate), collaborative sociability (worker to worker), political sociability (partisan to partisan), cross-cultural sociability (foreigner to foreigner), and casual sociability (stranger to stranger). Note that the movement on the scale is from an early stage in life (e.g., familial) to a later stage (collaboral), 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.

What is especially germane is Denney’s (1979) observation that over the past few centuries there has been a gradual shift in locale for the satisfaction of sociability needs. No longer do the traditional institutions such as the family, work place, and neighborhood satisfy our needs for conviviality and social interaction. Instead, Americans are now forced to turn to less personal, less intimate, more public locales (e.g., bars, discos, cruises) for their social sustenance. On this point, Lofland (1973) wrote that the necessity to cope with large numbers of personally-unknown others, the emotionally painful, wrenching shift from tribalist to cosmopolitan, is part of the texture of modern life... For most of us, the world of strangers is a permanent home. For most of us, the world of strangers must become routine. (pp. 179-180)

The notion that society has now reached a point in its social development where casual sociability among strangers is “where it’s at” will be taken up in later sections that offer a theory of sports attraction of spectator sports for millions.

**Venues for Casual Sociability**

Venues for casual sociability have been referred to as “scenes” or “action systems” (Lofland & Braswell, 1982), “public spaces” (Kenen, 1982). They represent settings in which a variety of social encounters, from the very adventure of simply encountering and conversing with strangers, “(Lofland, 1982). Sociability can find expression in a variety of different settings, from the very adventure of simply encountering and conversing with strangers, to more formal settings, such as skating rinks, bars, and discos, as well as more informal settings, such as cultural events like the Super Bowl.

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**Anatomy of a**

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later sections that offer a theory of sports spectating that helps explain a major attraction of spectator sports for millions of urban Americans.

**Venues for Casual Sociability**

Venues for casual sociability have been referred to as “social worlds” (Unruh, 1983), “scenes” or “action systems” (Irwin, 1977), “third places” (Oldenburg & Brissett, 1982), “public spaces” (Lofland, 1973), and “public places” (Kemen, 1982). They represent settings in which participants can experience a variety of social encounters, from the very intimate to the “mild but quite pleasant adventure of simply encountering and conversing with people one has never met before; that is, with strangers” (Lofland, 1973, p. 168). The search for casual sociability can find expression in a variety of settings including discotheques, skiing areas, fern bars, second-hand clothing stores, bars, taverns, coffee houses, saunas, fishing camps, shuffleboard tournaments, laundromats, shopping malls, supermarkets, and, as will be argued later in the paper, sports arenas and stadia. What all of these venues have in common is the promise of casual encounters with strangers of a quasi-primary kind. These venues offer the willing participant the opportunity to be convivial yet anonymous for the duration of the encounter (Wiseman, 1979). Each venue represents a response to the quest for sociability in urban settings (Schacht & Unnithan, 1991).

That we enter into these venues during our leisure time makes sense, because it’s during these moments that we frequently make efforts to establish primary and secondary social relationships with others (Snyder, 1986). It is during leisure time that a great deal of “informal social business” normally gets done.

The possibility that public venues could satisfy important psychosocial needs was noted by Lofland (1973) when he observed that “the world of strangers—may, for many persons some of the time and probably for some persons all the time, be experienced as ‘freeing,’” “exhilarating,” “fun,” “exciting” (p. 158).

What makes these public venues especially attractive locales, according to Lofland, is the fact that risk is minimal because it’s implicitly understood by the participants that they are not going to move into private spaces. Thus, these public places, spaces, or scenes represent one of the major mechanisms in urban society by which total strangers can be transformed into “personally-known others” (Lofland, 1973).

**Anatomy of a Sports Encounter**

The very close connection between urbanization and the rise of American spectator sports has not been lost on sport historians (Betts, 1953; Hardy, 1982; Karp & Yoels, 1990; Kuklick, 1991; Riess, 1989). The two have always gone hand in hand, each nourishing the other. But what is it about attending a sports event that facilitates encounters with strangers and the promise of casual sociability? Careful analysis of the “anatomy” of a sports encounter provides us with some tentative answers (Kemen, 1982).

**Status/Positions Are Known and Roles Understood**

There can be little if any misunderstanding among spectators regarding who and what they are and the types of behaviors expected and permitted at sports events.
They recognize, from the moment they pass through the turnstiles, that they are
crucial to the event. Without their physical presence, there can be no contest.
Thus, spectators share in the collective knowledge that they are vital, important,
and integral to the action. The role behaviors associated with the status/position
of “spectator” are also known and understood. It is expected that spectators will
clap, boo, yell, scream, hiss, or “do the wave,” as their moods and passions
dictate. Even though the person sitting next to you is a total stranger, you can be
sure that both of you share the same status/position and are likely to indulge in the
same repertoire of behaviors before the game is through. These shared meanings of
the event and the spectator role make casual sociability that much easier.

