IMPLICIT RELIGION AND THE HIGHLY-IDENTIFIED SPORTS FAN: 
AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF CLEVELAND SPORTS FANDOM

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ABSTRACT

Scholarly writing on the conflation of “sport as a religion” regularly concentrates on the historical and institutional parallels with the religious dimensions of sport, focusing on ritual, community, sacred space, and other categories more traditionally associated with “religious” life. Instead, this study redirects focus toward the neo-religious nature of modern spirituality; that is, the fulfillment of Thomas Luckmann’s prediction that a significant aspect of modern spirituality would concern the need to construct a “self”—the constantly shifting work of forming personal identity and enhancing self understanding. As such, internal commitments and intense devotion may perform as a de facto “invisible religion” in the lives of people. As popular culture provides useful texts toward satisfying this ongoing work, professional sports can act as a conduit of both personal and collective self understanding for “highly identified fans,” subsequently operating as an invisible religion within their lives.

This study investigates the nature of fandom among a sample of Cleveland professional sports fans. Using a semi-structured interview format, it explores the lived world of patrons of the Parkview NiteClub, a long standing Cleveland sports bar/blues club, asking, “How might the experience of this group of ‘highly identified fans’ in Cleveland constitute a kind of ‘invisible religious’ experience that both shapes their view of themselves and influences how they journey in this life”? Using Edward Bailey’s tripartite “implicit religion” rubric to assess “commitment,” “integrating foci,” and “intensive concerns with extensive effects,” formal interviews with 15
Parkview patrons took place over six months, using a semi-structured questionnaire to explore the contours of their devotion to the Cleveland teams.

The interviews reveal that the co-mingling of civic history, existence of the teams, and personal life narrative of the fans themselves are intimately interwoven, producing a relationship between the three that moves the teams from mere entertainment outlet to a chief component of the fans’ self-understanding. They testify that much of their past history and current reality is affected by their relationship to the teams in Cleveland, and that both personal and collective identity gets continually influenced by the existence and performance of the teams themselves. Thus, this study concludes that the activity of sports fandom can be considered both invisibly and implicitly religious, and that “sport fandom” as a site may provide a venue for future scholarly work concerning neo-religious behavior within modern society.
Dedicated to Cleveland sports fans around the world.

Someday “waiting till next year” will be someone else’s burden.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Piling On: Exposing the Wound Again

*I don’t get Lebron fans…he doesn’t care about his fans yet you all worship him.*

July 8, 2010. 9:28 EST. “In [sic] this fall I am taking my talents to South Beach and play
with the Miami Heat.” Cue disgusted bar patrons waving dismissively toward the raised
televisions on their way out the doors. Cue #23 jerseys burning on Euclid Avenue. Cue the next
chapter in Cleveland author Tim Long’s *Curses: Why Cleveland Fans Deserve to Be Miserable*,
a treatise on professional sports gloom and Rust Belt psychological distress. With these words
Lebron James did what Clevelanders fully expected given their conditioning—he hurled another
spear into the collective heart of the city, once again reminding Cleveland sports fans of their
repeatedly enforced plight as the longest suffering professional sports fans in the country.

Why the uproar? Charting a simple surface reading, a highly sought after and worldly
iconic 25-year-old African American male took a well-paying job in another city with a better
annual climate and more promising night-life. What “The Decision” meant symbolically,
however, struck a cruelly-sensitized nerve within the Cleveland metro area. As a lifelong
Cleveland area native, I had my own empathy for the city at this moment. While watching the
interview on a laptop in the backwoods of Texas, I turned to my wife immediately after James
spoke the words and said, “I’m mostly sad for the city and for what this means to the people who
live there.”

But what *does* it mean to the people who live in Cleveland? Why does it mean anything
when an adjustment gets made to what should perhaps be nothing but an entertainment vehicle
within city limits? The James decision became a flashpoint for something much deeper in the
psyche of the highly identified Cleveland sports fan, a devotee who follows three major teams
that haven’t won a major championship between them since 1964. As this work will demonstrate, his “defection” stung at no less than the core of Cleveland’s self-understanding, a significant spoke of their subjective “meaning making” wheel—indeed, the event pillaged an interior location within fans that not only potentially justifies properly religious language in its description, but also may circumscribe a form of neo-religiosity within our current cultural moment.

**Cleveland Fan Base: A Constructed/Imagined Community with a History of Sports Loss**

The Cleveland sports fan population is an “imagined community” similar to other urban communities with professional sports teams, but is also constituted by its own comparative subtleties. A.P. Cohen suggests that while *form* between imagined community boundaries can look exactly the same, *meaning* can vary greatly, and thus Cleveland as a cultural site becomes intriguing for its similarities, but perhaps more so for its subjectively perceived and real differences from other professional sport team urban centers. The way Clevelanders perceive themselves—with their glorious initial century of history placed dimly alongside manifestations of more recent media narratives—and how they internalize the perception of “outsiders’” view of them provides insight toward this “meaning,” for “any geographical location, whether the size of a nation or a state or even a town, is little more than an expanse of land until those living there have an idea of who they are and what that location means to them.”

Clevelanders are heirs of both a glamorous civic history largely forgotten in the national consciousness yet echoing faintly in the lives of inhabitants of Ohio’s Western Reserve, coupled with the more recent perception of Rust Belt deterioration, concomitant economic and social decline, and civic decadence—all elements of the most commonly repeated national narrative today. Since “people construct community symbolically, making it a resource and repository of
meaning, and a referent of their identity,” how do these contrasting “histories” (both forgotten/ignored mythological past and constantly reinforced decaying present) impact identity formation in the current moment and what role do the teams play in this process? How do Clevelanders describe the meaning that their professional sports teams carry in their daily lives against their perception of how outsiders view the teams, the city, and its inhabitants?

Cleveland fans are marked by professional sport team losses that have mythological proportions within the greater sports community, with defeats by each of the three main teams—the NFL Browns, the MLB Indians, and the NBA Cavaliers—at moments when each were on the brink of championships. Regular reminders of memorably designated games—“The Catch,” “Red Right 88,” “The Drive,” “The Fumble,” “The Shot,” “Game Seven/Jose Mesa”—as well as multiple other non-titled collapses lead both Clevelanders and outsiders to conclude: Cleveland and their fans are cursed—“the most tortured sports city in America.” While sport franchises in other cities have claimed their own curses (for example, the Chicago Cubs), no other sports city has endured the length of pooled futility as Cleveland: 153 combined seasons without a championship between the three major teams as of May 2013. Mass entertainment sports should provide a respite, an amusing refuge from the economic and industrial decline that resulted in Cleveland becoming the target of national ridicule, but instead the teams contribute fodder toward the punch line. As Long notes, “Our list of woes is endless, replete with bad trades, front office mistakes, personal tragedies, and various defeats snatched from the jaws of victory.” While other cities share similar Rust Belt hardship (Detroit, Pittsburgh, Buffalo), no other city has lost so dramatically at virtually every turn for so long.

James’ seven years in Cleveland as arguably the most celebrated and watched NBA basketball player offered Clevelanders not only a reprieve from their perceived irrelevant status
as a city but also hope that a championship was forthcoming, promising relief from the burden of being a perennial loser. Given the extent of the championship drought, the “bad sports luck,” and James’ boyhood home of Akron being just thirty miles south of Cleveland (“He’s one of us!”), it is perhaps little wonder that properly evangelical language surrounded his stay: a *Sports Illustrated* cover article dubbing him “The Chosen One” while still in high school; a Nike ad campaign exhorting his followers to become a “Witness” to his greatness; before accomplishing anything at the professional level, the self-crowned and media-promulgated “King James”; indeed, the expectation among journalists and commentators that James would be Cleveland’s “savior.” Instead, with “The Decision” he drove a dagger deep into the psyche of Clevelanders, adding the latest installment to the pantheon of dramatic losses while reinforcing the perception they fear/disdain most among non-Clevelanders—that Cleveland is an undesirable place to call home—evoking an emotional, physical, (spiritual?) reaction that reverberated throughout the region.11 Yet Clevelanders remain unwavering in their devotion to the teams that regularly find new ways to break their hearts, a curiosity that provokes this study.

**Cleveland and the Enigma of Highly Identified Fans**

Daniel Wann, perhaps the foremost authority on sport fans and their motivations,12 identifies both the characteristics of the “highly identified fan” and the consequences of such devotion.13 While Wann and others have written extensively on the positive psychological health of those who collect themselves around sporting franchises and their players, they also note that “highly identified fans” are not easily able to dissociate themselves from the team when it loses (for example, “Cutting Off Reflected Failure” as a way of coping with incessant loss) and therefore “the psychological well-being of highly identified fans is jeopardized.” They further suggest that “highly identified fans may experience depression and an intense negative affective
state and adopt a poor outlook on life subsequent to their team’s defeat,” scrambling for ways to deal with the dissonance of their devotion in light of the subsequent pain it brings. Fans will either break their “relationship” with a team altogether or separate themselves until change is made—but neither seems to happen in Cleveland, in spite of consistent data that suggests an adjustment in their commitments to the teams would follow.

Indeed, while verifiable that “occasionally a city will rally around a losing team,” it also remains true that “most mediocre teams are communal embarrassments rather than community assets.” Yet Clevelanders continue to devotedly support and follow their teams, regardless of the psychological trauma produced. Why? This project aims to answer the following research questions: Why the collective fetishization of pro sports teams in Cleveland, in spite of losing regularly, and in some memorable cases dramatically, since 1964? Why do these teams matter so much to Clevelanders and what do they hope to get from them even after years of disappointment? Given that every human makes certain “demands” (perhaps “supplications” is more appropriate from the position of “worshipper”) of the fetishized, what is it that Cleveland sports fans hope to get (re: need) from their teams? In short, how might the fan experience in Cleveland constitute a kind of neo-religious (re: “invisible” or “implicitly religious”) experience that both shapes their view of themselves and influences how they journey in this life?

The Cultural Background Provoking This Study: Four Moves

Four concurrent American cultural moves of the past fifty years inform this study and are introduced here: the mega-rise of not only the sport industry but also the intensification and expansion of fandom surrounding it; the cultivation of “identity” as a locus of modern spirituality while reimagining the “sacred;” “implicit religion” as a rubric for ascertaining modern spirituality; and sport fandom as a central “textual” site for personal and collective identity
construction. As the sport machine of the late-twentieth, early-twenty-first century arose within an increasingly secularized climate, it becomes imperative to examine the place of sport fan devotion within this particular cultural moment.

*The Mega-rise of the Sport Industry and Fandom Surrounding It*

With the ascension of sport as an institution early in the last century, it remains surprising that little was written from a theoretical standpoint until the waning decades; indeed, as late as 1973 Harry Edwards referred to it as sociologically “the most ignored of America’s institutions.” Irrespective of academic neglect, the ascension of the mass-entertainment, spectator-sport business produced intensified fandom and team-followership, a result of a proliferation of social, economic, technological, and religious forces crashing together at the same time. Social critics began to ask how “athletic games, designed entirely for entertainment and recreation, acquire[d] the power to influence to such a degree international relations, domestic politics, important segments of the economy, the educational system, and the public psyche?” Writing many years before the advent of twenty-four hour sport channels like ESPN, Arnold Beisser reflects that

In a nation conscious of having a strong, efficient, capitalist economic system, there is less newspaper space devoted to financial matters than to sports. In a nation proud of its heritage as a political democracy, its citizens are often less interested in political contests than they are in sports competition. In the schools and colleges of a nation providing the greatest educational opportunity for all, the academic is often submerged by sports. In the mass communication media struggling with entertainment programming for the seemingly insatiable appetites of its consumers, nothing endures as well as current sports contests.

Truly, by the time sport was taken seriously by scholars, it had arguably already become at least metaphorically “religious” in both its global scope and practically immeasurable influence on the American scene.
Though fandom need not necessitate making sports into a life-shaping devotional pursuit, the “highly identified fan” is hardly a difficult subject to discover within the populace—particularly within the American urban center—a fan whose emotional, psychological, and perhaps even spiritual commitment to the team rivals the most devout following of traditional religion. This devotion, while often appearing irrational, nevertheless exudes a tremendous grip on large swaths of the sport-viewing populace, a socially ubiquitous phenomenon that begs further study and consideration. Paralleling this movement, the redefinition of religion itself within a secularized milieu also demands fresh conceptualization.

**The Cultivation of “Identity” as a Locus of Modern Spirituality while Reimagining the “Sacred”**

During most of the past century, a belief in the death of traditional religion became conventional wisdom within the social sciences. Whether fully left for dead or not, cultural trends suggested that within industrial societies, secularization was replacing Protestant religion as the dominant ethos within Western societies—with the United States following close behind Europe in making the transition. While the contention that traditional religion would disappear gets countered today by multiple indicators of traditional religious health and vitality in communities around the world, nevertheless it remains true that “the publics” of virtually all advanced industrial societies have been moving toward more secular orientations during the past fifty years,” and that “a systematic erosion of religious practices, values and beliefs has occurred among the more prosperous strata in rich nations.”

In 1967, cultural and social theorist Thomas Luckmann (and others throughout the coming decades) predicted that in place of traditional religions which posit an exterior God to be “found” and list dogmatic codes for living, humans would instead turn inward to discover the “god” or “gods” within, and would spend life energy toward constructing a sense of self and a
“lifestyle” to sufficiently fill the void. These practical behaviors would produce and frame subjectively focused, devotional attachments within them—creating what he called an “invisible religion.”

Four decades later and armed with empirical data that supports Luckmann’s speculation, Sean McCloud reiterates his thesis by suggesting that “we are living in a post-traditional, ‘late modern’ society in which self-identity, community, and the codes we live by are no longer ascribed, but reflexively made and re-made in continuous ‘projects of the self.’” The “sacred,” previously limited to doctrinaire explanations delivered by church and guru-like authorities, could be redefined within operative forms of the personal commitments that give shape to secular life, reflecting “a revision of Emile Durkheim’s understanding of the sacred as a social form that shapes communal identity, values and experiences of collective effervescence, and concepts from cultural anthropology in which the sacred acts as non-negotiable marker of essential values or boundaries.” Thus, sociologists intensified their study of cultural “texts” along with the surrounding contextual processes in which the sacred could be remembered and made real in people’s lives, for increasingly within these texts the (neo)sacred arose and gave shape to both personal and social life. Practically, identification of the worldly, “secular sacred” was en vogue, and within that atmosphere a subjective quest for personal fulfillment and identity construction (“projects of the self”) followed close behind.

“Implicit Religion” as a Rubric for Ascertaining Modern Spirituality

Theorists in the Western world struggled finding language to adequately describe the religious nature of the “secular sacred,” as religious terms themselves carried traditional meanings and the baggage of institutionalization. Searching for terminology to effectively capture the notion of a “popular religion” produced debate around concepts such as civil religion,
invisible religion, folk religion, natural religion, and popular religion itself. Writing in England in the midst of these debates in the late-1960s/early-1970s, Edward Bailey coined the term “implicit religion,” based on the idea that “there is an irreducible spiritual or religious dimension within human existence—that everybody has some „ultimate” or set of ultimates, even if it be self,” and that one’s lived commitments to those ultimates arguably constitutes one’s implied religion.

Bailey offered and developed the concept of implicit religion as the “empirically based understanding of human being, „religious” or „secular,”” and sought to find “meaning that originates in the life-world, and expresses itself in a complex network of symbols and practices.” By asking whether “it would assist our understanding of secular life if one saw it as possibly containing some kind of religiosity of its own?” Bailey offered a hermeneutic of human consciousness and social reality that examined the “medley of human intentionality” in an effort to study people as they really are in their lived experience: To what are they committed? What integrating foci shape a particular individual/group’s behavior(s)? What intensive concerns produce extensive effects?

I believe Bailey’s notion of “implicit religion” provides a rubric within which to explore the dynamics at work in the life of individual identity constructors, helping bring subjective “invisible religion” to light—being particularly useful within the symbolic community called “fans.”

Sport Fandom as a Central “Textual” Site for Personal and Collective Identity Construction

Within popular culture during the latter decades of the twentieth century, various forms of fandom would aid individualized “projects of the self” both in shaping identity and offering fodder for neo-religious sensibilities—not least of which is professional sport fandom. Indeed, even before modern media turned practically every sports broadcast into a “must-see” spectacle, Mircea Eliade posited in 1957 that among other cultural texts like books and cinema, “athletic
contests” may be one of the modern modes in which the sacred appears, offering a “residuum of, or substitute for, magico-religious time,” and though it took decades to fully catch the attention of academicians, literature surrounding the “religious” nature of sports participation and the fandom surrounding athletics eventually found its place within scholarship. James R. Walker suggests sardonically that sports rather than religion, contra Marx’s oft-quoted contention, are indeed the new opiate of the people, questioning whether “the religious fervor that sent crusaders to suffer boiling oil at the walls of Jerusalem and conquistadors to slaughter the Aztecs, has been transferred to the fevered fans wearing Yankee pinstripes, Chief Wahoo ball caps, or…Packer cheese heads?” Likewise, sport fan scholar Daniel Wann anticipates that for fans, institutions like sport might “assume greater levels of importance as society secularizes and theological beliefs become less salient,” thereby allowing fandom sites like professional sports to help fill the void, and Joyce Carol Oates astutely observes that “the decline of religion as a source of significant meaning in modern industrialized societies has been extravagantly compensated for by the rise of popular culture in general, of which the billion-dollar sports mania is the most visible manifestation.” Indeed, however we might trace the history of its evolution, today sport connotes far more than a simplistic diversion—arguably producing, by now, irreversible implications for society.

Delving further into the role of fan texts acting as neo-religious identity constructors, Lawrence Grossberg theorizes that “the most obvious and frightening thing about contemporary popular culture is that it matters so much to its fans,” noting the alarming “degree to which specific cultural contexts become saturated with affect.” He further posits that

For the fan, popular culture becomes a crucial ground on which he or she can construct mattering maps…The fan gives authority to that which he or she invests in, letting the object of such investments speak for and as him or herself. *Fans let them organize their*
emotional and narrative lives and identities. In this way, they use the sites of their investments as so many languages which construct their identities.\textsuperscript{32}

Thus, perhaps one significant aspect of the fascination that teams hold over devotees is their ability to function within and contribute toward personal and collective identity construction, a characteristic of sports team devotion and socio-religiosity that, while certainly acknowledged and studied individually within the sociologies of both sport and religion, remains significantly under-theorized by scholars working within the conflation of those disciplines. For example, even Janet Lever’s brilliant ethnographic expose of Brazilian soccer, while acknowledging the “salient identification” that fans experience with their local team, nevertheless does more to develop the social ramifications of collective identity and ritual solidarity, largely bypassing the potentially “implicitly religious” complications for the individual identity constructor.\textsuperscript{33} Other scholars like Richard Lipsky note that “sport is the „magic elixir” that feeds personal identity while it nourishes the bonds of communal solidarity,” creating a “dramatic and symbolic world with important political as well as social ramifications,” but still stops short of conjoining his observations with anything directly “religious.”\textsuperscript{34}

I ask to what degree, then, might sport fandom function in an “implicitly religious” fashion, igniting commitment while also forging personal identity (a function and work of traditional religious doctrine now circumscribed by secular sensibilities) within individual fans? Along this same trajectory, what is the nature of the “invisibly religious” devotional commitment made to a particular team by a fan base and from where does it derive its strength?

**Summary**

The nature of religious expression has altered greatly in the past several decades. While traditional forms of religious systems and hierarchy lose more and more ground in the cultural imagination, other forms of religious expression have risen in at least supplementary fashion (if
not in ways that completely replace traditional forms themselves) in the lives of Americans. The Judeo-Christian ethos, so predominant in past American centuries, has empirically experienced a diminishing of its symbolic grip on our culture; yet, homo religiosus continues to construct and become devoted to new ways of both identity formation and meaning-making, and mass-marketed modern sport aggressively presents itself as a credible option to fill the void. Given this backdrop, we should wonder, along with Arnold Beisser, “whether sports still serve the same psychological and social purposes for which they were originated”; indeed, perhaps “it is time to reconsider old meanings of sport to athletes and fans, and to interpret them in the light of new data.”

How should sport be conceptualized in relationship to traditional expressions of religion? What is the place of identity formation/construction related to sport fandom in a culture where projections of the self carry supreme significance? Could it be argued that personal identity (and by extension, collective/civic identity) become the cornerstone of the secular religious milieu, the American religion of our cultural moment, and that for “highly identified fans” much more is at stake than just wins and losses?

I agree with Roger Aden and Titsworth that “while generalizations about sports fans are indeed beneficial, we also have much to gain by exploring specific cases in order to better understand how and why particular fans devotedly cheer for particular teams in particular places.” Consequently, this study examines how the history of Cleveland figures into the construction and maintenance of the “highly identified Cleveland sports fan,” showing how the sports teams within Cleveland might constitute themselves religiously in the lives of Clevelanders.
Chapter Explanations

In chapter two I will further consider both literature surrounding the discussion of sport and religion and also the current religious climate in America, a cultural and religious “turn” that forms the basis of my study of Cleveland fandom as a potentially neo-religious experience. I will identify yet move beyond the obvious overlap between the institution of sport and traditional religious expressions—sacred myths, symbols, objects, rituals, space, and time—to explore how the place of personal identity formation, perhaps the supreme aspect of modern religious expression, functions through sport fandom. I will also introduce the central theoretical commitments that found my central argument, establishing the critical concepts of both “invisible” (theoretical) and “implicit” (practical) religion.

Chapter three offers a cultural history of the city of Cleveland, examining the saga of its extraordinary rise and fall. I trace its founding as a wilderness outpost on the shores of Lake Erie and describe its astonishing development into an engine of the American Industrial Revolution before finally outlining its equally staggering descent toward relative insignificance after the stock market crash in 1929. This chapter also introduces the role of organized sport as a significant civic institution within the city, becoming a psychological and economic mainstay for the citizenry.

Chapter four traces the founding and key moments of the three primary professional sports teams in Cleveland—the baseball Indians, football Browns, and basketball Cavaliers—while also introducing analysis to explain their grip on the fans” imagination. I will consider the cultural moment that birthed each team and point to key moments in their histories that help construct the nostalgic memories of current fans.
Chapter five offers an overview of the ethnographic method employed in this study, including the process of semi-structured/random interviewing and my understanding of its hermeneutic efficacy. I will also introduced the site of the ethnography—the Parkview NiteClub in Cleveland—and describe the procedures for developing a participant sample, conducting the interviews, and managing the data acquired.

Chapter six paints a “thick description” of the Parkview NiteClub. This chapter examines its establishment in the late-1800s as a Cleveland drinking establishment, its transformation under current ownership into a blues club and sports bar, and considers key moments in its colorful history. In doing so, I establish the general ethos of both the physical setting and its clientele, introducing the “voice” of those who form a fan community within the Parkview.

Chapter seven utilizes the implicit religion rubric to help organize themes that arose from the data, while chapter eight engages discussion regarding that same data. Comprised of both random and formal interviews that developed during 112 hours of fieldwork, a narrative develops around the higher order themes that arose, while each theme is separated by fuller anecdotal moments, provisions of both affective coloration and “thick(er) description” from the data archive.

Finally, chapter nine concludes the study. I offer my own closing considerations, and forecast both the significance of this current work along with ideas for future research.

Whether holding to the existence of a personal God, a deistic and indifferent God, or no supernatural God at all, Americans today engage their lived world pluralistically, using popular culture to create meaning making, life-shaping “gods” of their own. Relying heavily on the contributions and socio-religious thought of Thomas Luckmann (“invisible religion”), Harold Bloom (“the American religion”), Matt Hills (“neo-religiosity”), and especially Edward Bailey
(“implicit religion”), I will consider how Clevelander’s attachment to their team in some cases replaces traditional religion altogether, but at the very least acts in an equally supplementary fashion in the pluralistic shaping of their worldview. In doing so, we might show that when commentators suggested that Clevelanders, responding with bitterness and anger to the latest installment of their personal civic misery, should “get a life,” that that is exactly what they were trying to do: in this case through their local professional basketball team. As this study reveals, the passionate local reaction to the departure of James—rather than reflecting an extreme exception—displayed, instead, the expected rule among long-suffering Cleveland fans. In a first step toward understanding the reaction of these Clevelanders, I will first explore the connection between two sprawling sociological sites—sport and religion—examining the history of discussion surrounding their attempted meshing.
Notes


4 See Anthony P. Cohen, The Symbolic Construction of Community (New York: Tavistock Publications, 1985), 76. “The moral to be drawn from this rather wordy discussion is that in looking for the distinctiveness of communities—that is, in seeking their boundaries—we should not be deceived by their apparent similarities into supposing that they are actually alike, nor even that they are becoming less different. The residents of Wandsworth, Winnipeg and the Western Isles may all spend much time watching the television—indeed, watching the same television programs—may use the same terminology to address their parents, may affiliate to the same religious denominations, may observe the same calendar and the same life-cycle ceremonies, and may apparently be dominated by the same economic imperatives. But none of these apparent convergences of life-style entitles us to suppose that the cultural boundaries which separate them are now redundant and anachronistic.”

5 Eric Bain-Selbo, Game Day and God (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 2009), 86. It is noteworthy that other cities similar to Cleveland in demographics, historic economies, climate, and Midwestern temperament have four professional sports teams with the addition of NHL hockey, while Cleveland has never been able to maintain a hockey team after several failed attempts. One should at least ask what it is about the Cleveland mentality that finds no place for a sport that otherwise flourishes in Pittsburgh, Detroit, Chicago, etc.

6 The “Rust Belt” is a label given to those locales (commonly within Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia) hit hardest by the turn away from the heavy industrialization that characterized the first half of the twentieth century. Between 1969 and 1996 manufacturing employment declined by 32.9% in these regions, creating a dislocation in many of the cities still felt today. See Steven High, Industrial Sunset: The Making of North America’s Rust Belt, 1969-1984 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), and Barry Bluestone, The Deindustrialization of America: Plant Closings, Community Abandonment, and the Dismantling of Basic Industry (New York: Basic Books, 1982). However, see also Matthew E. Kahn, “The Silver Lining of Rust Belt Manufacturing Decline,” Journal of Urban Economics, No. 46 (1999): 360-376, who notes the environmental upside to this decline, a natural cleansing contributing to the resurgence of many urban centers within the Rust Belt states.

7 Cohen, Symbolic Construction, 118.

8 See Appendix A for a partial list of Cleveland professional sport’s most infamous losses. See also http://bleacherreport.com/articles/199669-futility-the-curse-of-the-cleveland-sports-fan. For list of “Most Tortured Sports Cities,” see www.proxy.espn.go.com/espn/page2/story?page=tortured/cleveland. The drama behind this (not nearly comprehensive) list reflects the sense of loss, dismay, and a teasing, tantalizing flirtation with championships that characterizes the Cleveland professional sports experience in the last half of the twentieth century.
The Indians last World Series Championship occurred in 1948; the Browns last championship happened in pre-Super Bowl era 1964; and the Cavaliers, founded in 1970, have yet to win an N.B.A. crown.

I spoke with one Akron area pastor who spent the beginning portion of his sermon the Sunday following “The Decision” helping his congregation sort through the grief they felt, trying to frame perspective for the loss.


See D.L. Wann, “Measuring Degree of Identification,” 5. Also, Daniel Wann, *Sport Fans: The Psychology and Social Impact of Spectators* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 6, where he explains “To assist in the accurate assessment of team identification, Wann and Branscombe (1993) developed the Sport Spectator Identification Scale (SSIS)…The SSIS contains seven items with response options ranging from 1 to 8. (After answering all seven questions and adding up the totals) higher numbers represent greater levels of team identification…In general, scores less than 18 indicate low level of identification, while scores greater than 35 suggest a high level of identification. Individuals scoring between 18 and 35 are classified as moderately identified.”


See Leonard Koppett, *Sports Illusion Sports Reality: A Reporter’s View of Sports, Journalism, and Society* 2nd ed., (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), ix, where Koppett suggests the consolidation of the following forces as part of the perfect storm that produced the sport institution as it exists today: “(the) expansion and movement of markets, the shift from newspapers to television as journalism’s primary expression, the attainment of bargaining powers by players, the rise of modern marketing, the growth of formerly „minor” sports, altered views of amateur and college activities, the effects of new emphases on civil rights and ethnic diversity and cross-cultural influences.”

Koppett, *Sports Illusion*, 1. See also Kevin O’Gorman, *Saving Sport: Sport, Society, and Spirituality* (Dublin: Columba Press, 2010), 215, who suggests that “The prevalence and popularity of sport in countries that are not in the grip of war or famine are proof that people are entertained through this medium of mass culture, even if they cannot all enjoy the taste and fruit of victory. The many cultural variations of sporting engagement and
entertainment are evidence of a universal search for something beyond the mundane and monotonous. However, questions remain about the meaning of sport and its location, both literal and metaphorical, in life.”


25 Each will be defined and described in relationship to “sport as” later in this work. See N.J. Demereth, III, “The Varieties of Sacred Experience: Finding the Sacred in a Secular Grove,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, vol. 39, issue 1 (March 2000): 2, who beyond adding the additional terms “quasi-religion” and “para-religion” in his discussion, refers to all such debate as “the sociology of the sacred.”

26 See Christiano, et. al., *Sociology of Religion*, 55. Bailey differentiates himself from Paul Tillich’s concept of “ultimate concern” by suggesting that Tillich’s use is constraining; that is, people may have multiple “ultimates” and they may not even acknowledge them as a “concern.” In this sense, Bailey is more concerned with the “lived life” of individuals and groups, and in this sense Tillich’s “ultimate concern” may only be a subset of the person’s overall commitments. Also, Bailey acknowledges having seen the phrase “implicit religion” first used in 1958. See Thomas Ford Hoults, *The Sociology of Religion* (New York: Dryden Press, 1958).


30 In Adam C. Earnheardt, Paul M. Haridakis, and Barbara S. Hugenberg, eds., *Sport Fans, Identity, and Socialization: Exploring the Fanademonium* (New York: Lexington Books, 2012), ix. Note that Walker does not subscribe to the “opiate” analogy, and favors instead the idea of commercialized sports acting as a “pusherman” to get us to buy more product; thus, sports fanaticism is both created and hijacked by marketers.

any other point in history. With the reduction of ritual in religion, it is not surprising man turns to other “rites” to again see some form of quasi-order to his life. For many, sport fulfills this function.”


35 See Pew Forum statistics that acknowledge the significant increase in those who claim no specific “traditional” religious orientation at http://religions.pewforum.org/reports/.

36 Beisser, Madness in Sports, ix.

CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW AND THE RELIGIOUS TURN

Part I: The Emergence of Sport/Religion as a Legitimized Field of Study

Standing as one blind before the proverbial elephant at the conflation of sport/religion, we should admit with Michael Novak that while sports can tell us a great deal about people, it is only as tea leaves tell us about the future—much depends on how we read the leaves.\(^1\) Prior commitments, either academically, religiously, or both may contribute to an inability to see either sport or religion in the ways required by our current cultural moment, demanding a sort of “conversion” to different ways of conceptualizing the two as fields of inquiry. As separately both sport and religion remained significant sociological categories in the final decades of the last century, we should expect a range of thought on just how closely they can legitimately be brought together as concepts—indeed, “the interpenetrations of the relationship between sport and religion have been more conceptual and ethereal, but also more diverse” as opinions from various disciplines have claimed ground around them.\(^2\)

What Do We Mean by the Terms “Sport” and “Religion”?\(^3\)

Quite obviously, the “sport as religion” prospect necessitates clearly defining both subjects in advance of positing any subsequent theorization. While any effort to adequately secure definitional assurances will inevitably fall short in a work like this—especially since by now sport itself has become almost as complicated as religion to define—I will nevertheless attempt to offer a requisite starting point.\(^4\)

Defining “Sport” \(^5\)

According to Alan Guttmann, sports are “‚‚playful contests, that is, non-utilitarian contests which include an important measure of physical as well as intellectual skill.” Richard
Guilianotti goes further in suggesting that sports are *structured* by rules and codes of conduct; they are *goal-oriented* while aiming at particular objectives producing “winners and losers”; *competitive*, being deeply motivated by defeated rivals and broken records; *ludic*, which enables playful experiences and germinates individual and collective excitement; and perhaps the most theoretically significant distinction, sports are *culturally situated*, “in that (the previous four categories) correspond closely to the value systems and power relations within the relevant sport’s host society.” This “situatedness” allows sports to take on different meanings in different cultures—arguably, even different meanings within different locales within the same national culture. Significantly, when “sports as play/games/contests” get transposed to “sports as business,” sport as a concept becomes considerably more complicated.

While less generous toward the play facet inherent within sports and more reflexively aware of the burgeoning sport establishment at the time of his writing in 1973, sociologist Harry Edwards posited sports’ placement within historical conditions and offered the first-fruits of an important sociological development: the transposition of *sports*, or individually, self-contained play-oriented competitions, into *sport*, the “formally organized association” of collected individuals into an institution. Indeed, as Andrew C. Billings, Michael L. Butterworth, and Paul D. Turman differentiate, where *sports* may refer to specific contests, *sport* equals “the institutional arrangement of leagues, teams, officials, players, fans, and media.” As such, sports as games then make up a sub-set of the overall world created by sport as an institution.

With these considerations in mind, this project modifies Charles Prebish’s summary definition, which I believe may account for both “*sports* as particular contests and “*sport* as an institution: “Sports are recreational activities, specifically involving a game, competition, or the like, that require bodily and often mental exertion, abide by fixed rules, aim at fun and/or
play, and may be divided into (a) informal sports, (b) organized sports, and (c) corporate sport.”¹⁰ The plural “sports” generically refers to individual games, while the singular “sport” associated with “corporate” connotes the broader cultural institution.

As an institution, “sport is at once both trivial and serious, inconsequential yet of symbolic significance…Sport in many cases informs and refuels the popular memory of communities, and offers a source of collective identification and community expression for those who follow teams and individuals.”¹¹ For this reason, however we sort through the distinguishing nuances of attempts at definition, professional sport fandom carries a social weight burdened with significant consequences both for those who count themselves as fans and those living among them who do not.¹²

**Defining “Religion”**

While defining “sport” certainly carries its share of complications, the more provocative definitional conflict in this study surrounds the concept of “religion.” How one defines “religion” will in large measure predetermine where one can feasibly arrive at the end of an analysis regarding its relationship to sport, for “ultimately, resolution of the conflict will follow directly from one’s conception of religion, the supernatural, and the sacred.”¹³ Catherine Albanese suggests three primary classifications for defining religion that succinctly label the central conceptual distinctions present among scholars, categories that likewise describe the main definitional issues faced in this particular work.¹⁴

*Substantive* definitions tend toward the other-worldly spiritual dimension of religion, focusing on a relationship with God (or the gods). A favorite of theologians and philosophers, this approach engages the concept on its own historically understood terms: through the major hierarchical religious institutions (Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, for example) with a
focus on questions involving ultimacy and the supernatural. Examples include E.B. Tylor’s long-accepted axiom that religion depends on “belief in Spiritual (or Supernatural) Beings;” Rudolph Otto’s contention that religion generates a feeling of holy awe, a mystery that produces attraction and terror simultaneously; or F. Max Muller’s more emotionally dependant “faculty of apprehending the Infinite.” Melford Spiro offers a more culturally conscious definition while still bifurcating the supernatural from the ordinary, suggesting that religion involves “culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings.”

Substantive definitions reveal their limitations, however, not only by failing to account for major religious initiatives like Buddhism and Confucianism, but also more broadly since “some writers feel that people in complex and changing societies such as ours are religious in new ways. The substantive definitions are felt to be too narrow and too tradition-bound, hence blinding researchers to these new modes of religiosity.” This tension caused scholars to move beyond simply asking about belief connected to the supernatural, instead paying more attention to behavior connected to experiential, lived reality.

Consequently, functional definitions “emphasize the effects of religion in actual life.” Functional approaches acknowledge that whether we assume an actual Divine Being or not, people still have a religious “impulse”; that is, they will seek to construct meaning in the midst of the chaos of modern life, desiring a stable sense of identity through an organizing set of principles or beliefs. They will examine the affects of both traditional and broadly defined non-traditional religious belief systems without the limiting constraints of macro-preconception. As examples, Paul Tillich suggests that religion is constituted by determining one’s “ultimate concern” in the face of death and other major life issues. He says that religion “can be defined as a system of beliefs and practices by means of which a group of people struggles with [the]
ultimate problems of human life,” as does F.J. Streng who says that religion is “a means toward ultimate transformation,” where the ultimate is a natural or supernatural force that people hold to be real and of such significance that they define their lives on its terms.\(^{18}\) Perhaps Richard Niebuhr best articulates the functionalist position when he says that

> It is a curious and inescapable fact about our lives, of which I think we all become aware at some time or another, that we cannot live without a cause, without some object of devotion, some center of worth, something on which we rely for our meaning….If we do not wish to call this faith religion, there is no need to contend about the word. Let us say then that our problem is the problem of faith rather than of religion. Now to have faith and to have a god is one and the same thing….When we believe that life is worth living by the same act we refer to some being which makes our life worth living. We never merely believe that life is worth living, but always think of it as made worth living by something on which we rely. And this being, whatever it be, is properly termed our god.\(^{19}\)

Functionalist approaches pay attention less to what is supposed to be believed doctrinally and instead focus on how people really organize and order their lives—constructing a sense of meaning and purpose along the way—and how society is affected by such behavior. What gets declared “sacred” by a people will have significant impact on social structures and modes of living.\(^{20}\)

Finally, formal definitions “look for typically religious forms gleaned from the comparative study of religions and find the presence of religion where such forms can be identified.” These forms can include “sacred stories, rituals, moral codes, and communities” and are traceable both cross-culturally and throughout history.\(^{21}\) Mircea Eliade focused attention on assessing forms of the sacred versus the profane (ordinary) among social groups, suggesting that the history of religions was “constituted by a great number of hierophanies, by manifestations of sacred realities,” the sacred revealing itself to humanity through the ordinary structures of daily life.\(^{22}\) He writes that “the sacred is preeminently the real, at once power, efficacity, the source of life and fecundity. Religious man’s desire to live in the sacred is in fact equivalent to his desire
to take up his abode in objective reality, not to let himself be paralyzed by the never-ceasing relativity of purely subjective experiences, to live in a real and effective world, and not in an illusion.”

