



## THE ALL 'AMERICAN' PASS TIME: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF BASEBALL FANDOM

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### ABSTRACT

Baseball is one of the most popular sports in the United States as well as in other countries all around the world in which spectators of all ages participate. This study is based upon observations of the spectators of a major league team (Tigers) in a large US metropolitan area (Detroit), in order to offer more insights about the communal nature of the sport. The aim of this analysis is to increase the awareness regarding baseball spectators' symbolic actions and develop a framework to retrieve these interactions. The function of this study is to provide systematic data on the baseball fun and it is an attempt to explain how baseball spectators' language, norms and other social practices communicate ideologies, values and beliefs.

Keywords: Baseball, sports, events, ballparks, crowd, spectators, fans, culture.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Sports are rational, interactive and entertaining activities whose rules and functions are culturally derived [1]. Sports as athletic events contribute to the quality of our lives. In the past, societies have used athletic events as ethical and moral models for the spectators. Television broadcasts bring into our home every day more than 1200 hours of sporting events, including baseball. Baseball games in modern society have become a combination of businesses and entertainment associated with sophisticated technologies that often provide their own set of challenges. Baseball events can be characterized as social phenomena with recognition and influence at all the levels of social life. Baseball spectators fascinate and puzzle us, as well as attract and repel one another. Spectators display complex behaviors and provide a rich subject for analysis. Baseball reflects and reaffirms cultural values and ideas of the American society through the socialization and integration of people throughout the years [2]. The rationale of this study is to generate awareness and understanding of baseball fans behavioral patterns in order to develop a methodological framework for the retrieval of these symbolic actions.

## 2. MATERIALS & METHODS

### 2.1 The Setting of the Study

The setting of the study were the various scheduled conference baseball games of the Detroit Tigers in both Tiger Stadium (e.g., Minnesota Twins, Pittsburgh Pirates, Milwaukee Brewers, Boston Red Sox Cincinnati Reds) as well as in Comerica Park (e.g., Cleveland Indians, Chicago White Sox, Kansas City Royals, Baltimore Orioles, Seattle Mariners, New York Yankees, Chicago Cubs), over a long time period. All the above games were also broadcast in cable and local TV stations. Detroit is the only city in the American League whose membership is older than the league itself. Baseball in Detroit received its baptism in the National League, a fact often overlooked. In existence from 1876, the National League had a team in Detroit from 1881 through 1888. In 1900 Detroit participated in the Western League, which was renamed the American League, and its status as minor league was transformed to Major League status in 1901. The Tigers became World champions three times throughout their history, in 1935, 1945, and 1984 [3].

Baseball has been played on the site of the Tiger Stadium since 1900, a year before the American League was born with Detroit as a charter member. Known as Bennett Park at that time, it became Navin Field in 1912, Briggs Stadium in 1938, and Tiger Stadium on January 1, 1961. Tiger Stadium is owned by the City of Detroit, which purchased the plant from then-owner John E. Fetzer for \$1.00 in November 1977. The City of Detroit then leased the stadium for 30 years with a 30-year renewal option. The Tigers Stadium has a projected capacity of 52,416 spectators divided in both Upper and Lower decks which include 11,732 box seats, 23,611 reserved, 6,269 reserved grandstand and 10,804 bleachers. In 1993, an \$8 million renovation was completed including a facelift of the traditional "corner" at Michigan and Trumbull with the construction of the new, fan-friendly Tiger Plaza. This renovation also included high technology applications such as the installation of a color video scoreboard, an improved sound-system, and the enhancement of the "Tiger Den" seating area. The Stadium grounds and parking lot cover 8, 5 acres. The playing field occupies approximately half of the total area [4]. The setting (spectators of the 219 section - lower deck reserved seats) provided a major and minor theme for the analysis of the communication culture helpful for revealing how emotional expression of he spectators is influenced within the immediate situation of the players and the game in general.