Time Boundaries

Sports spectators don’t feel hurried, harried, or pressured to engage in social
interaction at a game. There is plenty of time to engage the stranger next to you
if that is your desire. The frequent time-outs and intermissions that are built into
the structure of a game provide spectators with ample opportunities to engage
one another.

In order to feel comfortable, strangers need to know that there are clear-cut
boundaries with respect to the starting and ending points of a possible encounter.
The temporal restrictions imposed on sports events guarantee this will be the
case. It is implicitly understood between two spectators that whatever sociability
takes place will terminate with the referee’s whistle or the game’s ending buzzer.
Neither spectator presumes that the social interaction will extend beyond the
temporal boundary of the game. This mutual understanding guarantees the safety
of the interchange.

Sense of Commitment and Shared Knowledge

Unlike strangers standing in line for a bank teller or waiting to have their groceries
checked out at the local supermarket, strangers at a sports event share an unspoken
commitment to the event, a silent but understood enthusiasm for what is about to
unfold. The shared interest, excitement, and even passion that strangers bring to
a sports event increase the probability that they will seek each other out.

When strangers feel that they can be of service to one another, they’re more
likely to interact. Sports fans pride themselves on their knowledge about the
games they follow and the athletes they root for. Some fans are “walking
encyclopedias” of sports trivia and esoteria who are only too willing to share
their information. Sociability among sports strangers is likely to occur because
the possibility of sharing and trading useful information is great.

Ecological Setting and Social Structure

Kenen (1982) observed that the “social comfortableness of a space” is a major
factor in the occurrence of sociability between strangers. In the modern sports
arena/stadium, we have a “public space” that is especially conducive for casual
sociability among strangers. Most arenas are comfortable, safe, and clean. With
the advent of the “bubble” and the retractable roof, facilities now provide sports
spectators with the ultimate in ambient comfort. In addition, whereas silence can
be deadly for initiating a conversation with a stranger, the ever-present noise,
hum, or buzz of a crowd makes it easier for words to flow.

Sociability in the Stands

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Initiating Conversation

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They recognize, from the moment they pass through the turnstiles, that they are crucial to the event. Without their physical presence, there can be no contest, vital and integral to the action. The role behaviors associated with the status/position and the spectator role make casual sociability much easier. Although all of the aforementioned factors are positively related to sociability among strangers, they are not sufficient in themselves to bring it about. Kenen (1982) described the missing ingredient in the following way: “It is the presence of an underlying communal social structure, or at least unambiguous norms regarding entrance and exit from interactions with strangers that are most likely to support a casual and natural public life” (p. 179). Such a communal social structure is very much in evidence at sports events as spectators join in revelry as they cheer on their favorites while celebrating themselves in the process. The soccer stadium is a venue where the rules regulating interactions with fellow strangers are implicitly understood and enforced. It is a place where the partylike atmosphere of the occasion makes interaction with strangers not only possible but highly probable.

Initiating Conversations at Sport Events

Although the defining characteristics of a third place are very much present at a sports event, only actual person-to-person attempts at interaction lead to a social exchange between strangers (Wiseman, 1979). According to Loftland (1973), three factors that strangers weigh before deciding whether to start a conversation or reply to one are desirability, legitimacy, and appropriateness.

Desirability

Basic to deciding whether to talk to a stranger is “identifying” who the person is. This monitoring process involves matters of location, appearance, and behavior, all of which should be relatively easy to determine when you are evaluating the person seated next to you at a sports event. Not only do you share the same proximate location, but there’s a good chance his or her appearance and behavior are not unlike your own. For example, her red, white, and blue sweatshirt with the distinctive Buffalo Bills logo quickly informs you that she’s no stranger at all—she’s a Buffalo Bills fan! The festive mood of the occasion coupled with your own desire to “party” makes the person seated next to you a much more likely target for conversation than, say, the person seated next to you on an airplane, at a movie, or at the theater. Thus, no higher mathematics are involved in determining the desirability of initiating a conversation with a stranger at a sports event; the desirability is there from the start.