Thus, a significant outflow of formal definitions includes the search for that which constitutes the sacred within a particular culture, exploring the source, maintenance, and affect of those “texts” (for example, objects, spaces, persons) declared “sacred” among a people.

As Albanese summarizes, “while many people live without Gods, nobody lives without religion.” Debate surrounding the consideration of sport as an American religion is influenced by all three positions—substantive, functional, formalist—and considering the starting point of a given theorist remains critical if we are to properly comprehend the debate as it unfolds.

**Separate but “Equal”: Validity as Social Institutions**

In spite of the preponderance of current writing on the subject of sport co-mingling with religion, Jay Coakley is not alone in his assertion that while sport merits serious consideration alongside religion, the two fields should be studied separately. He preserves traditional distinctions between supposed “sacred” and “secular” realms of activity, asserting that “ideologies focus mostly on secular, here-and-now, material world issues, and they’re neither automatically nor inevitably linked with the supernatural or a divinity,” while “religions always bring a divinity or the supernatural into the sense making process and connect meaning and understanding to a sacred realm that transcends the here-and-now material world.” Therefore, sport as an institution fits more responsibly into the secular *ideology* category, while religion is reserved for those interests deemed *supernatural*.

Some efforts to discuss the conflation of religion and sport are content to leave each institution as an isolated abstraction of the larger society, assessing their touch points without an attempt to induce their fusion. Wilbert Marcellus Leonard III, calling sport a “functional
equivalent of religion in America today” while still recognizing the “dialectical” relationship between sport and religion, suggests with an evenhanded simplicity that each influences the other—“the connection is not unilateral,” but rather interdependent. This position gets reiterated by D. Stanley Eitzen and George H. Sage, who further suggest that while efforts to call sport the equal of religion ring a bit superficial, nevertheless as institutions they are increasingly intertwined, each making inroads into the other, yet still as completely separate entities. Likewise Daniel Wann, while acknowledging both the analogical and functional relationship between sport and religion, and further suggesting that institutions like sport might “assume greater levels of importance as society secularizes and theological beliefs become less salient,” still warns against forcing sport into a religious box, making more of their union than is either justified or necessary.

At a superficial level, then, much has been written on the interdependence between the institutions, some focusing on the use of religion by sport, far more concerned with the use of sport by religion. At this point, we may confidently conclude that maintaining a cloistering of “religion in the sacred” and “sport in the secular” realms reflects a fossilized binary whose borders have long sense blurred. While certainly still studied as separate categories within their respective disciplines, the tidy sacred/secular divide no longer holds in our cultural moment. Considering the empirical parallels traditional forms of religious expression have with the institution of sport—the overlap in nomenclature, outward forms and rituals, strength of devotion, and existential or affective reality—is simply too hard to ignore, and to refuse allowing incisive co-mingling between the two arenas betrays predetermined commitments or willful blindness.
Breaching the Levy: Sport as a Greenhouse for Civil Religion

In 1973 sociologist Harry Edwards published his pioneering *Sociology of Sport*, a book “aimed at closing this gap in our knowledge and understanding of what is, sociologically speaking, perhaps the most ignored of America’s institutions.” Edwards crafted a sociological lens to focus attention on the intensification of sport with “the American way of life,” paying careful attention to the wedding of national/civic ideology with what had historically been ignored as mere “play.” In Althusserian fashion, he argued that sport had become hegemonically infected with an ideologically rooted form of the American “civil religion,” being used to endorse and promote American creeds, values, and traditions without necessarily doing so overtly or even consciously. Concerned with the values being projected onto and subsequently through sports, Edwards offered two statements regarding the co-mingling of sport and religion which influenced the next four decades’ writing on the subject.

Noting the ritual and ceremony, the symbolism, and the ideology leading to ultimate values or “conceptions of the good life” bound to the American version of sport at the end of the twentieth century, Edwards summarized: “*Sport is essentially a secular, quasi-religious institution. It does not however, constitute an alternative to or substitute for formal sacred religious involvement.*” Edwards set sports off from the traditionally “sacred,” nevertheless suggesting that the civil weight they bear demands a word like religion to describe it, yet not equating this “religion” with that of historical religious movements. Several paragraphs later, however, he asserted the paradoxical sounding statement that “*If there is a universal popular religion in America it is to be found within the institution of sport.*”

Edwards, who saw in sport the ideal institutional shell for the propagation and concealment of American inequalities, called sport a “secular, quasi-religious institution,”
suggesting that if the label “universal popular religion in America” applied anywhere—a collective, life-directing system everyone could buy into—the institution called sport certainly qualified. In making these statements, Edwards introduced the relationship of “sport as a religion” into the academic realm. He summarized that “for the price of a ticket, the sociologist who has done his homework and knows what to look for, can gain access to a mirror reflecting the past traditions, the present turmoil, and, to a great extent, the future destiny of society.”

Just before Edwards published his discipline-altering work, Cornish Rogers critiqued the “religious nature of the spectacle” that had become televised sports, suggesting that “the more closely we analyze the mystique of sports, psychologically and functionally, the more we tend to use religious language to describe it.” Rogers argued that the religion of sports is really the tripartite religion of American ideology, the mass spectacle of sports smuggling in “God, country, and good sportsmanship” through its forms and performances, while also concluding that “sports are rapidly becoming the dominant ritualistic expression of the reification of established religion in the United States.”

Joseph Price make this same point in his trenchant analysis of the mythology surrounding America’s pre-eminent sporting event, the Super Bowl, calling it “a major religious festival for American culture,” while citing its “convergence of sports, politics, and myth.” Referring to the pre-desacralization of sports in other cultures at other times, Price suggests that the Super Bowl “succeeds in reuniting these now disparate dimensions of social life,” operating hegemonically to smuggle “America” to professional football consumers, both at home and abroad.

While the Super Bowl is the supreme, annually scheduled spectacle and conduit of civil religious sensibilities, hardly a group sporting event takes place that doesn’t include some co-mingled aspect of country (national anthem), traditional religion (pre-game prayers), and
sporting mythology (player introductions). As such, Craig A. Forney broadens the discussion to include America’s three major sports—baseball, football, and basketball—calling them “the holy trinity of American sports” since they portray three core stories of the nation’s worldview, working “together to provide a comprehensive and in-depth portrayal of civil beliefs…expressing pivotal elements of ritual, myth, doctrine, ethics, social life, and experience.”

We should note at this point: if sport is in the service of civil religion as that term gets used technically, scholars were not always saying that sport is a civil religion, but more often that it functions as a conduit for civil religion. It would only be a natural next step to ask what else the institution of sport might be concealing in its wake. Indeed, others would extend the “sport as conduit for civil religion” notion by assessing not just sport vis-à-vis nationhood, but emphasizing instead the latent Protestant ethos seeping from the pores of sport, suggesting the waning of and potential replacement for traditional religion in its institutional forms altogether—especially given the intoxicating and satisfying nature of the sport spectacle versus the diminishing hold of traditional religion on society in general. Given both its latent and stated value system, sport could perhaps satisfy multiple “American” longings at once: for entertainment spectacle, for a generic civil/secular bonding agent, and—perhaps most significantly—for traditional Protestant religion itself. Thus, from the early 1970s to present day, scholars focused on asking, “In what ways does sport parallel religion (formally)?”, “How does sport operate as a religion proper (functionally)?” and perhaps most provocatively, “Can sport literally be called a religion in the lives of devotees (substantively)?”
Sport as a Religion? Something More, Something Less

As scholars grew more comfortable considering sport as an experience akin to traditional religion, they struggled to land language that adequately and accurately described the phenomenon, striving to overcome the latent limitations of metaphors and analogies. The surplus of adjectives and modifiers used is overwhelming, as the line that separates the two continues to waver uncertainly. Extending Edwards’ work, many acknowledge sport as something of a “civil” religion, but then qualify it as also considerably more, something that at minimum functions as a religious phenomenon in human lives by creating communal bonds, providing ritual shape, and communicating life-constructing values.

For example, A. Bartlett Giammati calls sport, particularly American baseball, a “kind of popular or debased religion,” providing an experience that somehow “mirrors Americans sacred concerns,” alongside Tracy Trothen, who came to a similar conclusion regarding hockey in the lives of Canadians. Eric Dunning calls sport a “humanistic” religion wherein “we worship other humans and their accomplishments,” fetishizing and declaring sacred that which surrounds the athlete or team, while Coles called British soccer a “surrogate” or “substitute” religion in the course of studying behaviors at a rivalry game. J.B.K. Endo calls sport a “metaphorical religion,” Maurice Roche a “religion of the people,” Susan Saint Sing a “multilayered sacramentality,” and Kevin O’Gorman an “alternative theology.” With every attempt at categorizing and making sense of sport in religious language, we witness the employment of a constantly expanding parade of adjectives and descriptors. However, perhaps the three most influential terms that rose up after civil, and certainly the most helpful for this current work, were cultural, folk, and natural. As such, these three briefly receive further explanation here.
**The Cultural Religion**

Albanese contends that sport as an institution equals a form of *cultural religion*; that is, while certainly influenced by the Protestant and civil forms of religious expression, sport moves beyond these controls and helps give shape to the ordinary, everyday lives of Americans through “codes of living,” noting that “a religious community expresses itself not just in belief and ritual but also in everyday behavior.” Sport becomes a template for organizing one’s “everyday life” by serving up rules for socio-cultural behavior. As such, sport offers symbolic vehicles that open windows to a transcendent world while helping people search for meaning in the everyday world of lived experience, apart from the purposeful search through traditionally held extra-ordinary means. Sport plays its part as a spoke in the wheel of pop culture, a function of the entertainment industry that does far more than just entertain.

Together, heroes and songs, literature and magazines, films and television serials surrounded Americans with popular reminders that reassured and reinforced their system of beliefs. Although the language was disguised and not often openly religious, the gospel that popular culture preached through the media was powerful persuader because it built on what people already believed. More than any organized religious denomination, it was able to capture the public eye and ear. Created by society, it was also creating a society in its image.

Sport helps create culture by communicating a set of value-infused codes, to help “Americans fit a grid to their own experience in order to define it and give it structure.” Thus, Albanese argues that the cultural religion of sport teaches and reinforces that life is a struggle between winners and losers; success is a result of teamwork; competition is a value in itself; loyalty, fair play, self-denial, hard-work, and being a “good loser” are important character qualities to possess; millennial themes of American dominance and innocence are a result of birthright. Again, these attributes of sport cannot be completely separated from either their Protestant or American civil moorings, nor from the capitalism that drives everything today;
indeed, we might challenge whether sport is creating culture or culture (at least as politics and Protestantism) is creating sport, but in all probability, the relationship is mutually reciprocating.

*The Folk Religion*

James Mathisen both solidifies and goes beyond Albanese by calling sport a *folk religion*.\(^{51}\) He argues like Albanese that sport has a dominant “creed,” developing its own power, its own authoritative values, finally dependent on neither traditional religion nor the political establishment for its strength (though again deriving some peripheral dynamism from both). Folk religion “emphasizes the common religion of a people as it emerged out of the life of ‘the folk,’” and in doing so, “sport raises up particular values and myths of its own and projects them onto the culture with a normative certitude.”\(^{52}\) Sport as a folk religion has a particular power of its own to constitute “believers” along a certain life trajectory, as Robert Lipsyte describes in his acerbic labeling of the sport-folk religion as *SportsWorld*—“a dangerous and grotesque web of ethics and attitudes, an amorphous infrastructure that acts to contain our energies, divert our passions, and socialize us for work or war or depression”—but a version more contained and focused within a particular locale.\(^{53}\)

Mathisen sees the emergence of sport as a folk religion as inextricably linked to the fall of the uncritical acceptance of the American civil religion; that is, as American exceptionalism took a hit in the 1960s, as increasing fragmentation of both American political and social life became the new norm, and as traditional religious institutions lost their hold on social consciousness, Americans needed another “cultural binding force” to fill the void.\(^{54}\) For Mathisen, folk religion offers a more promising theoretical lens through which to categorize sports because civil religion is too broad and inclusive as a category, while folk religion congeals the common vision of the localized masses—the “folk.” Following his reasoning, in a
fragmented culture where a nationalistic civil religion becomes harder to conceptualize with confidence, smaller “folk” communities take up the slack with their own commitments to localized ideals, pouring energy into (and receiving it back from) their community teams.

He notes the “taken-for-granted” reality that sport garners in the life of our nation, citing three of its component parts as foundations for its folk religion status: a distinctive set of myths, values, and beliefs; collective, cultic observances; and evocative senses of historical continuity and tradition. We might further his argument by suggesting that in a general sense, folk religious impulses lend themselves to a more localized communal ethos, a helpful insight when arguing for a communal set of beliefs that contrast themselves with any other set of “folks” from another city or region.

The Natural Religion

Perhaps Philosopher Michael Novak—in his 1976 ode to sports, *The Joy of Sports*—should be credited most with moving the discussion of sports and religion away from the civil fusion and toward the possibility that in fact sports stably stand on their own feet as a religion and not merely as a conduit of national and Protestant ideologies. While Novak certainly saw the civil religious aspects of sporting events, recognizing that “going to a stadium is half like going to a political rally, half like going to a church,” he just as quickly added that “sports are not the civil religion of the United States of America, or Great Britain, or Germany.”

In making his argument for sports as a “natural religion,” a “pagan sense of godliness,” and simply a “form of godliness,” Novak seems to waffle between positions, searching for language in almost tautological fashion: *Sports are not to be confused with traditional forms of religion—they are a secular/civil religion. Only they’re not like the American civil religion as
that concept gets historically understood; indeed, as lived, they more closely resemble traditional forms of religion. Exemplifying the struggle that all experience while theorizing through the limitations of language, Novak breaks from his circular reasoning to posit several arguments for sport as a “natural” religion.

He notes the oft-cited attribute of sports as a “civilizing agent,” tutoring us in “the basic lived experiences of the humanist tradition.” But he goes beyond these remnants of civil religion to suggest that “sports flow outward into action from a deep natural impulse that is radically religious: an impulse of freedom, respect for ritual limits, a zest for symbolic meaning, and a longing for perfection.”

They [rituals of sports] do serve a religious function: they feed a deep human hunger, place humans in touch with certain dimly perceived features of human life within this cosmos, and provide an experience of at least a pagan sense of godliness. Among the „godward” signs in contemporary life, sports may be the single most powerful manifestation. I don’t mean that participation in sports, as athlete or fan, makes one a believer in „God,”…Rather, sports drive one in some dark and generic sense „godward.”

Novak argues that sports tap into that immeasurable aspect of human existence, the “spirit,” which animates all of life but resists scientific enquiry. They reproduce those mythological outlines common to religious traditions by recreating “symbols of cosmic struggle, in which human survival and moral courage are not assured.” Herein lives their power to exhilarate or depress: they expose the agon of history, man/woman against nature, others, themselves. For Novak, “sports owe more to the ritual grammar of religion than to the laws and forms of entertainment”—“I”m on the slope of life, or I am on the slope of death. Being, or nonbeing.”

Novak argues that the “primal symbols, metaphors, and acts” found within sports are much more ancient and frightening than any other form of entertainment or artistic expression, and defends sport as a primal manifestation of the spiritual impulse within humans, a natural
religion unavoidably co-equal with other more traditionally affirmed versions of externally embodied religion. Novak argues that sport both mines and extends the human spirit in its ultimate form; as such, sport is a natural, paganistic, religious manifestation, the embodiment of spirit seeking expression, for both participants and, in a lesser way, spectators.  

*Summary of the Importance of Sport as Cultural, Folk, and Natural Religion*

For my purposes in this dissertation, we should view these three dominant views interdependently as through a funnel, starting socially broad and becoming more subjectively focused along the way. As a *cultural* religion, sport captures and embodies the broadest strokes of the American ethos, the “American way.” It functions consciously and unconsciously like other pop-cultural texts, both reflecting and shaping society along the way. The unavoidable, ubiquitous (re: smothering?) nature of professional sport in our day, however, certainly gives sport an advantage over almost any other culture-shaper at this moment in American history.

On a more local level, while still maintaining its place within the broader social dynamic, sport may reflect the specific vibe of a locale, taking on the shape of a *folk* in a particular region, state, or civic community. While the game of football, for example, gets played by the same formal rules in Cleveland when compared with Los Angeles, we should not be surprised to discover upon closer study of the ownership/organization, players/team, and their fans a reflection of the particular reigning ethos of the host city itself.

Becoming even more subjectively focused within the locale, sport as a *natural* religion produces different sentiments within different people. Like all matters of the spirit/soul, while not quite knowing where it comes from and certainly struggling to understand where it goes, the sensate sport experience abides in humans (both players and fans) with both affective and repetitive success. Indeed, sport stimulates the body, mind, emotional center, and spirit/soul—in
short, the entire person—regardless of our ability to fully understand or synthesize the origins of its power.

This project draws from each of these three conceptualizations of “sport as religion” and extends them further: How does this cultural, folk, and natural experience function as a meaning-making, identity-forming element within the lives of Cleveland fans? How does sport both contribute to and constitute a new form of religiosity within humans—a neo-religiosity—given our particular cultural moment, and how does this religiosity manifest itself in the lives of a specific, localized fan base? Indeed, if sport can bring humans to the “furthest reaches of spirit and meaning,” perhaps it is no wonder that some scholars conclude that sport is a religion equal to (and in some ways surpassing) other traditional modes of religious expression.

**Visiting the Extremes: Sport is the New Religion vs. a Match Made in Hell**

As we’ve already seen, much scholarship develops variations on the theme of worshipping ourselves, our American nation, and our generically dispersed and accepted values as a collected people, where sport becomes a receptacle for our secular longings. Yet those who embrace a more “enchanted” view of material creation cite sports’ ability to ignite genuine “intimations of the sacred, ultimacy and a quest for perfection,” where “sacred” moves us beyond ourselves to something truly “Other,” perhaps instilling “quasi-religious qualities of heart and soul.”63 Laying aside the hesitancy to equate sport fully as a religion that characterizes other writers, these scholars assert definitively: *Sport is a religion.*

Charles Prebish became the most notorious advocate of this position after stating unequivocally that “it is not just a parallel that is emerging between sport and religion, but rather a complete identity. *Sport is religion* for growing numbers of Americans, and this is no product of simply facile reasoning or wishful thinking.”64 He talks about the “mystical dimension of
sport as a means for inspiring ultimate experience.” For Prebish, neither all sports nor all sport experiences should be considered religious anymore than all moments inside a church should be considered religious, but only those moments that produce ultimate, life-altering experiences which finally benefit others. Yet the framework for such experiences is always in place and available to everyone—just like within traditional religious expressions. Relying on a definition of religion that includes both form and experience, he summarizes his theory by saying

What it all boils down to is this: if sport can bring its advocates to an experience of the ultimate, and this (pursuit and) experience is expressed through a formal series of public and private rituals requiring a symbolic language and space deemed sacred by its worshipers, then it is both proper and necessary to call sport itself a religion. It is also reasonable to consider sport the newest and fastest-growing religion, far outdistancing whatever is in second place.65

Likewise, in his localized study of college football in the American South, Eric Bain-Selbo concludes that the myths, symbols, and rituals surrounding Southeastern Conference football function in concert to bring Southerners together as a congregation of worshippers. After unpacking the sacred nature of football sites, the social function of both game-day and the extra-curriculars leading to the event itself, the ritualized violence, the affective qualities of game day, and the co-mingling of the particular civil religious myths of the South, he concludes that football “nourishes the soul” of Southerners.66 Football, in this case, is doing religious work by helping humans “negotiate what it is to be human,” and by engaging the pursuit of three traditionally “religious” concerns: “Religious ways of being human engage the transcendent—that which rises above and beyond the ordinary. They engage the sacred—that which is set apart from the ordinary. And they engage the ultimate—that which defines the final, unavoidable limit of all our ordinary concerns.”67

Apologists within the “sport is a religion” camp suggest sport produces these same three affects: transcending the ordinary, declaring the sacred, connecting with the ultimate. For
example, Lonnie D. Kliever argues that “the common denominator of all forms of play is the experience of transcendence,” since “play takes us out of the limitations and obligations of the everyday world.”

Price argues that sport creates sacred moments by mythologizing nostalgic, collective history; by literally sanctifying (“setting apart”) the parameters of the playing field and locker room; by the constructive way time frames the game itself, along with pre- and post-game ceremony and cadence. Price cites Eliade’s contention for humans as *homo religiosus*, where “the categories of time and space provide the orientation for cosmicization, or the development of a worldview, construing and maintaining one’s way of being in the world.” He views this cosmicization or worldview-making as in keeping with the fundamental nature of religious activity; that is, establishing order within the world of a game “replicates the cosmogonic act of the gods in the creation of the world.” In this way, “through their symbols and rituals, sports provide occasions for experiencing a sense of ultimacy and for prompting personal transformation.”

However, even with a growing openness toward consideration of the sport/religion fusion, some scholars maintain their reluctance toward the concept. We find those who don’t want their particular discipline contaminated by the other, like George Core, who remains mystified by the attempt of the academy to study sports since “some departments of human endeavor cannot be studied empirically or otherwise examined academically.”

Grant Jarvie writes with disdain as a sociologist offended that religion has infiltrated the sociology of sport for its own purposes, contributing to its excesses rather than curtailing them. While these scholars concern themselves with the “colonization” of their discipline by religion, others like Tom Krattenmaker and Michael L. Butterworth are troubled that the merging of religion with
sport jeopardizes sport”s democratic ideals by fraternizing with and ultimately embracing Fundamentalist forms of faith within what should be inclusive domains.74

Others maintain a traditional position regarding the doctrinally stated purposes of religion and subsequently don’t think the core of sport has much to do with real religion at all. Like Joan Chandler, who suggests that “while sport may provide us with examples of belief, ritual, sacrifice, and transcendence,” nevertheless “sport per se cannot tell us where we came from, where we are going, nor how we are to behave while here; sport exists to entertain and engage us, not to disturb us with questions about our destiny.” By her definition, that “uncomfortable prerogative” belongs to religion, and put bluntly—“sport is not a religion.”75 Likewise Tara Magdalinski and Timothy John Lindsey, while acknowledging sport’s offer of “a ritualistic tradition, a complement of suitable deities and a dedicated time and space for worship,” nevertheless cite its failure to “address the basic questions that religious communities try to answer.”76

Still others are concerned that traditional notions of religion are diminished or diluted by associating with sport. In harsh tones, Higgs writes as one perplexed by the scholarly desire to join sport and religion conceptually, suggesting that when considering sports, “little seems to be gained by the apparent obsession to surround them with metaphors of religion or to categorize them as religious”—indeed, it only complicates matters.77 The diluting of religious tradition (re: Western Christendom) with the secularity of modern sports promises dire consequences for both.

Likewise, Shirl Hoffman is concerned that when wed with sport, religion loses its prophetic voice as both a moral change agent and imago dei-encouraging branch of society. He agrees with Frank Deford’s early writing on the subject, arguing that religion, if it has any place at all within the sport conversation, should refine sport, hold it accountable to something
higher—not become one with it. In all these instances, theorists contend (albeit for different reasons) that both sport and religion are better off left essentially where we started—as separate categories, aware of yet directly untainted by the existence of the other.

**Coda: Modern Sport vs. the Problem of Defining Religion**

If we privilege the term “religion” with the supernatural qualities of its original (re: substantive) uses, we might immediately conclude with Higgs, Magdalinski, and Chandler: “Sport is not a religion.” Contra Prebish’s confident though sometimes strained efforts to equate sport with the traditional notion of religion, “substantivists” would align with Edwin H. Cady who asserts that sport as religion is altogether a metaphor, “at best, sort of sacred”—sport working far better as a metaphor for religion than religion working as a metaphor for sport. For how could sport be a religion: Only the most liberal of metaphysical gymnastics would suggest that modern sport concerns itself with the supernatural in any historical use of the term, nor does sport as an institution attempt to tackle the grand philosophical questions of existence directly. Even functionalist definitions that wrap themselves around “ultimate concerns” arguably fall short, since the primary concern within sport is to “win,” not to discern the meaning of life.

We further constrain ourselves when we not only assume the necessity of a supernatural/“other-worldly” concerned referent, but also when we restrict ourselves to the historically institutionalized (re: acceptable) versions that constitute “religion.” In this case, the formalist approach becomes relevant, starting with the comparative forms of traditional religious expression (declaring the sacred, enacting rituals, perpetuating myths, etc.) and attempting to find corollaries within the world of sport—as the literature reveals, a quarry already mined for many rich overlaps and insights. But if we allow for comparisons with such essentialized starting points, we are forced into conclusions that will not always account for the available,
observable data within human interactions, nor are we dealing honestly with the sprawl created by “over 4,200 religions, churches, denominations, religious bodies, faith groups, tribes, cultures, movements, [and] ultimate concerns” that people rely on for organizing their internal lives, not all of which meet the criteria of “historical religions.”

Prebish suggests that “in the rapidly changing world of today, a variety of social and cultural phenomena have appeared that were never anticipated at the beginnings of many of the world”s historical religious traditions.” As demonstrated by recent literature on the subject, those who talk about religion struggle with the changing definition of religion itself, along with the constantly evolving ways that both individuals and communities constitute themselves “religiously”; most evidently, tension arises when trying to force those ways into the old categories, “pouring new wine into old wineskins.” When the skins break, we either ignore the reality of the experience or dismiss it as something less than “religious.” Exposing this problem and the subsequent need for developing possible alternative solutions creates a demand for the kind of work being done in this study.

If problems result from holding to stagnant conceptualizations, we should consider: Why do we privilege the traditional definition with its inherent baggage of expectations? Should we not at least ask: If we could approach this immediate moment completely free of the snare of historically understood examples, images, and prejudices regarding the term “religion,” what would remain for our own cultural age to describe the inveterate human condition, still homo religiosus in spite of ourselves? We might recognize that words change meaning, symbols change meaning, and even sources of meaning change meaning as cultural transformation takes place—indeed, as cultural history demonstrates, neither symbols/words nor the societies within which they are generated remain static. Common use of the word “religion” arguably took on a
more extended definition at the beginning of the twenty-first century than it did at the turn of the twentieth, a broadening that must be taken seriously if we are to deal adequately with “religiosity” in our own cultural moment.\textsuperscript{83} Perhaps we need to be set free from our traditional conceptions of what constitutes religion in lieu of the particular cultural moment within which we find ourselves theorizing—not for the purpose of self-serving and convenient word games, but in an attempt to honestly interpret modern culture.

As Thomas Luckmann suggests, “the recent sociology of religion tends to take a particular historical form for the prototype of religion \textit{tout court} (translated: “and nothing else”),” but to answer some critical social questions it becomes necessary “to find a perspective in contemporary society [that is] less prejudiced and parochial.”\textsuperscript{84} What if we could start with empirical data itself instead of and apart from pre-determined idealized systems of ideas within which they must fit, instead “making bricks with which to build a wall, as against searching for items to fit a blueprint”?\textsuperscript{85} What if, indeed, we might consider whether modern religion might be “regressing” to a social form of religion that preceded institutional specialization, and allowed ourselves to assert that “the norms of traditional religious institutions—as congealed in an „official” or formerly „official” model of religion”—cannot serve as a yardstick for assessing all religious behavior in contemporary society?\textsuperscript{86}

For as has already been noted, sport may never accomplish substantively (nor does it intend to) what historic religions purported to accomplish, nor will a mere formalist/functionalist broadening of our definition of religion help us understand human religiosity if the remnants of the traditional metaphors surrounding the word constantly linger in the background. Regarding our use of the term “religion,” we might heed George Orwell, who suggested a half-century ago that “the worst thing one can do with words is to surrender to them,” since if language should
function as “an instrument for expressing and not for concealing or preventing thought,” then we must “let the meaning choose the word, and not the other way around.” How then should we conceptualize the term “religiosity” given our current cultural moment, and where does the institution of “sport” intersect that conceptualization?

**Part II: The Religious “Turn”: Secularization and/or American Neo-Religiosity?**

Harvey Cox’s axiomatic contention that in 1960s America, while traditional forms of religion might function as a hobby, as a national or ethnic identifier, even as an aesthetic pleasure, nevertheless “for fewer and fewer does it provide an inclusive and commanding system of personal and cosmic values and explanations,” became a cornerstone for the “secularization thesis” of American culture. Indeed, overwhelmingly since the European Enlightenment of the late eighteenth century, “leading figures in philosophy, anthropology, and psychology have postulated that theological superstitions, symbolic liturgical rituals, and sacred practices are the product of the past that will be outgrown in the modern era.” In summarizing this complicated process, C. Wright Mills suggests that at one time “the world was filled with the sacred—in thought, practice, and institutional form. After the Reformation and the Renaissance, the forces of modernization swept across the globe and secularization, a corollary historical process, loosened the dominance of the sacred. In due course, the sacred shall disappear altogether except, possibly, in the private realm.”

When earlier in the century Max Weber spoke not of secularization but rather “the disenchantment of the world,” he framed human social consciousness, as sociologist Peter Berger argues, as “passing from the enchanted garden of primeval religiosity into the cold comfort of modern reality,” where “modern scientific thought places man in a universe devoid of supernatural presences and modern technology gives him the limited comfort of increasing his
control over the universe.” Within this view, Americans essentially traded (or at least blended) their Middle Eastern mythologies with European Enlightenment rationalities, permanently altering socio-religious discourse as a result.

However, the assertion that the rise of scientific progress would cause religion to fade ever-more from the public square and diminish people’s desire for religious fare turned out to be only half right: while formal religious institutions pined, Americans were as “religious” as ever (ironically, perhaps more so), but in decidedly different ways than previously. Even Berger, a chief proponent of an “all or nothing” secularization view in the 1960s and 1970s, wrote years later that “The world today, with some exceptions…is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more than ever. This means that a whole body of literature by historians and social scientists loosely labeled „secularization theory” is essentially mistaken”—though perhaps only mistaken in its most extreme forms.

Indeed, N.J. Demerath III argues against the myopic notion that “religion was once all dominant in pre-Reformation Europe and the undifferentiated societies of underdeveloped countries and tribal settings, but that religion is now in linear decline and destined to disappear altogether in more complex nations.” Instead, he favors a second strand of secularization theory („middle range”) that “eschews the all-or nothing poles of religious omnipotence and religious disappearance.” Acknowledging an ever-present liminality, a moderate view “develops lesser scenarios of secularization that are non-linear in that they are subject to reversals and asymptotic in that they are unlikely ever to bottom out at zero.” As Keith Roberts postulates, “in rapidly changing societies, religion sometimes takes on unconventional forms…these alternative forms of religion mean that religion is not so much declining in North America as changing in significant ways. New forms are emerging and old forms are taking on modified form.”
Regardless of one’s positioning regarding “secularization,” Pippa Norris and Ron Inglehart suggest that no less than a metamorphosis between the historically understood categories “sacred” and “secular” is taking place. They argue that “modernization” (defined as the process of industrialization, urbanization, and rising levels of education and wealth), “greatly weakens the influence of religious institutions in affluent societies, bringing lower rates of attendance at religious services, and making religion subjectively less important in people’s lives,” leaving people with the task of “sacralization” within their own subjective, “secular” experience. As a result, Demerath III posits that people are increasingly christening the historically “secular” as religiously “sacred,” expanding the terms themselves, stimulating “religiosity” by contributing to a “religious vitality through change rather than religious decline and irrelevance through changelessness in a changing world.” The “process of sacralization” phenomenon of the past 50 years created a burgeoning investigation among theologians, anthropologists, and sociologists, practically forcing the idea of “religious” into a period of redefinition.

*The Self as a Site of “Sacralization”: Thomas Luckmann’s “Invisible Religion”*

Writing in the same decade that Cox made his initial assertion, sociologist Thomas Luckmann theorized regarding the secularization trend within American culture. In *The Invisible Religion* (1967), Luckmann acknowledged that secularization was indeed having an effect, though perhaps not the one regularly predicted. He asserted that “the structure of the modern sacred cosmos and its thematic content represent the emergence of a new social form of religion which, in turn, is determined by a radical transformation in the relation of the individual to the social order.” In short, Luckmann suggested that secularization, while perhaps diminishing the role of traditional religious institutional expression and influence in the public square, did
relatively little to people’s desire for “religiosity.” Instead, Luckmann posited the idea that people are just as religious now as they were before, with the exception that they are now burdened with needing to construct their own forms of neo-religiosity to fill the gap left by traditional institutions. 99

In comparison to traditional social orders, the primary public institutions no longer significantly contribute to the formation of individual consciousness and personality, despite the massive performance control exerted by their functionally rational „mechanisms.” Personal identity becomes, essentially, a private phenomenon. This is, perhaps, the most revolutionary trait of modern society. Institutional segmentation left wide areas in the life of the individual unstructured and the overarching biographical context of significance undetermined. 100

Beyond offering doctrinaire teaching on matters of life and death, traditional religious institutions had historically taken the primary role in prompting individuals to view themselves through particular but comprehensively ideal “identity” prisms—yet now their loss of effective control over the population left such work to subjective individuals themselves. Individual identity, meaning, and significance became substantially privatized.

Since the „inner man” is, in effect, an undefinable entity, its presumed discovery involves a lifelong quest. The individual who is to find a source of „ultimate” significance in the subjective dimension of his biography embarks upon a process of self-realization and self-expression that is, perhaps, not continuous—since it is immersed in the routines of everyday life—but certainly interminable. In the modern sacred cosmos self-expression and self-realization represent the most important expressions of the ruling topic of individual „autonomy.” Because the individual’s performances are controlled by the primary public institutions, he soon recognizes the limits of his „autonomy” and learns to confine the quest for self-realization to the „private sphere.”101

While the daily performances of individuals in society could still be “controlled” within work environments, schools, and yes, even traditional places of worship, nevertheless the quest for discovery of an „inner man” who determined ultimate significances through his or her own „self-realization” became en vogue; indeed, according to Luckmann, the primary „spiritual” pursuit of modernity became subjective/biographical identity formation.
Luckmann argued that Americans were pursuing “a radically subjective form of
„religiosity“ characterized by a weakly coherent and nonobligatory sacred cosmos and by a low
degree of „transcendence“ in comparison to traditional modes of religion.”
With no single obligatory sacred system or hierarchy holding sway over public consciousness, instead “the
autonomous consumer selects…certain religious themes from the available assortment and builds
them into a somewhat precarious private system of „ultimate“ significance,” producing a
constantly changing variety of “ultimate” meanings. (What constitutes a “religious theme”
comes from within a constantly expanding notion of religiosity itself, as we shall soon see.)
Throwing off the external restraints and traditional taboos of organized religious parameters,
modern humans were now seemingly free in their private search for identity, as society now
„sacralize[d]” the [relative] liberation of human consciousness” from social constraint.
This “quest for self-realization,” still largely dependent upon social institutions for the raw material of
its construction, becomes never-ending in its re-formation—comprising a significant portion of
the internal life work of each individual human.

Luckmann lamented that “with few exceptions the extensive findings of research in the
sociology of religion provide answers only to those questions which directly concern the fate of
specialized religious institutions in modern society.” Instead, particularly given the changing
ethos within Western culture, we should ask, “What are the norms that determine the effective
priorities in the everyday lives of typical members of modern industrial societies? What are the
subjective relevance systems that have an overarching, sense-integrating function in systems of
„ultimate” significance? How are they linked to social roles and positions?”
In other words, regardless of what people check on a census regarding their stated institutional religious
affiliation, how do they actually order and live their lives? What holds sway over their priorities,
their relationships, their thought processes? How do they conceptualize their self-understanding related to the raw material of their subjectively experienced culture?

Further, though “individual religiosity” (conceived as the subjective formulation of personal identity) would no longer depend on massive public institutions for its confirmation and support, it would nevertheless come to rely upon the more transient support of other “autonomous individuals” who might become partners in “partial sharing” and “joint construction” of systems of ultimate significance. While Luckmann argued that the nuclear family would come to hold even more sway (at least initially) in shaping one’s “sacred cosmos,” he also recognized the secondary role played by subjective others outside the home, since “friends, neighbors, members of cliques formed at work and around hobbies may come to serve as “significant others” who share in the construction and stabilization of „private” universes of „ultimate” significance.” Potentially, “if such universes coalesce to some degree, the groups supporting them may assume almost sectarian characteristics and develop…secondary institutions,” communities that function to give plausibility and support to the individually constructed but now commonly shared belief system.106

Though traditional religious institutions would continue to survive within the increasingly secularized social sphere, having lost their monopoly in defining the sacred cosmos for modern (particularly Western) humans, they would compete “with many other sources of „ultimate” significance for the attention of „autonomous” individuals who are potential consumers of their „product.”107 This “consumer orientation,” an impulse hardly limited to economics, characterizes the individual’s entire life, as she is left with myriad options regarding goods and services, popular media, friends, schools—even determining exactly what characterizes ultimate meaning—offering a rich, heterogeneous assortment of possibilities which make up “the
consumer’s social biography.” Indeed, among the many peddlers contributing to self-understanding, the purveyors of popular culture (for example and of particular concern within this study, the national administers of “sport”) would now play not simply a diversionary role, but would supply fresh data for personal identity construction and worldview formation at a level not previously known, aiding Americans in piecing together a personalized (and in some cases shared) “invisible religion.”