The Comerica Park, Tigers new ball park, is a mile away from the old stadium. Between 1997 and 2000 the Tigers had their worst record in their history, losing 109 games. After moving to Comerica Park, they returned stronger than ever with a new roster of players. Jim Leyland was named head coach and manager in October 2004. In 2006 the Tigers won the American League Champions once again, followed by a great success in the 2011 season when they became Champions of the American League Central Division. Famous players were part of the team's roster, including Justin Verlander, Jose Valverde, Ty Cobb, Mark Fidrych, Cecil Fielder, and Ozzie Virgil, the first African American to play for the Tigers. To this day, Tigers call Comerica Park their home, and Brad Ausmus who succeeded Leyland in 2013 is their 38<sup>th</sup> manager [5].

## 2.2 The Crowd Concept and Fandom Experience

There is symbolic interaction in the formation of temporary gatherings and interaction dynamics between individual and collective actions [6] (Figure 1). The most characteristic forms of these actions are variation, inclusiveness and short duration. The concept of the crowd involves an assembling phase, a gathering phase, and the dispersing process that follows.

Fandom experience is linked to these temporary stages but expands outside of the event course along with and away from the crowd. It is associated to everyday routines, preferences and choices and the sense of belonging as it is embedded in the person's belief system.

*The Crowd and Collective Behavior*

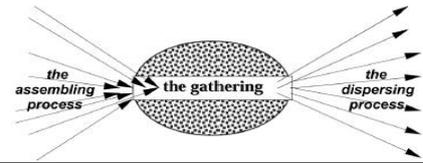


FIGURE 1. Life Course of the Temporary Gathering

## The method of the study

Qualitative methods were employed to collect the data of this study. Both field and recording notes were the primary sources of data acquired through participant observation. Trujillo has done extensive research on sport in the organizational setting reflecting on why communication and sport matters while focusing upon all those challenges that research faced in this area [7]. While addressing many of those challenges, the authors' notes offer valuable insights relating to the setting, behaviors, activities, participants and events. Participant observation inside the ballpark was continued throughout the game as well as many games were watched in cable television.

These notes consisted of specific key words and recorded verbatim phrases, which were taken immediately after they occurred. Eventually, after every observed game both recorded and written notes were outlined and transformed onto full notes. To gain entry to this unique world a research strategy, that Riemer calls "opportunistic," was applied [8]. The authors took advantage of a unique circumstance by enlisting a close friend as a gatekeeper, because of her role as an assistant in Tiger's public relations office. They were granted two tickets each time to watch the Tigers team. They also took advantage of their previous experiences as fans and researchers in Europe's soccer stadiums while; they were participating as observers among spectators.

## 2.4 Baseball in General

Baseball is considered a global sport [9] and plays a very influential role in many cultures by creating new mediated images. In baseball, American values are enacted, displayed, and observed. It is frequently called the "National Pastime," and is a game suited to relaxation and contemplation [10] and is being considered as really important to the lives of the people and of the places where it is played (11). Baseball offers less continuous excitement to the spectators, viewers or listeners than do other sports such as football, hockey (12).

Many scholars have examined several dimensions of many sports cultural frameworks including baseball and show how the people studied define themselves through that sport. To that extent ballpark culture and show how the spectators define themselves Warshay identifies three aspects that make baseball unique [13].

These are:

(a) It is not a timed game but it continues until all innings have been expended;

(b) There is not a space, field, or territory game in the sense that other sports such as football, hockey are; and

(c) Baseball is played every day during the season in contrast with the other sports which are played once a week (football) to two and three times a week (hockey, basketball).

## 2.5 Facts and Figures

According to expert blogger Bernardo, baseball is a much bigger business than the second most followed sport in the US and the 52 million of its adult followers: the betting industry gambled &722 million on the sport during the season 2014-15 [14]. Detroit ranks 7<sup>th</sup> in teams and performance rank and 38<sup>th</sup> in costs and fan engagement rank. Harris Poll (15) conducted in December 2012 reports baseball to be the most popular sport in the 50-64 age groups. With \$7.5 billion in revenue, MLB marks its 10th consecutive year of record revenue in 2012: an astonishing 74.8 million fans attended games, the fifth-best record in baseball history. MLB also signed TV deals with Fox, Turner and ESPN that will double its annual media payout through 2021.