Legitimacy and Appropriateness

Although there are some public situations where interactions between strangers are not expected to occur (e.g., standing in an elevator, sitting in a dentist’s reception room, waiting in line at the post office), the sports venue is a most legitimate locale for social interaction. What makes the occasion legitimate, according to Loftland, is the very high probability that the other person will define the encounter as expected and quite all right under the circumstances. It is tacitly understood among sports spectators that casual sociability and feelings of camaraderie are expected outcomes. The festive, partylike atmosphere of the game helps to legitimize whatever verbal overtures ensue.

The appropriateness issue addresses the question of whether the setting is perceived as “right” for the encounter. If a meeting between two strangers is
Potential Problems for Sport Managers

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Despite the fact that banners have traditionally served fans by effectively communicating their feelings, some baseball and football managers have sought to enforce antibanner policies. Israeloff (1991) exhaustively researched the issue and reached the following conclusion: "When an owner seeks to prohibit anti-management messages on banners or seeks to regulate banners for viewpoint-neutral reasons, the fans' first amendment rights simply outweigh any proffered interest of the owner" (p. 455). On the same issue, Norman Siegel, executive director of the New York City Civil Liberties Union, has observed that "selective confiscation of banners based on the content of the message is unacceptable in a free society, and is intolerable in a city-owned public facility like Yankee Stadium" (quoted in Rosenthal, 1989, p. 8).

Management's decision to enter the dubious business of adjudicating whether a banner is in "good taste" is reckless at the very least; it can serve no other purpose than to alienate the fan. It clearly undermines the conviviality and good fun associated with this artistic and literary act of self-expression.

Restrictions on Player–Fan Interaction

Another questionable infringement on spectator behavior at professional football games is the NFL's anticlebration rule. Rule 12, Article 14C of the NFL's rules book calls for a 5-yd penalty against teams whose players high-five fans or throw balls into the stands (Kirkpatrick, 1991). Although the league had the good sense to recently repeal the 5-yd penalty for high-fiving, players still face a $1,000 fine for tossing the ball into the stands. The league would be smart to realize that for a variety of reasons, players' salaries being one of them, the distance between the fan and the player is growing wider with every passing season. Such innocent behavior as an exchange of high-fives between players and spectators symbolically shores up this already weakened bond and adds an unexpected, exciting moment to the fan's day. These brief, fleeting moments of quasi-intimacy between player and fan deserve to be preserved, not discouraged by management.

Restrictions Against Smoking

Recently, the management of Detroit's Tiger Stadium joined the managements of other "outdoor" venues, for example, Alameda County Stadium (Oakland A's), Texas Stadium (Dallas Cowboys), and Jack Murphy Stadium (San Diego
Padres and Chargers), in banning smoking. Spectators who want to light up will now have to leave their seats and indulge in an area under the stands. Although it is generally acknowledged that passive smoke poses a serious health hazard in closed areas with inadequate ventilation, the above stadia are mammoth, open areas. Whether the presence of passive smoke in an outdoor stadium poses a health risk is yet to be proved. Rather than impose yet another measure of control on some fans, I side with those who would push, instead, for educational efforts against smoking along with the establishment of nonsmoking sections in the stands. The latter would offer an acceptable compromise between the spectator’s right to use a legal product and the nonsmoker’s right to be protected.

Although these four examples do not nearly exhaust all the subtle and not so subtle ways stadium managers have sought to control the behavior of sports spectators in recent years, they do illustrate what appears to be a growing and disturbing pattern at some sport venues, particularly professional stadia and arenas. Although attendance figures over the past few years do not provide any visible evidence of resentment or alienation on the spectator’s part, there are at least two good reasons why management should take notice of what is going on.

Escalation of Ticket Prices

The increase in ticket prices to professional basketball (NBA), baseball (MLB), football (NFL), and ice hockey (NHL) games over the past 20 years has been dramatic. For example, between the 1960–61 and 1989–90 seasons, the highest priced ticket to Boston Celtics basketball games increased from $3.50 to $32 (814%). Percentage increases for the best tickets to Detroit Tigers baseball games, Cleveland Browns football games, and Detroit Red Wings hockey games were 433%, 933%, and 525%, respectively ("Thirty Years," 1989, p. 3D). The average ticket prices for MLB, NHL, NBA, and NFL games are now $8.34, $20.86, $22.52, and $25.21, respectively.

What seems to be happening is that the party is becoming more and more costly to attend, while the party-goer is coming under greater and greater control by the host. I would submit that skyrocketing ticket prices coupled with management’s recent Big Brother policies will inevitably engender feelings of discontent among the faithful. When that happens, the sports fan may decide to take his or her limited discretionary funds and find a better party.