**The Self as a Site of “Deification”: Harold Bloom’s “American Religion”**

Years later, an even more pessimistic Harold Bloom took Luckmann’s thesis further down the trail of inward mobility. Bloom suggests that when the Judeo-Christian ethos held a corner on cultural symbolic representation, even then Americans were driven by alternative, subjectively-chosen internal “religious” processes, asserting that “large unconscious assumptions have far more to do with belief than do overt doctrinal teachings, at least among our vast Protestant population.” As such Bloom concerns himself with what he holds as the genuine American religion of modern experience, examining the motives lurking behind while also being a product of those “large unconscious assumptions.”

Bloom suggested that Americans, cut loose from the strictures of overbearing outside influences on their individual conscious, were nevertheless still torn between competing internal agendas, saddling them with a “fragile” identity. Like Luckmann, he argues that given the waning influence of traditionally understood religious institutions upon the culture, Americans are considerably more free and sanctioned to rove endlessly within their own constructions of internal reality, almost entirely unhindered and unaided by fixed, external evaluative norms. Unlike most countries, we have no overt religion, but a partly concealed one has been developing among us for some two centuries now. It is almost purely experiential, and despite its insistences, it is scarcely Christian in any traditional way. A religion of the self burgeons, under many names, and seeks to know its own inwardness, in isolation.
What the American self has found, since about 1800, is its own freedom—from the world, from time, from other selves. But this freedom is a very expensive torso, because of what it is obliged to leave out: society, temporality, the other. What remains, for it, is solitude and the abyss.\textsuperscript{110}

Americans, in short, must constantly work through a dual tension: who am I as an individual and how do I relate to society at large? Bloom builds on William James’ definition of religion as the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine” by adding this intriguing complication: that is, “the American persuasion, however muted or obscured, that we are mortal gods, destined to find ourselves again in worlds as yet undiscovered.”\textsuperscript{111} For Bloom, Americans see themselves as pragmatically divine, and thus are burdened with constructing a reality that accommodates their own individual conscious while at the same time dealing with other humans as social beings.\textsuperscript{112} Among other implications, this burgeoning narcissism complicates matters by forcing individuals into a fluid negotiation with polysemous cultural texts—texts that provide identity markers and boundaries that refuse stasis, but instead retain constantly shifting meanings.

\textit{Summary Reflections on Luckmann and Bloom}

Temporarily laying aside some of the more provocative assertions in Luckmann and Bloom’s work, two observations stand out for this current study. First, they contend that Americans tend to be pluralists in spite of themselves. The suggestion that Americans are inveterately torn between two realities, the social self and the personal self, parallels a cultural studies benchmark: that we are constantly negotiating belief systems, navigating the tension between our intellectualized spiritual beliefs and the control beliefs of our emotional and psychological life. We all, even those characterized by Fundamentalist concerns, seem to carry a measure of impulsive pluralism within us, despite doctrinal demands to the contrary.\textsuperscript{113} That is,
while our desire to answer questions of “ultimate” concern may be finally answered within one system, that same system, even if predominant in the life of the “believer,” may also find competition from another belief network that touches the immediate concerns of everyday life (or of personal/social identity). As Keith Roberts notes, “The meaning systems of people have, no doubt, always been characterized by a good deal of syncretism, but because of changes in access to the mass media, self-help groups and others espousing their own philosophy of life probably have more influence on common citizens than in earlier eras. This may account for more individuality in meaning systems,” meaning systems that resemble the variety of a buffet rather than a single order from the available menu. Consequently, one need not ultimately settle on just one form to capture their religious imagination; even those who profess ultimate allegiance to one form or another may indeed find under close surveillance that their lived experience is divided out among several competing belief systems, “a *bricolage* in which institutionally validated beliefs are less and less important in individual lives”—hence, religion *a la carte.*

Second, they conclude that Americans ultimately believe themselves in control of their own destiny, practical “gods” unto themselves who construct their own lived environments. In this sense, both Luckmann and Bloom remind us of the “cosmogonic” worldview shaping put forth by Eliade, replicating “the cosmogonic act of the gods in the creation of the world,” empowering humans with a sense of divine agency as they give shape to their personal cosmos. As Roberts explains, the “privatization of religion involves each individual developing a personalized meaning system or philosophy of life by drawing from many sources in modern life, including secular media, the traditional religions, and popular televangelism programs,” extending throughout the raw material of modern social life.
now essentially promoting this freedom, Americans would depend on sources other than and alongside traditional religious institutions to form and establish a “personal identity.”

The concept “identity” has itself taken many turns since Luckmann and Bloom wrote decades ago—politically, socially, and functionally. While “identity” remains a highly contested term within popular cultural and sociological discourse, Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper suggest alternative idioms that might stand in for the word itself, thereby “doing the theoretical work „identity“ is supposed to do without its confusing, contradictory connotations.” Among a host of words and phrases they propose, “self-understanding” becomes particularly useful in our discussion in this context, as it is “a dispositional term that designates what might be called „situated subjectivity“: one’s sense of who one is, of one’s social location, and of how (given the first two) one is prepared to act.” On both the cognitive and emotional level, “self-understanding” connotes the practical sense that persons have of themselves and their social world, and as predicted by Luckmann and Bloom, the quest for self-understanding/identity formation grounds a cornerstone of modern religious sensibility.

**American Religiosity and the New Spirituality: The Quest for “Identity/Self-Understanding”**

In describing our cultural moment, Sean McCloud contends that we live in a period of “extreme” modernity, characterized sociologically by “fewer set identities, fixed roles, and uncontested grand explanatory schemes.” The product of late-modern technical and structural developments is a “globalized society in which risk permeates individual consciousness, constantly upsets feelings of ontological security, and requires the concerted development of trust.” Thus, finding ourselves “disembedded from fixed identities, ascribed communities, and traditional authorities,” humans are increasingly “moved to develop and maintain new identities, achieved communities, and authoritative ontologies.” As a result, Anthony Giddens argues
that humans are “forced” into continually choosing and refining personal “lifestyles,” engaging in constant “reflexive projects of the self,” since in late-modernity “self identity has to be created and more or less continually reordered against a backdrop of shifting experiences of day-to-day life and the fragmenting tendencies of modern institutions.”\textsuperscript{121} Hailing Luckmann’s prediction regarding the consuming quest of modernity to define the “inner man,” these “projects of the self” function to set boundary lines around life—both establishing self-understanding and enabling social connection while scripting a personal narrative within which to live. In Giddens’ telling, “self-identity has to be created and more or less continually reordered against a backdrop of shifting experiences of day-to-day life and the fragmenting tendencies of modern institutions.”\textsuperscript{122}

Elsewhere, in describing late-modernity’s affect on the notion of personal “spirituality,” Robert Wuthnow argues that “a traditional spirituality of inhabiting sacred places has given way to a new spirituality of seeking—that people have been losing faith in a metaphysic that can make them feel at home in the universe and that they increasingly negotiate among competing glimpses of the sacred, seeking partial knowledge and practical wisdom.”\textsuperscript{123} Within this environment, a “person does not have an ascribed identity or attain an achieved identity but creates an identity by negotiating among a wide range of materials.”\textsuperscript{124} He argues then that spirituality becomes a function of personal identity—the quest for a “self”—relocating the traditionally religious and moving it from within an “institution” to within the “self.”

As subjective roles are no longer predefined, “individuals have to worry about who they are, who they want to be, and how they want other people to perceive them,” and their inner life is thus largely ordered by and “connected to the fact that humans increasingly create a sense of personal identity through an active sequence of searching and selecting”—constructing a proper
narrative for the world to see. In turn, as understandings of what constitutes the “sacred” continue to morph and expand, their negotiated personal spirituality becomes much more a quest for self-understanding combined with subjective declarations of “sacred” lived moments as people attempt to understand the ultimate source of sacredness in their own lives. In short, they create and re-create their own subjective “selves,” and correspondingly create and seek their own sense of experiential “sacredness.”

In such an environment, the vestiges of traditional religion combined with the constantly evolving texts of popular culture become cultural resources for constructing both meaning and identity, for comprising the spiritual and declaring the sacred. As Wade Clark Roof suggests, within this late-modern “spiritual marketplace,” ultimately “responsibility falls more upon the individual—like that of a bricoleur—to cobble together a religious world from available images, symbols, moral codes, and doctrines, thereby exercising considerable agency in defining and sharing what is considered to be religiously meaningful.”

In this particular historical moment, the raw material of cultural production gets infused (potentially) with meaning that stretches far beyond the intent of its originator, being co-opted for use in the personal quest for both identity/self-understanding and the development of a particular form of late-modern spirituality.

**Regarding Sport as a Text: Collapsing the Sacred/Secular Divide into Fan Identity**

Reflecting a typically progressive stance on sport and religion, Maurice Roche writes that in a culture where the mass of people claim to be uninterested in religion, “perhaps it is more appropriate to observe that „sport is the religion of the people.‘” Like so many others, he suggests that “sport provides apparently secular, but [from a sociological perspective] quasi-religious experiences such as those of sacredness and transcendence, communal ritual and
symbolism, and collective drama and emotionality. Sport is an important sector of popular culture in modern societies both as a quasi-religious institution and also as an industry.**127

However, this way of conceptualizing “sport as a religion” also maintains and feeds a problematic sacred/secular binary, where “secular sport” (re: low, base, vulgar) is compared to “sacred religion” (re: high, exalted, pure), privileging a persistent duality surrounding the concepts I seek to collapse in this work. Instead, I want to view sport as being sacred on its own terms—perhaps better, the “terms” shaping the contours of “late-modern” spirituality. For as one theologian suggests, “in a pluralistic world, it is not religion (in the traditional sense) we have in common. What we have in common is the secular.” New Zealand scholar Michael Grimshaw amends his own idea by suggesting that “what we also have in common is sport, and we can reinterpret it, re-mythologize it and our lives in the secular, enabling us to express that which we may choose to call our basic spiritual dimensions.”**128

Thus, within a culture searching to re-sacralize rudiments of their “secular” lived world, sport—already containing sundry elements that resemble and hail familiarly traditional religious language (and perhaps in spite of this reality)—becomes fertile ground within which to plant and grow. As a result, it might be said that highly identified fans can show us what it looks like when “worship is enacted within a religious culture free from the authority of only one God and outside of institutional rules of ritual action, an appropriate state of being for people who believe they are in the presence of something extraordinary, breathtaking, and sacred.”**129

**The Experience of (Sport) Fandom within a Pop-Culturally Saturated Environment**

Though historically fandom was categorized as delusional or even psychotic, in recent decades scholarly work on fans began approaching fandom as a serious field of inquiry, recasting fandom of all varieties as a complex arena in which to study the relationship between fans, stars,
entertainment texts, and the media industries. As Jennifer Porter proposes, “far from being a pathological symptom of cultural consumption gone wrong, fandom can be seen as an integral vehicle for the articulation and experience of something deeply meaningful—a statement about what truly matters—as filtered through and symbolized by pop culture.” Broadly defining a “fan” as one who admires or appreciates the object of their attention, as one who distinguishes and forms commitments to particular cultural texts [whether human, material, or ideological], we might ultimately move toward a greater understanding of ourselves by endeavoring to understand the fan impulse.

In Frederick Exley’s fictionalized yet semi-autobiographical A Fan’s Notes, he ponders the extent of his visceral commitment to the New York Giants football team.

In contemplating the primeval hold that the Giants have upon him, Exley’s description not only typifies the highly identified fan, but also moves us beyond a functional “sport is like a religion” characterization toward something more primeval, existential, and at least quasi-ontological.

While heeding the potential contribution of mere nostalgic yearnings, Exley gives up on determining the source of its strength and moves to describing the Giants as his “One God,” as a “life giving, exalting force” presiding ubiquitously over his life-world, testifying to his complete surrender to and identification with the team—indeed, transforming a mere team and game into a sacred source of life. Testimonies like Exley’s suggest that sport maintains a sacred vitality of its own, animating religious energies and stimulating innate longings for personal and social
transcendence that parallel those of traditional, institutionalized religious settings, but also offering something more uniquely positioned outside our normal conceptualizations of “religion.”

Obviously, highly identified fans may find that a significant portion of their self-understanding becomes colored by their relationship to a particular fan text within a specific locale. Returning to Exley’s narrative, we find his protagonist describing the melding of his own subjective person with that of his favorite New York Giant, Frank Gifford.

I cheered for him with such inordinate enthusiasm, my yearning became so involved with his desire to escape life’s bleak anonymity, that after a time he became my alter ego, that part of me which had its being in the competitive world of men; I came, as incredible as it seems to me now, to believe that I was, in some magical way, an actual instrument in his success. Each time I heard the roar of the crowd, it roared in my ears as much for me as him; the roar was not only a promise of my fame—it was its unequivocal assurance.134

This may represent a polar position on the continuum of affect, as certainly not all highly identified fans can consciously identify or express the extent of their connection like Exley, nor are all of them as fully immersed. Yet, for a highly identified fan an intensely perceived connection with either the composite team or specific players comprising the team may influence and contribute to their self-understanding in some similar fashion. As the research findings of Wann and others indicate, “because of their close association with a team, highly identified fans often view it as a reflection of themselves…the team becomes an extension of the individual” and, without a hint of hyperbole, “the team’s successes become the fan’s successes and the team’s failures become the fan’s failures.”135 Hardly limited to a minority position within American culture, highly identified fans’ affective response to a player or team generates definite social ramifications demanding deeper reflection.
Theorizing Fandom in an Identity Starved/Seeking Culture

Cornel Sandvoss notes that “the object of fandom, whether it is a sports team, a television program, a film or pop star, is intrinsically interwoven with our sense of self, with who we are, would like to be, and think we are.” He writes that “the relationship between fans and their objects of fandom is based on fans” self-reflective reading and hence narcissistic pleasures, as fans are fascinated by extensions of themselves without realizing it.”  Hence, a subject’s intensely emotional, fetishistic attachment to “objects” may reflect a fondness for projections of themselves, a method to relieve and resolve narcissistic tensions within their own being, a way to further shape self image. Sandvoss further contends that, “It is not just the fan who appropriates the fan texts, but the text assumes the power to appropriate the fan. While the object of fandom is subject to a radical reworking and appropriation into a reflection of the fan him or herself, the fan text gains structuring influence over the fan.”

Thus, the relationship between the highly identified fan and text becomes symbiotic, where the primary image-bearer becomes unclear: the fan co-opts the text while simultaneously being co-opted by the text itself. (As an example in the context of this work, a fan of a particular team may project moral or social expectations onto the organization and its players as an extension of themselves, while at the same time the performance or movement of the team affects the psychological moods/perspective/expectation of the fan in his or her daily life.) As Sandvoss continues, the fan text moves from being merely a pop cultural object of entertainment to something more primitively significant: “The burden of maintaining the self-reflective relationship between fan and object of fandom falls not on the mirror image alone, but equally on the fan him- or herself. Through fans’ self-reflective reading, the object of fandom, the fan text, becomes a narrative focal point in the construction of life narratives and identities.”
Neal Gabler, in his book *Life: the Movie*, suggests further that beyond the general notion of “secular,” we share a particular identification with popular culture as fans. Gabler reflects on the merging of media transformation and self-conscious identity formation, where life itself now seems a medium we each “perform” in, where every day we don a costume and may choose to identify as classy, blue-collar, urban, casual, defiant, chic, sexy or religious—choices largely influenced by our consumption of “celebrity” culture. He argues that we do not remain aloofly distanced from popular culture, but instead inhabit it in the quest for identity, meaning, and a narrative large enough to satisfy our own imaginations—often allowing and using pop cultural texts to shape and refine our own image and self-understanding. Thus, as a significant locus of popular culture, sport teams and players may do for highly identified fans what movies and their stars do for lovers of Hollywood: they offer building blocks for identity construction and image maintenance, projecting a narrative within which to live.\(^{139}\)

Popular culture becomes a locus where people may construct what Lawrence Grossberg calls a “mattering map,” a multi-layered matrix that determines what carries significant value, priority, and moral weight in a person’s life. Within these “maps,” pop cultural texts become a language that “help[s] organize their emotional and narrative lives and identities,” even letting the object of their affection “speak for and as him or herself.”\(^{140}\) At this point, the text becomes an extension of themselves on multiple levels, hence receiving an ever growing amount of emotional energy. Extending this position, Cheryl Harris writes that fandom is “a feature of everyday life, part of an ongoing struggle in which we all must engage to establish, maintain and repair our own sense of selves.”\(^{141}\) Fan “texts” become a working ground for identity construction, building blocks in Luckmann’s “quest for self-expression and self-realization,”
Bloom’s “religion of the self,” Giddens’ “projects of the self”—the central concern and starting point for subjectively-shaped “invisible religion” within late-modernity.

**Fan Communities: Nurseries of “Neo-Religiosity” and “Postmodern Salvific Moments”?**

One can argue that sport fandom offers a secular alternative to “other-worldly” pursuits, satisfying the same psychological and physiological impulses for community, for ritual and symbol, for moments of perceived transcendence, beyond mere personal identity construction. Fandom, actualized within a collective group, offers both an individual pursuit of self as well as a desire to be collected into a whole, to experience the “collective effervescence” only available within group participation, “a set of people whose interpersonal relations complete for one another the symbolic expression of religious experience.”

McCloud suggests that as fans forge a commitment to a particular text, “they attempt to create and participate in a community tied to nostalgic pasts, identity, and self-fulfillment.” The group helps actualize or reify the experience of personal fandom since “the group legitimates the religious experiences of individuals in it by incorporating them into a social perception of reality and ultimately into the social construction of reality of the culture in which they live.” It has the same (or at least) similar physiological, psychological, communal affect as traditional religious groups, even if dealing with different forms of questions and stated pursuits, borrowing religious terminology while changing the locus of the “congregation”’s” ultimate, articulated quest.

Reflective of “fandoms” in general, an inter-connected community may form around the same text within a fixed location, relying on both a “categorical commonality” and “relational connectedness” to draw them together. However, Brubaker and Cooper suggest that “when a diffuse self-understanding as a member of a particular nation (or city) crystallizes into a strongly bounded sense of groupness (the sense of belonging to a distinctive, bounded, solitary group),
this is likely to depend not on relational connectedness, but rather on a powerfully imagined and strongly felt commonality.”¹⁴⁶ Thus, one need not be relationally connected in any meaningful way apart from the imagined connection created by affiliation with the fan text. Nevertheless, a “collective identity” related to the text—that is, the aggregated individual “self-understandings” of a fan base—may also be significantly molded by that same text.

Not surprisingly, then, given the intensity of personal and collective experience surrounding fan events, fans often appropriate historically “religious” language to describe their devotion to the fan text since, as McCloud observes, “the late modern project of the self is weighty business, and for many moderns the most serious language they have access to is religious.”¹⁴⁷ However, Matt Hills cautions that “neoreligiosity, not religion is what we must consider when thinking about cult fandoms.”¹⁴⁸ For Hills, “neo-” implies that something new (or at least detached from the baggage of institutional religion) is happening among humans devoted to fan texts, while “religiosity” recognizes the uncanny parallels to historical (re: institutional), religious communities reflected in fan behavior.¹⁴⁹

Hills cites devotion to fan texts as “novel religious forms which are assumed to supersede organized religion,” while embracing Luckmann’s thesis predicting “a move from socially-organized religion to „individual religiosity” revolving around loosely connected themes and deriving from the individual’s experiences…in the private sphere.” Further hailing Luckmann, Hills describes the search for “non-institutionally specific religious activity” which “continues to co-ordinate the efforts of the individual to create, or find himself created within, a „symbolic universe” which could act as a sacred context through which everyday practical actions could be legitimated or regulated”—with the texts of fan cultures being prime options for inclusion in the fluid canon of secularized sacrality.¹⁵⁰
Again, fandom provides structuring boundaries within which to develop a subjective sense of identity, a “self” for presentation to the rest of society, reified by the texts (re: teams) themselves. But fandom also offers what Michael Grimshaw calls “postmodern salvific experiences” for both individuals and groups—a “total now-ness of being” in the world without the other-worldly connotation of a traditional understanding of mysticism. He refers to “the newness and fullness of being with, where life and world wondrously conjoin” in a moment, and borrows from Nicolas Berdyaev the notion that

Religious life is a spiritual experience not a psychological one, nor is it a reality that comes to us from without. *Spiritual life is the awakening and the manifestation of the soul.* That is why the religious life is an acquiring of kinship...Religion can be defined as an experience of intimacy and kinship with being. In religious life man ceases to be aware of his strangeness and isolation.

Thus, sport fandom “enable[s] us to realize that we can recognize, create and participate in the „unguarded moment” where we gain a new reading of existence, that moment when the sense of rapturous enjoyment, at-one-ment, and the epiphany of „spiritual aesthetics” occurs.” At their best, sports offer to both participants and spectators “experiences of the ineffable outside the constraints and parameters of religious institutions.” Cornel Sandvoss, concurring with Grimshaw’s appreciation for the “postmodern salvific” efficacy of the fan text, observes that “in contrast to religion, fandom lacks an absolute, other-worldly framework through which social realities are constructed and legitimized...rather than a communal search for a future place in another world, they are individual journeys seeking a sense of place in this world.” Indeed, the possibility that a sport team or individual player provides an embodied sense of transcendence for the fan—not transporting him out of this world but focusing him within this one, enabling her to “burst totally and completely, yet fleetingly, into the „now””—once again reflects a “postmodern” (or late-modern) conceptualization of religious experience.
In a “disenchanted” world, we might find great solace in anything that gives us whiffs of something “other” along the way—even if that transcendent other remains ironically yet entirely this worldly—and sport fandom fills a part of that void for highly identified fans. I would argue that pop cultural texts do the heavy lifting for a late-modern notion of embodied spirituality: they provide material for self-understanding and identity formation, and they offer opportunity for a heightened spiritual sense of oneness with the material creation as encountered. As Chidester notes, “traces of religion, as transcendence, as the sacred, as the ultimate, can be discerned in the play of popular culture. As a result, we can conclude that popular culture is doing a kind of religious work, even if we cannot predict how that ongoing religious work of American popular culture, now diffused all over the globe, will actually work for the United States of America.”

That “religious work,” to be properly appreciated, must be read against the backdrop of a non-institutionalized version of religious sensibility and experience, an understanding of the pre-eminence of the “self” within the spiritual marketplace, and the positioning of popular culture among both realities.

Regardless of the situated particulars structuring our cultural moment, humans persist in seeking something by which to order their lives and to construct/reconstruct their identity. The late-capitalist cultural enterprise conspires to offer the raw material of “religious” devotion and expression, helping them do both. Will sports team devotion carry us through the death of a child or satisfy our soul in hospice? Probably not. But again, there are other questions pertaining to religiosity at stake. Unavoidably, in moments of extreme duress, we all find whether what we truly believe has the power to satisfy; short of those severe moments, in a culture granted leisure time as a category of life, we remain largely uninhibited from developing our own ideas about what constitutes religion and spirituality for “me.” As Luckmann and
Bloom and others note, this truth encompasses both the beauty and the tragedy of being a twenty-first century American: we are free to pursue exactly what suits us, and are fully responsible to embrace the consequences of our choices—whether positive or negative—alone in the end.

Implicit Religion as a Lens into Neo-Religiosity

Often the struggle to position sport *vis-a-vis* religion boils down to asking whether it becomes possible to receive from elements surrounding sport culture what people get/got from traditional religion. As already suggested, perhaps the question needs reframing in a secularized, mass-marketed, immediate, self-realization seeking culture—indeed, why should it matter? Why should we privilege traditional religion, its imagery, and its academically established categories when we use the word “religion” or when evaluating modern institutions for their “religious” value? Isn’t there a separate question—that is, not whether secular religious expressions are efficacious according to traditional religion, but whether they meet the standard of a secularized cultural expression of spirituality today?

With this in mind, moving through and extending beyond Luckmann’s “invisible religion,” Bloom’s “American religion,” Giddens’ “projects of the self,” Hills’ fandom as “neoreligiosity,” and Grimshaw’s ‘postmodern salvific moments,” this study finds Bailey’s theory of “implicit religion” particularly useful for studying fan cultures in general, and specifically the fan culture of Cleveland. Implicit religion as a rubric does not supply an institutionalized approach but rather one recognizing that religiosity presents itself throughout the world, not only through traditional categories but also in countless more secular ways that lie outside normativized boundaries. Bailey recognizes the possibility of behaving in ways that are considered historically religious (that is, behaviors that fall within the moral or *regula* proscribed
boundaries of institutionalized religions), while not tracing their source to those traditions whatsoever. For example, praying “without formulating any concept of a Being to whom one prays,” or having peace, hope, and love without being tied to a specific Deity common to the original model of western religious studies; indeed, altogether releasing “the study of religion from the final consequences of its western origins.”

Like others, he contends that the ideal-type terms “holy” and “sacred,” so much a part of previous “sociology of religion” discussions, do not account for all that constitutes “religiosity” in modern culture. Bailey asks “if the human quality of dimensional religion in small scale universes can be summarized as a sense of the sacred; and if the human quality of relational religion in historical civilizations can be summarized as encountering the holy; what form (if any) does religious experience typically take in contemporary society or culture?”

He answers his own question by offering the idea of “implicit religion”—a symbolic concept that seeks to discover “what makes people tick,” not just in a secular society but within any culture constituted as human. Indeed, both within the visible, explicitly embraced, institutionally affirmed forms of religiosity as well as “the formation of religious phenomena and…[the] forms of actual religiosity which either precede the stage in which they present themselves in terms of a specific tradition, or are not explicitly identified as religion” at all.

“Implicit religion” sets out to “understand people as they really are—as people…to understand the Causes for which they live, and might die, as well as the causes of their living and dying—those things about which they are Determined, as well as those things by which they are determined.”

Being human, regardless of census check-boxes and official meeting attendance, involves a paradoxical dialectic: being religious in a secular sort of way while also being secular in a religious sort of way. In this sense, most people live with a certain lack of “integrity,” since
it could be that the unofficial religion is, for a certain (individual or social) unit of personal life, at a particular moment, perhaps only in specific ways, their real religion; while their professed religion is really merely their quasi-religion, operating say, only at the level of formal identity, or in their political life. On the other hand, each may be empirically true to real life in different situations.\textsuperscript{161}

Bailey’s tripartite rubric, by his own admission a development of Luckmann’s “invisible religion” thesis, functions as a hermeneutic of social reality that is “concerned with the medley of human intentionality,” highly sensitive to the pluralistic nature not just of belief but also behavior in a secularized culture.\textsuperscript{162} While concentrating on human attitude, rather than just the forms of its expression, it qualitatively observes these interwoven aspects of human belief/behavior: 1) commitment, 2) integrating foci (or nodes of belief), and 3) intensive concerns with extensive effects.\textsuperscript{163} The interplay, overlap, and cross-cutting of the terms with a particular subject attempt to lay bare those realms of interiority constituting the “religious” dimension of a person’s existence, where religion has less to do with formal, institutionalized expressions and more with the pre-conventional, subjective, personalized organizing of one’s life. If, as Ellwood contends, “religion always presupposes a reality other than the visible…religion draws maps of the invisible world,” might we allow the possibility that especially in a world where institutional conceptions of the divine “Other” are publically smothered or removed altogether, we could expect the neo-religions (re: alternatives to institutional religion) to map the interior of our own constructions of spiritual consciousness?\textsuperscript{164} Implicit religion presupposes that a mapping of the invisible world is constantly taking shape—both consciously and unconsciously, individually and communally—and that assessing “commitment,” identifying “integrating foci,” and tracing “intensive concerns with extensive effects” might allow access to those arenas of human being responsible for such work.\textsuperscript{165}
Implicit Religion in the Context of Cleveland Sport Fandom

In this project, I am concerned with the immediate cultural-religious climate within American culture; specifically, “the cultural grounds on which contemporary forms of religion and the sacred are constructed and contested” among a group of highly identified sport fans in Cleveland, Ohio.¹⁶⁶ Traditional forms of religious involvement are obviously still practiced in this environment but within this discussion they are not constraining.¹⁶⁷ Moving beyond the surface discussion of whether or not sports can be considered a religion in the historical/institutionalized sense, I am more concerned here with the pluralistically lived reality of persons in their daily lives—specifically, how sports might be constituted in an implicitly religious sense in the lives of Clevelanders (particularly relative to their “self understanding”).

As Jennifer Porter suggests, the essence of understanding implicit religion in pop culture fandom contexts involves uncovering what a person stands for, what they feel they must or must not do, who they feel they are, who they belong with, and how they ultimately situate themselves in their own personal history, their community, the world, and the cosmos.¹⁶⁸ In this study, I will explore the possibility that professional sports do not exist as mere entertainment outlets, but rather play a significant role in the lives of autonomous reality constructors, contributing to the sacred cosmos of a post-modern technological society. Where the seeking of an identity and/or self-understanding becomes a significant portion of the personal religious aim, where “religious thought and activity represents one”s acting-out or actualizing who one thinks he or she really is deep within,“ identification with a sports team may play a critical role toward that very end.¹⁶⁹
Notes

1 Michael Novak, *The Joy of Sports: End Zones, Bases, Baskets, Balls, and the Consecration of the American Spirit* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), 3. I also agree with Robert W. Coles who suggests that depending on one’s starting point, those discussing the sociological overlap of sport and religion are often “like an artist, a botanist and a lumberjack trying to describe the important features of a tree: it is unlikely they would use the same terms, or even roughly equivalent terms.” See Robert W. Coles, “Football as a Surrogate Religion,” in M. Hill, ed., *Sociological Yearbook*, 61-64.

2 See Appendix B for various examples. See also James Mathisen, “American Sport as Folk Religion: Examining a Test of its Strength,” in Joseph L. Price, *From Season to Season* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 2001), 141. Mathisen notes that “religionists, philosophers, historians, communications theorists, and especially sociologists have joined the discussion.”

3 Charles Prebish, “The Sports Arena: Some Basic Definitions,” in Charles Prebish, *Religion and Sport: The Meaning of the Sacred and Profane* (London: Greenwood Press, 1993), 19-43, where Prebish likewise attempts to position the terms. See also Coles, “Surrogate,” 62, where he suggests that the sociological study of both sport and religion “are populated, for similar reasons, with one set of people eager to destroy and debunk the myths of others, while another set are not a little frightened of laying too much emphasis on the social processes involved, and spoiling the magic of that which they consider to be so important.”


10 Prebish, “Basic Definitions,” 25. Prebish suggests an inverse relationship between sports becoming more hierarchically organized and a participant’s ability to experience “fun.” For him, formalization constitutes the final extension from pure sport to what he calls athletics: “the organized program of games in a school, college, or university.


12 See Richard Lipsky, *How We Play the Game: Why Sports Dominate American Life* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1981), 9-10, where he poignantly offers that “The Sportsworld is a lived world, like those of literature and the theater, that
is highly charged with human meaning. As a dramatic and symbolic world the Sportsworld has its own plots, scenes, characters, and settings. The game itself is the ritual hub of the sports universe; the team provides social structure; sports language gives the world cohesion; fans play the game vicariously through the athletes. Underneath and penetrating all the dramatic appeals is the powerful symbolism of play. The success of the Sportsworld rests on its ability to build its symbolic structure on the memory of play, on the illusion of play, and, finally, on the fantasy of play.”


18 J. Milton Yinger, *The Scientific Study of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1970), 7; F.J. Streng, C.L. Lloyd, and J.T. Allen, *Ways of Being Religious* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: 1973), 6-9; also, Hoffman, *Sport and Religion*, 10, where he further says, “This „ultimate“ undergirds, conditions, and encompasses human life such that without it, in the face of death, unfilled hopes and personal alienation, life would be meaningless and dead…According to Streng’s definition, any human activity one undertakes with hopes of moving toward the ultimate has the potential to be religious.”


21 Albanese, *Religion and Religions*, xvii.


23 Ibid, 28.


25 Most discussion concerning “sport as a religion” seems to have the Christian tradition in mind as a backdrop and starting point. Borrowing from Hoffman, *Sport and Religion*, viii, we should not be surprised that scholars begin here, since though it is true that “prominent American athletes are numbered among those faithful to the tenets of Judaism, Islam, and other religions,” nevertheless “religion in American sport is by and large a derivative of American Christianity, both in its Catholic and Protestant versions.”


Edwards, *Sociology in Sport*, vii. See Earl Smith, ed., *Sociology of Sport and Social Theory* (Champaign, Il.: Human Kinetics, 2010), xii, where Smith says that “While Edwards’ book cannot be said to be the first or the only theoretically framed examination of sport and society, the dissertation which led to the book publication represented one of the first systematic efforts to utilize social theory to empirically examine the world of sport and identify sport as a microcosm of society.”

See Kevin O’Gorman, *Saving Sport: Sport, Society and Spirituality* (Dublin: Columba Press, 2010), 8, where he insists that “For many people, sport isn’t just the icing on the cake of life. It is life. Next to sex, it is what makes the world go round for a large proportion of the western world, now with plenty of time on its hands and not a notion of what to do with it. That is why sport has become far too important to be left to the sports pages.”

Robert Bellah popularized the idea of non-traditional religious expression through secular means, and others soon recognized the possibility of re-categorizing the American sport phenomenon as something akin to religion. In Bellah’s conceptualization of “civil religion,” he cites the co-mingling of a generic god (though usually internalized as a Judeo-Christian version) and national ideology, reified through calendar, ritual, and speech, “a collection of beliefs, symbols, and rituals with respect to sacred things and institutionalized in a collectivity” such that particular religious divisions are transcended in the pursuit of a national faith. See Robert Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” *Daedalus*, vol. 96, no. 1: (1967), 8. Initially conceived in Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract* (New York: Penguin Books, 1762/1968).


Edwards, *Sport and Sociology*, 90. Italics added to both quotes.

Edwards, *Sport and Sociology*, 364. Agreeing with Edwards, Zbigniew Krawczyk offers one of the more provocative theses regarding the civil religious impulse of the sports institution in general. He notes sport’s “parasacral function,” arguing that dating back to the original Greek Olympian games that sport was used to tap into “sacred” (as opposed to “profane”) interests but became “desacralized” when the Christian church, after becoming the dominant European religion, “did not recognize the sacred properties of sport.” As such, sport has since been used to increase and strengthen the nation-state, no longer concerned with appeasing the “gods,” but rather, the secular deification of nationhood. See Zbigniew Krawczyk, “Sport and Sacrum,” in Georg Anders and Mait Arvisto, *European Integration and Sport: Selected Papers of the First Conference of the European Association for Sociology of Sport* (Munster: Lit, 2004), 142.
Cornish Rogers, “Sports, Religion and Politics: The Renewal of an Alliance,” The Christian Century 89 (April 5, 1972): 392-394. Ironically, the “established religion” being reified may refer to either the generic civil religion that binds us together, or the privileged and rhetorically similar remnants of dormant Protestantism still embedded in the cultural/historical fibers of our nation in spite of intensified secularism in the public square.

See also Gary Laderman, Sacred Matters: Celebrity Worship, Sexual Ecstasies, the Living Dead, and Other Signs of Religious Life in the United States (New York: The New Press, 2009), 54, where he writes that “Although some see it as simply a national, secular holiday, the Super Bowl plays out in American culture year after year as a religious event, sacrosanct and celebratory in the lives of millions of fans from all faith traditions and philosophical schools, including believers and nonbelievers, God fearing fundamentalists and free-spirited lefties.”

Joseph Price, “The Super Bowl as Religious Festival,” The Christian Century (February 22, 1984): 190-191. See Barbara Ehrenreich, Dancing in the Streets: A History of Collective Joy (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006), 225-246, where she contends that the modern sport spectacle, providing something significantly more important than just a civil religious function, fills the void left behind when “carnival” was removed from the American social sphere. In this sense, the Super Bowl is the ultimate sporting/social carnival.

Craig A. Forney, The Holy Trinity of American Sports (Macon, Ga: Mercer University Press, 2007), 24. See also Michael Mandelbaum, The Meaning of Sports: Why Americans watch Baseball, Football, and Basketball and What They See When They Do (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), where Mandelbaum takes the same three sports and highlights their reflection of particular eras of American cultural history. Clifford Geertz, reflecting upon the social positioning of Balinese cockfighting in the lives of participants, draws a conclusion that might be applied to the ethos experienced at the championship game in any of the three main professional American sports: “What the cockfight says it says in a vocabulary of sentiment—the thrill of risk, the despair of loss, the pleasure of triumph. Yet what it says is not merely that risk is exciting, loss depressing, or triumph gratifying, banal tautologies of affect, but that it is of these emotions, thus exampled, that society is built and individuals are put together.” See Clifford Geertz, “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight,” in The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays (New York: Basic, 1973), 448.

As one of the first to make this claim, A. James Rudin, primed by the resultant uproar after the NFL scheduled to playoff games on Christmas 1971, suggested that “professional football has emerged as a new religion which supplements—and in some cases even supplants the older religious expressions of Judaism and Christianity.” Illustrating his point by drawing parallels between training regiments, demand for commitment, uniforms, weekly rituals, devotees, pilgrimages, specialized nomenclature, and ultimate goals, Rudin proposed that his examples clearly illustrated, albeit rather superficially, that “pro football is indeed America’s new religion,” but only in the sense of relative devotion and outward, formal appearances. A. James Rudin, “America’s New Religion,” The Christian Century 89 (April 5, 1972): 384.