In the broad demographic basis (16) 54% of men admit they are baseball fans compared to 41% of women; higher income households are more represented among baseball fans as in other sports, rather than low-income households.

The game itself is structured along popular social themes such as winning, fighting, and functioning under strict rules. This results in a kind of frenzy of people who sometimes experience an unhealthy obsession. Beyond our passive involvement as media spectators, we all participate directly in one way or another. Millions of people are annually involved in baseball through organized fan clubs.

In a packed arena the crowd seems like one very large, noisy animal that is ready for anything. From a distance, the fans are unified and look like one huge entity (17).

## 2.6 Baseball Spectators Make-Up

Fans in our society are a necessary element of any sporting event as well as the athletes. A baseball event would collapse without the devoted fun atmosphere that usually accompanies the crowd not only because of the finances but also because of the loss in the event's spirit, agony and joy. At first sight, the sea of faces at a baseball event look like an amorphous mass. On closer inspection, a number of distinctive types of spectators can be isolated in the reserved section seats. Baseball has a universal appeal. All ages, genders (50 to 60% males), and races (most of them white and few African American) participate openly having their own behavioral norms, symbols, values, beliefs, designations, and rituals.

All spectators, as you enter into the reserved section on game night, can be divided into five groups. These groups consist of spectators which have characteristics similar to those that attend other team-oriented sport events such as soccer (18), basketball, football.

These groups are:

- (a) The "loyalist old supporters" which attend their team regularly and devote their life to the club. There is a significant number of older people that come to watch the game and "their team can do no wrong;"
- (b) The youngest supporters which usually are old enough to attend games on their own or are accompanied by elders. Looking around, there are a tremendous number of children, which comprise one of the larger percentages of the audience. The children in a general seem to be less involved in the game and more involved in talking, looking, and observing the behavior of different people in the crowd;
- (c) The "experts" who know more about their team than the coach, and clearly voice their opinion from the stands (i.e. change the pitcher);
- (d) The "outsiders," who can be foreigners in contrast with almost everyone in the setting they express a lack of understanding about specific rules of the game and reactions to the events in the arena, or not regular fans who come to kill time because they don't have anything to do;
- (e) Women fans, quite large in numbers, who follow their boyfriends/husbands. The males are ogled over as the females. As the women walk by the men eye them like a "meat market" in which these men were cruising these women. In the same way with the other sport settings such as college football or basketball.
- (f) The "jokers" express loudly a number of caustically amusing comments focused usually on the players of the Tigers opposing team whenever there is a pause in the game (e.g., among the innings).

Something significant about baseball spectators is that there is always movement within the crowd. During the game fans move, going in different directions and are rarely seated more than an inning. Different clothing and hairstyles reveal the diversity among spectators. Men between the age of 28-38 seem to be in a second childhood" phase. They get very fast excited over the simplest things, such as taking pictures of the players or catching a fly ball.

According to an empirical model developed by Demmert, fan attendance is influenced by a number of variables, such as the relative quality of the club during a season, characteristics of the club's market, athletic talent employed, pricing and broadcasting decisions, number of games televised [19]. Relationship marketing is the key to generate positive fan behavior among never, past and infrequent attenders through strong, long-term relations between people and organizations, and new web 3.0 technologies such as social networks and mobile applications (20).

## 3. RESULTS & DISCUSSION

### 3.1 Spectators Characteristics

Wiseman notes that the main reason that sports still survive is because of their masochistic constituents [21]. It is known that throughout history when high risks have existed, public support has been positive. There are however limits and boundaries in engagement and

participation. Contrary to team-controlled branding, fandom is a personal ownership that positions supporters as agentive meaning-producers with a sense of symbolic ownership that can be celebrated or renounced (22). Organized fans can create and promote branded commodities, and sometimes threaten typical relationships between consumers and brands, while the physical environment and the aesthetic quality of the facility along with the feelings of ownership and pride have an effect into the perceptions of current and prospective spectators when it comes to their desire to stay and return to the ball park. Many studies have focused upon environmental factors associated with spectator attendance and sport consumption behavior.