Top-Down Power

Communications Professor John Fiske (1991) characterized the modern-day workplace as an excessively monitored and personally oppressive environment. Many workers find themselves under the constant supervision and evaluation of omnipotent control agents who impose upon them top-down personalities and identities. For Fiske, the controlled, disciplined order of the work place and the top-down power it exerts severely restrain the development of individualistic personalities and social relationships.

In spectator sports, Fiske argued, we have a popular cultural form that has the potential to turn the machine back on itself, to allow the spectator to become the monitor and not the monitored. According to Fiske, by allowing spectators to escape the tyranny of the work place, sport offers them the possibility of experiencing bottom-up, individuated identities and a sense of empowerment. For Fiske,
the popular pleasure of sports spectating is that it contradicts the spectator's everyday experience; it reverses the social order.

Although Fiske's observations of the modern workplace are provocative and stimulating, he fails in his analysis to recognize how controlled the sports stadium has really become. I submit that it is in danger of becoming just as controlled a consumer space as the workplace of which Fiske is so critical. In order for spectators to fully experience the pleasure of sports watching and the free, spontaneous sociability it affords, control must be kept to the absolute minimum. I fear the top-down, imperializing power that Fiske so astutely identified in the larger society knows no bounds. Its desire to exert greater and greater control over things human makes the stadium just as vulnerable as the workplace.

I've argued that there are already clear signs that this power has violated the perimeter of the ballpark. This disturbing development needs to be faced head on by sport managers and reversed lest the stadium becomes nothing more than a sad, lonely caricature of the very workplace from which spectators seek relief.

Sport does, indeed, have the potential to offer spectators empowered, bottom-up, individuated personalities but only if the stadium is allowed to remain an "open" space. Management's recent efforts to control spectator noise, smoking, banners, interactions with players, and the like give pause for serious concern.

**Recommendations for Sport Managers**

Having identified some recent trends that run counter to or compromise the pure sociability experience available to sports spectators, let's now turn our attention in this last section to some of the proactive measures sport management can take to not only preserve but promote spectator conviviality.

**Architectural Conductiveness**

It goes without saying that sociability is very much related to the architectural design of a sports facility. Comfortable seats, air conditioning (where feasible), good sight lines, nonglare lighting, and numerous and easily accessible rest rooms, food and drink concession areas, walk ramps, and exits allow for a pleasant spectating experience as well as increase the likelihood of pleasant, positive interactions among spectators. For example, research has shown that exposure to high population density and high temperature can negatively impact interpersonal, affective behavior. Griffith and Veitch (1971) found that attraction responses evoked by strangers across a variety of temperature and population density conditions were significantly more negative under hot and crowded conditions. If management is interested in promoting casual sociability among spectators, it needs to recognize that "personal-affective experiences mediate the expression of interpersonal or social-affective behaviors such as evaluations, approach-avoidance, aggression, and attraction" (Griffith & Veitch, 1971, p. 96).

On a very practical level, what the research strongly suggests is that managers must pay particular attention to such mundane but nevertheless important considerations as the spectator's "leg room" and "elbow room," the width of seats, the space between aisles, and the ambient temperature and humidity of the facility. Looking further into the future, we may discover that long, parallel rows of fixed seats, which presently dominate even the most modern of sports facilities, can be improved upon. Swivel seats to better facilitate face-to-face interaction if
so desired, saw-tooth configured rows, grouped seating arrangements, and the like are just some of the possibilities that management may want to consider.

Promoting "Connections" Between Spectators

If, in fact, third places for casual sociability are becoming more and more necessary in American society (Oldenburg, 1989), what can management do to increase the probability of strangers "connecting" at their facilities? Last year, the Toledo Mud Hens of the International Baseball League came up with an ingenious way for combining baseball with blind dates. On designated Saturday nights, the club arranged for fans to sit next to someone of the opposite sex. Management first set aside a particular section of the stands and then sold the even-numbered seats to males and the odd-numbered seats to females. Because fan response to this unique promotion was so positive, management is looking to enlarge upon the concept in coming seasons. What about special seating sections set aside for particular age groups, neighborhoods, widows and widowers, divorced people, tall people, short people, gays, lesbians? Only a lack of creativity limits the possibilities.

Providing for Tailgaters

For many fans, the party inside the stadium is not nearly as much fun as the party outside. We're talking big-time fun as in tailgating, both before and after a game. Tailgaters have been known to arrive in their recreational vehicles hours if not a day or two before a game to get a choice location in the parking lot. Smorgasbord spreads are laid out that would make a five-star chef green with envy. In the midst of the pregame barbecuing, a host of informal social activities can be observed including frisbee throwing, touch football, group sing-alongs, television watching, and visiting with other tailgaters. Aficionados compare tailgating to camping with its informal atmosphere, camaraderie, and sense of community. Tailgaters report that they not only seek to renew old acquaintances and friendships in the parking lot but also try to make new ones. Attending the game following a sumptuous lunch is, for some tailgaters, a necessary interruption in a 24-hr day that will continue after the game with more socializing, dinner, late-night campfire activities, and maybe even a sleepover.