See Karla Zimmerman, ed., The USA Book: A Journey Through America (Victoria, Australia: Lonely Planet Publications, 2009), 18. “You can talk all you want to about arts, politics, religion or any of those other admirable pursuits. What really draws Americans together, sometimes slathered in blue body paint or with foam-rubber cheese wedges on their heads, is sports. It provides social glue, so whether one is conservative or liberal, married or single, Mormon or pagan, come Monday at the office he or she is chatting about the performance of their favorite team.” See also John W. Loy, Barry D. McPherson, and Gerald S. Kenyon, Sport and Social Systems: A Guide to the Analysis, Problems, and Literature (Reading, Ma.: Addison-Wesley, 1978), 301, where they argue that sport functions as “a civil religion or quasi-religious institution, which replaces sectarian religion for the purpose of fostering social integration.”

See O’Gorman, Saving Sport, 212, where he affirms the idea that “Were a historian to search for our era’s understanding of itself, he would find few clear or coherent voices. Some of those voices would sound bemused, claiming that in despite the immensity of its reach, sport is an ephemeral pastime. Others would case sport as a religion without a god, its rituals a late modern liturgy, its champions touched by divinity.”

46 Albaneese, *Religions and Religion*, 475. Though Albaneese seems at times to be splitting hairs between civil, cultural, ordinary, and natural religions in an effort to categorize American religiosity, nevertheless her explanation of “cultural” religion moves us a step beyond the narrowly political implications of Edwards’ “sport as civil religion.”


49 Albaneese, *Religions and Religion*, 476. See 477-482 where she also examines the role of technology and popular psychology alongside sports in fulfilling the same role. See also Howard S. Slusher, *Man, Sport, and Existence: A Critical Analysis* (Philadelphia: Lea and Febiger, 1967), 134, where he contends that as sport “evolves into a symbolically developed ideology...sport becomes both what it is and a declaration of the culture...(One) need look no further than the Americanization of sport in keeping with the technological and materialistic values of our society.”

50 We might ask how changes in the sport ethos since Albaneese first wrote this in 1983 would change the culturally religious message of today. Indeed, these changes are significant to the place of professional sports in aligning with the individualistic American religion of today, which Mathisen also notes. As religious historian John Wilson articulates, “the world of sports has become central to American popular culture....The emphasis upon success, closely identified with money, derived from brute power melded with technical expertise, is perhaps the most direct and telling dramatization of the content of the American culture....This culture created and sustained through the modern means is linked to public religion in America.” See John F. Wilson, *Public Religion in American Culture*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1979), 135.


56 Novak’s work became, as one critic noted, “a nodal point in the analysis of sport and religion: here was someone taken seriously as a philosopher, theologian and scholar of religion who in turn was taking sports seriously.” What

57 Novak, *Joy of Sports*, 18-19, 31. He repeatedly states that “sport is not a religion in the same way that Methodism, Presbyterianism, or Catholicism is a religion,” nor “Christianity, or Judaism, or Islam, or Buddhism, or any other of the world religions,” yet pragmatically we must conclude that Novak believes sport closer to these affective traditions than the more placid civil religion of Americanism. The institutions of sport generate something like a civil or secular religion in its non-traditionally religious sense, yet sport as an experience is closer to traditional religions in its affects.

58 Ibid., 19-20, 27.

59 Ibid., 20.

60 Ibid., 21.

61 Ibid., 48.


68 Bonnie Miller-McClemore, “Through the Eyes of Mircea Eliade: United States Football as a Religious Rite de Passage,” in Price, *From Season to Season*, 121. See also K. Erik Thoennes, “Created to Play: Thoughts on Play, Sport, and the Christian Life,” in Deardorff II and White, eds., *The Image of God in the Human Body*, 79-100, where Thoennes makes a similar argument. See also Lonnie D. Kliever, “God and Games in Modern Culture,” in Price, *From Season to Season*, 42. The very reality of play’s power to “create alternative views of reality and states of consciousness is why play always occurred under religious control in traditional societies.” Thus, according to Kliever, the efficacy of play to produce a sense of transcendence led religious authorities to demonize it, attempting to smother its effects in the lives of the populace.

69 Joseph Price, “From Season to Season: The Rhythmic and Religious Significance of American Sports Seasons,” in Price, *From Season to Season*, 54-57. He sees a sacred occurrence even in the rhythm of the sporting calendar itself, asserting that “with the cycle of the seasons, resolution and renewal can be effectively anticipated and realized.” Slusher reiterates the sacred nature of sporting contexts by saying that “The arenas and coliseums are little more than shrines for spiritual activity. They allow man to escape the boredom of everyday life and reach out to a larger existence.” In Slusher, *Sport, Man, and Existence*, 127.

71 Ibid., 223.


76 Tara Magdalinski and Timothy John Lindsey, *With God on Their Side: Sport in the Service of Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 1, 198-199. In citing people’s lack of devotion to sports in times of crisis, as in the aftermath of the 2001 terrorist attacks, they conclude that “sport is clearly not a religion, for when it comes to the crunch, it fulfils few of the functions of religion.” However, see also Michael L. Butterworth, “Ritual in the „Church of Baseball”: Suppressing the Discourse of Democracy After 9/11,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, Vol.2, No. 2 (June 2005), 107-129, where he contends that sporting events, with their unique blending of religious ritual and political rhetoric, provided a communal balm in packed stadiums of solace after the events of 9/11. Indeed, communally watched sporting events may provide something that traditional religion supplies in the midst of grief, even if we determine they are not as efficacious if consumed in isolation.


78 Frank Deford, “Religion in Sport,” *Sports Illustrated*, (April 19, 1976): 100. In his highly-cited *Sports Illustrated* essay “Religion in Sport,” Deford lamented the rise in what he termed “Sportianity,” the influx of religious organizations that had co-opted the sport scene for the purpose of evangelism, while not “speak(ing) out against the cheating in sport, against dirty play”; further, “no one attacks the evils of recruiting, racism or any of the many other well-known excesses and abuses,” arguably condoning behaviors with their conspicuous moral silence.


80 Found at [http://www.adherents.com/](http://www.adherents.com/), a site devoted to gathering information on all groups that constitute themselves somehow “religiously.”


83 N.J. Demerath, III, suggests that within a discussion today that co-mingles “sacred,” “secular,” and “religion,” religion exists as an outlier, confusing the discussion by its very presence. He particularly concerns himself with the infecting of the word “sacred” with the germs of “religion,” citing three reasons to de-shackle the terms: 1) When religion is used as the model, it tends to narrow the search for the sacred to only those things which are historically considered religious in character; 2) using religion as our model/plumb line tends to imply that organizations, experiences, and events that fall short of the model may fall short in providing sacred consequences; 3) using...


92 See Zimmerman, *The USA Book*, 20. “Today, Protestants are on the verge of becoming a minority in the country they founded. Numbers have declined steadily, from about two-thirds of residents in the 1980s to 51% currently, according to the Pew Research Center. Catholics represent about 24% of the country, with the denomination receiving a boost from Latino immigration. Those practicing the main non-Christian religions—Islam, Buddhism, Hindu, Judaism—have grown collectively to represent nearly 5% of the country. Mormons comprise about 2%. The remaining slice of the pie—and one of the fastest growing categories—is ‘unaffiliated.’ These are Americans who say they have ‘no religion’; the proportion has grown to 16%. Some in this catch-all category disavow religion altogether (around 4%), but more nurse spiritual beliefs that simply fall outside the box. Americans are fluid regarding religion.” (Italics added)


95 Roberts, *Sociological Perspective*, 371. See also Sean McCloud, “Liminal Subjectivities,” 298, who in citing the large numbers of those identifying as “unaffiliated but not unbelieving” on a 2006 Baylor Religion Survey suggests that “denominational identification is becoming progressively less significant for individuals, but religion itself is not. Religion continues to be important in individuals” everyday lives—even for those who do not belong to a religious institution.”

96 Norris and Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular*, 25. They continue: “The overall trend is clear: within most advanced industrial societies, church attendance has fallen, not risen, over the past several decades; moreover, the clergy have largely lost their authority over the public and are no longer able to dictate to them on such matters as birth control, divorce, abortion, sexual orientation, and the necessity of marriage before childbirth.” However, researching attendance within historically “religious” services, Stanley Presser and Mark Chaves found that “evidence from all sources indicates that weekly attendance at religious services has been stable since 1990. Taking a longer view, the best evidence—from time-use studies—suggests that weekly attendance at religious services declined between 1950

97 See Demerath, III, *Varieties*, 3. See also Yinger, *Scientific Study of Religion*, vii, where he says, “To me, the evidence is decisive: human nature abhors a vacuum in systems of faith. This is not, then, a period of religious decline but is one of religious change.” See also Mark Chaves, “Secularization as declining religious authority,” *Social Forces*, vol. 72, no. 3 (1994): 749-774.

98 Luckmann, *Invisible Religion*, 114. See also 40, where he attributes the lack of recognition or “obscuring” of this “new social form of religion” to the “survival of traditional forms of church religion, the absence, in the West, of an institutionalized antichurch, and the overwhelming significance of Christianity in the shaping of the modern western world.”

99 Or perhaps just as “irreligious” as the historical record may now show.


101 Ibid., 110.

102 Ibid., 117.

103 Ibid., 102.

104 Ibid., 117. Acknowledging the surface blessing of a “liberation (that) represents a historically unprecedented opportunity for the autonomy of personal life for ‘everybody,’” Luckmann at the same time feared the embracing of a “nonobligatory sacred cosmos” would impair society, fearing Americans would retreat en masse into a private sphere to seek their own destiny “while Rome burns.”

105 Ibid., 91.

106 Ibid., 106.

107 Ibid., 107-108.

108 Ibid., 98. See also 99, where Luckmann further asserts that “the individual constructs not only his personal identity but also his individual system of ‘ultimate’ significance…a certain level of subjective reflection and choice determines the formation of individual religiosity. The individual systems of ‘ultimate’ significance tend to be…both syncretistic and vague, in comparison with an ‘official’ model internalized.”


110 Ibid., 37.


112 Who, incidentally, are charged with their own claim to “divinity,” making for interesting social tensions.

113 Roberts, in making a distinction between “official” religion and “non-official” religion, argues that while ecclesiastical leaders strive to maintain doctrinal continuity and consistency, in fact “many people seem to be quite comfortable with a highly incoherent assortment of beliefs and practices….Rationalized theology may be less capable of providing a powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting system of meaning for the average person.” Roberts, *Sociological Perspective*, 91.

Merideth B. McGuire, *Religion: The Social Context* 5th ed. (Belmont, Ca.: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2002), 293. Prebish suggests that one cannot be faithfully devoted to a traditional religious establishment and also worship at the altar of sport. Price on the other hand, notes: “This conflict arises most frequently out of monotheistic concerns, since in monotheistic traditions true believers can adhere to only one form of faith. However, if we recognize, with historians of religion like Mircea Eliade, that it is possible for persons to be simultaneously religious in apparently competing ways, then a new respect for pluralism might arise, and we could consider ways to appreciate the rhythmic or antagonistic forces for allegiance among devoted fans who are also faithful followers of an established religious tradition.” See Prebish, “Heavenly Father, Divine Goalie,” 52-53, and Joseph Price, *From Season to Season*, 229.

In Price, *From Season to Season*, 223.

Roberts, *Sociological Perspective*, 365. “The product that each popular philosopher is selling is a worldview—with its own definition of what makes life worth living. Popular religious tracts, *Playboy* magazine, psychological theories expressed in best-selling books and magazines, and underlying themes and values in popular television programs can all affect a person’s sense of the meaning of life and one’s individual ‘philosophy of life.’”


Brubaker and Cooper, “Beyond ‘Identity,’” 17.


Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, 186. See also James William Coleman, *The New Buddhism: The Western Transformation of an Ancient Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 211, where he further says that “identity is no longer a given; we must actively work to construct our own sense of who we are, which is then continuously revised in terms of the responses we elicit from others and our evaluations of our own performances. The pervasive psychological uncertainty of our times has led us to ravenous hunger for identity.” He argues that uncertainty and a loss of ascribed identity have led to “a society of seekers straining to discover a religious identity that can anchor our precarious sense of who we are.”

Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 3-4. Wuthnow suggests that Americans, while trying to navigate life with both feet planted firmly in the air, have shifted from a spirituality of “dwelling” to one of “seeking.” “A spirituality of dwelling emphasizes habitation: God occupies a definite place in the universe and creates a sacred space in which humans too can dwell; to inhabit sacred space is to know its territory and to feel secure. A spirituality of seeking emphasizes negotiation: individuals search for sacred moments that reinforce their conviction that the divine exists, but these moments are fleeting; rather than knowing the territory people explore new spiritual vistas, and they may have to negotiate among complex and confusing meanings of spirituality.”
124 Ibid., 9-10.
125 Ibid., 10.
127 Maurice Roche, “Mega-Events and Media Culture: Sport and the Olympics,” in David Rowe, ed., *Critical Readings: Sport, Culture and the Media* (Maidenhead, Berkshire: Open University Press, 2004), 169. See also Roche, *Sport, Popular Culture and Identity*, 2, where Roche reflects that “The development and spread of sport since the late 19th century in the West and across the world was once profoundly bound up with processes of nation-building and modernization. The spectator spheres addressed by sport organizations and sport events throughout much of the 20th century, including those constructed by nationally oriented press, radio and early mass television, were predominantly built on a local-national axis. *As such they fostered both local and national collective identities.*” (Italics added)
134 Exley, *A Fan’s Notes*, 148-149.
137 Ibid., 110-111.
138 Ibid., 110-111. Italics added.
139 However, note the important distinction Gunther Luschen, George Harvey Sage and Leila Sfeir make when they say that “To understand the meaning of spectator sports in contemporary society, as well as its popularity, it is necessary to direct attention to what in English is termed the „fan” rather than the casual observer.” What holds true sociologically for the “highly identified fan” does not necessarily correlate for the casual (or even regular) observer. See Gunther Luschen, George Sage, and Leila Sfeir, *Handbook of Social Science of Sport* (Champaign, Ill.: Stipes Publishing Co., 1981), 354. See also Wann, et. al., *Sport Fans*, 2-4, where the authors further distinguish between “sport fans and sport spectators,” “direct and indirect sport consumers,” and “lowly and highly identified sport fans.”
140 Grossberg, “Affective,” 60-63. Grossberg further argues that fans actively construct their identities within consumer culture “partly because there seems to be no other space available, no other terrain on which we can construct and anchor our mattering maps.”
See Hoffman, “Sport as Religion,” 6, in Hoffman, Sport and Religion. “The concept of transcendence is closely related to the notion of the sacred. Used in a substantive sense, transcendence refers to the supernatural, which is of an order beyond the ordinary or natural world...Used in an operational way, however, transcendence can refer to non-supernatural powers, ideals, and symbols regarded as being of ultimate significance. Although these powers may be accessed through vehicles of ordinary culture, they are described as transcendent because they are afforded top priority in a scheme of values.”

Sandvoss calls this “projection of self-identity onto a collective” an “individualized collectivity.” See Sandvoss, 64.


Robert S. Ellwood, Introducing Religion: From Inside and Outside (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1993), 133. See also Magdalinski and Lindsey, God on Their Side, 2, where they suggest “we need to recognize that religion intersects both personal devotion and social and cultural institutions and has a significant impact on the formation of both individual and group identities.”

Brubaker and Cooper, “Beyond ,Identity,” 20.

McCloud, “Popular Culture Fandoms,” 203. However, see also Chidester, Authentic Fakes, 9, where he reminds us that “Although the productions of popular culture might in many ways look, sound, smell, taste, and feel like religion, there is a distinct possibility that they are not actually religious....What counts as religion, therefore, is the focus of the problem of authenticity in religion and American popular culture. Making the problem worse, some religious activity appears transparently fake...but even fake religions can be doing a kind of symbolic, cultural, and religious work that is real.”

Matt Hills, Fan Cultures (New York: Routledge, 2002), 117-119. He does so for the triangular purposes of 1) avoiding an essentialization of religion which favors a “return” or “relocation” of religion in a supposedly secular culture, 2) acknowledging the pragmatic production of “new regularities” of discourse rising up around fan groups while still 3) admitting the “unusual recurrences” of religious discourses and behavior within fandom.

Relative to the religious efficacy of pop cultural texts, other theorists conclude that popular culture produces “authentic fakes” (David Chidester) or a “hyper-real” religion that functions as a “simulacrum of a religion” produced through popular culture and stimulating inspiration in believers/consumers. Both of these contributions maintain a fixed and essential understanding of “true” religion against which all other purveyors of religiosity are measured against. Instead, Hills wants to bypass the history of “real” religion altogether, suggesting rather that what preceded institutionalized religion is in fact “real,” and that what we are experiencing now is a return to something more authentic regarding cultural manifestation of the religious impulse. See Chidester, Authentic Fakes, and Adam Possami, Religion and Popular Culture: A Hyper-Real Testament (New York: Peter Lang, 2005). See Porter, “Implicit Religion in Popular Culture,” 279, where she forcefully concludes that “if something looks like, if someone acts like, if someone sees the world like a religious person, it doesn’t matter whether the framework for expressing this mode of being is drawn from popular culture or from existing mainstream faiths.”

Hills, Fan Cultures, 127.

See Michael Grimshaw, “I Can’t Believe My Eyes: the Religious Aesthetics of Sport as Postmodern Salvific Moments,” Implicit Religion, Vol. 3, No. 2 (2000): 92. “It is postmodern because it accepts that it occurs not „out of this world,‟ but wholly within it. It is postmodern because it does not involve a notion of the sacred breaking through to the profane, of the transcendent becoming known in this world, nor of the „physical‟ being miraculously changed by encounter with the „spiritual.‟” Rather it is what could be termed the recognition of authentic, holistic embodiment.”

While reference to Luckmann’s work is sparingly present within the sport/religion discussion (see Tom Faulkner, “A Puckish Reflection on Religion in Canada” in Price, From Season to Season, 185-202, for a work that utilizes his paradigm to explore Canadian hockey), Bailey’s “implicit religion” as a theory would appear to be almost completely absent from the literature on sport and religion. Two rare examples of the direct co-mingling of implicit religion and sports include New Zealand scholar Michael Grimshaw’s essay in 2000 on fan identification with the “fallible gods” of professional sport competition, and Jennifer Porter’s brief autobiographical piece about her successful experience teaching a class using the implicit religion rubric to analyze Star Trek, rave, and sports fans. See Grimshaw, “Religious Aesthetics of Sport,” 87-99, and Jennifer Porter, “Editorial: On Teaching Implicit Religion at Memorial University, Newfoundland,” Implicit Religion, Vol. 10, No. 1 (2007): 5-7.

Edward Bailey, Implicit Religion in Contemporary Society (Weinheim, Germany: Kok Pharos, 1997), 47.

Bailey, Implicit Religion, 3-4. See also Michael Jindra, “Star Trek Fandom as a Religious Phenomenon,” Sociology of Religion (Spring 1994): 31, where he also suggests that “without its institutional and confessional forms, we often fail to recognize religion in our own society.”

Bailey, Implicit Religion, 268, and Wilhelm Dupre, “Why (and When) Should We Speak of Implicit Religion?,” Implicit Religion, vol. 10, no. 2, (2007): 132. Also, see Christiano, Sociology of Religion, 56, where he says, “To seek how people come to commit, to value, to adore, to hate, to celebrate, to grieve—to do these things and to account for them—is to seek the rough ground out of which religions arise and to which religions are called to speak at all times and in all places.”


Bailey, Implicit Religion, 48-49.


Robert Ellwood, Jr., Introducing Religion, 5. See also Heidi Campbell, When Religion Meets New Media (New York: Routledge, 2010), 8, where she explains that “Within lived religion, language and images of the sacred become flexible defining tools; practitioners may draw from multiple traditions and infuse the traditional with new meaning in order to redefine contemporary spiritual life. Implicit religion recognizes that seemingly secular practices may serve a religious role in people’s everyday life and therefore see religion as the undisclosed sacredness of the secular world. This means religion can be viewed as a hybrid space where traditional religious language and notions can be transposed upon actions and artifacts previously seen as non-religious.” (Italics added)

While recognizing close parallels with other adjectival terms already directly examined in the discussion of sport/religion (specifically civil, cultural, folk, natural), Bailey (and this current work) prefers “implicit” because “it keeps its options open with regard to its referent’s structural and historical origins, its social and cultural location, its mode of religiososity, and its relationship to other forms of religion.” See Bailey, Implicit Religion, 41.

See Jacob Needleman, *The New Religions* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1970), xiii-xiv, where he suggests that the traditional categories and images surrounding the symbol “religion” are not an enemy unless they hinder understanding and interpreting of our current cultural moment—when ecclesiastical presuppositions obstruct our understanding of human spirituality by trying to force it into interpretive forms not appropriate to hold them.


Ellwood, *Introducing Religion*, 4. But also note, “Of course, who one thinks one really is may not coincide with reality, for there are various kinds of self-deception that can be practiced in these matters. Moreover, not everyone would make the assumption that his or her inner nature has a relation to ultimate or infinite reality.”
Separated by almost exactly a century, two gatherings of prominent Clevelanders illustrate the dizzyingly disparate (and understandably confusing) images of Cleveland maintained within public imagination. The following juxtaposition encapsulates the tension within its century-separated but parallel narratives.

On October 16, 1879, John Hay, journalist and former secretary to President Abraham Lincoln, held a dinner party for his friends in his sprawling mansion on Euclid Avenue, a four-mile stretch of luxury internationally dubbed “Millionaire’s Row.” The party included some of the most powerful political, economic, and intellectual leaders in the nation, with many of them being from Cleveland and the broader Western Reserve: Rutherford B. Hayes, former Ohioan and current president of the United States; future president James A. Garfield who hailed from just outside Cleveland; congressional leader R.C. Parsons; and nationally prominent economic leaders Henry Payne, Amasa Stone, W.J. Boardman, and Samuel L. Mather. They gathered together to honor another native of the Western Reserve, Dean Howells, who was then editor of the prestigious *Atlantic Monthly*, and to bask in anticipation of an increasingly prosperous future for Cleveland, the nation, and of course, themselves. A city at the geographic center of the American industrial revolution at the end of the nineteenth century, its leaders arguably held the reigns of economic history in their time.

Fast forward to December 15, 1978, when another group of Cleveland’s business and political elites gathered around a table with current mayor, Dennis Kucinich. Sitting glumly with Kucinich were Brock Weir, chairman of Cleveland Trust; Maurice Saltzman, a major garment
manufacturer; and George Forbes, president of City Council. The chief agenda item concerned the possibility of Weir and others further extending fourteen million in short term loan notes to the city that came due at midnight. The mayor argued that local leaders were blackmailing the city into selling the municipally owned electrical utility to their private one, while Weir suggested the owners hard-line represented a plea for the city to regain a sense of fiscal sanity and stability after years of spiraling politically and economically out of control. With Euclid Avenue still outside their meeting window—its mansions long razed and replaced with check cashing outlets, dilapidated buildings, and fast-food establishments—the men sat not as “the successful representatives of new economic activities in a growing city and national economy but a battered and beleaguered set of profoundly conflicted local leaders of a now declining city.” As the clock struck midnight, Cleveland became the first city since the Depression to declare bankruptcy, the exclamation point of a fifty year fall from national prominence.¹

This chapter outlines the origins of Cleveland, tracing its move from a wilderness outpost to an economic super-power before returning—largely as a result of dramatically shifting underlying economic plates—to a considerably more modest position within the “Rust Belt.”² In constructing this cultural history, I will establish something of the ethos of “Clevelanders,” a community of people forged from an ethnically diverse stew, constructed both within a magnificently distant past and amid a more recent reputation for urban squalor/failure. Into both of these environments arose the three main professional sports teams whose existence forms the basis of this study: the baseball Indians, the football Browns, and the basketball Cavaliers. I will offer insight into the significance of each team given its inception at a particular cultural moment in the history of the city, along with the construction and development of the imaginary community called “Cleveland fans” that follow these teams. The historic triangulation and
symbiotic relationship between the three—city, fans, teams—offers potential insight into the intensity of their current intermingling. But first, however, I will sketch the birth of a city.

“The Mouth of the Cuyahoga Will Be the Place”

When General Moses Cleaveland and the 50-plus members of his expedition party landed on the shores of Lake Erie in the as-yet unexplored Western Reserve tract of the Northwest Territory on July 4, 1796, they did so in anticipation of anointing a capital city for the area. They sought a wilderness nexus that would maximally serve their desire to plot the surrounding land and sell it as quickly as possible. Cleaveland was immediately impressed with the “communication” possibilities of the site he landed upon, a liquid intersection that promised not only transport of men and supplies, but also future commercial transactions. Located at the northern mouth of the Cuyahoga River (“crooked water”) and the southern shore of Lake Erie, the region offered water transportation through the state, across to Canada, and back toward the eastern states from whence they came. Cleaveland understood the obvious value of such portability, and after several weeks of mapping the area, he officially marked off and declared the capital city “Cleaveland” (modern spelling of “Cleveland” henceforth) before returning to Connecticut, never again visiting the area he founded with his name.

With a nod toward the long-term civic ethos of the region, precious little help was given the original settlers of the land, and the Connecticut Land Company responsible for its surveying made it consistently clear through the first several decades of Cleveland’s existence that their “primary goal was not settlement but quick sale for profit.” While the model typically utilized for settling new areas involved gathering a community of people before dividing out the land, Cleveland was parceled and sold without particular concern for habitation. Whoever showed up
in Cleveland existed quite literally on their own, apart from the displaced Native Americans still inhabiting an agreed upon tract that stretched west of the city for sixty miles.

Further aggravating attempts to inhabit the area, the miasmic river itself created sickness that scared away all but the most adventurous and rugged frontier types. Whatever potential the land held lie immediately dormant, screened off by a noxious river, bitter winters, and offended Native Americans. Thus, from its inception, Cleveland attracted particularly rugged, strong, self-willed and industrious individuals who relied upon themselves and those who struggled alongside in like-minded fashion. As later inhabitants would note with pride, in Cleveland, “the weather is rugged…the economy is rugged…the women are rugged.” While few attempted to make Cleveland home before moving away from the site, even fewer would maintain a Cleveland address; indeed, in April 1800, Mr. and Mrs. Lorenzo and Rebecca Carter were the only official residents of Cleveland.

**Accidents of History and the Making of an Industrial Metropolis**

By the start of the twentieth century, however, Cleveland was the nation’s seventh largest city, boasting a population of 381,768. The previous one hundred years saw Cleveland transform from a wilderness outpost populated with rugged frontiersmen into a burgeoning industrial city, housing some of the country’s elite businessmen, entrepreneurs, and creators.

After its first twenty-five years, Cleveland had already moved beyond the expectations of its New England creators (though perhaps slower than investors had originally imagined), becoming a port town following “commercial trends rather than cultural heritage, economically focused and cosmopolitan, with a wider variety of ethnicities, commercial enterprises, and religious institutions than the typical homogeneous New England town.” Though it took several decades to find momentum, “with brave hearts and unquenchable faith, families moved
slowly to the frontier to claim cheap land and map promising trails of progress.”12 While most of these early migrations were composed of Northern European ancestry, before the end of the nineteenth century Cleveland would become a magnet for immigrants from all corners of Europe, a racial stew that would form the backbone of the city’s character into the modern day. Cleveland found itself a recipient of several historical “accidents” that significantly altered the shape of its future, birthing an urban, industrial behemoth which charged unexpectedly out of the wilderness.

The Construction of the Ohio Canal

Significantly toward this end, the building of the Ohio Canal and choice of Cleveland for the Northern terminus in 1832 instantly made Cleveland a port-of-entry for boats from the north, east, and south, circulating nineteenth-century commerce of all sorts.13 The Canal augmented trade and increased opportunities for farmers in a wide swath around the region, while both enhancing and spreading the new fame of the city nationally. Suddenly, in a community that had previously struggled to maintain population, “vessels crowded the river, light and heavy vehicles filled the unpaved streets, and pedestrians wormed their way around bags, barrels, and boxes on the sidewalks.”14 During this time, social sectors within the city began uniting around common associations since “as population increased, as ethnic and racial distinctions appeared, and as social differentiation took place, residents were forced to establish institutions in order to express themselves in a city that lacked the homogeneity and harmony of traditional rural society.”15 Clevelanders were already in search of an identity, both as disparate immigrant groups that wanted to maintain touch with their heritage and as a swiftly swelling horde attempting to fuse into something altogether new.
The Herald of February 20, 1849, noted that the canal had “made Cleveland,” suggesting that while it cost five million to build, it returned more than twenty times that much. The paper further offered that subsidiary profits from the canal included a jump in population to 21,000—versus 3,000 without it—and created property valuing at ten million instead of three. By 1840, Cleveland “held the position of one of the leading cities in the Union,” largely as a result of canal traffic, as the center of population had changed its base from a little east of Baltimore to the eastern boundary of Ohio. Yet even in the boom years of the canal, leaders were positioning Cleveland for the next politically charged but highly anticipated transportation revolution: the railroad.

**A Transportation Revolution: Moving from Water to Rail**

Progressives pointed out that while the canal had increased Cleveland’s commercial bottom line, it remained a city that lie dormant four months out of the year. The railroad would allow not only year-round travel and trade, but would also dramatically increase the speed and amount of both. In 1851, after much political haggling and several failed attempts to establish a rail line, preparations were made for a celebration marking the arrival of the Cleveland, Columbus, and Cincinnati line. By 1853, Cleveland would be connected to Painesville, Pittsburgh, and New York City to the east, along with Chicago and St. Louis toward the north and southwest. In a short span of time, Cleveland became one of the major rail centers in the country, further enhancing its reputation as a commercial interchange of ore, lumber, and every imaginable farm product. A practically uninhabitable outpost fifty years previous, Cleveland now became a model for the national urban center of the future. Yet, while the city had certainly opened itself to new business activity, its reputation remained “as a pretty residence place, with its shady streets and broad fields,” and “few of its citizens ever dreamed, much less
expressed, the idea of its ever becoming a great manufacturing city.” That would soon change before the first shots were fired on Fort Sumter.

**Civil War, Iron Ore, and Oil: The Move toward Manufacturing**

With the onset of the Civil War, Cleveland experienced the double-edged paradox produced by war: the tragedy of high human casualties contrasted with the necessity of high manufacturing demand. Though undeniably morbid, “bloodshed and prosperity mixed well.” Perhaps presciently, industrial requirements for the war increased immediately on the heels of amplified discussions regarding Cleveland’s future as a port city. An August 10, 1860, *Cleveland Leader* editorial read, “Much talk is heard in Cleveland on the subject of manufacturing, but nothing much is done about it. We continue to make nothing and buy everything. Cleveland must rise, if at all, by manufacturing.” The war created an exigency that Cleveland would rush to fill, since the wars’ “demands for material and supplies fueled nascent industries and started the city on the road to industrialization.”

Two other local occurrences combined with the war to ignite a manufacturing spark. In 1855, Lake Superior iron ore began making its way to Cleveland in huge quantities with the opening of the Sault Sainte Marie canal, fueling the city’s fledgling iron and steel works and furthering its reputation as a transshipment point. In addition, by 1863 local businessman John D. Rockefeller perfected a method of oil refining that catapulted Cleveland to the forefront of the American Industrial Revolution, while making himself the nation’s first billionaire.

Both during and following the war, businesses of all kinds flourished and manufacturing interests rapidly grew among the entrepreneur class. The iron and coal initiatives developed with such speed that Cleveland became a chief mart along the lake, and one of the busiest of Western cities. By 1868, the Flats (the lowland bordering the river) and lakefront were lined with
roundhouses, steel rolling mills, factories, lumberyards, chemical plants, oil tanks, and various warehouses supporting the production of diverse machinery, castings, bar iron, nails and spikes, structural iron, railroad equipment, and stoves. Suddenly, within a decade after the war, Cleveland was a hub for manufacturing interests from every direction, prompting historian Crisfield Johnson to quip two decades later that “The war found Cleveland a commercial city and left it a manufacturing city.”

**A Demand for Labor and the Swelling of an Ethnic Population**

Cleveland’s industries and commercial businesses required a steadily expanding labor force, and like other cities swept up in the swelling manufacturing wave, they turned to southern, central, and eastern Europe for workers. Cleveland became increasingly attractive to migrant workers as its employment opportunities increased, and the subsequent influx of workers from non-English speaking parts of Europe (“the New Immigrants”), particularly between the years 1870-1914, created an ethnic mosaic which characterizes Cleveland to this day.

Neighborhoods tagged The Cabbage Patch, Goosetown, The Angle, Warszawa, Little Italy, Chicken Village, Dutch Hill, The Haymarket, Whiskey Island, Cedar Central, and the Bird’s Nest congealed around ethnic identities and made Cleveland, as historian William Dennis Keating suggests, representative of the American cultural experience—“at once intense and unprecedented in its historic long-term mixture of ethnicities, races, and beliefs at all class levels.”

Cleveland, the city of immigrants and home to over fifty different ethnic groups (“the ethnic mosaic”), was also the “unmeltable city,” defined spatially and culturally by carefully maintained boundaries yet proudly attempting to fuse together as an imagined community of “Clevelanders.” Thus, while still New England Puritan in its social and ethical consciousness
and almost as diverse as other coastal cities in its makeup, this strange brew of “contented, native-born aristocracy on the one hand, and an increasingly heterogeneous, multiethnic city (workers) on the other” profoundly marked Cleveland’s “economic, social, cultural, political, and intellectual life” through to the present day.⁳⁰

Nationally significant in the aftermath of the wars’ disorienting and devastating hostilities, what had been “a rural nation with a steadily growing population and small pockets of industry serving local and regional markets” became within four decades “a bustling urban complex marked by geometric urban population increases, heavy industry in need of a massive labor force, and a national marketing structure”—with Cleveland helping lead the way.⁳¹ Cleveland woke up from the war no longer a “quaint little New England colony perched primly on the bluff overlooking the beautiful Lake Erie and clinging to Cuyahoga’s hillsides,” but instead became in less than seventy years “an intersection toward which men [sic] and events of destiny were riding hard.” Practically overnight relative to historical time, they would meet in Cleveland and make it a metropolis of world importance.⁳²

**Growth in the “Golden Age”**

For the next 65 years after the Civil War—the “golden age” of the city’s existence—Cleveland steadily progressed in virtually all sectors of social life. Its population, constantly expanded by the flood of European immigration that continued unabated until just after WWI and resumed with the “Great Migration” of Southern Blacks after the war, reached 900,429 in 1930, making it the fifth largest city in the nation and the third most-populated metropolitan area. Euclid Avenue, known literally around the world as “Millionaire’s Row,” housed some of the nation’s wealthiest families in its mansions, including John D. Rockefeller, Leonard C. Hanna, Harry K. Devereux, Jeptha H. Wade, and a host of others. The four mile
stretch, boasting “large detached houses with expansive, landscaped lawns and sculptured gardens,” became a symbol of the cities” progressive fortunes in both business and culture, and functioned as a “linear roll call” of Cleveland’s business and cultural leaders.\textsuperscript{33}

During this time significant culture-shifting inventions were conceived in Cleveland, including the first operative traffic lights and gas mask (Garrett Morgan), a functional arc light (Charles Brush), contributions to automobile, bicycle and diesel technology (Alexander Winton), and back-saving dock loading machines (George Hulett).\textsuperscript{34} Urban planners from around the nation visited Cleveland to learn its methods, especially while under the leadership of the most popular and practically progressive of Cleveland mayors, former railroad magnate Tom L. Johnson (1901-1909), who cleaned up the streets, kept trolley fares low for workers, advocated municipal ownership of utilities, and pursued social justice in all its various urban manifestations. His “Group Plan” would eventually be realized in the 1920s when the lakefront and harbor areas were revitalized with a mall of civic buildings, including an enormous public auditorium and library. Reform, charity, and philanthropy societies arose in step alongside the continuous entrepreneurial expansion, creating protection for the underprivileged and marginalized within Cleveland society.\textsuperscript{35}

Besides being a source of pride for its inhabitants, the city itself had established an identity as a “winner,” all the more enhanced by its long-shot beginnings and “against all odds” persistence in becoming a premier American city. Cleveland’s background mythology of a “steady march of progress” grew and was nurtured with each new success story. Built on the backs of courageous settlers who determined to make a city with little outside New England help, it became a city fortified and nourished through the inner courage and physical strength of European immigrants and workers seeking a new life in a new country. Housing forward
thinking entrepreneurs and businessmen who risked all in dogged displays of perseverance, their
determination fueled by their loyalty to one another and to their city-making purposes.

Cleveland’s elite families grew wealthy through industry at a time when manufacturing was
becoming king in America, living in a city branded by steel, iron, coal—industries
metaphorically identified with strength, fortitude, grit. Indeed, Cleveland was a tough city for
tough people, and whoever claimed to represent it would always be evaluated against this
distinctive, minimalist trait.

In 1924, Cleveland flexed another muscle when Oris P. and Mantis J. Van Sweringen,
brothers with substantial amounts of both vision and capital, broke ground for a massive union
terminal to reside next to Public Square, the largest construction project of the 1920s in the
city—indeed, a “city within a city.”36 The Terminal Tower would become Cleveland’s most
visible landmark, the tallest building in the world outside of New York until 1967 and an iconic
symbol constantly reassuring Clevelanders of their place in history. When the first train entered
the depot amid pomp and ceremony on October 23, 1929, Cleveland optimism reached its zenith,
anticipating that the Terminal would act as a performative reminder of the city’s
greatness—servicing a constant flow of trains, people, and commercial exchange—far into the
future.