To understand better the relationship between baseball events and spectators it is necessary to identify some of the general characteristics of individuals that watch baseball events based upon Tats is findings [23]. These characteristics can be applied to the baseball spectators in order to understand how their communicative actions, interpretations and emotional stage-setting are an affected throughout the game. These characteristics are:

(a) Spontaneity. Spectator's behavior becomes more spontaneous with the effects of various situational-sensitive influences, resulting in a lack of control, pressure from the spectators as a totality, and an inability to think through the consequences of a particular irresponsibility;

(b) Anonymous. The spectators who comprise the crowd feel that their presence revokes their identity. This creates the impression that they are a part of a larger sum of totality;

(c) Circumstantial. The composition of spectator groups is made up of people who do not know each other and they meet by coincidence for a short period of time;

(d) Ease of Feeling Transfer/Submission. The ease of feeling transfer is a result of submission, which arises from mass pressure. Thoughts are feelings that become those of mass movement;

(e) Need for Action. This feeling is created by the spectators as a totality as the most appropriate method for dealing with a problematic situation. For example, spectators who disagree with the interpretation of the game rules from the part of referees and the resulting situation often feel superior to them and immediately express an opinion with boos, hisses, and cuss words.

All these characteristics offer us insights as to how spectator's emotions function within totality. It seems in many ways to challenge the social order of the American society.

### 3.2 The Many Faces of Baseball Events

Many scholars have examined several dimensions of many sports culture, including baseball and show how the spectators studied define themselves through that particular sport. According to Trujillo the institution of baseball and the context of the ballpark can be used to study many aspects of organizational life in the capitalist system, communication and the mass media as well as

how people "enacted and expressed similar feelings and emotions about the importance of baseball in their lives and of the places where it is played" [24]. Different approaches can be adopted to study the context of the ballpark as culture and particularly its setting (spectators). This study of the ballpark's setting culture is guided by an interpretive approach.

Culture can be defined as a "pattern of beliefs and values shared by the members" of a specific group (25). Geertz defined culture as a "multiplicity of complex conceptual structures many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another which are at once strange, irregular and inexplicit" (26).

Baseball as an athletic even constitutes to the quality of our lives. Baseball as a social phenomenon has many faces, which reveal how spectators experience different interrelated dimensions of the Tigers stadium culture as well as their motivation to watch baseball. Some of these faces are obvious, some are masked and others are false. To understand the enormous Pan-American interest in this rather puerile activity it is important to not consider it only as a game. Having in mind Morris and Trujillo's work, there are four "faces" that can be applied to our case [27 & 28]:

(a) Baseball as a Battle. It is one of the masked faces of baseball, concealed by the fact that Tigers against their arrivals (e.g. Indians) confront each other in their effort to complete more runs. Each baseball game is seen as a battle which at the end results in a winner and a loser regardless of how many innings it takes. The spectators wish to be with the winners but many times find themselves with e losers and thus feel frustrated.

Many believe that an athletic scene such as baseball field can become a place to let out ones suppressed feelings of anger and everyday stress. This anger, combined with anonymity, the loneliness and sometimes strange human behavior creates stressful situations. Most of the time people let out this stress at baseball events which are places of "time bomb diffusion" where the time bomb is the suppressed feelings a person has inside of him/her self;

(b) Baseball as a Social Attraction: when the Tigers win then the fans have gained psychological "points;" they feel individually and socially superior toward the fans of the other team (e.g. Brewers, Twins);

(c) Baseball Events as a Social Drama: Because of the elements of "agon," or ritual contest and "mimesis," or symbolic representation Tiger events like the other baseball events can be interpreted as social drama. The Tigers arena can be seen as a cultural arena through which fans, players and workers share a common sense of reality through various rituals and traditions (29). As Nimmo and Combs state: The deeper structure of a baseball event reveals the contest, the triumph of justice and the intervention of fortune, anxiety as the game proceeds, heroic deeds and untimely errors, dramatic climaxes, and the euphoria of the victors along with the gloom of the vanquished (30)

(d) Baseball as a Type of Show/Entertainment: Baseball is certainly mass entertainment with all the trappings of

“showbiz.” It boasts great stars, virtuosos’ performances and is “America’s best pass time.” From this perspective the stadium is an amusement park structured not to represent everyday reality but to present an idealized and sanitized escape from reality (31). Baseball events as well as the other professional sporting events are organized based upon the gambit of entertainment industry because of the emergence of formalized union-management relations, geographic expansion of the business, and heavy exposure on television.