Writing about tailgating at Rich Stadium, home of the Buffalo Bills of the NFL, Johnson (1985) observed, "Tailgating at Rich is a movable feast. It's major league partying, bearing as much resemblance to ordinary picnicking as a station wagon does to a Winnebago" (p. 4). Outside Williams-Brice Stadium, home of the University of South Carolina Gamecocks, tailgaters pay as much as $7,500 for a choice parking space. Also thrown in is the use of a 7,000-square-ft clubhouse containing space for barbecues, a full kitchen, dance floors, and fireplaces.

Sport managers would do well to cooperate if not cater to this ever-increasing population of tailgaters. Some of the amenities that management could provide include special sections in the parking lot for recreational vehicles, paved roads and play areas, picnic benches, restrooms, shuttle rides to the game, and flexible lengths of stay.

Food and Drink

It goes without saying that good food and drink contribute heavily to a party's success. Many fans plan on having their lunch or dinner at a sports event, so
management should not disappoint them with subpar fare. Tasty, nutritious, attractive, reasonably priced food and drink served by clean, well-groomed, courteous food handlers should be available at several easily accessible concession areas. Television monitors should be well-situated at the food stands so customers can view the action. Management should also consider revising the menu every 2 or 3 weeks in order to give spectators some variety. Creative, well-researched additions to the stadium or arena menu could be an exciting, unexpected dimension to the eating experience, which may be the major reason for many spectators’ attendance. Good food and drink often serve as the focal point for casual sociability, whether it’s standing in line discussing with a stranger the choices available or sharing a fresh, warm bag of peanuts or popcorn with the person sitting next to you.

**Player-Fan Interactions**

One way management can foster greater sociability at a sports facility is to provide more opportunities for fans to mingle among themselves as well as interact with the athletes they pay so dearly to see perform. Picture-taking and autograph sessions before a game are just two ideas management may want to explore. The old Brooklyn Dodgers Knethole Gang concept could also be dusted off and refocused with both kids and older fans in mind. As a young boy, I can clearly remember the excitement and anticipation of going to the Polo Grounds, home field of the New York Giants baseball team, for an instructional workshop conducted by some of my heroes. My friends and I would get to the park around 10:00 a.m. and join hundreds of other kids, listening in awe as one of our favorites explained and demonstrated the intricacies of the sacrifice bunt or stealing second base. Not only were these sessions rich in useful information, but they were fun, sociable, friendly occasions as well. Not only would such knethole sessions be well received by kids today, but I’m sure they would also prove a great success with adult “knotheleers” as well.

The aforementioned examples of management-initiated efforts to maximize the sociability available at sports events are far from inclusive, but they do underscore one aspect of sports spectating that team owners should not take for granted. Although management does indeed provide the “house” for what may well turn out to be a swell party (Kutcher, 1983), there’s no guarantee that such will be the case. More can and needs to be done for the legions of spectators whose major pleasure derives from the pure, casual sociability associated with sports events.

**Summary**

The increasing pressures of urbanization coupled with what Slater (1990) calls “the destructive pursuit of loneliness” have changed the very nature of the sociability experience in America. Now, more than ever, Americans find themselves having to satisfy their needs for conviviality in less traditional ways. Casual sociability, that is, social exchanges with strangers in public places, has become more important than ever before. In the sports stadium and sports arena, we have a public place, a third place, outside of the home and work, where the “play form of association” is freely available. On this point French philosopher Michel Serres observed, “The spectator sports are not exactly what one tends to think.
They are cultural, one of our last ways of being together’’ (quoted in Kazancigil, 1982, p. 172).

Managers need to recognize sport’s potential for providing “close encounters of a quasi-primary kind” (Wiseman, 1979). Creating the illusion of community is not enough (Lewis, 1990); sport managers need to advertise their facilities as special enclaves possessing gemeinschaft possibilities (Wiseman, 1977). Not only are greater numbers of spectators likely to make their way to these facilities as a result, thereby improving the bottom line, but management’s active promotion of the social and communal possibilities of sports events should help satisfy, however incompletely, the sociability appetite of a mass, urban society that grows hungrier with every passing day.

References


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