Economic Apocalypse: 1930s Financial Tornado Ushers Urban Demise

But six days after the dedication ceremony, on “Black Tuesday,” a financial tempest
descended upon the nation that devastated Cleveland, a battering from which the city never fully
recovered. Like the biblical Babylonians who conspired to build a tower to heaven, only to have
their language garbled and plans for dominion foiled, the stock market collapse hit Cleveland,
according to banker/businessman Cyrus Eaton, “harder than any other American city.”37
Staggered at its core, Cleveland business output was cut by thirty percent over the decade, and
ten of thousands filled unemployment and bread lines for years. Flight to the expanding
suburbs accelerated, as the consequences of urban blight became more tangibly prominent: an
increase on the streets of crime, prostitution, abandoned buildings, downward spiraling education
options, and political corruption.

Notwithstanding occasional hints of rebirth scattered over the next eighty years,
Cleveland, once described as “the mirror of the industrial revolution” and “the urban leader of
national economic growth,” now appeared as the urban symbol of a new mirror of national
economic development—this time reflecting deindustrialization, unemployment, and
disinvestment. After “the Crash,” Cleveland coasted downhill with dizzying speed, recovering
some semblance of industrial fortitude in the decade following World War II, but only
momentarily; instead, depression, abandonment, economic decline, racial unrest, and fiscal crisis
would characterize the reality and reputation of the city practically to the present day. Even the
Cuyahoga River, once an emblem of civic pride and its literal gateway to national prominence,
became symbolic of Cleveland’s demise when in 1969, stewing decades of industrial waste and
neglect, it caught fire making head (and punch) lines nationally. As noted in the introduction to
this chapter, by 1978 Cleveland was in such disarray that it became the first city to financially
default since the Depression years, bookending both an unexpected rise and subsequent fall so
dramatic as to demand Hollywood scripting. Remarkable as it seemed given its previous history,
describing Cleveland as being in a post-Depression recuperative stage throughout the decades
leading to its bankruptcy was “plausible enough to people who remember the exuberant,
dynamic Cleveland of pre-Depression days” and who could “compare it with the somber,
convalescent city that walked with a dragging gait and a querulous expression” into the early
1980s. Yet through it all, the gritty city retained important advantages, “not the least of which were hardworking and generous citizens proud of the city’s past and hopeful for its future”—now vulnerable and seeking vicarious “victory” to assuage their grief in the remnants of their past.

**Sport Stadiums: Plugging Holes in the Psychological Dam?**

Since the beginning of the city’s demise in the 1930s, while yearning for both psychological and fiscal recovery, many Clevelander’s “hope for the future” would be umbilically tied to the fortunes of their professional sports teams, sources that on both counts promised far more sustenance than they could deliver. In a moment dripping with irony, while still gasping for breath after Black Tuesday dealt a blow to its civic manufacturing gut, on July 2, 1931, Clevelanders dedicated Cleveland Municipal Stadium, a $2.64 million dollar creation on lakefront landfill that at the time gave Cleveland the largest and most impressive sports stadium in the country. Holding 78,129 permanent seats, the stadium materialized after voters passed a 1928 bond while still riding the economic high of the 1920s, designing it “to meet the whole gamut of civic and sporting purposes and to accommodate the vast throngs of people that characterized life in a major metropolis.” During the christening ceremony, former City Manager William R. Hopkins suggested that the stadium would “be an enduring monument to the spirit and aspirations of our people,” and would also “take its place among the best known structures of the world.”

On July 31, 1932, the Cleveland Indians baseball team played their first game in the stadium before 80,184 fans; on September 10, 1937, the Cleveland Rams, conceived the year before and a predecessor to the future Browns, kicked off their season against the Detroit Lions in their new home. Both teams lost in their debut at the Stadium, perhaps acting as a prescient
sign of future struggles, but the most significant point remained: Cleveland, within a few years of its most anguish-inducing social trial, opened a monstrous play-land stadium, birthed an NFL football team to compete in it, and moved its hugely popular baseball team within its cavernous parameters, all while still reeling socially, economically, and politically. Indeed, “built in a time of economic disaster, it was a symbol of a city’s faith in its future,” a faith and future wed together by its professional sports teams. Cleveland historian James Toman argues that moving far beyond the “architectural significance” afforded to the edifice, the stadium housed “the field upon which much of the social and cultural history of Greater Cleveland has been written” in the twentieth century. Under eerily analogous social circumstances within the city, a similar expectation was projected onto potential stadium property just before the close of that same century.

Fifty years later in March 1982, fresh on the heels of fiscal default and now under the leadership of new Mayor George Voinovich, Cleveland surprisingly received the tag of “All-American City,” a proclamation that cited the city for its “enactment of major government reform, streamlining City Council and implementation of a comprehensive fiscal recovery strategy, and restoration of a downtown performing arts and entertainment complex.” Perhaps motivated by language that affirmed broadening its entertainment reach, leaders were constructing plans for a domed stadium to take the place of the now crumbling and decrepit Municipal Stadium, along with a new basketball arena that would bring the NBA Cavaliers back downtown, returning from their current home some twenty miles outside the city.

Realizing that its old industrial economy was no longer viable, Cleveland entrepreneurs understood that service industries such as banks, hospitals, restaurants, entertainment, and hotels would now be the core of the financial system. Historian John Grabowski observes that sports
would comprise a critical component of the future in two significant ways: “Winning teams would not only boost the city’s image through their national exposure, but also bring needed revenues to the community. The place of sports in civic life had come 180 degrees from its origins. Play was now work and sporting pastimes were economic products of equal or greater value than previous products such as agricultural crops, or the iron and steel produced by Cleveland’s once vast mills.”

All three owners of the major sports teams in Cleveland favored the sports complex idea, but on May 8, 1984, Cuyahoga County residents voted down the proposed raising of their taxes to pay for the project. In the ensuing years, as the plans for the complex were reshuffled, city leaders began buying up land in the only area that could handle two stadiums, and on May 8, 1990, Clevelanders passed a “sin tax” supporting the Gateway Economic Development Corporation, charged with building the new stadiums in the old Market District. Once again it would be professional sports—indeed, professional stadiums—charged with carrying the mantle of a hopeful future for Clevelanders. Even the name of the project—“Gateway”—carried obvious implications, for these stadiums and the teams playing in them were expected to open a gateway to a new future for Cleveland and its inhabitants. Grabowski notes that “in perhaps the ultimate historic irony, the facility was slated to be built in the area that had housed the city’s market and wholesale houses since the 1820s. Where once Clevelanders had bought and sold the very necessities of life, their descendants would cheer the athletes of the twenty-first century and, in doing so, perhaps be as central to the regional economy as the farmers and traders of the 1800s.”

In the years since the Browns and Indians began playing in Municipal Stadium, there existed “a remarkable parallel between sports and civic progress—no longer an activity that
seemed to take place independently of the city’s development, sports became symbiotically linked to the social, political, and economic fortunes of post-World War II Cleveland,” and by the 1980s, “the economic dominance of sports had begun to influence the city’s destiny.”

In attempting to attract businesses and residents, this [“New Cleveland” movement which helped spawn Gateway] and other programs (and perhaps the passage of time and the dulling of memories) successfully dispelled the negative images of riots, burning rivers, and rusted factories, and promoted the city’s cultural amenities and business advantages. A large part of such national promotions of the city centered around sports. Cleveland was a big-league city, and its professional teams, especially the Browns, were touted as a civic asset.

Understanding how the teams playing in these stadiums and arenas came about in the first place, and the social moment in which they arrived, helps one understand both their status within the culture of the Western Reserve and the fans that so assiduously follow them.
Notes

1 William Dennis Keating, Norman Krumholz, and David C. Perry, eds., Cleveland: A Metropolitan Reader (Kent, Oh.: Kent State University Press, 1995), 17-18. This source provided the inspiration for the juxtaposition of these events to start the chapter.

2 See Philip Cooke, The Rise of the Rustbelt (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1995), for an overview of the rise and fall of cities at the center of steel, iron ore, and automobile production. Cooke makes suggestions on how Rustbelt cities can reinvent themselves, getting in step with national trends away from industry toward service.


4 Writing in 1967, George Condon affirmed General Cleveland’s insightful choice concerning the lake and it’s connection to the adjacent river by writing “The waters of Erie always have commanded the attention of Clevelanders, not just as a gratifying scenic asset but because of the realization that this, one of the largest bodies of fresh water in the world, is the real source of the city’s advantage and prosperity.” George Condon, Cleveland: The Best Kept Secret (Cleveland: J.T. Zubal and P.D. Dole Publishers, 1967), 115.

5 Miller and Wheeler, Concise History, 10. Though also note Harlan Hatcher and Frank Durham, Giant from the Wilderness: The Story of a City and Its Industries (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1955), xi, where the authors argue that “The men who bought these acres believed in the future of America, and the money from the sale of these unknown acres was used to give Connecticut a permanent school fund. Thus from the very beginning the spirit shaping the Cleveland area was marked by a happy balance between business foresight and a sense of responsibility.”

6 Malaria was the most common ailment contracted from the stagnant portions of the river.

7 With prescient irony given the current study, the first Caucasian child born in the Reserve, of James and Eunice Kingsbury, died of starvation a few weeks after its birth, further discouraging other New Englanders from the shores of Lake Erie. See C.A. Urann, Centennial History of Cleveland (Cleveland: Press of J.B. Savage, 1896), 17.


9 Miller and Wheeler, Concise History, 14, 17. Carter himself became the forerunner of all future corrupt political figures in Cleveland, by initially communicating to outsiders that the harbor would never be opened and that no money could be had through trade, all the while clearing $1,000 per year through his own Indian trading. He organized a band of desperados and outlaws who both helped him work with the Native Americans while also threatening away new businessmen. Paradoxically, years later he also became the leading figure in growing the region, albeit upon his own terms. On the Carter’s tombstone in Erie Street Cemetery, located and preserved within what would become the Gateway district just outside Progressive Field, is the following praise: “When others fled fever and ague, the Carters stayed…They Remained, Others Fled.”


11 Miller and Wheeler, Concise History, 2.

12 Rose, Making of a City, 113.

13 Work began on the canal in 1925. As a further benefit to inhabitants, it also forced a significant clearing and cleansing of the toxic river.
Others feared the smoke and soot from billowing engine stacks would pose a health risk and damage natural environments. See Condon, *Best Kept Secret*, 115, where he writes regarding the onset of the railroad, “This was part of the price of progress—tracks that scarred the land and routed beauty; trains that rumble through the streets, shaking houses and soiling the flower and the foliage with their soot. Cleveland, like every other town of the time, was happy to pay the price.” See also John Grabowski, Diane Ewart Grabowski, and Mark Tebeau, *Cleveland: A History in Motion: Transportation, Industry and Community in Northeast Ohio* (Carlsbad, Calif.: Heritage Media, 2000).

A business directory of 1852-53 reflects burgeoning pride in the city’s progress: “The travel through our city has become immense; the old lumbering stage-coaches have been so entirely driven from our thoroughfares that they are already looked upon as objects of curiosity, and will, doubtless, soon be sought for, to grace the cabinets of the curious, and be given a place, side by side, with the inquisitorial instruments of torture. Our numerous and excellent hotels are constantly filled to overflowing, and scarce one of all these arriving and departing crowds that does not bear irrepressible testimony to the business and beauty of our city.” Urann, *Centennial History*, 77-78.

One quarter of all men eligible to fight from Cuyahoga County were either killed or wounded even as demand for a workforce skyrocketed. See David D. Van Tassel and John J. Grabowski, *The Encyclopedia of Cleveland History* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), 190-193, and Miller and Wheeler, *Concise History*, 69.


Urann, *Centennial History*, 93. See also Miller and Wheeler, *Concise History*, 70, where they observe that “Cleveland’s enviable location on major rail and water routes put it in an ideal position to attract those industries that depended on an abundance of raw materials and ready access to the nation’s markets.”

Johnson, *History*, 80-83. William Ganson Rose describes the sensory change as industry took over in Cleveland: “The smoke of prosperity mingled with the odor of hemp and canvas, oil, and grease…The air was filled with hoarse blasts from steamship whistles, the clang of ships’ bells, and the hoot of tugs and locomotives. Industry was making men rich. Wealth beyond dreams was being attracted to Cleveland as factories expanded to meet increasing demands for their products.” See Rose, *Making of a City*, 361.

See Van Tassel and Grabowski, *Encyclopedia*, 557-563. “The nature of this migration (that is, what groups arrived during particular time periods) was determined not only by the opportunities available in the city but also by national and international factors permitting, necessitating, or expediting the migration of various national groups.”


Keating, et. al., *Metropolitan Reader*, 20-23.

Miller and Wheeler, *Concise History*, 77-78. See also Condon, *Best Kept Secret*, 335, where he notes the complexity of defining “Cleveland” given its cacophony of diversity. “Perhaps this is what makes identifying Cleveland clearly such a troublesome matter; the image is made up of too many slivers and fragmented parts. It has a little bit of everything, and in some instance a whole lot of something, but it is not that you would accurately describe it as a monolithic institution. Cleveland, in fact, is not any kind of an institution. It is a collection of very interesting people who have come together from all parts of the globe to engage in a very interesting enterprise—the building of a new society in a new city, in a new land. Only through patient, sympathetic analysis is it to be understood, but it is less difficult to appreciate.”

Campbell and Miggins, *Birth of Modern Cleveland*, 19. Viewed as “the Silicon Valley” of the American Industrial Revolution, thousands of new companies would be launched at the intersection of Lake Erie and the Cuyahoga River over the next several decades. See also Harold C. Livesay, “From Steeple to Smokestacks: The Birth of the Modern Corporation in Cleveland,” 54-70, and Darwin H. Stapleton, “The City Industrious: How Technology Transformed Cleveland,” 71-98, in Campbell and Miggins, *Birth of Modern Cleveland*.

Condon, *Best Kept Secret*, 114. “The town that moved into 1850 with a population of 17,034 persons arrived at 1900 with a population of 361,768.” See also Samuel Peter Orth, *A History of Cleveland, Ohio* (Chicago: S.J. Clarke Publishing Co., 1910), 638, where Orth summarizes the economic history of the region from 1820 to 1910: “Two decades of hand industry, two decades of primitive manufacture, preparing the products of the farm for the market, followed by two decades of the development of iron and steel, which development is continued to the present day. The decade of 1870 was the decade of oil; the decade of 1890 that of clothing and paints; and the decade of 1900 has been the decade of the automobile.”

See Jan Cigliano, *Showplace of America: Cleveland’s Euclid Avenue, 1850-1910* (Kent, Oh.: Kent State University Press, 1991), 1-4. “The progressive fortunes of capital and culture that built the residences and created the vision for this avenue were the same fortunes that drove the growth of the city. The commitment of money, energy, and creative vision by residents sprang from the same values that they invested in the city’s development. The Avenue symbolized more than a monument to the personal fortunes and accomplishments of the families who lived there; it was also a monument to the strong and dynamic city they had created. Euclid Avenue was probably the most important integrating element in the city during the formative years of Cleveland’s development.” (italics added)


Van Tassel and Grabowski, *Encyclopedia*, 297. See also Miller and Wheeler, *Concise History*, 129 and Hebert H. Harwood, *Invisible Giants: The Empires of Cleveland’s Van Sweringen Brothers* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2003). Also Rose, *Making of a City*, 874, where he notes that “The Terminal buildings were completed and were immediately rated as the second most important group of commercial buildings in any nation. A city within a city, the group embodied a tremendous railroad station, towering office buildings, Higbee’s modern department store, Harvey’s restaurants and shops, the famous Hotel Cleveland, a monumental Post Office, and offices of major banks. The Terminal Tower…rose majestically more than seven hundred feet, the tallest building outside of New York City.”
Eaton was personally worth $100 million in 1929, with many of his investments being in Cleveland businesses. His net worth in 1930 free-fell to $100 thousand. See Condon, *Best Kept Secret*, 301.

Keating, et. al., *Metropolitan Reader*, 18.

Miller and Wheeler, *Concise History*, 181.


Miller and Wheeler, *Concise History*, 181. See also Steve Gleydura, “The Cleveland Joke,” in *Cleveland Magazine*, December 2007, where Gleydura notes that Cleveland “possesses this burning river of desire to overcome, to scream. Go to hell, Laugh In.” Screw Johnny Carson and his „Tonight Show” monologue,” in an effort “to show the rest of the world we really are players.” He recalls a 1973 Dix and Eaton ad that read: “We shouldn’t over-react. But the next time some network joker turns Cleveland into a punch line, let’s mail him a twenty-pound salami from the West Side Market along with instructions on what to do with it.” Gleydura cites Cleveland’s “unity, optimism, and determination” as seedbed sources for a renewed civic psyche.


James A. Toman, *Cleveland Stadium: Sixty Years of Memories, Revised Edition* (Cleveland: Cleveland Landmarks Press, 1994), 16-17. See also Morris Eckhouse and Greg Crouse, *Where Cleveland Played* (Charleston, South Carolina: The History Press, 2010), 90, where the authors describe the deaths of two construction workers who fell 115 feet on a windy day on January 30, 1931, presaging both equal and lesser tragedies that would take place at the stadium in years to come.

Toman, *Cleveland Stadium*, 20. The current City Manager Daniel Morgan declared that “the ancient world never saw a structure like this.” While the structure was conceived primarily with baseball in mind, the Municipal Stadium Committee detailed over sixty possible uses for the city-owned stadium, including pageants, dramas, concerts, business expositions, various civic gatherings, boxing, wrestling, gymnastics, track and field, skating, hockey, tennis, soccer, and cricket, along with the staples of baseball and football. See Toman, *Cleveland Stadium*, 7-8.

In both cases, the move into Municipal Stadium was temporary. Both franchises moved in and out of the Stadium each year depending on perceived ability to fill it. The Indians made it their permanent home in 1947, following the Browns who made it their home upon their inception in 1946.


*Cleveland Browns Fan* (Cleveland: Gray and Company Publishers, 1999), 19-23, where he describes the Tower ("strong, rigid, powerful") as his father and the Stadium ("curved and worn and gentle") as his mother.

**48** Toman, *Cleveland Stadium*, 39. See also James Toman and Gregory G. Deegan, *Cleveland Stadium: The Last Chapter* (Cleveland: Cleveland Landmarks Press, 1997), 100. “Although the Cleveland Indians lost both the first and last game ever played at Municipal Stadium, the history of the years in between transcend the numbers in the win column. The facility’s durability and fixed presence on the lakefront became the stage for many baseball dramas: tears of elation and frustration, proud and unifying moments in the city’s civic history, significant moments in the annals of major league baseball, and for any fans who ever saw a game at the Stadium, special memories fixed forever in their minds.”

**49** Keating, et.al., *Metropolitan Reader*, 11. Italics added.


**52** The new plan called for a smaller, un-domed baseball stadium and adjacent basketball arena, yet pushing the new plan through only estranged Browns owner Art Modell, who now owned the lease on Municipal Stadium and couldn’t put his Browns in the smaller Gateway arenas. Ironically, Cleveland would lose the source of greatest historic sports pride when Model acrimoniously moved the Browns to Baltimore after the 1995 season.

**53** Grabowski, *Sports in Cleveland*, 144-145. Grabowski continues in describing sports’ move from an extra-curricular entertainment option to a critical economic vehicle within Cleveland: “Whether many Clevelanders perceived this irony is an open question, for Gateway was the result of a historical process that came to a rapid culmination in the years after 1945. Remembering only what they had experienced, many younger Clevelanders could not envision a time when sports had not been important, and even for their parents and grandparents, who may have been born as early as 1900, sports were an integral part of their experience. That games were once a luxury in Cleveland is a fact that predates living memory. That games are now viewed as an economic and civic necessity is also a fact, and one that would have been unfathomable to those who first settled on the banks of the Cuyahoga River some two hundred years ago.”

**54** Grabowski, *Sports in Cleveland*, 83.

**55** Ibid., 139. See Mark S. Rosentraub, *Major League Winners: Using Sports and Cultural Centers as Tools for Economic Development* (Boca Raton, Flor.: CRC Press, 2010), especially his chapter “Can a city win when losing?: Cleveland and the building of sports, cultural, and entertainment facilities in the midst of population declines and job losses,” 185-222, where Rosentraub credits Cleveland (along with Indianapolis, Reading, and Columbus in other chapters) for reinvigorating their image and downtown environment thanks to the production of innovative sports and cultural venues. Although contrary to popular ideological explanations suggesting that the existence of sport venues alone will generate income and significant return on their investment (including his own!), Rosentraub nevertheless argues that stadiums combined with a broader city plan (including the commitment of private investment) have potential to revitalize urban centers, but these are rare examples in the history of public stadium funding projects. See also David C. Barnett, “Rust Belt Reboot Has Cleveland Rockin,” accessed at *http://www.npr.org/2012/06/11/154740024/a-comeback-for-downtown-cleveland*. 
As Cleveland historian John Grabowski notes, the original settlers and citizens of the city in the wilderness had “little time for games and no space in their packs for the implements of play”—they were, quite literally, absorbed with staying alive. Leisure time among the settlers was almost nonexistent through the first three decades. However, in the financially successful years following the Civil War, Cleveland became “a large population, living in cramped neighborhoods and having some disposable income and access to rail lines,” which “widened the possibilities for entertainment and recreation.” Clevelanders embraced many diverse sporting activities and competitions during these years, both as participants and later as spectators, including harness racing, cricket, curling, skating, polo, bicycling, tennis, golf, pedestrianism (a precursor to modern track and field), basketball, and of course, baseball.

Sports functioned among the Cleveland population in three primary ways at this time. First, as was the case in other cities, the range of sports one participated in and followed had both social and class connotations—accordingly, while pedestrianism was available to the working-class masses, polo was not. The choice of sports embraced by individuals created a cultural divide among Clevelanders, acting as a statement of both status and access. Secondly, for the majority of Cleveland’s predominantly immigrant population, sports provided an avenue of assimilation into American culture, even if that would only be the “working class” sport culture for most. Finally, sports gave that same immigrant population an opportunity to maintain their own culture “wars” in competitions with other ethnic groups in the city. Thus, right from the start, sports in Cleveland were intimately merged with a development of identity among the
different groups of residents, with class and ethnicity being the two predominant fault lines of distinction.

At the turn of the last century, the American nation experienced a seismic transitioning from amateurism and informality to professionalism and organization regarding sport, with entrepreneurs looking to commodify sports and package them for spectating consumers. Paralleling American business in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century, “sports were rationalized, made more efficient, and made more profitable.” Moreover, “Victorian culture, with its values of self-control, domesticity, and a stern work ethic, was giving way to a consumer culture based on a code of material abundance, leisure, and self-fulfillment.” Into this cultural moment, both locally and nationally, professional sports arose and sought a following in Cleveland.

The Cleveland Indians: “Our Tribe” and a Narrative of Suffering

Baseball, on its way to becoming “America’s Pastime,” embedded itself in national consciousness during and immediately following the Civil War. While a growing number of athletic activities flourished in urban centers everywhere, “only baseball was viewed as broadly representative of the community’s athletic standing,” and only baseball provided heroes with an almost universal community appeal.”

Cleveland experienced several incarnations of professional baseball in the last three decades of the nineteenth century, teams comprised of a handful of paid players mixed with other non-paid players playing in volatile leagues that might crumble mid-season. These teams include two versions of the Forest City’s (1871-1872; 1879-1884, renamed the “Blues” in 1882), with a third version being renamed the Cleveland Spiders (1887-1899) and lasting 12 years in the National League. The Spiders put Cleveland on the baseball map, featuring future Hall of
Famers Cy Young, Jesse Burkett, Bobby Wallace, and winning the 1895 Temple Cup (the pre-
World Series championship) versus the Baltimore Orioles. Spiders manager and future Hall of
Famer Pat Tebeau became a hero among all classes for being an advocate of “rowdy baseball”
and for saying that “a milk and water, goody-goody player can’t ever wear a Cleveland
uniform.” Cleveland fans became notorious in baseball circles for being particularly raucous,
bombarding Baltimore players with potatoes and other objects during the Temple Cup series. In
keeping with the reputation of Cleveland as a tough place to live, for visiting teams it would also
be a tough place to play.

However, by 1899, ownership moved the best players to a new team they recently
purchased in St. Louis and began shifting “home” games to cities outside Cleveland. These
moves angered fans, who started calling the team “The Misfits” and “The Wanderers,” while
refusing to support a team that went 20-134 and no longer produced local pride. As
“Clevelanders looked to their professional team as a symbol of their city,” they could no longer
associate with the embarrassment of the Spiders ineptitude. They folded after the 1899 season,
leaving Cleveland once again without a professional team.

Grabowski notes that given “the embarrassing episodes preceding the demise of the
Spiders…it is a wonder that local citizens would have had any desire to see professional baseball
return to Cleveland. But in a pattern that would be repeated countless times in the decades to
come, Clevelanders brushed aside embarrassment and team mismanagement and continued to
support the professional game.” In 1901, the Cleveland Blues began play in the new American
League, the franchise ancestor of the modern day Indians.

The Blues’ inaugural season saw the team finish in last place in every statistical
category—though in final league standings they finished seventh out of eight teams—but that
would dramatically change the next season when they acquired Nap Lajoie, arguably “the first recognized sports hero in Cleveland.” After hitting .422 the previous season with the Philadelphia Athletics, Lajoie immediately made Cleveland a credible big-league franchise, a personality with such drawing power that their home field seating capacity was increased from 9,000 to 27,000 by the end of the decade. They even renamed the team the “Naps” in his honor in 1903. The buzz around the team prompted an April 29, 1903 Plain Dealer essayist to declare “Cleveland had gone baseball mad—actually raving mad,” before citing huge attendance figures at weekday games as evidence of their frenzied condition. Indeed, the new American League team would remain the unchallenged darling (though often one of exasperation) of Cleveland professional sports until the Cleveland Rams football team was established three decades later in 1936.

Renaming the Team: The Mythology Surrounding Chief Sockalexis

In 1915, the Naps were renamed the “Indians” after a player who mythologically symbolizes the Cleveland franchise (and the Cleveland fan’s desired perception of the franchise) in multiple significant ways. From 1897-1899, Louis “Chief” Sockalexis, a full-blooded Penobscot Indian, played outfield on the team. Sockalexis, one of the Spiders” best players, was said to be “strong and fast…[with] fire in every movement,” but he apparently also had an unquenchable thirst for alcohol, and after two-and-a-half meteoric seasons, he retired from baseball. A January 18, 1915 article in The Plain Dealer described the significance of the name change:

Many years ago there was an Indian named Sockalexis who…so far outshone his teammates that he naturally came to be regarded as the whole team. The fans throughout the country began to call the Clevelanders the ,Indians.” It was an honorable name….It has now been decided to revive this name…There will be no real Indians on the roster, but the name will recall fine traditions. It is looking backward to a time when Cleveland had one of the most popular teams in the United States. It also serves to revive the
Several critical insights are worth noting regarding both the choice of Sockalexis as the emblem of the team and the narrative depicted in this article, especially as they both relate to the Cleveland fan and her relationship to “the Indians.”

Sockalexis reflects something of the strength, speed, and dominance that Clevelanders fancied true of themselves at the turn of the twentieth century—marked by the confident swagger that typically adjoins such prowess. With the tragic irony that usually accompanies Anglo handling of Native Americans, he represented for them a fighting spirit—the will of a survivor embedded in a fiercely competitive athletic body—which coincided with the ethos of Cleveland’s first hundred years.

Further, the renaming recalls a moment in time when the Spiders were briefly competent and relevant during the 1897 and 1898 seasons, yet conveniently ignores Sockalexis’ alcohol-induced departure from the team seven games into their record setting pursuit of futility in 1899. The selectivity of historical memory among Clevelanders establishes itself (or at least reveals itself) in this moment, since whatever good feelings might be associated with the 1897-8 teams were quickly contaminated by a level of fan anger directed at the team and administration for a competitive ineffectiveness never seen before nor since the 1899 team. To suggest choosing Sockalexis’ name hails “a time when Cleveland had one of the most popular teams in the United States” at best stretches the imagination to contextualize Sockalexis during two seasons of productivity; at worst, it conveniently ignores the reality of the team’s hostile collapse and demise only a year later.

Though ancestrally native to the land, Sockalexis nevertheless embodies an alien gathering point for immigrants used to being the “Other” themselves. Arguably, the diversity of
their ethnicities becomes coalesced and galvanized within the Native American ethnic heritage—the “Other” who encompasses all “others.” As baseball “gained the loyalty of the youth of Cleveland’s urban neighborhoods in the early 1900s,” and functioned to “transcend the boundaries of race, class, and nationality,” the choice of Sockalexis provided a unifying totem—again, ironically—for the largely immigrant population of Cleveland to gather around. As ethnic tensions only increased in neighborhoods throughout the twentieth century, the baseball Indians provided a neutral ground upon which European foreigners were united, under the banner of that most abject of American “citizens”—the native American. In a strange twist, Sockalexis represented a common past enemy for the largely European population of Cleveland, but stripped of his native heritage and culture, he now symbolized a neutralized adversary, a conquered nemesis whose extant strengths were still admired, sought after, emulated within Anglo-European culture—and now co-opted for the logo of the local professional baseball team.

While there would be “no real Indians on the roster,” neither would there be any “real Clevelanders.” When professional baseball took shape as a business, increasingly players came purchased from all over the country, and rarely did a player of quality rise up within a city and remain to play in that city. Thus, even the understanding of it being “our team”—more specifically, “our Indians”—so demographically accurate only two decades previously, now depended on projections of the imagined community created and assumed by fans themselves, who would thrust it onto both the team and the Chief Wahoo caricature of Sockalexis across the decades. A Team of Grief: The Narrative of Suffering Unfolds

Finally, this “single great player” so full of potential only maintained greatness for two short seasons before succumbing to his own addictions, prescient as a precursor for the
Shakespearean pile of tragedy the Indians would endure through the present day. The following list of calamities, though hardly complete, suggests a fabrication—for it seems almost impossible that a single organization could endure so much grief in its history and still remain intact.

Pitcher Addie Joss, the best hurler in the major leagues at the time, died suddenly of tubercular meningitis on April 14, 1911. He was 32.

Pitcher Don Black suffered a brain aneurysm while batting in a game in 1948, nearly killing him while ending his career.

Herb Score, the most heralded rookie pitcher in a decade, was nearly blinded in one eye when he was hit by a line drive on May 7, 1957. Score was never the same player again, functionally ending his career in his third season.

Shortstop Larry Brown had his skull fractured and suffered other head and facial injuries after a collision with another outfielder in 1966.

Walter Bond, a promising outfielder, was diagnosed with leukemia while playing for the Indians; he died at age 29 in 1967.

First base slugger Tony Horton suffered a nervous breakdown and attempted suicide during the 1970 season. He never played again.

During the 1970 All-Star game, catcher Ray Fosse severely injured his shoulder in a relatively meaningless collision at the plate with Pete Rose, a long-time hero of the cross state Cincinnati Reds who provoked the confrontation with his aggressive style of play. One of the Indians brightest hopes, he never became the hitter he seemed destined to become.

On a day off during 1993 Spring Training, a spring featuring the best roster put forward in almost four decades, pitchers Steve Olin and Tim Crews were killed instantly when the fishing boat they rode in went under a low bridge. A third pitcher in the boat, Bob Ojeda, suffered major head trauma and retired after a brief return to the mound later in the year.

Pitcher Cliff Young died seven and a half months later in an automobile accident.

Finally, in perhaps the representative catastrophe in Cleveland sports history, during the 1920 season which ended with Cleveland winning their first World Series, popular shortstop Ray Chapman took a pitched ball square to his left temple, cracking his skull and severing his brain stem from its base. Though he would surprisingly leave the field on his own feet aided by
teammates, he died later that night in a New York hospital, sending a wave of grief through both the team and the home city. Thus, even one of the greatest seasons on the field in Indians history became marred by the constant reminder of having lost Chapman, to this day the only player ever to be killed by a pitched ball in the Major Leagues. While all teams endure injuries and occasionally even catastrophes over the course of their history, the Cleveland Indians regularly saw their best seasons marred by grief, had their future stars sidelined by misfortune in the prime of their careers, and attracted a level of organizational suffering that seems out of proportion when compared with other teams in the major leagues.

Long-time Cleveland sports writer Paul Hoynes asks, “Has ever a team been touched by more tragedy?” while at the same time offering that “Maybe that’s why the Indians have endured in Cleveland. In spite of their privileged position—grown men making good money for playing a boy’s game—the Indians have always seemed very much like the people who follow their fortunes.” He reflects further that “There has always been something achingly human about the Indians, something that keeps them attached to the pulse of Cleveland.” If they are indeed attached, it remains in a strange, sadistically symbiotic way, for beyond the unparalleled human tragedies that befell the players, for long stretches of time the team often played equally disastrously on the field.

**Following a Loser through the Decades**

Since 1901, the Indians can claim only three winning eras: 1917-1921; 1947-1956; 1994-2001. When they were good, they were dramatically good, teams full of All-Stars and future Hall of Famers, players whose accomplishments on the field were heroic and memorable. Each of those winning windows contain the Indians only World Series births—five in all—with two Series championships in 1920 and 1948. But the sparse nature of those moments only fuels and
heightens the mythology that surrounds them while conversely amplifying the head-shaking frustration felt during the many more frequently experienced losing seasons.22 (Even their most recent World Series teams ultimately produced more agony than joy: In 1954, after posting a then-record 111 regular season wins, being swept by the Giants in four games; in 1995, fielding a team full of All-Stars and the most potent lineup in the Major Leagues, inexplicably losing to the Braves in six; and worst of all, in 1997 when their most reliable pitcher for the past several years, Jose Mesa, gave up a game tying run with one out in the ninth inning of Game 7, setting up a tenth inning loss to the six-year-old Florida Marlins.)

Some would suggest that “the seemingly endless summers of woe make the Cleveland Indians so infuriating, so oddly endearing, so undeniably and intensely, our team.”23 The theory suggests that the suffering induced by acts of fate coupled with incessant losing binds the community together, makes Clevelanders the stewards of that most precious affect—hope—which must be collectively kept alive and nurtured amid the constant attack of defeat.24 Regardless of the psychology behind it, the history of the Indians” team starkly mirrors the history of Cleveland itself, a narrative Clevelanders themselves have in their blood—a proud and genuinely successful beginning, marked by dramatic stretches of precipitous falling, sprinkled with hope-inducing restorative moments. Indeed, the seasons of the Indian”s most successful teams hail some of the most progressive moments in the city”s history, cultural/social moments that play into the largesse of the team”s accomplishment in a Clevelander”s social memory.

Perceptible Pattern or Casual Coincidence?: Rising and Falling with a Team and a City

The team arrived in the first year of the twentieth century, at a heady, optimistic time when Clevelanders like historian Clara Urann pondered the seemingly limitless possibilities for the city: “Great as our city is in many ways, the cry is still for „Greater Cleveland,“ and we
naturally ask what marvelous changes may be expected during the coming century? In what shall this much-talked-of greatness consist?”

The 1920 championship team kicked off the most productive and region-altering decade since the just after the Civil War, producing new landmark buildings, progressive political maneuvers, and an ever expanding business and shopping district, including the opening of many cultural and leisure sites.

The post-WWII decade began a brief resurgence in manufacturing expansion and hope for recovery from the Depression malaise, even posting a brief population surge through 1950. Innovative Indians owner Bill Veeck filled Municipal Stadium with attendance-record crowds of people to watch the best pitching staff in baseball.

Finally, the star-studded Indians of the mid-90s arrived in Cleveland to play in a new stadium, a result of the urban-renewing Gateway Project, which erased the dilapidated reminders of a past gone awry in the old Marketplace District and replaced them with new lofts, stores, and stadiums, signaling the latest installment of a rebirthing plan.

For the highly-identified Cleveland Indians fan, the unspoken non-sequitur locates its justification in this history itself: “Teams win when we are successful as a city; we are successful as a city when our teams win.” Therefore, the hope that arises each spring when prospects for the season remain genuinely optimistic might easily morph into anticipation for the city itself, regardless of current economic, political, or educational circumstances to the contrary. Theirs is a collective nostalgia for a moment in time-past when being seen as relevant was never a goal, simply because for eighty years Cleveland was among the standards of both excellence and relevance—thus, with that historical memory framing current reality, the apparent demise of both the city and its teams must only be temporary. Before national media (and comedians) labeled Cleveland “the Mistake on the Lake,” Cleveland was “the Best Location in the Nation,” and Clevelanders refuse to concede their civic loss—especially to outsiders. As Cleveland social
critic George Condon insightfully offered in 1967, “What a city seeks, in tying its emotional hopes to the ups-and-downs of a collection of grown athletes in modified knickerbockers, is precisely the hallucinative type of joy that gripped Cleveland in 1948, when all the world looked good in spite of the contradictory facts to be found in reality.” The one constant—in good times and bad—was the Indians, a team whose history of suffering paralleled the psyche of its populace.

The sixty-year local evolution of baseball from a pick-up game once played on Public Square, to an acceptable, regulated, marketable commodity promising returns for investors and incentives for good workers, is perhaps the overriding symbol of sports development in Cleveland during the 1860-1920 period. Other sports had risen to serve the needs of the wealthy and the workers, and to meet purposes as diverse as indicating social status and teaching Christian values. None, however, fit the overall needs of a cosmopolitan, business-oriented city as well as baseball. In the next thirty years other sports would attempt to follow this example, and in doing so would provide Clevelanders with a multitude of diversions and heroes in an era of prosperity, depression, and war.

Indeed, as football increasingly captured the American imagination toward the middle of the twentieth century, the Indians would soon share their privileged status (and their stadium) with a team wearing helmets and shoulder pads, a team destined to compete with them (and most would say supplant them) as preeminent within the Cleveland-fan consciousness.