Tigers’ stadium can be seen as a: powerful discursive system that succeeds at making people accept as normal what they generally would not, enjoy what they ordinarily would not, repress aspects of themselves that they generally would not, and not question what they generally would. [32]

### 3.3 Roles that Baseball Serves

There is a fine line that distinguishes the boundaries that separately athleticism as a noble idea and as advertising. From racing to soccer, from skiing to baseball, each emerges as the new “desirable object” of good-looking attractive champions. The road to success that a baseball athlete must follow in order to become a sex symbol is strange and dangerous. In many cases, baseball stars replace movie stars in the minds and hearts of spectators and they sometimes even fulfill their erotic imaginations.

It is true that Detroit fans are enthusiastically involved in Tigers baseball events. Not only do they (the Tiger fans) offer moral and psychological support to the athletes but they also receive satisfactory feeling from the spectacle. This acts as a means of escaping the daily routine. There are three basic roles that baseball serves stimulating Detroit’s people to attend baseball events.

These roles emerge from athletic functions (33) and offer us insights of how Tigers spectators are motivated to watch their team games in the stadium – and can also be connected with some of Litras positions regarding athletic psychology (34). These roles are:

(a) Sociocreations role: Baseball events can be seen as a way of “living with” and “communicating with the others.” For the baseball fans, the event is a source of relaxation and time consumption. The level of interaction is very high. All the people are interacting with each other, probably because of the timeless and the slowness of the game in comparison with the other sports (i.e. soccer). In other words, a lot of verbal and non-verbal communication occurs as the game is going on, such as describing and discussing different subjects from personal to politics, and from athletics to local news, and the cruising of each other.

Baseball provides the setting in which the Tigers spectators can practice their skills in communication, realize one’s aspirations and gain a sense of achievement. It provides the arena those spectators, just like in European soccer games, coming from different backgrounds and experiences can socially interact. Perhaps in the future, they may come together as friends, partners, team mates or even “relatives”.

In Europe the participation of a spectator within the rest of the setting, particularly in the soccer games, makes him feel and realize that he is a member of a team. So, by participating in the setting, the spectator feels a sense of security, which allows him to face problems such as stress or rejection. Valuable social experience may be obtained by participating as well;

(b) Self-Assurance Role: In this role the baseball athlete tries to show his talents and other abilities (i.e. Philips, Fiedler etc.) in an effort to perfect himself. This often results in the athlete becoming a “public hero” after a winning game;

(c) Sexual Role: This role shows baseball events and particularly athletes as a way of expressing eroticism and narcissism. For example, an athlete’s interest in his own body and his own public success creates various sexual roles which Tigers spectators use as a vicarious reference (i.e. Philips, Fiedler etc.). It is true that impulses of homosexuality occur in baseball events through the interest for the bodies of the athletes as individuals and as a team, particularly from the part of teenagers.

The “sexual role” is one of the main reasons for the participation of people in baseball events, and it is deriving from the Greek ideal of perfecting and admiring the human body. A baseball event dictionary includes words with sexual content. Of course, other impulses exist in baseball events such as psychological, neurodynamic, economic and above all social.

## CONCLUSIONS

Baseball is a major sport in the United States because of its dramatic enactments of social values, belief and commercialism. The spectators of this game are particularly enthralled in the Detroit’s metropolitan area. In Detroit, a city with a large geographical area (the 6<sup>th</sup> in size metropolitan area in the United States) and a medium population according to its size the fans have elected Detroit baseball to a significant ritual and source for identification. As avid supporters they participate often in their team’s games; travel great distances and emotionally express their loyalty and dedication to the “Tiger.”

