

## FANS AND SPECTATORS

**Definitions:** **Spectators** are those who watch sport, either directly (in person) or indirectly (via the media), while **fans** also watch but have an affiliation in which aspects of identity, emotional significance and value are derived from group membership.

A **spectator sport** is a sport that is characterized by the presence of spectators, or watchers, at its competitions. Spectator sports may be professional sports or amateur sports. They often are distinguished from participant sports, which are more recreational.

Most popular sports are both spectator and participant, for example association football, basketball, cricket, volleyball, golf, rugby and tennis. Less popular sports are mainly participant sports, for example hunting.

The increasing broadcasting of sports events, along with media reporting can affect the number of people attending sports due to the ability to experience the sport without the need to physically attend and sometimes an increasingly enhanced experience including highlights, replays, commentary, statistics and analysis. Some sports are particularly known as "armchair sports" or "lounge room sports" due to the quality of the broadcasting experience in comparison to the live experience.

Spectator sports have built their own set of culture and traditions including, in the United States, cheerleading and pre-game and half time entertainment such as fireworks, particularly for big games such as competition decider events and international tests. The passion of some sports fans also means that there are occasionally spectator incidents.



A Major League Baseball game being played at Yankee Stadium in New York

The North American Society for Sport Management (NASSM) devotes much of their annual conference to research addressing the psychology behind a desire to view spectator sports, and how it might be leveraged to increase demand. Much of the research focuses on exploiting a need for vicarious achievement, and a desire within the spectator to project a public image through a declaration of team allegiance.

Separation of the active and the passive, the line between sport and spectator, gives rise to the paradox of the spectator—described by French philosopher Jacques Rancière; which is to seek an opportunity to passively contemplate engaging in an activity, and in doing so, forfeit that life moment one might have used to actually engage in the activity.

### The Difference between Fans, Spectators and Audiences

I have a friend who attends all the basketball games at University of Washington. He endlessly works the sidelines. "Nice shot, Q." "Good D., Mac." He calls encouragement and criticism to the players which they often hear. He works the refs. "How could you do that Wanda!" "You owe us 2 now, Kathy." "Nice call, Bill." I watch him carefully because he epitomizes the nature of a true sports fan.

Fans are not spectators and not audiences; just watch the participation of the painted school clad fans at the NCAA tournament.



Spectators watch. The Latin root of the word emphasize "seeing" and "watching," sometimes in a disinterested way. Spectators can be very sophisticated, watchers know the nuances of acting or playmaking and enjoy the finesse and fine points of the game, art, spectacle. You can often recognize them as they lean forward with intent stares and moving eyes. But in a sports context they remain passive in their interaction with the game; they watch, analyze and appreciate. (of course there are spectators like those who watch too much beach volleyball who gaze and oogle rather than watch and see, but that is another story)

Audiences hear. Again the Latin root gives it away; audiences listen to the audio dimensions of the world. Symphonic audiences provide an archetype; they listen in intense attention enraptured by music. Sophisticated listeners hear theme and variations and transpositions and understand and appreciate the nuance and mastery of musicians whether at Cleveland symphony or Green Day or Sugar Land concerts. Some listen with their whole bodies and you can see their metronome feet or hands move or they sway with their whole bodies. Sometimes they hum or mouth or sing along with the music or voice; many modern musicians invite this form of participation and the audience jumps in.



An experience like *Cirque de Soleil* creates both audience and spectator with its multidimensional world of sound, site, action, fancy, music, acting, gymnastics and sheer virtuosity. But at the core, the spectator and audience member remain receptors of the experience.

Sports fans participate in a different way. The linguistic roots are obscure for this uniquely American term but seems a shortened form of fanatic. That should warn us right away. Linguistically, fanatics are "inspired by god, mad, enthusiastic" and carry a lot of frightening connotations that suggest fans move beyond reason and analysis into a different realm. The regular soccer riots and deaths in Europe do nothing to dispel these linguistic and emotional roots.

Sports fans create and shape the experience of sports. They are not passive receptors but active parts of the game itself. They influence action on the field of play. As my friend demonstrates, true fans participate in the sports. Go to a college game and you find bands blaring, student sections hollering and waving hands. Fans desperately impart emotional energy, support and distraction whenever they can. At football games they cheer so loud they force teams to wear radios or use sign language to convey plays. In basketball games they augment runs and try to break the other team's momentum or

concentration. At races runners can literally feel and be moved by the energy from the fans.



Fans matter so much that sports often has a "home field advantage" largely created by the fans in the stands. Student sections and fans heckle and try to get inside players heads; they work to take players out of their games or reinforce their own players. They work referees as hard as any sideline coach. Leaving aside the litigation about who owns the "12th. man," a number of teams rely upon their home fans to give them a home field advantage. This advantage grows from the fan's emotional contagion and the comfort and the support it imparts to players. The fan base can infuse energy and hope in emotionally flagging moments as well as provide an endless stream of invective against other teams. Sports fans actively shape the environment in which athletes play as well as interacting in some obscure way with players and teams, for good or bad.

I've often commented upon how individuals who follow sports teams link an aspect of their identity to the team's presence and actions. This identity carries over into memory, but it also affects off field behavior. Fans sit in front of TVs with other fans wearing paraphernalia and talk, socialize and scream at TV suffering when their team suffers and exalting when their team excels. More than a few of us have been known to bow our heads or fold our hands in supplicant prayer--we know God has better things than to attend to a Mariner's game--but we do it anyway.

If you want an interesting lesson into the fanatic psychology of American sports culture, just peruse the hundreds of thousands of blogs devoted to teams and sports or follow twitter about teams and players. The vast majority carry rants and raves and expletive laden infantile comments upon teams and the going ons. But a surprising number (witness this one) offer thoughtful and interesting commentary upon their teams, sports or culture. The world of baseball is laden with sophisticated blogs like Fangraphs that link remarkably obsessive and smart individuals (who clearly need a life) who bring to bear passion and sophisticated analytical imaginations to offer fascinating ways to analyze and understand their beloved sport.

This baseball blog sphere now interacts with the world of professional assessment of players as well as leading to more interested and engaged fans for teams and sports. It offers an opening into sports for the life of the mind as well as the life of identity, aesthetics and deep appreciation of the form and achievement of human possibility.

Fans are different and that difference has some important implications for how they should act as fans. Being a sports fan is an existential choice. It involves a way of being in the world and relating to other human beings. The point of the game is being a fan involves a moral stance. It means acting in ways that impact others and the game. This means it involves obligations and responsibilities. As a friend of mine reminded me, spectators refer to "the team" and fans use the word "we."

I think being a fan involves taking oneself seriously and how we act in relation to our team but also to other teams and to other fans. At the core, we share a common appreciation of the sport and its own dynamics, but because fans often link their identity to their teams, the very ugliness that communal

loyalties can unleash can climb out from fan tribal loyalties. So being a fan involves not just passion but, as I have written in another post, being responsible and self-controlled in your passion and loyalty.