**The Cleveland Browns: “The Best Show in Football” and a Narrative of Abandonment**

When Arch Ward and Leo “Mickey” McBride set out to place a professional football team in Cleveland in the newly formed All-America Football Conference in 1946, a perfect storm of circumstances converged at their doorstep, serving up ingredients for success and connection with the community of fans that far surpassed their own efforts. First, the “victorious” climate in post-World War II America carried with it an aroma of optimism, a positivity seeking social and cultural outlets for expression. The beginning of the “baby-boom” generation supported the official entry of a relatively new concept into the sociological lexicon—
leisure time—that would radically alter the nature of both work and play for Americans. Suddenly, just as veterans returned from both Europe and the Pacific, people managed more money and more time away from work, largely a result of national union negotiations occurring almost daily around the country.\textsuperscript{31}

This new leisure culture both birthed and accelerated the advertising industry as we know it today, especially “advertising that stressed the desirability, the civic responsibility even, of spending one’s money and leisure time on entertaining oneself.” As “men were far more likely to be both sports fans and higher wage earners” at the time, “entertainment often took the form of attending and following sports events.”\textsuperscript{32} While previous incarnations of professional football in Cleveland withered, the Browns were planted in soil fertilized by a burgeoning capitalism.\textsuperscript{33}

Further, by the end of World War II, Ohio had already established itself as the country’s hotbed of football. Though people followed baseball and other sports, Ohioans “seemed to care first and foremost about football,” and in this sense they anticipated by decades “the love affair with the game that would blossom in the country as a whole after the midpoint of the century.”\textsuperscript{34}

Cleveland as a faltering industrial city and the style of post-World War II football seemed destined for one another. As American political scientist Michael Mandelbaum asserts, “It is from the industrial world of the nineteenth and twentieth century’s that football emerged,” and, not coincidentally, “it is the distinguishing features of this world that football reflects.”\textsuperscript{35} Football utilizes measured time, clock-controlled deadlines, specialization among a division of labor, synchronization of many labor parts, sequencing of collective acts, constantly changing technical aspects, and sanctioned violence. Indeed, “if a football team is like an industrial enterprise, a football game is like war”—at least in its movement and strategy, if not also in its brutality.\textsuperscript{36} We should not be surprised, then, to find Ohio in general and Cleveland
specifically—a city still cultivating a gritty, industry-based value system and lifestyle in spite of a national tide turning toward technology—embracing football en masse like few other regions in the country.\textsuperscript{37}

\textit{Paul Brown and the Creation of Modern Football}

In the midst of these cultural realities, Arch and McBride’s most important move was the acquisition of Paul Brown as the team’s first head coach (and subsequently their namesake).\textsuperscript{38} Brown, an Ohio native and Miami of Ohio graduate, already held a reputation as a successful coach at both the high school and college levels, leading Massillon High School to an 81-7-2 record over nine seasons before leading Ohio State to the National Championship in one of his three seasons at the helm there. A consummate organizer and innovator, Brown brought a different level of coordination to the entire team’s workings both in the locker room and on the field, essentially ushering in the modern age of football. Among his contributions to the game, he introduced the playbook, “taxi squad,”\textsuperscript{39} face mask, game films, and a crisp organizational regimen at the professional level, and by the time of his hiring, he was “the most visible and respected football figure in Ohio.”\textsuperscript{40}

Brown set out to build a team that was to be the New York Yankees of football, and everything about the organization reflected that goal. Leading with his own rules—which included winning with order, class, and toughness—meant Brown answered to no one about his approach to coaching or running the team. Strict public relations attention—players were not allowed to smoke or drink in public, especially when travelling as a team—communicated a high moral image to the fan base, giving the Browns a “family friendly” appearance and attracting both parents and youth.\textsuperscript{41} When Brown drafted African-Americans Marion Motley and Bill Willis, he broke the NFL’s unspoken color-line, a full year before Dodgers owner Branch Rickey
and player Jackie Robinson did the same in Major League Baseball.\footnote{42} Using his own reputation for success as collateral against naysayers, Brown invested heavily in public image and cross-cultural talent, inaugurating a new era of football.

Fans immediately took to the Browns, with over 60,000 attending their first home game. Though hardly done intentionally, the ethnic mix of the team gave “the unmeltable city” something to embrace as a proud and unified Cleveland. The team was “Hungarian, Czech, and Irish; Polish, Italian, and Armenian. They were Slovenian, Greek, and Lebanese; Slav, Lithuanian, and significantly, African American. Many grew up poor during the Great Depression, and they were overwhelmingly sons of the working class; one was the son of sharecroppers.”\footnote{43} Clevelanders could relate to this team—hard-nosed, disciplined, clean-cut, ethnically diverse—and desperately needed the psychological boost the Browns extended to a community still reeling from the catastrophe of the previous decade and the recently ended war.

But, perhaps most importantly, they won. Marketing themselves over the first decade as “the best show in football,” the Browns played in the pre-Super Bowl era championship game for 10 straight years, winning seven of them. They tallied a 113-20-4 record from 1946-1955, dominating both the All-America Football Conference (1946-1949) and the National Football League (1950-1955) over that span, fielding teams that would eventually place nine players and four coaches in the Pro Football Hall of Fame. Otto Graham, who played quarterback during the entire decade of championship games, suggests that fan’s attachment to the team initially stemmed from their dominance of the league. Graham notes that “Way back when we first started off, we won a lot. That creates fans. If you go out there and lose three quarters of your ballgames, nobody wants to see you. The fans were loyal because we won. People like a
Indeed, spanning twenty-seven years between 1946-1973, Cleveland fans experienced only one losing season while watching their professional football team.\textsuperscript{45}

Thus, one might argue that Cleveland fans’ initial embracing of the team arose as a combination of the team’s inception at a particular cultural moment, the co-mingling of a broad ethnic mix of players coupled with meticulous image management, and the irrepressible goodwill that arises from being associated with a Midwestern-value laden “winner.” Through almost three decades of dominance, “Browns Town” was born.\textsuperscript{46}

\textit{Jim Brown and the Affective Embodiment of Clevelanders}

Reflecting their almost inconceivable good fortune as a team, even the lone losing season experienced during these years (a 5-7 record during the 1956 season), produced the high draft pick that resulted in one of the greatest players ever to play—Jim Brown. The ironically named “Brown” became an on-field embodiment of the Cleveland ethos: a bruising running back who plowed into the line of scrimmage, disappeared momentarily before reappearing on the other side, dragging and shedding defensive players as he continued running. After eventually being tackled, Brown would gingerly rise to his feet (often giving the appearance of being hurt), slowly make his way back to the huddle, then blast into another hole on the ensuing play.\textsuperscript{47} Clevelanders loved not only his “smash mouth” approach to the game and his yeoman’s blue-collar look in doing it, but also the paradoxical contrast of his seemingly effortless dominance of the league. They fashioned themselves in his image: the battered and bruised city that continued to “get up” over and over again to get the job done, while trampling urban competitors within their collective civic imagination. While social critic Simon Anholt suggests that “we are social creatures, team players to our core, and our core finds meaning and identity almost as much in the team as in the
player,” in this particular case, Clevelanders found themselves maximally identifying with both a

team and a player—a player ideally suited to encompass their own view of themselves.48

Jim Brown playing for Paul Brown on the Cleveland Browns—a perfect storm of

mythological import for the region. The football gods seemed to smile on the city through the
team—even as population dwindled, jobs left, and the rest of the country moved economically
toward technology and service industries. The civic psyche depended increasingly more on the
fortune of its football team to mask the harsh realities of becoming a “Rust Belt” city. By now,
the Browns were an ingrained and significant feature of thousands of Cleveland families, an
anesthetic for life’s most trying realities and an adhesive between generations experiencing their

own difficulties with connecting through the 50s and 60s.

Art Modell and the Beginning of the End/Descent toward Irrelevance

A series of events in the early 1960s would spell the end of the Browns” league

dominance in the decades to come, though strangely and in an inversely proportional way, fan
intensity toward the team never waned through the years—indeed, arguably, it increased. But
the Browns would never be the same team or organization after leaving the decade of the 1950s.

First, in 1961 businessman Art Model purchased the team for the then astronomical

amount of four million dollars. Model would figure prominently (and ominously) in the Browns
immediate and future narrative. In one of his first major moves as owner the following year, he
allowed future Hall of Fame running back Bobby Mitchell to be traded for rights to the number
one pick in the 1962 draft, a pick the Browns used to draft Ernie Davis. Davis, a Heisman
Award winner who, like Jim Brown, not only came from Syracuse but also ran in similar
fashion, promised to give the Browns the most dominant running attack in NFL history for years
to come. Instead, at the first team physical doctors discovered that Davis had leukemia, and he would die within the year.

Adding to the tragedy of Davis’ death, Model inexplicably fired Paul Brown at the end of the year, bringing to a close his storied paternal run as head coach of the Browns. Though the Browns would play in the championship game four times in the decade of the 60s, their victory in the 1964 game over the heavily favored Baltimore Colts would be—significantly—the last major professional sports championship the city would experience to the present day. 49

The Intensification of Fan Identification and Expectations

During a decade of mediocrity in the 1970s, starved fans waited expectantly for the return of their Browns, the winning Browns that produced so much pride in the city. Journalist and die-hard Browns fan Scott Huler, reflecting on the civic angst of those years and the demand for the team to bring the city out of its funk, lends insight into the expectations that highly identified Browns fans had for the team.

Those were dark days in Cleveland, those early seventies days. The Hough riots were part of our lives then; the Cuyahoga River catching fire was part of our lives then. Mayor Ralph Perk’s hair catching fire and the plants closing and the jobs leaving and the city declining and damn it, nobody was doing anything about any of it, and the Indians had been terrible since before anybody could remember, and now even the Browns—the Browns! Ten championship games in ten seasons! Jim Brown, the best football player ever!—now even the Browns were no good, and we wanted somebody to do something about it and damn it we wanted Phipps (quarterback and 1970 first round draft pick). And he couldn’t save us and he couldn’t save our city, and it turned out nobody could, at least not then. 50

But the losing decade only seemed to further galvanize Browns fans. Brian Sipe, who played with the Browns from 1972-1983, marveled at playing with a 3-11 team in front of 67,000 ravenous fans every week: “I was completely unprepared for not only the attention but the genuine caring, the sort of identification they had with the team as being part of their family. In San Diego [where he played college football], the fan support was based primarily on what
your win-loss record was. If you win, people come out and see you and if you don’t there are other things for them to do.”

Conversely, in Cleveland, the Browns had already become part of the identifying fabric of the city, irreparably woven into the psyche of Clevelanders. Years after his retirement from football, Jim Brown recalled the fans’ identification with the team and the team’s connection with the fans, and summarizes—both literally and figuratively—the “familial” connection surrounding both.

What really surprised me was the intensity of the fans—the honesty of the fans, and the enduring kind of memory that the fans had…I thought it had just been a matter of football. But it was more than that. It was relationships and memories, between fathers and sons, and mothers and daughters. Families had gone to those games and had related in beautiful ways and would always remember and identify with me, with the Browns. I did not know it ran that deep.51

Brown understood what Clevelanders admitted almost from the beginning—that among fans, the Browns were treated like a member of the “family” and therefore anything concerning the Browns could be afforded a level of emotional energy similar to that given one’s immediate relatives.52 Not surprisingly then, they also acted as a principle bonding agent between members within a family. Clevelanders, in using affective language to describe their relationship to the Browns, were admitting the team (though perhaps unconsciously) into their primary identity shaping sphere—the home unit—and therefore felt deeply about their every move within the city, in season and out.

Using generalized “family” language to describe the fans relationship with the team, though already sounding hyperbolic, was surpassed in some cases by even more intimate language. Jerry Sherk, who played for the Browns from 1970-1981, suggests that “The fact that Cleveland was a hard luck town, and the Browns were a quality team, well, it made for a love affair that is still going on. It’s a town with a „hole in its psyche” which fell in love with a team
that stood up for it during the tough times, and represented it so well. The Cleveland Browns and the town of Cleveland might be one the biggest town/team love stories in the twentieth century. It’s a romance. It’s hard-hitting. It’s music.”

Correspondingly, Hall of Fame tight end Ozzie Newsome extended the romance metaphor to a never-ending relationship, a relational “marriage” of necessity that stretched through the week. “I think it’s a bond between the fans and the players within the community. It’s not just something that happens on Sunday. It’s something you live with twenty-four hours a day and seven days a week. The Browns game was played seven days a week, from one game to the next.” As one fan suggests, the perception of a romance between the Browns and its fans cut in two directions: “It was both ways. It wasn’t just us loving the team. It was the team respecting us too.” But through the end of the 1970s, the “love affair,” “romance,” and mutual “respect” with the Browns produced a level of disappointment—like relationships are prone to do—never before experienced by the fans, who were bewildered both by the apparent downfall of the city and the parallel demise of its teams.

Further exasperating the situation, in tantalizing fashion the Browns produced three memorable runs toward the Super Bowl in the 1980s only to lose in excruciating style each time. The losses, given their own titles and rehearsed regularly on major sport networks each year to this day, are emblazoned in the collective memory of Browns fans like major national catastrophes. The team’s close calls—“Red Right 88” (Brian Sipe’s final seconds, end-zone interception against Oakland in the 1981 playoffs), “The Drive” (Denver’s John Elway orchestrating a last minute 98-yard game tying drive in the AFC Championship in 1987), and “The Fumble” (Ernest Byner’s drop at the goal line in the last two minutes of the AFC Championship in 1988)—epitomized the struggling city and deepened the angst of deflated fans.
Yet the fans’ relationship to the team—which, perhaps contrary to critical expectations—only became more fanatical. During this decade the “Dawg Pound” was born in the East end zone, a nationally recognized cheering section made up of hundreds of barking adults in dog paraphernalia. By the late-80s, more than two-hundred Browns Backer fan clubs (made mostly of tens of thousands of dispersed Clevelanders), existed in cities around the world, a statistic no other pro sports team could even remotely match.

*Brown’s Fans and the Search for Ontological Description*

Buoyed by their distant history of winning and fortified by the symbolic connection of family and friends equally connected to the team, Browns fans explain their attachment to the team in the most creative ways: some biological, some ethical, some aesthetic-historical—but all thickly romanticized. Examples include:

I can’t explain it, but the Cleveland Browns are in my DNA. Something about seeing those orange helmets come on to the field is exciting. Some people who aren’t Browns fans say Cleveland’s helmets are among the ugliest in sports, and I could not disagree more. Cleveland has the best helmets in all of football. That helmet (and uniform in general) stands for *Excellence*, even though they are temporarily down.

No logos on the helmet. No dancing girls. No climate-controlled dome….Even the name “Browns” lacks glitz….It’s just honest, down-home, Ohio football…The simplest and most humble uniform, the simplest and most humble name.

The ground on the field of Cleveland Municipal Stadium is as brown as dry, dead leaves, as brown as any ground has a right to be, as brown as any ground on which men play professional sports….Brown is the color of the milky coffee that my father pours out of his thermos, steaming into the damp November air, and sips to warm up….Brown is the color of the crowd—a stadium Browns game is the first place that I experience the feeling of being in a crowd comprising many black people….Brown is the color of the unfamiliar downtown buildings we pass as we drive in to the game, always arriving a half hour before kickoff. Brown is the color of the factories we can see in the distance under the low gray clouds beyond the bleachers. Brown is the color of the leaves by the side of the road, the mud at the schoolyard where my brother and I pretend we are football players. Brown is the color of autumn. Brown is the color of my true love.
Fans’ efforts to describe their relationship to the Browns—perhaps more specifically to the symbolic representation accrued by an orange helmet split down the middle with brown and white stripes seen on a Fall or Winter day in Municipal Stadium—resembles a striving for the ontological, for language that describes pathos more than logos. The colors of the uniform, while carrying symbolic weight and meaning for the brand “Cleveland Browns,” likewise symbolically constructs and creates value for the sub-culture “Cleveland Browns fan.” This collective striving for language to describe the relationship fans have with the team has become part of the shared boundary-setting equation among fans themselves, and as Cohen argues, “just as the ‘common form’ for the symbol aggregates the various meanings assigned to it (in this case, the ‘form’ being an embodied Browns uniform combined with Municipal Stadium on Fall/Winter days), so the symbolic repertoire of a community aggregates the individualities and other differences found within the community and provides the means for their expression, interpretation and containment.”

Hence, what constitutes “the Browns” also comprises a certain community boundary for fans—individually emotional and affective, yet also communally coalescing—that transcends ethnic and social differences, thereby giving reality to the community’s boundaries relative not only to other fan bases, but also other cities and parts of the country in general.

The symbolically constituted “Browns fan” community, while together clinging to historical memory markers/ideas like “victory,” “class,” and “pride” so intimately associated with the early years of the team, now clings just as passionately to the shared struggle of being cast-off as “irrelevant,” suffering as “losers,” and enduring “heartbreak” practically as a badge of honor; indeed, as Roger Kahn laments in his book *The Boys of Summer*, “You may glory in a team triumphant, but you fall in love with a team in defeat.” Browns fans, having moved well
past their collective experience of “glory,” were now deeply “in love” with their often
insufferable team, a sentiment anchored by years of deflating losses, a visceral energy that bound
them against all other urban football fan bases.

“Like a Family Member Had Been Murdered”

By 1995, thirty-one years elapsed since the last championship, twenty-six years since
being in a championship game. The city celebrated the opening of the Gateway Sports Complex
the year before, a venue where the Indians and Cavaliers would now call home, and a
revitalization of the downtown area seemed imminent.

Then Art Modell did the unimaginable.

On November 6, 1995, one day before voters would pass a $175 million Cleveland
Municipal stadium renovation bill and a day after rumors began swirling of a move, Modell
announced that he was taking the team to Baltimore. Irritated that the Indians and Cavs were
granted new stadiums while the Browns were left to play in severely dilapidated Municipal
Stadium, Modell brokered a deal with Baltimore civic leaders involving a new stadium without
notifying Cleveland leaders of the negotiations until the official announcement came, and “the
ensuing furor that erupted in the city was unprecedented.”64 Modell conjured the final ingredient
in a recipe for quasi-urban apocalypse in Cleveland, wakening the community to action in ways
that far surpassed the collective reaction to more substantive-seeming crises in their past.

Grown men wept openly around Cleveland while watching Modell make his
announcement. Ohio native Carmen Policy (who would help run the Browns upon their return in
1999) summarized the fan’s feelings by stating, “People referred to it like a death in the family.
Well, it wasn’t like it was just a death in the family. It was like a family member had been
murdered…It wasn’t just a loss, it was a cruel and unfair loss.”65 In the mind of a fan base that
would commonly testify (without a hint of exaggeration) that “other than our religious traditions, we had no family traditions to speak of except for the Browns,” the move defined maximum betrayal and produced a mind-numbing sense of disbelief and loss.66

A 44-year old fan, who attended games more than thirty years, acknowledged after the Sunday game before the official announcement that “This is more like a funeral than a football game. I sat in my office with a 12-pack of beer last night and cried. I really did. I cried.” Others noted that “The Cleveland Browns are part of Cleveland, and to move them is a crime.”67 Jim Brown himself lamented, while walking the field the day before the official announcement, “It was the worst feeling I’ve had here, other than when Kennedy got killed. It was like a dream out there today.”68 One Browns Backer articulated the assault that fans felt on their symbolically collective, generationally induced nostalgia, citing that for most Clevelanders loyalty to the team was a family inheritance: “I was born and raised a Browns fan. My father has always been a Browns fan. It crosses the generations. It’s very devastating.”69

Loyalty, longevity, tradition—words long embraced by Clevelanders as part of their own ethnic, civic, and personal identity—became trashed in a moment of brokering between Modell and the city of Baltimore.70 Perhaps understandably considering the history, the big shouldered city that previously endured so many heart-stopping lunges at the trophy and too many winters of their own discontent, a town faithfully filling the stands with crowds of rabid, barking fans for decades, reacted like a man bitten by his own dog.71

The tear in the fabric of Cleveland’s social-psyche was palpable, but once the initial shock wore off, Cleveland leadership and citizens fought back, filing multiple suits against Modell, while overwhelming the NFL commissioner’s office with faxes and letters demanding to keep the nickname, colors, and history of the Browns in Cleveland. Though Modell took the
football team to Baltimore as planned, the NFL granted Cleveland the “Browns” franchise and promised them a new team in 1999. The current installment of the Browns has scrambled together two winning seasons since their inception through 2011, with perhaps the cruelest irony being that the Baltimore Ravens became one of the premier teams in the league over that same span, winning Super Bowl XXXV in January 2001 and Super Bowl XLVII in January 2013.72

Terry Pluto, long-time Cleveland sports writer for The Plain Dealer and other regional newspapers, asked his online readership “why, more than four long decades after your team”s last championship…despite a relentless pattern of heartbreak, teasing, and more heartbreak…[recently] capped with a decade of utter futility…do you still stick with the Cleveland Browns?”73 Respondents frequently mentioned the answers already revealed in this chapter, recounting the winning tradition and their identification with paradoxical “normal guy” heroes, a sense of intimacy garnered by civic pride in “our” team, and the family of origin galvanization that took place through embracing the entire organization through the years. He concluded the book that arose from those email correspondences with this bottom-line summary quote from one respondent.

I continue to watch this mess for two reasons—character and deferred gratification. I think it says something about who you are when you identify the team you root for…It shows character to choose a favorite team, to stick with that team no matter what and not run off to a new team every time your team slides. Our union with the Browns is a marriage, for better or worse.

Pluto concludes that, as admittedly irrational as it may seem, for the fans in Browns Town, “there are some temporary separations, but divorces just don’t happen.”74

**The Cleveland Cavaliers: The Taste of Relevance and a Narrative of Betrayal**

“With the first pick in the 2003 NBA draft, the Cleveland Cavaliers select: Lebron James.” As the bearer of that announcement, NBA Commissioner David Stern became a
messenger of euphoric hope for both the Cleveland psyche and the local economy. A little over a year since James filled the cover of *Sports Illustrated* as a high school junior (an issue where he was dubbed “The Chosen One”), James fulfilled an almost unimaginable dream for Clevelanders: one of their own, a player “already being mentioned as the heir to Air Jordan,” would play his home games in downtown Cleveland, instantly reviving the city’s professional sport relevance and presumably breaking the championship drought persistent since 1964.\(^{75}\) Writing several years before the 2003 draft, Scott Huler rued the demise and departure of the Browns and reflected on the championship contending teams of the 1960s by lamenting that “they will never be back—we’ll never catch lightning in a bottle the way Paul Brown did. Jim Brown was a once-in-a-lifetime guy; Jim Brown will never be back.” But indeed, in the 6’8” 225 lb. man-child James, Cleveland caught “lightning in a bottle” and now had the basketball version of Brown, birthed just thirty miles to the south in Akron and ready to dominate the National Basketball Association the way Brown trampled opposing tacklers forty years ago in Cleveland’s past.\(^{76}\)

After Clevelander Nick Mileti successfully acquired franchise rights to an NBA team in 1970, three periods of Cavalier basketball significantly shape collective fan consciousness leading up to the drafting of James 33 years later: the “Miracle of Richfield” years (1975-1978), the disastrous Ted Stepien years (1980-1983), and the promising Lenny Wilkens years (1986-1993). Each in its own way contributed to the psyche of fans connected to the team—fans that for many more years had already been immersed in the angst-filled trials of the Browns and Indians—establishing the back story and setting the stage for James’ 2003 entrance.
In Pursuit of “the City Game”: “It Was Clear to Me that We Should Have a Team”

Born in 1931 into an East Side Italian factory-working family, Nick Mileti arguably became Cleveland’s most visible entrepreneur of the 1970s. In 1968, after buying the downtown Cleveland Arena along with its most prominent tenant, the minor league hockey Barons, Mileti set his sights on acquiring an NBA team. For Mileti, whose working class background and ethnically deep Cleveland roots made him entirely a son of Cleveland history, having an NBA team became a matter of personal civic pride. Mileti believed that “sports drive a community” by marrying “its ethnic, social and economic fiber” and giving it “pride and purpose,” and he understood intuitively the importance of bringing big-time basketball to his city. Nationally, as baseball’s influence began to fade and football continued to capture and dominate the American consciousness, in the last decades of the twentieth century basketball came to symbolize urban “cool.”

Recalling what football meant to the industrial world, basketball increasingly denoted the new economy of the post-industrial cosmos—technical, sleek, fluid—while also becoming the predominant urban chic sport. Reflecting the technological and service industry worker standards of personal ingenuity and adaptability, basketball players increasingly mirrored nascent hip-hop artistry and flow; that is, “like the „knowledge worker” of post-industrial society—the designer, the economist, the psychologist—what the basketball player brings to his enterprise is his own skill,” kinesthetic movement embodied and expressed within the organized chaos of a five-person unit. Basketball did not need Cleveland (at least six other cities were bidding for teams), but in Mileti’s mind, to remain a major league city heading into the next century, Cleveland needed basketball, and on October 14, 1970, the Cleveland Cavaliers played (and lost) their first game.
Like most expansion teams that lose regularly, the first Cavalier teams could barely be taken seriously—merely a reprieve between the end of the Browns season and baseball spring training—but something about the hard-scrabbled, cast-off nature of the team endeared them to Clevelanders. They developed a cult-like following in their first season, and local media dubbed them the “Lovable Losers,” the “Madcap Mob,” and sometimes more harshly, the “Cadavers.” Perhaps attributable to the stumbling nature of their play and being the “new kids on the block,” they had celebrity-like status both in Cleveland and around the country. But by 1975, shrewd draft picks and trades made during the first four seasons produced arguably the most beloved team in the history of the franchise, a team remembered not for comedic losses but instead a shocking playoff series win.

*The Miracle of Richfield: “The Washington series was the greatest sporting event I will ever see in my life”*83

The roster from the 1975-76 team includes names spoken with a romanticized hush among Clevelanders to this day, practically constituting a mythology unto themselves in Cleveland sport fan conversation—Austin Carr, Jim Chones, Bobby “Bingo” Smith, Clarence “Foots” Walker, Campy Russell, Jim Brewer, Jim Cleamons, Dick Snyder, Nate Thurmond—names immortalized largely as a result of the 36 days that followed the regular season, arguably “the most stirring days in the history of the franchise.”84

Playing a best-of-seven series against the Washington Bullets, a team featuring three future Hall of Famers, the Cavs fought to a 3-3 series tie, forcing a seventh game at home. The two teams battled with expected playoff ferocity: three of the seven games were decided by two points or less in the final seconds, while another went into overtime.85 Playing four home games in front of playoff record attendance totals, the fans arrived 20 minutes before warm-ups began and stomped, pounded, and cheered “We want the Cavs!” with such energy that the concrete
walls vibrated under the arena. Indeed, before Game 1, two players in the Cavs locker room held the pre-game chalkboard to keep it from falling to the floor.86

The whole series, Cleveland media maximally dramatized the underdog role, emphasizing that their team could outdo the arguably more athletically gifted individuals representing the Bullets.87 As a bunch of “bums from nowhere” taking on the flashy East Coast giant, the players endeared themselves all the more to their blue-collar fan base.88 When Dick Snyder took an inbound pass and drove to the basket with nine seconds on the clock and the score tied at 85, the “miracle” was born: Snyder banked a shot off the glass, the Bullets fumbled the inbound pass, and Cleveland fans hysterically rushed the court as the time-clock read zero.89

Writing the day after the game for The Plain Dealer, Hal Lebovitz struggled to describe the scene from the previous day.

How do you write about it? Where are the adjectives? Incredible. Stupendous. Overwhelming. A miracle. Those words are all too lame. The noise hasn’t stopped. These ears will ring forever. They’re still tearing up the Coliseum as these words are being written. Fans are going absolutely ape…The baskets have been torn down…These mad, mad fans…Deliriously mad. Are you beginning to get the picture?90

As Cavs guard Austin Carr said years later, “I have never experienced anything like that in my life. It was unreal…They [the crowd] were coming from everywhere. They were frantic. It was like a flood, like something happened. I got weak in my knees. The noise, I’ll never forget the noise.”91 Center Jim Chones added, “I’ll never forget those crowds at the Coliseum. They will never be like that again. These players today have no idea what it is like to be cheered by a crowd that is totally in love with you. All they cared about is that you made the effort.”92

But before the next series against the Boston Celtics, a series Cavs players entered with even more confidence than the one against the Bullets, center Jim Chones broke his foot in practice, taking away both his points and defense for the rest of the year. With their inside game
weakened, the Cavs lost the series in six games, and plagued by injuries for the next three years, the team faded without returning to the heights of 1976. Reflecting on the “miracle” team years later, bookended by its euphoric victory against Washington and its devastating finish against Boston, native Clevelander and writer Scott Raab lamented that “the Miracle of Richfield was not a shot or a game; it was a team and a season, an unfolding of fate that can stand alone as an exemplar of the cruel architecture of Cleveland sports.”

The Stepien Years: “If Stepien buys the team, get the hell out of town as fast as you can—he’s nutso!”

Mileti sold the team in 1979, and it changed hands four times in the period of a few months before landing in the grasp of Theodore J. “Ted” Stepien, a local advertising businessman. Though the Cavs were already in a shambles when he took the reins, Stepien quickly offered evidence that he would drive the Cavs to an unthinkable low, leaving alienated and embarrassed fans in the wake. In three short seasons, Stepien oversaw the “Dark Age” of Cavalier basketball and nearly destroyed the team. A few examples from his leadership portfolio include:

Helping organize a 1980 publicity softball-drop from the 52nd floor of the Terminal Tower. The balls, expected to be caught by members of Stepien’s professional softball team, reached speeds of 144 miles per hour while travelling the 700 feet in six seconds. One woman sued Stepien after her wrist was broken by a wayward ball, while others ushered a man to the hospital with a shoulder injury; another man likewise sued for damages to the roof of his car.

Hiring Don Delaney as General Manager. Delaney, the current manager of Stepien’s professional softball team, brought no basketball management experience and subsequently became overseer of all basketball operations.

Hiring Bill Mussellman as Head Coach. Mussellman, still despised by Ohioans for his role in orchestrating a mid-game brawl with Ohio State players when he was coaching at the University of Minnesota, was later described by Delaney as “the most vicious human being I ever met.” Hated by players, media—even secretaries—Mussellman vindictively traded away players that the fans loved.
Becoming the forefather of “continuous entertainment” at games. Featuring a polka-music driven fight song (Stepien was Polish), scantily clad cheerleaders called “The Teddy Bears,” “Crazy George, the World’s Greatest Ballhandler,” and “The Amazing Boot,” a man who would crunch empty beer cans with his teeth, explode firecrackers in his mouth, and eat raw eggs.\(^{97}\)

Suggesting the Cavs had “too many blacks.” Speaking shortly after he bought the club, Stepien said that he intended to make the team more “white.” “White people have to have white heroes. I myself can’t equate to black heroes…I need white people. It’s in me—and I think the Cavaliers have too many blacks, 10 of 11. You need a blend of white and blacks. That draws, and I think that’s a better team.”\(^{98}\)

Firing Joe Tait, the beloved radio voice of the Cavs and Indians: After Tait criticized “the ridiculous polka fight song…questionable trades, corny showbiz, and promises of on-court success that obviously can’t be kept,” Stepien fired Tait as broadcaster of Cavs games. Fans responded by organizing a “Goodbye Joe Tait Night” at the final home game of the 1980-1981 season, filling the arena with 20,175 angry protestors (with 8,252 being the previous high for the year) and showering Stepien with popcorn and hot dog wrappers.\(^{99}\)

Trading their 1982, 1983, 1984, 1985, and 1986 first-round draft picks. In return, Stepien acquired a handful of average veterans who were troublesome off the court and ineffective on it (one of whom was cut eight days after reporting to the team), decimating the team’s future and leading the NBA to create “The Stepien Rule,” which forbids a team from trading away a first round pick in two consecutive years.\(^{100}\)

A 1982 *New York Times* article suggested that just a few years after the Cavaliers were not just respectable but legitimately good, they had become “the worst club and most poorly run franchise in professional basketball, only because they have seemed to have worked so hard and resourcefully to achieve these lows.”\(^{101}\) As one fan recently summarized, “I know many hate Modell, and he had his issues as an owner, but he’s not in the same class of dumbassedness. Not even close. Ted is in his own division.”\(^{102}\) The Cavs were 66-180 with home game attendance averaging less than 3,000 during Stepien’s three years; far worse for fans, just several years removed from the embarrassment of the city default, his humiliating leadership only enhanced the mock-worthy perception of the “loser” city. In 1983, Stepien sold the Cavs to George and
Gordon Gund, who began sorting through the remains at Stepien’s ground zero in hopes of resurrecting not only the team, but also a beleaguered and staggered fan-base.

*The Lenny Wilkens Years: “The finest basketball team on the planet”*¹⁰³

By 1986, under the direction of head coach Lenny Wilkens and general manager Wayne Embry (coincidentally, the first African-American coach and general manager pairing in the history of the NBA), the Cavs would begin a stretch of eight playoff seasons in the next nine years, including three 50-plus win seasons. Placed equally alongside the mythologically celebrated “Miracle of Richfield” team, players during these years once again represented the symbolic image Clevelanders cherished—hard-working, selfless, underdogs—overachievers trying to prove themselves in a decimated market. Fans loved that Wilkens coached the game the way he played it: “in a cerebral and quietly efficient manner, with his face acting as a mask that refused to betray his innermost emotions.”¹⁰⁴

The team featured Brad Dougherty, a plodding, non-athletic looking center; Mark Price, a short, thin, largely ignored second-round pick who many thought would not make the team; John “Hot-Rod” Williams, a player mired in a point shaving scandal during his senior year at Tulane (later cleared of all charges); Miami of Ohio phenom Ron Harper, who struggled with a severe stuttering impediment; journeymen Craig Ehlo and Mike Sanders, role players who doggedly clung to the league each season; and Larry Nance, an aging veteran star whose best days were thought behind him.

Little flash on the court, no flash off the court—a team made for Clevelanders. Fans, while still somewhat shaken by the previous ownership, grew increasingly attached to the way the group gelled and played as a team. A rejuvenated pride began to swell within the fan base, and in the team’s first season under Wilkens (1987-1988), they battled in the first round of the
playoffs before losing to Chicago when Michael Jordan scored 21 of his 39 points in the fourth quarter of Game 5, “foreshadowing an event the following season that would impact the Cleveland franchise (and fanbase) future in a way no one could have imagined.”

After tearing through the regular 1988-1989 season going 57-25, amid a flurry of predictions throughout the league that the Cavs were the team to beat, they once again met the Chicago Bulls in the Eastern Conference Playoffs. Though going 6-0 versus Chicago during the regular season, the series returned to Cleveland for the final game on May 7, 1989, tied 2-2, before “20,273 roaring fans that were reminiscent of the „Miracle” days.” When Cleveland made a shot to go up 100-99 with three seconds left, Cleveland’s destiny seemed a lock. However, with the Bulls initial play thwarted, Jordan got the ball thirty feet from the basket then made a sharp move to the free throw line before pulling up to shoot. While Cleveland defender Craig Ehlo strained to block his attempt, Jordan hung in the air a moment longer before releasing the game winner, tormenting Cavs fans with what became known simply as “The Shot.”

“The Shot” by Jordan sent the Cavs “down a long, winding path of irreversible poor luck, beginning the moment he ended their 1988-1989 season and continuing in training camp the very next fall.” Multiple players missed significant parts of the next season due to injury. Ron Harper, the Cavs brightest hope at guard, was suspected of drug entanglements and was immediately traded for Danny Ferry, a player who never came close to replacing Harper’s production. The team was never the same, and though they returned to the playoffs in four of the next five years (losing to Jordan’s Bulls to finish three of those seasons), Magic Johnson’s prediction for them to be “the team of the 90s” now seemed naïve. Fans, whose hopes soared with the promise of this team and its embodiment of their ethos, had those hopes once again dramatically imploded into a collective pile of demoralized debris.
That Cleveland still had a professional basketball team after its rocky beginning in 1970 and the unconscionable leadership of Ted Stepien during the early 1980s was surprising enough, but that Wilkens’ teams did not win a championship at the turn of the next decade (nor even make it to the NBA Championship Series) left fans incredulous and disheartened. After Lenny Wilkens resigned as coach in 1993, within a year all the players under his watch either retired themselves as a result of injury or were traded. In their place came a hodge-podge collection of players entering through a constantly revolving door—players who appeared more concerned with their own careers than the plight of the Cavalier team—and fans struggled to connect with them for the next decade. However, one spring evening in New York City changed the narrative instantly—and dramatically—and placed the Cavaliers at the center of the professional basketball world.

**LeBron James: “He’s Something that Comes Along Once in a Lifetime”**

On the evening of May 22, 2003, four ping-pong balls with the numbers 6, 2, 3, 12 popped up and delivered Lebron James to his hometown team, perhaps the most anticipated event in Cavs (if not Cleveland sports) history—a night promising at least the rebirth of the organization if not the revitalization of the urban center. Certainly, as many newspaper articles reflected, “fortune was finally on the Cavaliers’ side after so many years of blown draft picks, sagging attendance and losses to Michael Jordan at the buzzer.” James himself, fresh off signing a $100 million dollar endorsement contract with Nike, said “I’m going to make Cleveland the way it was before Michael Jordan killed us all the time. I hope I can put a lot of smiles back on people’s faces in Cleveland. This was one of my long-term dreams. I’m real happy about being in Cleveland.” Fans were ecstatic at the announcement—as one suggested, “it’s an end to the bad luck we’ve had over and over and over”—and reports of fans with “fists
raised, screams echoing from every corner of packed room[s], and friends and strangers
toppl[ing] each other with hugs,” broke out all over Cleveland. The three-time high school
state champion knew how to win and understood the history of sports misery within the city, a
legacy that Clevelanders—most of whom had never tasted a championship in their
lifetime—assumed was about to change with the arrival of James.