Baseball events as extraordinary events, formal rituals, provide the community with an alternate social world to that found in everyday life. Part of the power of these events lies in their ability to evoke symbols and myths relating to the community. They create a setting in which the spectators simultaneously experience their humanity by allowing their everyday differences to lapse and new relationships to emerge. The feelings during the game and the acknowledgement of common bonds are “communitas.” (Spectator sense of oneness with others, his common fate and humanity) (35).

Tiger stadium, like other ballparks, is a meeting place for social interactions which between families, friends who gather together on dates, outings and work picnics, provide involvement in a community event (36). American values are simultaneously enacted in the setting including patriotism in the mildest form,

commercialism, and mass media. Liquor and coke ("America's favorite drugs").

Patriotism is enacted with the signing of the national anthem at the start of the game and is continuous throughout the game with the rare loud expression and reinforcement of monolithic complaints and opinions to the coaches and the players about many things regarding their team without any specific reasons. These stressful and highly emotional situations can cause violent events and are influenced either by specific members of the setting (usually spectator reactions of the opponent team) or by the overall social context in which spectators live (37).

In contrast with the other popular sports such as football, basketball, and soccer, baseball fans do not seem to make any serious effort to appear with at least some item of clothing in the team colors (at least in my section) while in the other sports a reinforcement of patriotism is given through colors (i.e. the spectators of the teams participating in the World Cup). As America was becoming a mass society, baseball was becoming a commercial activity (38).

Commercialism's role is largely contained inside the stadium and co-exists with high technology and entertainment. Tiger's stadium billboards function as a source of entertainment for the spectators. The two huge colorful billboards keep the attention of the fans particularly during the breaks. Advertisements such as Nike, Marlboro, Chevrolet Camaro, IBM, NBD, Comerica Bank, and WJR radio, are rotated targeting different types of spectators (young or old, males or females etc.) each time. Stadium music is played in prerecorded form over the loudspeakers to accompany the commercials and appeals to all fans, keeping them entertained during lulls in the action. The spectators become more reactive and supportive when their favorite team is playing offense rather than defense as well as when their favorite players get in/off the plate – with the contribution of the announcers who pronounced the names with different voice tones which seemed to have a strong effect on spectators' appeal. Announcers' experience the action in complete conversational turns depending upon varying degrees of excitement markedly increased when the Tigers complete a run.

Media crews have top priority in visual access while they broadcast the games. Television stations, along with stadium cameras capture and provide. Through monitors in various parts of the setting including the concession stands and hallways, not only the extraordinary moments of athletic spirit but also display series of beautiful, well-trained bodies which advertise different products. This coverage gives to the games a totally new dimension sending new messages to the world. Popular athletic events such as baseball are no longer perceived as noble physical and spiritual competitions but as opportunities of the media and large multinational corporations to display their products on the perfect bodies of athletes. This kind of exploitation amasses incredible profits for the sponsors but also for the management of the teams, in which spectators are an extrinsic value as an important financial resource (39).

The amount of beverages and beer along with food (i.e. pizzas, peanuts, chips, etc.) sold and distributed directly to the setting and at the concession stands by the employees of a catering company named "Sport Service" during the game is amazing. As Deegan and Stein state, this open mass selling of substance "brings the world together" and "joins generations [40]."

Through observations of fan behaviors it is obvious that baseball is a significant institution in the U.S. There are many implications for our society, organizational life and cultural values. Baseball is more individualistic from its main competitors (i.e. football, hockey on ice, soccer, basketball etc.). It is also a game "for contemplation, punctuated with occasional peaks of intensity and anticipation" (41). The baseball stadium provides a different kind of outlet which is more appropriate for a more sedate fan that comes to the stadium for entertainment rather than the sport itself, while conduct sports such as football, soccer, hockey, basketball provide the outlet for a more energized fan. Baseball fans communicate in a very solid way, based upon continuous social interaction, which seems to be most of the time "shop talk" rather than "intellectual."

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