After Sports Illustrated donned James with the messiah-hailing label of “Chosen One,”
other marketing reps were quick to pile on with their own religious and royalty branding tags—
“Witness [his greatness],” “King James,” and “Savior,” as examples—building on the ephemeral
glow cast by the all-white suit he wore on draft night. Nike eventually hung a 10-story banner
on the building directly across from the Cavaliers home arena and essentially the entrance to the
city from the south proclaiming “We Are All Witnesses,” featuring James at the end of his pre-
game powder toss, looking into the heavens with arms outstretched—the civic “savior” had
arrived.

A return to relevance

Indeed, the city of Cleveland anticipated more than just championships to flow through
James—they expected a change in reputation, and more importantly, a resurgence of cash flow to
the downtown area. A team that never participated on national broadcasts would suddenly be
taken seriously by ESPN, ABC, and the weekday home of NBA basketball, TNT. Ohio media
contended that “the hometown kid (known as „King James‟) will not only help the club fill
20,000-seat Gund Arena every night, but he‟ll put the spotlight on a town that hasn‟t had a world
championship since the Browns won an NFL title in 1964.” James brought instant credibility
and a boost to the beleaguered status of the city. As sports columnist Bud Shaw noted, “because
James” stock in trade is the incredible, the Cavs are laughingstocks no more,” further suggesting that “the Cavs and James are a match made in box-office heaven.”

Business owners in the Gateway District surrounding the stadiums counted on James “to lift them out of their slump and restore them to the glory days of the 1990s, when the Indians were a championship [caliber] team, streets overflowed with people and business was good.” As the city was preparing to run a $12 million deficit, the timing could not have been better in the eyes of city leaders, who saw James as a marketable commodity that surpassed anything they could plan for within a budget. Columnists noted that “he”s already being hailed as the savior of the NBA”s worst team,” but then also asked whether “James [could] help pump life into a neighborhood the way the Indians of the 1990s [did], with their roster full of big name players and regular trips to the postseason?”

“The Savior” delivers—partially

On many anticipated levels for fans, James delivered. The Cavaliers, while missing the playoffs in his first two years, nevertheless immediately doubled their win total from 17 to 35 games his first full season, escalating each year until finally leading the league in regular season wins (66 and 61) in consecutive seasons. The team played no less than 20 games on national television each year, including participation in the coveted Christmas Day slot. National media, assigned to follow James” every move, found themselves logging weeks at a time within the city limits, churning out positive stories about Cleveland and the surrounding region into mainstream consciousness.

Game attendance, which often totaled less than 5,000 actual persons the year before James arrived, shot above 20,000 for practically every home game; suddenly, Cavaliers tickets became difficult to acquire. As hoped, the Gateway District boomed between November and
May; estimates suggested that James brought no less than $48 million to the downtown area, a number increasing to $150 million when the Cavaliers played 10 home playoff games. Indeed, for Clevelanders, James had already become more than a sports superstar—“he’s a one-man economic engine that drives the lane, fills the bars and puts Cleveland on national TV.” Further enhancing the economy (and perhaps producing fuel for the engine to run), as Cleveland economist LeRoy Brooks suggested, was simply the affective dimension: “He makes people happier…he makes people feel better, more enthused…[that’s why] sports are so big…sports bring a community together.” Correspondingly, when an enthused community literally comes together, they often spend money, which civic leaders were more than motivated to encourage.121 Cavs fans and the city of Cleveland itself embraced their superstar and clung to him for help in finally turning the page on their recent history of sport franchise debacles and general civic embarrassment.122

“Born here, raised here, plays here, stays here”? Entering the 2008 season, national media began poking at a question looming on the not-so-distant horizon: When he became a free-agent in July 2010 after his seventh season in the league, would Lebron James sign a deal to keep him in Cleveland, or would he move to a larger market? Clevelanders took solace in several pointers in their favor, not least of which was James” being from the area: “God’s reward to Cleveland for the suffering.”123 But early exits in both the 2009 and 2010 playoffs (capped by James” seemingly and inexplicably disinterested performance in Game 5 of the season ending series against Boston), agitated new fears within the fan base that perhaps James would be tempted to go elsewhere.124 A circus atmosphere surrounded the courting of James during the weeks leading up to his July 8, 2010 announcement, an interview that Clevelanders would add to their collective pile of sports misery.
“The Decision” and a perception of betrayal

“If you give your child everything he wants, every time he asks for it, that kid is going to come back one day and steal your car.”

“I think this is the first time in history one man managed to destroy an entire city. Even the Enola Gay had a flight crew.”

James made his announcement—that he was “taking his talents to South Beach”—during a one-hour program aired on ESPN at the Boys and Girls Club of Connecticut. The show, immediately dubbed “The Decision” in keeping with the history of brutal but catchy monikers that catalogue Cleveland sports misery, brought a wave of emotion and backlash rivaling the Modell decision to move the Browns fifteen years earlier. Cavs owner Dan Gilbert, stepping wide of leadership protocol, immediately issued an open-letter to the fan base, calling James’ handling of the moment a “cowardly betrayal” and a “shocking act of disloyalty from our homegrown, chosen one.”

National sports commentators like Bill Simmons, while thoroughly acknowledging James’ motivation for a desired move to Miami, nevertheless suggested that in “turning that decision into a one-hour special, pretending that it hadn't been decided weeks ago, using a charity as your cover-up and ramming a pitchfork in Cleveland's back like you were at the end of a Friday the 13th movie and Cleveland was Jason...there just had to be a better way.” Labeling the previous evening’s entertainment as “The LeBacle,” Simmons used his column to allow Cavalier fans to voice their grief and posted over eighty of the responses that he received in the twelve hours that followed the show.

He knew the pain of Cleveland teams, whether he rooted for them or not. Thursday night, he dragged out our agony. On a special named "The Decision" he did that to us. To the people that lived through the “The Shot,” “The Drive” and “The Fumble.” None of our players would have done that to us. LeBron, get the hell out of our town. (Tom)
Sure there are other teams that are more futile, and some cities come close to our collective disappointment and pain. However, none of them have had the biggest homegrown sports star and pretty much only hope for a dying city, go on TV and give a blatant “F you.” (Michael)

I’m 25 years old. I’m about to re-enlist for another tour overseas with the Army. I have an idea of what matters and what doesn’t. But this still hurts. Nothing stings worse than when one of your own rips your heart out. Not like this. (Paul)

Explain to me why I should care about sports when the savior of my city turns out to be a false prophet. (Collin)

Closest example of what Lebron did with Cleveland: Instead of proposing to your girlfriend, dumping your wife on the Jumbotron. At the Super Bowl. (Eric)

I hope Miami is greener, LeBron, because Cleveland is more dead now than when you arrived. It doesn’t matter how many titles you win… (Derek G.)

People from Ohio have a strong connection to where we are from. We love the Browns, Cavs, and Indians, even when they’re terrible. We love our athletes and treat them like gods...No other city feels this in EVERY sport, in such a variety of ways…Just know that people in Cleveland rarely forgive or forget. Half a century of losing hardens people to the point of dumping beer on old women who are dumb enough to wear Steelers gear to Browns games, even to the point of hating our once beloved son LeBron…We burn his jersey not to hurt him, but for us. Destruction is great company to misery. (David)

You just saw the sports death of a city. I can’t see LeBron ever being hated as much as Modell, but his future will be similar…The anguish with Lebron is a little different—he was supposed to be one of us. He was supposed to be the Chosen One. When the chips were down, he didn’t show up, and at the first chance he had, he bolted and left us hung out to dry, like so many before him. That’s the action I would expect from a politician—not a monarch. Even a self-proclaimed one. (Greg)

You have to make Cleveland the number one most tortured sports city of all time. After tonight it is indisputable. I am literally shaking as I type this. My city has been through so much, WHEN WILL IT END? (Kevin)

You know how happy Carrie looked at the prom? And when the pig’s blood was dumped on her you couldn’t help but empathize? And when she went on her rampage you were actually kinda rooting for her? That’s how I feel about the city of Cleveland right now. (Jessica)

This is a drunk email but I’ve never felt this betrayed. The deepest circle of hell is reserved for those who betray and LeBron earned his spot. (Jay K.)
So I'm watching LeBron treat Cleveland like my daughter treats her diaper, and I hear Jackson and Van Gundy (ESPN commentators) talking about how horrible the Cleveland fans are for burning his jersey and how „this is how you handle yourself” as though they're watching something I'm not. I like both of their analysis usually, but they've never spent a month's salary on games, never put in 80 hours waiting tables, taking out trash or even been stuck in an office with the escape of sports as a way to get through it. So they wouldn't understand that many fans don't care about "witnessing" LeBron whatever the heck that is, as if Cleveland fans should be grateful they got to see him dunk a bunch of times and choke in the playoffs. (Jay)

We had a LeBronfire last night…I burned everything I own with his name on it. My wife could sleep with my father and I wouldn”t feel this betrayed. Born here. Raised here. Played here. Betrayed here. (Kevin)

This small sample from Simmons” blog reflects the intensely emotive nature of Clevelanders’ response to what otherwise, on the over-simplified surface, was the announcement of a 25-year-old African-American male taking a job in another city; however, the resultant quake from the program belied something considerably more complicated on a both a cultural and historical level. Their comments trace a consistent theme, a complex wheel whose emotionally charged spokes lead inward toward a centering hub.

Affectively, Clevelanders reflected a sense of betrayal normally reserved for romantic relationships and other relationships built on trust—a trampling of the assumed fealty between the fans and their “savior” or “Chosen One.” Yet, while James was to use his sports “divinity” to exorcise the stigma of losing branded onto the Cleveland civic psyche, he instead capitalized on knowledge of this history to add his own scar. Beyond general basketball fandom or concern for the Cavalier team itself, Clevelanders reacted and took offense to the assault once again leveled on their collective civic character—a presumably shared understanding forged through years of political embarrassment and sports misery. The hope that a homegrown, James-led championship would purge the city of its previous forty-six years was not only dashed, but the misery itself became highlighted and extended by the “savior” himself. Even national media,
(many of whom predicted James would return to Cleveland in spite of social pressure to the contrary), fully aware of the heroic mythology being dissolved into Shakespearean tragedy through James’ televised spectacle, commented on what the move meant to Clevelanders and their immediate relationship to James.

“I’m taking my talents to South Beach,” James said, and it was like time stopped because—even for him—this was a moment so devoid of reality and free of concern of consequences…Yes, James will take his talent to South Beach and leave his soul in Cleveland. His hometown won’t hate him as much for leaving the Cleveland Cavaliers as for the way he left them. Leaving never would’ve been easy, but he went out of his way to humiliate them. LeBron James can never go home now. He’s the Browns leaving town, The Fumble, The Shot, all rolled into one colossal disappointment.131

Meanwhile, as the latest installment of civic sports misery took full shape, “the Cleveland fans, the veritable nation of Job, whose love burns yet through all the heartache and scorn,” collectively grieved and wondered aloud among themselves whether they would ever live long enough to participate in a victory parade marching down Euclid Avenue.132

**Conclusion**

“If the crux of ardent fanhood holds a touch or more of madness, then Cleveland fanhood is a bug-eyed, shit-smeared lunatic, howling for a God who’s never going to come.”133

In the ESPN soccer documentary *The Two Escobars*, the Columbian national team coach describes how a nation with a long history of losing at soccer was transformed by overnight success. In explaining the importance of the team to Columbians, he elaborated on the symbiotic relationship between nation and team. “[Fans say] that’s our team—our identity.” They embraced us [the team] and infused us with the joy that is the heart of our people. We manifested their dreams, ignited their passion.” Raab notes that “around the world, a single soccer, cricket, or rugby match can capture and embody a whole people’s history and self-regard, and change it as profoundly and permanently as war.”134 William Sutton, while contending that fan’s loyalty to their community is unwavering and long term, suggests that “fans who view the
team as an extension of their community have a strong emotional attachment to the team,” and that “although the success of the team reflects personally upon individual fans, it also reflects upon the collective identity of the community.”

Perhaps especially in a town ravaged not by physical warfare but fiscal and social deterioration, in a region that most recently lost seventeen percent of its population between 2000 and 2010, where sports rooting interests are passed on from birth and transcribed into the social DNA, it’s no wonder that for Cleveland fans sometimes “the mere existence of the Cavs, Browns, and Indians seems like all that keeps Cleveland from slipping into darkness forever.”

Within the city of Cleveland, the professional teams create a point of common ground, but also help forge and contribute to a common, symbolic identity: “Clevelander,” or more specifically, “Cleveland sports fan.” Whatever one’s distinction ethnically or socio-economically, the teams mirror something of what every Clevelander holds in common as a member of the imagined community called “Cleveland.” In a community with such pulsing ethnic diversity, the players on the local professional teams “become role models whose achievements have great meaning for the many racial and nationality communities that make up the city,” and as such, the performance of both teams and the individual players on those teams become “central to the area’s self-esteem.”

As Grabowski notes, “organized play has become woven into the fabric of civic life” in Cleveland, and the professional sports teams, for better and worse, have “reshaped the local economy, provided individual and group opportunity, and, most important, created a mirror in which the psyche of the city has been reflected.” Indeed, that “reflection” both produces and provokes a desperate longing to see a winner in the city, and long-time Cleveland sports writer Terry Pluto observes that “for all the gnashing of teeth about how the media and fan base is
cynical and negative, most of us know how quickly that can change with the fortunes of the team.”138

While the plight of Cleveland fans may be compared and contrasted across various categories with other urban sports venues, remembering their voluptuous civic history dating back to 1796, then combining it with the cultural climate surrounding the inception of the teams themselves and the more recent conflation of municipal and sport misery of the past five decades, creates a stew of ingredients rather unique in the annals of sport fan experience. Given the particular circumstances outlined in this chapter, we should not be surprised to find that within a highly identified fan’s imagination the teams comprise a significant part of their self-understanding, perhaps even at a level that might be considered “implicitly religious.”
Notes


3 William Ganford Rose, *Cleveland: The Making of a City* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1990 (1950)), 505-506. See also Elbert Jay Benton, *Cultural Story of an American City: Cleveland* (Cleveland: Western Reserve Historical Society, 1943), 63, where Benton cites the beginning of organized baseball in Cleveland with the Forest City Club in September 1865.

4 Grabowski, *Sports*, 14-35. The racial clashes could become intense as “games played between teams of differing ethnic backgrounds...were the cause of near-riots as the players battled on the court and their fans battled in the gymnasium and in the street afterward.”

5 Grabowski, *Sports*, 7. At least initially in the late 1800s, “the significance of such activity was minor in terms of economic impact (in Cleveland). The city’s leadership saw its future in terms of industrial output, and not in the services associated with leisure activities.” However, critically, “the performance of local teams...was increasingly viewed as a part of the city’s public image.” See also Grabowski, *Sports*, xii.

6 For further explanation regarding this cultural shift, see Steven Watts, *The Magic Kingdom: Walt Disney and the American Way of Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997), 6, where Watts goes on to say that “In the early 1900s, a new vision of America was becoming clearer and clearer. In an atmosphere of growing material abundance, the ideas that human instincts should be sated rather than restrained, that leisure had a place above old-fashioned attachments to productivity, that the external projections of human personality were more important than the internal restraints of character, emerged as threads of a new national culture.” See also T.J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981).

7 Grabowski, *Sports*, 35.

8 See John Thorn, Pete Palmer, Michael Gershman, David Pietrusza, and Paul Hoynes, eds., *Total Indians* (New York: Penguin Books, 1996), 33-34, for a more thorough history of the many manifestations of both professional and minor league baseball in Cleveland from 1871-1915, including the Negro League which played through the 1940s.

9 Rose, *Making of a City*, 566. Though perhaps anticipating future calamity, their home park stands were hit by lightning three years previously and burned to the ground. That they would subsequently play at beautiful League Park parallels a constant theme with all the Cleveland teams: the ability to rise repeatedly and Phoenix-like out of the ashes of disaster.

10 Grabowski, *Sports*, 12.


12 Ibid., 35.

13 Ibid., 35.

14 See Rose, *Making of a City*, 609. As of 2012, Cleveland, Boston, Detroit, and Chicago are the only charter members of the American League still playing in their original city.
After playing 1902 as the Bronchos, a moniker players thought more masculine sounding than the “Blues.” What they thought of the “Naps” ability to affirm gender qualities is unclear, but Lajoie helped them win, and perhaps that overcame all other possible objections.


See Schneider, Indians Encyclopedia, 2-3, and Thorn, Total Indians, 11-13, for more detail on these and other tragedies to overtake the Indians.


See Joe Queenan, True Believers: The Tragic Inner Life of Sports Fans (New York: H. Holt, 2003), 29, where Queenan attests to the memory sharpening affect of—frequently, dramatically, habitually—losing. “I do not know if defeat strengthens your character, but I know that it sharpens your memory. Yankee and Laker fans regularly misremember dates, eras, championships, putting DiMaggio on teams with Maris, putting Bob McAdoo on the 1986 championship team, but not the 1984 one. Less fortunate fans, those in Buffalo, Cleveland, Baltimore, Philadelphia, never forget anything.” (italics added)

In listening to Cleveland fans talk about the Indians, one doesn’t get the sense that losing endears them in a Chicago Cubs, cutesy “lovable loser” kind of way; instead, more of a “Why can’t the sonsabitches ever get it right?” kind of way, a lightening rod that absorbs all of Cleveland’s frustration with each loss that arrives. See also Jack Torry, Endless Summers: The Fall and Rise of the Cleveland Indians, Updated Edition (South Bend, Ind.: Diamond Communications, 1996), where Torry convincingly argues that the Indians many seasons of mediocrity owe the vigor of their reoccurring nature to an incompetent front office.

Others promote various “curse” theories to account for the Indians poorshowings. For example, when home town favorite and wildly popular ethnic celebrity Rocky Colavito was unimaginably traded by new General Manager Frank “Trader Lane” Lane a day before the start of the 1960 season, fans suggest that the move placed a curse on the Indians which mired them as cellar-dwellers for the next 35 years. This theory is forever archived in Terry Pluto, The Curse of Rocky Colavito: A Loving Look at a Thirty-Year Slump (New York: Fireside, 1994). See also Thorn, Total Indians, 22, where long-time Indians”beat writer Paul Hoynes notes that “Clevelanders treated the move as if Lane had traded one of their sons.”


As examples, the 1920s in Cleveland produced the introduction of practical inventions like the first hand operated traffic light, the move to a progressive city manager plan of local government, the debut of Ohio’s first radio station (WHK), along with the development of the Cleveland orchestra and a booming playhouse district, the groundbreaking for future iconic landmarks Municipal Stadium and the Terminal Tower, the finishing of a Group Mall Plan along the lakefront which included the Courthouse, Public Auditorium, City Hall, and the Federal Building, and the beginning of dozens of social service institutions providing aid to those in various forms of need.
Bill Veeck was a great baseball innovator, focusing on the game experience for the fans and introducing promotions on top of the game itself. He brought the first African American player to the American League in Larry Doby, and attracted some of the best players in the game to Cleveland during his short reign as owner. Once he was offered a large sum of money to run against popular incumbent Governor Robert A. Taft, and when his chances of winning were questioned, he responded “You still don’t think I’d have a chance against Taft? Well then, you weren’t in Cleveland during those three-and-a-half years when the Indians pushed the world news from the front pages. You weren’t in Cleveland in those years when the Indians brought the people of the city so close together that it was as if everybody was living in everybody else’s parlor. You weren’t in Cleveland in those days of cheer and triumph when every day was Mardi Gras and every fan a king.” See George Condon, Cleveland: The Best Kept Secret (Cleveland: J.T. Zubal and P.D. Dole Publishers, 1967), 282, and Bill Veeck and Edward Linn, Veeck as in Wreck: The Autobiography of Bill Veeck (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001 (1962)).

See Grabowski, Sports in Cleveland, 144.

Condon, Best Kept Secret, 282.

Grabowski, Sports in Cleveland, 37-38.

Andy Piascik, The Best Show in Football: the 1946-1955 Cleveland Browns, Pro Football’s Greatest Dynasty (Lanham, Mary.: Taylor Trade Pub., 2007), 10. At one point in 1946 there were more workers on strike in the United States than ever before in the history of the nation. Out of these negotiations, while workers lost many of the gains of the Progressive Era earlier in the century, they nevertheless had a restrained work day and higher wages than ever before experienced.

Ibid., 10.

The Cleveland Rams were the first expression of an NFL team in Cleveland, playing there from 1937-1942, 1944-1945 (with a year furlough because of the war). They had losing records in seven of their eight seasons in Cleveland, won a championship in their eighth, and were subsequently moved to Los Angeles when McBride and Arch initiated bringing a new team to Cleveland.

Piascik, Best Show, 13. “In several different seasons in the first ten years of the NFL” (which became formalized as a league on August 20, 1920, in Canton, Ohio), “as many as seven of the league’s franchises had been based in Ohio.”

Michael Mandelbaum, The Meaning of Sports: Why Americans Watch Baseball, Football, and Basketball and What They See When They Do (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), 119. Note Simon Featherstone, who suggests that Afro-Trinidadian social theorist and historian C.L.R. James was “perhaps the first theorist of sport to connect the way that a game was played with the social and historical moment of that play,” noting that “sport (is) a social and historical theater, and stylistic innovation (is) necessarily political innovation,” while also arguing that often “players (are) presented not as individualists but as embodiments of moments of historical change.” Featherstone further argues that civic self-perception gets structured through social and performative difference between cities, cultures, and historical moments in time. See Simon Featherstone, Englishness: Twentieth Century Popular Culture and the Forming of English Identity (Edinburgh: Edinbrugh Press, 2009), 121, and C.L.R. James, Beyond a Boundary (London: Hutchinson, 1969); also, Noel Dyck, ed., Games, Sports and Cultures (New York: Berg, 2000).

See Mandelbaum, Meaning of Sports, 119-143, and 177 for a fascinating consideration of the parallels between football and both industry and war. “For whatever combination of biological and cultural reasons, violence exercises a sufficiently powerful attraction that people will pay to see it. To be sure, football provides a controlled and non-lethal version of it, but violence is what, among other things, the proprietors of television networks and football teams are giving their audiences.”

For many years running, Ohio ranks alongside Texas, Florida, and California as being the top states for football recruiting and the top states for placing players in the NFL. See http://www.livestrong.com/article/344144-top-football-recruiting-states/ as an example. Ohio is regularly the only non-Southern/West Coast team in the top five.

McBride owned a taxi service, and Brown kept non-roster talent around Cleveland by getting them hired. In this way, they were available to join the team should someone get hurt or falter in his production. Hence, the non-roster group of players became the “taxi squad,” a term still used today for players kept in town for practice purposes only, hoping to earn a roster-spot through their effort.


See Scott Huler, *On Being Brown: What it Means to Be a Cleveland Browns Fan* (Cleveland: Gray and Company Publishers, 1999), 34, where Hall of Fame kicker Lou Groza describes Brown’s steely grip on the image of the team and player behavior. Brown understood the importance of image in both attracting a following and maintaining discipline within the ranks.

See Huler, *Being Brown*, 55, where Brown’s son Mike explains his father’s willingness to break the color line: “He paid very little heed to a code (of segregation) that then existed because it was not his code. That reflected the viewpoint of northern Ohio. They were not bigoted. The views were those of my dad and his community, which was northern Ohio, and it brought that community together. No one thought much about it, at least in Cleveland. It was just accepted.” See Plascik, 31-44, for a fuller description of the personal journey experienced by Motley and Willis.

Huler, *Being Brown*, 140.


Huler, *Being Brown*, 61. Significantly, the rights to draft Phipps came after Modell traded another fan-favorite—Ohio State football legend and future Hall of Famer Paul Warfield—to the Miami Dolphins, where he went on to star for many years, helping the Dolphins win a Super Bowl.

Ibid., 41-42.

For example, see Terry Pluto, *Things I’ve Learned from Watching the Browns* (Cleveland: Gray and Company Publishers, 2010), “Voices of the Fans: The Browns are Family,” 83-94. Agreeing with Lawrence Grossberg that affect is defined quantitatively as “the strength of our investment in particular experiences, practices, identities, meanings and pleasures,” and that qualitatively affect becomes “the inflection of the particular investment, the nature of the concern (caring, passion) in the investment, the way in which the specific event is made to matter to us,” passion for the Browns derived in no small part from its co-mingling with the idea of the emotionally charged concept “family.” See Lawrence Grossberg, “The Affective Sensibility of Fandom,” in Lisa A. Lewis, *The Adoring Audience* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 57.
Huler, *Being Brown*, 174-175. Sherk further elaborates in romance language that “I loved playing for the people. I related to the people of Cleveland, the underdogs who were fighting for respect. I tried to immerse myself in their emotions, their cheers...I had the philosophy that I was a warrior fighting for the respect for the people of Cleveland. I wanted to make them happy and proud to be represented by the Cleveland Browns. I saw the town as kind of depressed, and I wanted to help pull them out of the blues.”

Ibid., 132.

Ibid., 27.

Indeed, as historian Denis de Rougemont explains, “Happy love has no history...What stirs lyrical poets to their finest flights is neither the delight of the senses nor the fruitful contentment of the settled couple; not the satisfaction of love, but its passion. *And passion means suffering*. There we have a fundamental fact.” (italics added) In Denis de Rougemont, *Passion and Society*, trans. Montgomery Belgion (London: Faber and Faber, 1956), 15.

The “Dawg” reference arose when popular defensive backs Hanford Dixon, Frank Minnifield, Don Rogers, along with linebacker Eddie Johnson, began barking at opposing receivers in an effort to intimidate them. (In keeping with the tragic narrative of Cleveland sports, Don Rogers died of a cocaine overdose after his rookie season.)

Huler, *Being Brown*, 115-119. Jeff Wagner, one of the original Brown's Backer organizers, explains why he believes dispersed Browns fans claim their city's team even in a new location, citing an identity attachment with Cleveland itself. “Cleveland is just a working class community. Football was what bound people together during the winter. There’s just great pride there. The fact that the Browns had such a wonderful tradition, it gave people something to say, ”This is ours, and we’re something special”...There’s a kind of camaraderie and pride in growing up in Cleveland. It’s a people city, not a glamour city. They’re very down-to-earth people, and that’s why they’re unified. There is no place like Cleveland.”

Pluto, *Things I've Learned*, 12.

Ibid., 12-13.


Quoted in Queenan, *Tragic Inner Life of Fans*, 25. The quote continues: “Losing after great striving is the story of man, who was born to sorrow, whose sweetest songs tell of saddest thought, and who, if he is a hero, does nothing in life as becomingly as leaving it.” Or as Huler suggests less poetically, “I maintain that we needed that heartbreak—that heartbreak tempers fandom. During the seventies, the front-runners, if there were any, dropped off. From Red Right 88 on, those of us who came up after the championships forged our support and made it stronger, and our love of the Browns became deeper and more maniacal for those disappointments. When the next championship comes, we’ll enjoy it all the more for Red Right 88 and after, for all the close calls—the heartbreaking closeness of Red Right 88 makes us stronger.” See Huler, *Being Brown*, 91.

Michael G. Poplar with James A. Toman, *Fumble! The Browns, Modell and the Move: An Insider’s Story* (Cleveland: Cleveland Landmarks Press, Inc., 1997). Poplar served as executive vice president for Art Modell’s Cleveland Stadium Corporation—the arm of his business ventures that handled the stadium lease—for over 20 years.

Associated Press, “Browns finally return to a rejuvenated city,” *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, Monday, August 9, 1999: C7. See also Tom Archdeacon, “The Howl of the Dogs,” *Dayton Daily News*, Monday November 6, 1995, Section News, 1A, where John “Big Dawg” Thompson, a 400-pound fan who achieved some notoriety for symbolizing and anchoring the Dawg Pound cheering section since its inception, said likewise at the game before the official press conference, “(I) kept the mask, my dog bone and bell in my bone bag all day. I just couldn’t get
into cheering. I feel like my brother died and hey, if your brother’s dead you wouldn’t wear a dog mask to the funeral.”

66 Pluto, Things I’ve Learned, 83.


68 Bill Livingston, “Browns Already on Outside Looking In,” Cleveland Plain Dealer, Monday November 6, 1995, Sports, 1C.

69 Steve Stephens, “Browns Loss Stings Voinovich End of an Era: Fans in Columbus Sing the Blues as Browns Fade to Black,” Columbus Dispatch, Tuesday, November 7, 1995, News 01A.

70 For more on how these transactions came to play such a significant role within urban economies of the past 30 years, see Jon Morgan, Glory for Sale: Fans, Dollars, and the New NFL (Baltimore: Bancroft Press, 1997).

71 Mike Harden, “Die-Hard Browns Fans Vent Frustrations toward Modell,” Columbus Dispatch, Tuesday November 7, 1995, Sports 03F. Indeed, “radio sports talk hosts took on the role of chaplains to the bereaved, listening dutifully and clucking agreement at all the appropriate moments as spleen-venting devotees called Modell “a spineless SOB…””

72 See Terry Pluto, False Start: How the New Browns were Set Up to Fail (Cleveland: Gray and Company, 2004).

73 Reflective of the four eras covered in this chapter: 1946-1973 (consistently won, playing for and winning several championships, sniffling but one losing season), 1974-1979 (marked by mediocrity and losing), 1980-1989 (inconsistency, with the winning teams losing the biggest game in heartbreaking, dramatic fashion), and the last 21 years, 1990-2011 (including the departure to Baltimore and a trend of unabated, embarrassing irrelevance). See http://dawgpounddaily.com/2012/06/22/the-remote-report-on-the-bonding-of-cleveland-browns-fans/, where blogger Kevin Nye says that “Being a Browns fan is the tie that binds…Being a Browns fan is like being part of a strange club. You pay money (in some way) to join, then get your heart crapped on by guys you’ll never meet but idolize anyway, and then repeat every year until you have kids and realize that some things are more important; that is, until your kid is old enough to watch the games comfortably with you. It’s about knowing that everyone has a price, but also knowing that no one is ever going to offer the price that you’d require to give up your loyalty.”

74 Pluto, Things I’ve Learned, 249.


76 Huler, Being Brown, 62. Indeed, a Sports Illustrated Special Issue cover story featured Brown and James together as Cleveland legends, the old and the new. See Sports Illustrated, November 22, 2007.

77 Ironically, Mileti came into the world the same year Municipal Stadium was christened and just after Cleveland began its economic and social decline. Along with the minor and professional hockey teams he would own, Mileti held the Cleveland Indians from 1972-1975, a purchase that kept them from moving to New Orleans during their most miserable stretch as a franchise.

78 Joe Menzer and Burt Graeff, Cavs, From Fitch to Fratello: The Sometimes Miraculous, Often Hilarious Wild Ride of the Cleveland Cavaliers (Champaign, Ill.: Sagamore Publishing, 1994), 3. While blue-collar in his background, Mileti graduated from Bowling Green State University in 1953 (where the Alumni Center is named in his honor), before becoming a Cleveland lawyer and prosecutor.

See Mandelbaum, *Meaning of Sports*, 199-207. For example, basketball players utilize a spontaneous coordination that takes place both horizontally and vertically, largely lacking the mechanization of role so prevalent in baseball and football. In basketball, while players are gifted by height, speed, or skill to focus on a particular skill, they are nevertheless called upon to utilize all aspects of basketball’s core skills: passing, shooting, dribbling. While baseball and football deal with the elements of nature as part of their competitive context, playing outdoors on grass, basketball happens largely in a technologically controlled indoor environment.

Mandelbaum, *Meaning of Sports*, 200. Generally, this reflection became true regardless of racial background. As basketball became the sport of the urban streets, it perhaps naturally followed that the sport would be dominated by African-Americans; but regardless of racial composition, the sport reflects a post-industrial ethos.


Quote from *Plain Dealer* reporter Bill Nichols in Menzer and Graeff, *Cavs*, 47.

Menzer and Graeff, *Cavs*, 47. Ironically, Thurmond, the final and most critical piece added to the team, starred as a high school player in Akron and later at Bowling Green State University.

After six games the overall point totals were Bullets 557, Cavaliers 551.

See Menzer and Graeff, *Cavs*, 48-53. Home attendance totals for each game, all records at the time—Game 1: 19,994; Game 3: 21,061; Game 5: 21,312; Game 7: 21,564.

See Terry Pluto and Joe Tait, *Joe Tait: It’s Been a Real Ball: Stories From a Hall-of-Fame Sports Broadcasting Career* (Cleveland: Gray and Co. Publishers, 2011), 145, where former Cavs radio broadcaster Joe Tait reiterates the view that “This wasn’t a team where you could say, ’If you stop this guy, you stop the Cavs.’ It really was a true team.”

Menzer and Graeff, *Cavs*, 59-60. Fans were further galvanized by a fight song composed by a local disk jockey on WWWE, “a vintage 1970s Motown-like hoops song, heavy on saxophones, trumpets, and a driving beat.” The song, played as the intro/exit for Cavalier broadcasts for years to come, became a symbolic anthem representing the soulful, gritty, hip perception surrounding the team, featuring the repeated refrain “C”mon Cavs, gotta make it happen,” and the bridge lyric, “We’ll never surrender, ain’t no way, no matter what the odds, ain’t no way.” Read more on the history of the song and listen at http://www.nba.com/cavaliers/news/gotta_make_it_happen_030909.html

Video of the final nine seconds and the mayhem that ensued can be seen at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KIX5pUk2T9w. See also Jonathan Knight, *Classic Cavs: The 50 Greatest Games in Cleveland Cavaliers History* (Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 2009), 153-156, 185-188, 197-200.


Menzer and Graeff, *Cavs*, 53.

Ibid., 59. Italics added. See also Knight, *50 Greatest*, 200, where he cites a *Plain Dealer* editorial the day following the final game which read “There was a time when some thought basketball would never draw that well here (in Cleveland). That has changed—permanently. The Cavs are a solid basketball team. More than that, they seem to have an uncanny ability to bring forth heroes and miracles for any occasion.”

See Scott Raab, *The Whore of Akron: One Man’s Search for the Soul of LeBron James* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), 159. Also 162-163, where he reflects that “Some Cleveland fans still rank the ending of the Miracle of Richfield at the top of the list of heartache. I myself don’t have a list. I don’t need a list. But I think it
says something profound about the experience of Cleveland fan hood: what Clevelanders refer to as a miracle ended in heartbreak and agony. (italics added)

94 As told to Stan Albeck, Head Coach at the time when Stepien purchased the Cavaliers. Menser and Graeff, Cavs, 94.


96 Menser and Graeff, Cavs, 116.

97 After losing his first regular season game to the Boston Celtics, Stepien was overheard saying “I don’t know how the Celtics can be so good. They don’t even have cheerleaders.” Ibid., 105.


100 Elton Alexander, “Chaos Ruled in Stepien’s 3-Year Reign,” The Plain Dealer, Saturday, April 23, 1994: Sports, 9D. According to Alexander, the telephone joke among NBA general managers became, “I have to go now, Cleveland might be calling.”

101 Berkow, Failure, 1.


104 Menser and Graeff, Cavs, 262.

105 Ibid., 202.


107 Ferry, in another strange irony, would later become the general manager who oversaw the last five years of the Lebron James teams, doubly ingraining himself as a Cleveland sports villain.

108 Menser and Graeff, Cavs, 225.

109 See Pluto and Tait, Joe Tait, 234-236, where long-time broadcaster Joe Tait reflects on the change occurring with the players of the 1990s: “We had All-Stars on those teams (the Wilkens teams of the 1980s and early 1990s), and they didn’t need anybody to carry their bags. They didn’t have personal assistants…Somewhere along the line, some of these guys went from being basketball players to celebrities.”

110 Veteran Akron Walsh high school coach Frank Lupica on Lebron James before the draft. See Terry Pluto and Brian Windhorst, Franchise: LeBron James and the Remaking of the Cleveland Cavaliers (Cleveland: Gray and Co., 2007), 50.

111 Ibid., 84. As long-time Cleveland sports columnist Bud Shaw reflected, “Never a particularly smart franchise, the Cavs were doubly cursed by not being a lucky one. They had played under a black cloud from the moment Jim Chones broke his foot on the eve of the 1976 conference finals, through the crumbling of the core of the Mark Price-
Brad Daugherty’s contenders in the 1990s, all the way up to the ill-conceived quest for Shawn Kemp.” Bud Shaw, “For once, it’s a merry day for Cavs,” The Plain Dealer, Friday May 23, 2003, Sports Final, A1.


114 As Scott Raab reflects, “What made Lebron James matter so much—what made his coming to the Cavs seem like a miraculous twist of fate—was that he understood all of this (the negative history surrounding the city) and more. His pride in being a son of this soil was our own pride; his history, too, was ours. He hungered, like all of us, for affirmation and respect. He could rewrite our history and restore our pride and finally, after half a century, make us matter.” Raab, Whore, 23.

115 A banner Raab and others refer to as “Jesus James.”

116 Tom Withers, “Cavs crown King James,” The Cincinnati Press, Friday, May 23, 2003, News Final, A1. In this same article, then-Indians pitching star C.C. Sabathia said “I’m going out and buying season tickets. I’m excited, really pumped. This is just great for the city. Let’s hope a little of that good luck rubs off this way, and all the Cleveland teams start winning.”


118 Progressive Field (Jacobs Field at the time) shares a plaza area with Quickens Loan Arena (Gund Arena at the time), forming a hub within the Gateway District, while Cleveland Browns Stadium, now in place of old Municipal Stadium, is a mile further north along the lakeshore. A cluster of hotels, bars, and restaurants surround the Gateway Area, and the Indians and Cavs stadiums, with their much longer home seasons (81 and 41 games respectively), stand to draw considerably more people to the area than do the Browns, who only play eight home games.


120 Pluto and Windhorst, Franchise, 72-73.


122 Raab, Whore, 10-11. As writer and journalist Scott Raab noted, the fans, “having lived their whole lives in a punch line, having watched their favorite ballplayers leave as free agents or in lopsided trades, having seen each local franchise build a team seemingly good enough to win it all but doomed to fail in the end, often under circumstances so absurdly painful that some of them came to believe the town was actually cursed,” were more than prepared to become “King James” happily abject serfs.” Indeed, “pride and dignity were foreign to a fan base whose daily bread had forever tasted of ash,” and James’ accomplishments became a welcome source of both sentiments within the region that produced him.
Another James focused *Sports Illustrated* cover declared on May 25, 2009, still a full year before free agency, “Cleveland Rocks (No Joke!),” and cited a Dan Patrick interview with James saying “I’m happy in Cleveland. I don’t have any plans on going anywhere. These fans have done everything to support me. I’m excited about being here,” along with reassurances that his goal was to win a championship in and for Cleveland. Indeed, as the July 2010 date approached and just after James garnered his second consecutive regular season MVP honor, a marketing campaign rose up on Cleveland billboards proclaiming: “Born here. Raised here. Plays here. Stays here.” See Dan Patrick, “Just My Type,” *Sports Illustrated*, May 25, 2009 and Joe Posnanski, “Cleveland Rocks,” *Sports Illustrated*, May 25, 2009.

James further exasperated confused fans in his post-game interview after Game 5, stating, “I put a lot of pressure on myself to be the best player on the court. When I’m not, I feel bad for myself—because I’m not going out there and doing the things I know I can do. I spoil a lot of people with my play. When you have three bad games in a seven-year career, it’s easy to point that out.” However, owner Dan Gilbert condemned James in an interview with the Associated Press, suggesting that James “quit”, “not just in Game 5, but in Games 2, 4 and 6. Watch the tape. The Boston series was unlike anything in the history of sports for a superstar.” See Terry Pluto, “Learning from Cleveland Cavaliers owner Dan Gilbert’s letter of passion,” *The Plain Dealer*, Friday July 9, 2010, Sports, and Raab, 100-101.

Pluto and Tait, *Joe Tait*, 244.

“Seth,” from Bill Simmons’ “All Cleveland Sound Off.”

See “Dan Gilbert’s open letter to the fans,” July 8, 2010 at http://www.cleveland.com/cavs/index.ssf/2010/07/gilberts_letter_to_fans_james.html. For his efforts, Gilbert received a $100,000 fine from the commissioner’s office, scorn from national media, and the adoration of depleted Cavalier fans.

See Bill Simmons, “Welcome to the All-Lebron sound off,” July 9, 2010 at http://sports.espn.go.com/espn/page2/story?page=simmons/100709. Simmons further lamented that “For LeBron not to understand what he was doing—or even worse, not to care—made me quickly turn off the television, find my kids, give them their nightly bath and try to forget the sports atrocity that I had just witnessed. He just couldn't have handled it worse. Never in my life can I remember someone swinging from likable to unlikable that quickly. I will forgive him some day because I like watching him play basketball…But I will never, ever, not in a million years, understand why it had to play out that way. If Lebron James is the future of sports, then I shudder for the future.”

The accusation of betrayal made further ironic by James most prominent tattoo scripted vertically along his left ribcage: *Loyalty*.

Another contributor to Simmons’ blog wrote that “Everyone in Cleveland is now cursing LeBron's name, praying to whomever they all pray to that he gets his just desserts. But we know better. We're from Cleveland. The torture isn't complete until the most hated figures get to rub their championship rings in our face. The most vilified characters of our history all got to do it. Jordan got six. Belichick got three. Elway got two. Even Modell the antichrist got one. LeBron will get his, too. Maybe even more than Jordan. And we get to watch it for the next five years. Alas…it's the Cleveland way.” Indeed, after collapsing in the 2011 Finals, the James-led Heat won the 2012 NBA Championship.

See Raab, 9 and Gary Parrish, “We didn’t think he would do this to us,” CBSSports.com, July 9, 2010 at http://gary-parrish.blogs.cbssports.com/mcc/blogs/entry/6271764/23091423.


Grabowski, *Sports*, xii.

CHAPTER 5

METHOD

The Ethnography: Exploring the Life-World of Cleveland Professional Sport Fans

This project aims to answer the following research questions: Why the collective fetishization of pro sports teams in Cleveland, in spite of losing regularly, and in some memorable cases dramatically, since 1964? Why do these teams matter so much to Clevelanders and what do they hope to get from them even after years of disappointment? Given that every human makes certain “demands” of the fetishized, what is it that Cleveland sports fans hope to get from their teams? In short, how might the fan experience in Cleveland constitute a kind of neo-religious (re: “invisible” or “implicitly religious”) experience that both shapes their view of themselves and influences how they journey in this life?

To answer these questions, this study employs an ethnographic research approach featuring both the patrons and the site of a long-standing Cleveland sports bar/blues club—the Parkview NiteClub. Vikki Krane and Shannon Baird describe ethnography generally as “aimed toward understanding the culture of a particular group from the perspective of the group members,” aspiring to gain “insight into the behaviors, values, emotions, and mental states of group members,” while Karen O’Reilly describes ethnography as “involving direct and sustained contact with human agents, within the context of their daily lives (and cultures), watching what happens, listening to what is said, and asking questions.” Given my desire to explore the everyday, lived reality of the highly identified Cleveland sports fan, and since “the main strength of qualitative research is that it yields data that provide depth and detail to create understanding of phenomena and lived experiences,” an ethnographic approach allows me to explore the
beliefs, motivations, and behaviors of participants by entering into close and relatively extended interaction with people at a site within their everyday lives.³

Ethnographic research values a “concrete connection to the language and meaning of everyday life according to the actors involved”—in this case, sport fans at the Parkview NiteClub.⁴ This “language and meaning” was explored through observations and semi-structured interviews. The semi-structured qualitative interview, in both its formal and informal manifestations, focuses on culture through the participant’s perspective and through a firsthand encounter, highlighting nuances of the culture being studied while taking “mental pictures with a wide-angle lens.”⁵ While acknowledging that interviewing constitutes a dynamic process that is “part technique, part ethics, part theory, part method, part intuition, part collaboration, and part openness to deep vulnerability,” I also suggest it provides an optimal way to navigate the life world of participants.⁶

Steinar Kvale and Svend Brinkmann describe the life world as “the world as it is encountered in everyday life and given in direct and immediate experience, independent of and prior to explanation,” and suggest that “interviews are particularly well suited for studying people’s understanding of the meanings in their lived world, describing their experiences and self-understanding, and clarifying and elaborating their own perspective on their lived world.”⁷ They summarize the value of such interviews in the context of qualitative research.

A semi-structured life world interview attempts to understand themes of the lived everyday world from the subjects’ own perspectives. This kind of interview seeks to obtain descriptions of the interviewees’ lived world with respect to interpretation of the meaning of the described phenomena. It comes close to an everyday conversation, but as a professional interview it has a purpose and involves a specific approach and technique; it is semi-structured—it is neither an open every day conversation nor a closed questionnaire. It is conducted according to an interview guide that focuses on certain themes and that may include suggested questions.⁸
In this study, I desired to explore the life world of a particular sample of Clevelanders, and as “the qualitative interview is a research method that gives a privileged access to people’s basic experience of the lived world,” it offers an effective method toward that end. I focused on how the participants see themselves symbolically related as a sub-culture called “the Cleveland sports fan” and consider how this affects both their self-understanding and their notion of others’ perception of them as a result. As a symbolic repository of meaning, how do Clevelanders imagine themselves to be perceived as a result of their association with Cleveland teams? Beyond self-understanding, in what other ways might Cleveland teams function “implicitly religiously” in the lives of highly identified fans? What do the teams mean to this slice of Clevelanders?

This study is an inductive, guided exploration of the lived world of Cleveland fans, where “the patterns, themes, and categories of analysis come from the data; they emerge out of the data rather than being imposed on them prior to data collection and analysis.” In studying the life world of these fans, I inductively explored the following question: How does the Cleveland fan’s relationship to their professional teams constitute a form of neo-religious experience (focusing on personal/civic identity formation and contributing to the quest for constructing and giving a meaningful shape to subjective life)?

Epistemologically, inherent within the ethnographic approach lies the belief that multiple ways of seeing and interpreting things exists, as each person reacts differently to both her own and other’s constructed rendition of reality, situated in different social positions within different cultural moments. As Krane and Baird note, “To determine whose reality is „correct” is not the focus of ethnography; rather, understanding the social setting through the perspectives of the participants is the primary goal.” Thus, this study follows a naturalistic epistemological
paradigm, seeking to understand the natural setting within which a particular set of people lives, while exploring the multiple contours of their expressed realities. Correspondingly, I embrace Harry F. Wolcott’s notion that the goal of qualitative research within the naturalistic paradigm should not be validation, but rather understanding, an understanding produced from “critical elements” leading to “plausible interpretations.”

Theoretical guidance comes from Edward Bailey’s model of implicit religion, using his tripartite, over-lapping lens to analyze the nature of the Cleveland fan’s commitment to the three teams, assess integrating foci within this particular community that make the commitment(s) meaningful, and consider both the intensive concerns as well as the resultant external effects that comprise the subject’s life as a fan. Using the implicit religion template to organize these fans’ thoughts regarding their relation to the city and its professional teams, I explored the nature of their fandom, how it takes shape in the individual and collective life of a Clevelander, and why collective fandom persists so devotedly in the midst of historical data that should suggest otherwise.

I used an approach that is both narrative and discursive in its effects, allowing participants to craft their own story while exploring the potential for neo-religiosity within the text of their lives. I emphasize the thought processes of the participants, tracing the private, idiosyncratic thinking involved in remaining a Cleveland sports fan in spite of the recent negative history, “for it is here that we encounter people thinking about and symbolizing their community. It is in these depths of „thinking,“ rather than in the surface appearance of „doing“ that culture is to be sought.” As the “staples of the diet” for an ethnographer involve participation in the setting, direct observation, in-depth and surface interviewing, and use of archival data, I pursued all four at different points in the process.
Ethnographic Procedure

The Parkview NiteClub describes itself in its promotional literature as “a cool place for shady people,” and for over one hundred years has been a gathering point for Cleveland sports fans, and—perhaps just as important—fans of Cleveland proper. The setting is neither random nor accidental; I purposely sought a Cleveland sports bar with a long existential history, a place where Cleveland fans gathered together as a community for decades. The locale did not need to be advertised as primarily a “sports bar,” but must be a place where sports constitute a significant portion of both the historical and ongoing narrative. After researching through the Internet, talking with various bar tenders and local residents, and communicating with the Cleveland Visitors Bureau, I chose the Parkview NiteClub as the site of my study.

The Parkview offers a bounded set of Clevelanders within an establishment that prides itself on maintaining a dialogue around the Cleveland sport experience, and while certainly not attempting to represent all of Cleveland nor even all Cleveland sports fans, the site offers an opportunity to examine a particular slice of highly identified fans in an environment that exists at least partially as a communal/fan gathering ground. In addition to the fifteen formal interviews I conducted, I utilized purposive sampling of Parkview participants as part of my ethnographic analysis of the club itself, seeking to understand the Parkview’s positioning as “one part sports bar, one part blues club, 100% Cleveland.”

Access to Site and Participants

I received verbal permission from the Parkview manager (who also happens to be the owner’s son) to interact with and observe workers and patrons at the bar; he was in favor of the study and expressed pleasure that someone would do an ethnography at his bar. I asked him to introduce me to the work staff so that they were immediately informed and aware of the purpose
of my presence. While I intended to participate as a patron, I also repeatedly communicated to the management and workers that I was there to analyze the Parkview ethos and to interact with sports fan patrons.

My main approach to gathering data at the Parkview, apart from informal and formal interviews, included 112 hours in the bar as an “observer participant,” noting public behavior of Cleveland professional sport fans before and after home games and during televised games. Generally, “participation refers to presence in and interaction with a site when an activity or event is occurring,” and since participation within a night club or bar typically takes the form of conversation around eating and drinking, I found it relatively easy to enact both roles within this environment once I was seen as part of it. Other activities like watching games, gambling, pin ball, and listening to live music also allowed for participation while observing, while encouraging informal discussions concerning life as a Parkview patron and Cleveland sports fan with those in the bar.

Krane and Baird note that “observation is the backbone of ethnographic research” as it captures what can be seen through the eyes of the ethnographer. I ventured to “breathe the air” of the Parkview deeply, literally noting all that could be experienced both upon approaching the venue and within the fixed structure of its walls. Proxemic observations—“the study of people’s use of space and its relationship to culture”—also formed a significant portion of my understanding of life at the Parkview, as I observed how individuals within the bar area related to one another in limited space, while also noting differences within prescribed “zones” of the overall night club itself. My ethnographic observations allowed me to analyze three overlapping sub-cultures: “Clevelanders,” “Clevelanders at the Parkview,” and “Clevelanders at the Parkview who are sports fans.”
I endeavored to understand the “vibe” of the Parkview by observation, but also through asking questions of the workers to help me understand both the history of the place and the development of the culture. Bruce Berg notes that ethnography begins with gaining entry into the environment, gaining access through the “gate keeper” (people who formally or informally control access to human or material resources to the group or community, in this case the Parkview manager) and “key informants” (Parkview workers and regular patrons with respect and influence within the group); as such, I initially worked to build rapport with the group by engaging in conversations typically held within night clubs and assessing who might be helpful with my research. As Krane and Baird note, “poor rapport will result in poor data,” so I was particularly conscious of my need to “fit in” before projecting my agenda onto potential participants. I attempted to do this—for no formula guarantees acceptance into any group—by learning what interests those at the bar, asking questions about various patron’s history at the Parkview, and by explaining my own journey as a Clevelander. Baird observes that “building rapport with key informants and other members of the group can increase accessibility to group activities, knowledge, and discussions” which subsequently fosters data acquisition for the ethnography.

As rapport got established, I initiated conversation with people regarding their patronage of the Parkview and their life as a Cleveland sports fan. I informed them that I was doing my dissertation research on Cleveland fandom and that I was particularly interested in the Parkview NiteClub culture. I informed them that I might use their words as part of my final analysis, that I would keep any identifying information confidential by coding their name and any other potentially identifiable information, and that their participation in this research was entirely voluntary. Participants engaged in informal discussion about the Parkview and being a fan,
answering questions like "Why do you come to The Parkview?", "Why do you enjoy watching games at The Parkview?", “What does it mean for you to be a Cleveland sports fan?”, and others like these.

The Parkview “regulars”—while priding themselves on their openness to a range of diverse opinions—would seem to have a low tolerance for the type of elitist implications that dissertation work might inherently imply. As such, while maintaining honesty about my intentions, I initially avoided taking written notes while sitting in the bar until I determined that it would be received well. I instead went to an unpopulated area of the bar or back to my car to write down observations between conversations. While the nature of my work on fandom is not particularly morally sensitive nor does it require exceptional vulnerability to discuss, and although I am an “insider” relative to the Cleveland sports scene, nevertheless the positioning of the Parkview as a working-class bar on the edge of one of the city’s rougher neighborhoods makes my “outside visitor” status rather sensitive, especially as a visiting academic. (This bar prides itself as having been a bootlegger outpost during Prohibition, spreading illegal liquor throughout the Westside using its literal underground tunnel network—there are no academic degrees displayed on its walls.)

Participants/Sampling Criteria

Michael Quinn Patton describes purposive sampling as a strategy useful “when one wants to learn something and come to understand something about certain select cases without needing to generalize to all such cases.” Further, a convenience sample “refers to the selection of those cases that are the easiest to access under given conditions.” I am choosing a purposive, convenience sample in an attempt to insure acquiring “good informants”: having availability, willingness, and active desire to participate in the study, necessary knowledge and experience of
the Cleveland scene, and capability to reflect and articulate on the questions in the interview. Every participant in this study is either employed by or at least sporadically served at the Parkview as a customer—in some cases both. They range in age from early-twenties to late-eighties, represent both men and women across the socio-economic scale, and are almost entirely Euro-Caucasian.

**Parkview formal interview samples**

My primary goal in these interviews involves analyzing the lived experience of a select group of fifteen Clevelanders who, as a “criteria sample,” fall demographically within predetermined, specified criteria. The criteria include: verbally professing a passion for all three Cleveland professional sports teams, born in 1988 or before (such that they will have been at least eight years old when the Browns left Cleveland in 1996), a lifelong Cleveland native (lived outside a thirty-five mile radius of the city, which is the cable black-out restriction zone for ESPN, for no more than twenty percent of their life), and a Parkview patron.

A formal interview entails a planned meeting that usually happens out of the way of the action, offering a chance to talk in depth and without interruption. Formal interview participants were acquired through a procedure called “snowballing,” suggestions from Parkview workers (“key informants”), through my own personal observation, and occasionally through participants volunteering on their own. Snowballing involves a process of referral from one person to another, using participants to contact other potential respondents, “quickly building up and enabling the researcher to approach participants with credibility from being sponsored by a named person.” After broadly mingling with Parkview clientele for a period of time (David M. Fetterman’s “big net approach”), I asked various Parkview patrons the question, “Who do you know that qualifies as the most committed fan of all three professional Cleveland sports teams
that you know, fans so passionate about the teams that they are still disturbed the day after losses?” until I found participants who met the demographic criteria previously stated and who were both willing and desirous to talk.34

Once I determined a participant met the criteria, I requested an interview with him or her. This invitation happened either face-to-face (when possible) or over the phone. I recited the following script to potential formal interview participants: “I am a graduate student at Bowling Green State University. As part of my research, I am seeking to interview 15-20 people about their life as a Cleveland professional sports fan. If you participate in this research, I would ask you to read and sign a consent form before asking you a series of questions to explore your experience as a fan. I expect the interview to last about 60-90 minutes. There is no risk to you as a participant. I will not use your real name or any other identifying information in my final work. We can meet wherever is most convenient for you and can stop the interview short if that becomes necessary at any point. Would you be willing to let me interview you?”35

When they confirmed meeting the criteria and agreed to the interview, I asked them, “When is a convenient time and place to meet?” and we scheduled an interview. I interviewed participants wherever it was most suitable for them to meet, and all but two took place in a room on the second floor of the Parkview. I communicated the expectation that the interview would take 60-90 minutes, which became ultimately true for all fifteen interactions; indeed, several interviewees stayed and extended the discussion well beyond the formal interview time.36

Parkview informal interview samples

In addition, I informally interviewed 75-100 people during my field work at the Parkview, all from directly within the Parkview itself. Ely defines an informal interview as being “‘on the hoof’ during participant-observation when the time is available and the spirits are
amenable.”37 Thus, these interviews flowed naturally out of my participation in the Parkview culture while interacting with patrons. A common script I followed read, “I am a graduate student at Bowling Green State University. I grew up in Elyria and have been a Cleveland sports fan my entire life. For my dissertation work, I am doing a study on other people’s experiences as a Cleveland professional sports fan. I am doing my main research here at the Parkview, and am interested in the way things work here at the bar, especially for those who consider themselves regulars. Would you be willing to talk with me about life here at the Parkview and help me understand „the Parkview vibe”?38 As “ethnography not only involves participating and observing, watching and hearing, but also asking questions and listening to the answers,” I compiled bits of information as I mingled with patrons to gradually build up a more complex picture of the entire culture.39 I focused on the culture of the Parkview through the participants’ perspective of their own first-hand encounters, seeking to elicit participant meanings of events and behaviors within the night club itself.40

**Development of the Interview Guide**

In a semi-structured format, the interviewer retains a clear list of issues to be addressed and questions to be answered, but maintains flexibility regarding the order of topics. He lets the interviewee develop ideas and speak more widely on the subjects raised by the researcher, elaborating on points of interest for the participant.41 Thus, in order to have a “conversation with a purpose,” I explored a few general topics to help uncover the participant’s perspective regarding my “clear list of issues to be addressed,” but otherwise respected how the participant framed and structured the responses and where they guided me as interviewer.42

Margot Ely notes the importance of allowing persistent observations to influence the contour and direction of interview questions, explaining that questions should be “consonant
with or arising from the ongoing data as the qualitative researcher contemplates them.” As such, my ongoing observations both at The Parkview and within the interview processes themselves also informed, shaped, and guided the questions both before and during each interview.

Participants already articulated a passion for Cleveland professional sports teams by virtue of meeting the sampling criteria necessary for involvement. The core of this study concerns exploring the possibility of an implicitly religious commitment among these fans (as defined by Bailey)—investigating why it exists, the forms it takes, and its overall nature. Thus, structured questions break into three general groupings of 10-12 open-ended queries each related to participants’ fandom: those that explore commitment(s), those that explore integrating foci for the imagined community of fans, and those that explore intensive concerns with extensive effects. I generated the questions myself and asked for help from my dissertation committee and other Cleveland fan-friends who aided in giving shape to questions that would explore those three areas of fandom.

Patton suggests that “the way a question is worded is one of the most important elements determining how the interviewee will respond” and that in ethnographic interviewing, “questions should be asked in a truly open-ended fashion,” allowing respondents to answer in their own terms.

The truly open ended question does not presuppose which dimensions of feeling, analysis, or thought will be salient for the interviewee…it allows the person being interviewed to select from among that person’s full repertoire of possible responses…one of the things the evaluator is trying to determine is what dimensions, themes, and images/words people associated with the program use among themselves to describe their feelings, thoughts, and experiences.

Thus, I developed open-ended questions to stimulate expression of “feelings, thoughts, and experiences” surrounding participants’ life as a Cleveland professional sports fan in each of the three stated categories, taking care to acknowledge the constructed nature of each individual
interview and my role in shaping both the interview environment and the potential responses offered.45

**Procedure for Interviews**

For the formal interviews, I conducted 1-2 interviews with each participant. I interviewed the participants at a location that they selected, and the first interview lasted between 60-90 minutes and was audio-recorded. When we met, I first reviewed the purpose of the interview, which was to explore the nature of fans’ commitment to the professional sports teams in Cleveland. Then I provided a consent document to the potential participants, allowed them to read over the information, asked them if they had any questions, answered their questions, and asked them to sign the consent document. The consent document includes an overview of the minimal risks involved for the participant, the voluntary nature of their participation, and contact information should they have further questions regarding either the research or its processes.46

During this initial meeting and consent acquiring process, I also made “small-talk” to build rapport and ease potential stress the interviewee may be feeling. Initial questions enabled the participant to, as Denscombe suggests, “settle down and relax,” respond to “trigger” or “stimulus” questions that are relatively easy to answer and help build rapport.47 I asked if they had ever done an interview like this before, whether they ever thought they’d be part of a research project on Cleveland fandom, to offer their thoughts on the most recent Cleveland game, and other similar questions. I also asked demographic questions (for example, their age, length of time living in the Cleveland area, current occupation) as part of my “settling” approach. I offered these rapport-building questions until I intuitively sensed the participant was at ease and ready to move into more substantive questions.
Then we began the primary interview questions. I asked interviewees to answer semi-structured questions regarding their relationship to Cleveland’s sports teams. In my listening and responding, I embraced a slice of Elton Mayo’s communication method: listening for what the subjects wanted to say, what they did not want to say, and what they could not say without help. In an effort to do so, during the interview I “probed” interviewees to help them consider their own narrative descriptions at a level that perhaps does not happen in an ordinary surface recounting of their personal “Cleveland sports fan” history. A probe is an interview tool used to help interviewees go deeper in their response to a question, to increase the richness of the data offered and obtained, and to give cues to the interviewee concerning the level of response desired. Patton describes three different types of probe: detail-oriented, questions used to obtain a complete and detailed picture of an activity or experience; elaboration, cues given to the interviewee to keep talking on the subject further; clarification, probes that request more information to clarify ambiguity, non-sequiturs, or general lack of understanding. I used all three varieties of probes. I used probes to help interviewees deeply describe their experiences as a fan, and allowed responses to the semi-structured questions to trace the route we followed as the interview progressed.

When the interview finished, I transcribed the audio content into written form soon after completion. As I typed and re-read the transcript, I noted what John Lofland and Lyn H. Lofland call “puzzlements”: emerging questions about what does not fit or is not evident, or gaps in the data that lead to further questions. When the initial transcript produced 3-5 or more “puzzlements,” I requested a second interview with the participant. The second interview was semi-structured with clarifying questions that arose from my “puzzlements,” along with questions to ask if the participant did not cover them in the first interview. These questions
were of the “Tell me more about _____” and “You mentioned _____ the first time we talked; can you help me understand what you meant by this?” and other probe-level questions that allowed participants to further elaborate on their personal experience.

For the patrons at the bar (informal interviews), I immediately received verbal consent from the Parkview manager to observe and interact with patrons. I asked him to introduce me to the work staff so that they were also informed and aware of the purpose of my presence. For the bar patrons who seemed like potential informal interview participants, I told them that "I am working on my dissertation and I would like to talk to you about your experiences at the Parkview. If you agree to talk with me, if I bring up something you don't want to talk about, we can skip it. Are you willing to talk with me and be part of my study? By responding to my questions, you are indicating your consent to participate." If the potential participant said "no" or indicated they were unwilling to be part of my study, then the conversation ended. If they answered "yes," I continued the conversation and verbally requested consent to record (in writing) our informal conversations.

The topic of discussion was similar to common conversations already occurring in the bar: Cleveland in general, sports, music, Parkview culture. Also, the participants can remain anonymous (I may not even know their real names) since they did not have to sign a consent form. I made my personal contact information available to those who requested it should they have additional questions about the study. (In the end, both the formal and informal interviewees requested having their real names left in the final document. They wanted to be identified with their own testimonies and were proud to be a part of the research.)
Recording and Managing Data

Qualitative researchers rely on what Ian Dey called the three “I”s”—insight, intuition, and impression—but are inevitably guided by what Creswell refers to as a “data analysis spiral”: starting with inputted textual data, ending with a constructed account or narrative, and touching on multiple facets of overlapping analysis in between. Moving away from a purely linear approach to gathering data, I “spiraled” within and between observation, temporary summations, and analytical categorization as I acquired data through my own participant observations and field notes, interviews (both formal and informal), and archival documents written by others about the Parkview.

I digitally recorded the formal interviews, freeing me to focus on the interviewee. After each interview, I transcribed the interview into written text. As the study unfolded, I cursorily tagged the data searching for themes, relationships, and macro-categories that gave collective shape (albeit tentatively) to the individual encounters, using an NVivo coding program to label every line of every interview. Once I read and reread the transcripts multiple times, I then developed higher-order codes.

As previously noted, informal discussions usually took place with immediate note taking, what Berg describes as “an attempt to record everything about an observation period in the field”; at other times I made field notes after the discussion took place. Schensul calls field notes “written photographs of the site,” archives that should offer a precise account of observations without attaching value or judgment to the behaviors, conversations, or attitudes observed. As Carol Bailey observes, these notes may begin as mental jottings before being transposed into written comments, but they should thoroughly reflect, as Bonnie Sunstein and Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater argue, at least the following details: date/time of the account, specific
particulars of what happened during the visit, sensory impressions, personal responses to the data while occurring, specific words/phrases used or overheard, and questions about people or behaviors that arise. Thus, my field notes include verbal interactions, observed practices, and my contextual absorbing of the Parkview in general: décor, ambiance, mood, special relationships, table/bar arrangements and props, and the geographical context of the building itself. As these notes were only partial memory stimuli, I expanded on them when immediately possible after the visit, creating a “research log.”

A research log contains a detailed account of my observations of and interactions with patrons, the general sensory environment of the Parkview, and formal interviews as they took place. Baird suggests that a research log includes “a detailed account of the research setting and all interactions, characterized by elaborate details originating from memories and jotted reminders in the field notes.” Thus, immediately following each session (either ethnographic observation or interview), I expanded my field notes into a more substantial, detailed account of everything I encountered during my visit, including a summary report of the experience for future analysis and consideration. As part of my research log, I concluded the days’ observations with analytic notes which included my own insights, reflections, arising themes, and reflexive interpretations. I kept my field notes from the day and my research log in two separate documents, noting the date, time and length of my participation, observations made, and conversations had within the Parkview.

Agreeing with Kvale that “The transcript is a bastard, a hybrid between an oral discourse unfolding over time, face to face, in a lived situation—where what is said is addressed to a specific listener present—and a written text created for a general, distant public;” I strove to recreate a rich and nuanced account (“thick description”) of the interviews as part of my own
analysis and subsequent categorization, re-entering into a dialogue with the text by attempting to re-produce the full performance of the encounter and allowing subsequently produced new questions to shape future interactions.\textsuperscript{60}

\textit{Strategies for Producing Credible and Rigorous Research}

As noted earlier, my goal in this research is to understand a social setting and communal experience—the Parkview NiteClub and Cleveland professional sport fandom—through the perspectives of the participants themselves, seeking to understand the natural setting within which a particular set of people lives, while exploring the contours of their variously expressed realities related to fandom. As interviewer, I am learning to see the world through the eyes of the one being interviewed, striving to understand how they organize their behavior related to fandom.\textsuperscript{61} \textit{Understanding} becomes the preeminent goal, a prospect that hinges upon properly detailed, rich “thick description,” thorough observation, and incisive questioning—hailing Harry Wolcott’s “critical elements” leading to “plausible interpretations.”\textsuperscript{62} As such, the credibility of this research rests largely upon representing the participant’s words accurately, reflecting their ideas such that the final written product affirms their originally intended meaning.

Nevertheless, Berg suggests that “Good ethnography requires that the researcher avoids simply accepting everything at face value, but instead, considers the material as raw data that may require corroboration.”\textsuperscript{63} Only arrogance seeks to validate someone else’s life world; however, we might corroborate whether a particular pattern arises among multiple life worlds, and identifying this emergence became at least a partial goal of this study. No single set of approaches guarantees trustworthiness within qualitative research; however, using various methods and employing multiple vantage points to evaluate data lends credibility to observations, interview reports, and final analysis. Thus, I supported the trust of this study
through the following means: persistent engagement, gaining good rapport, thick description, pilot interviews, member checks, reflexivity, and alternative explanations.

**Persistent engagement**

As I live three hours away from the Parkview, I am limited in my opportunity to spend casual time “hanging out” at the site. However, I spent at least 112 hours of observation, participation, and informal/formal interviewing at the Parkview (between March-September 2012). I was present at the Parkview before and after at least one Cavaliers (basketball), Indians (baseball), and Browns (football) game, along with the NFL Draft which occurs in April. I absorbed as much of the Parkview culture as possible during the visits, attempting to craft “a comprehensive, descriptively detailed, conceptually framed, understanding of [this] social group.”

**Gaining good rapport**

Sands describes “good rapport” as “gaining and maintaining trust and friendly relations with prominent cultural members and then allowing their approval to seep down through the culture” and further suggests that “ethnography cannot be a successful research method unless the fieldworker develops rapport and friendship with the cultural members being studied.” Poor rapport leads to poor data because, as Krane and Baird argue, “without developing trusting relationships, participants will not be willing to open their lives to the researcher.” I worked at becoming “invisible” as a researcher (though not as a participant) by learning the acceptable behavior, language, and customs of the group and acting accordingly—“fitting in” to become transparent as a researcher. Thus, participants began to see me as “one of them” and less as an outsider present to do research. To establish rapport, I exercised authentic sincerity, studied the
specific communication language and rhythms of the Parkview culture, communicated empathy as a Clevelander and sports fan, and established common ground in general.\textsuperscript{66}

\textit{Thick description}

Clifford Geertz describes the ethnographer’s job as one of struggling for “thick description,” recounting not simply the behavior of a particular group of people but also striving to understand the context within which those behaviors take shape.\textsuperscript{67} For Geertz, “thin description” describes only the behavior itself without taking into consideration surrounding circumstances, both immediate and historical. I sought to keep my observations consistent with their broader context, seeking to understand and absorb the conditions of the situations and behaviors that I observed as much as visibly and intuitively possible. As Norman Denzin suggests, thick description “inserts history into experience,” attempting to “establish the significance of an experience or the sequence of events, for the person or persons in question.” Thus, given the qualitative nature of this process and my concern for “the voices, feelings, actions and meanings” of the individuals at the Parkview, I sought to maintain and situate not only their immediate lived context but also their narrative within the greater cultural history of Cleveland itself.\textsuperscript{68}

\textit{Pilot interviews}

Seidman warns that the “unanticipated twists and turns of the interviewing process and the complexities of the interviewing relationship deserve exploration before a researcher plunges headlong into the thick of his project.”\textsuperscript{69} Before initiating formal interviews with participants, I conducted “pilot” interviews with three fans who fall within my stated criteria, who are already marginally familiar with my research intentions, and who will ultimately help give further shape and focus to the questions I will ask in the formal interviews. Pilot interviews function as
“practice” interviews that demonstrated whether the interview guide was appropriate for the projected study by alerting me to elements of interview techniques that supported the objectives of my study along with those that did not. Good questions promoted discussion about the nature of the participants’ commitment to the teams, exposed the common foci of their collective fandom, and helped specify how their lived reality gets adjusted in relation to the teams. I used the same procedures with them that I used with other potential “formal” participants, and used the interviews to focus and strengthen the list of questions I finally used. If a question encouraged the participants to tell stories about the history of their fandom and elicited immediate responses without need of clarification, I considered it a good question. At the end of the pilot interviews I dropped several questions that were unclear or did not produce substantive conversation, reworded others to make them clearer, and moved the strongest questions toward the front of the interview.

**Member Checks**

I did a “member check” by receiving feedback from the interview participants by following up with selected interview sources, asking participants to react to transcript analysis and thematic hypotheses, since “to the extent that participants in the study are unable to relate to the description and analysis in a qualitative evaluation report it is appropriate to question the credibility of the report.” Member checking gives participants an opportunity to correct factual errors, challenge faulty interpretations, and give clarification where necessary. Ely suggests that a member-check requires “checking our interpretations periodically with the very people we are studying,” and feedback from participants helped me shape and focus follow-up questions for second interviews and helped insure I captured the Parkview culture accurately. For example, I changed the question “What do Cleveland fans share in common?” to “What do
Cleveland fans share in common with other Cleveland fans relative to the teams themselves?” which provided a much more specific reaction.

I also gave each formal interview participant a copy of the themes that arose from their quotes and asked for their feedback regarding my representation of their thoughts. While they all felt I represented them accurately regarding their fandom and relationship to the city and its teams, nevertheless their feedback produced several factual corrections. For example, while I originally understood MikeF to be the initiator of the “Go Browns!” street-painting campaign, he corrected the anecdote to reflect a close friend of his as the author of the escapade.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity is the process of situating the researcher as part of the ethnographic process, “reflecting critically on the self as researcher, the „human as instrument.” Reflexivity “forces researchers to scrutinize the process of discovering and interpreting their data and critically analyze the research process,” consciously attending to how their own subjectivity affects the research. Qualitative methods unapologetically “take the researcher’s communication with the field and its members as an explicit part of knowledge instead of deeming it an intervening variable.” The reflexive researcher must disclose “epistemological and theoretical perspectives, personal descriptions, and relationships with the participants,” while also considering the influence of race, gender, social class, religion, and socially labeled distinctions that may affect perspectives. As such, “the subjectivity of the researcher and of those being studied becomes part of the research process.”

Thus, properly contextualized data interpretation demands acknowledging my own relationship to the data collection process within a particular time and place—once again hailing “thick description”—an ethnographic necessity. As O’Reilly argues, self-reflexivity within
research demands thinking critically about the context and acts of research and the writing that
flows from it, while acknowledging that I am part of the world I am studying.\(^{77}\)

Embracing full-disclosure regarding my own social identity relative to this study, having
grown up in a Western suburb of Cleveland, it should be noted that I personally meet most of the
“highly identified fan” criteria of the subjects I am studying and certainly count myself a
“Clevelander.” As such, I took care not to allow this study to venture into auto-ethnography,
though my own experience within the context of the study and knowledge of the history helped
with question asking and follow-up. Certainly, I face the challenge of avoiding “going
native”—seeing everything from the interviewee’s perspective and failing to maintain some level
of disinterested distance—given that I am a Cleveland native.

However, moving beyond the “deliberate naivete” necessary for a quality ethnography
(what Ely refers to as “making the familiar unfamiliar”), whatever I may know about the fandom
scene in Cleveland, I was certainly ignorant of this particular group of people and even more
unacquainted with their individualized subjective experience.\(^{78}\) I tried to strike a balance
between “saying enough about myself to be alive and responsive but little enough to preserve the
autonomy of the participant’s words and to keep the focus of attention on his or her experience
rather than mine.”\(^{79}\)

**Alternative explanations**

I continually attempted to generate potential alternative explanations for the source of the
“commitment” these folks have in relation to the teams, and took care to allow negative cases (as
they arose) to inform the analysis. Qualitative research carries additional ethical burdens by
“offering considerable interpretive latitude to the researcher,” and I purposed to reflect the full
range of response in my final analysis, even if such data offered more contradiction than clarity.\textsuperscript{80}

\textit{Discussion of Ethical Considerations Involved (for Participants)}

While agreeing with Urie Bronfenbrenner that “the only safe way to avoid violating principles of professional ethics is to refrain from doing social research altogether,” nevertheless ethical research integrity remains a necessary pursuit.\textsuperscript{81} Though this subject matter does not involve sensitive content, the exploration of a life world is always a potentially delicate matter, rife with personal opinions and feelings. However, in this study, risks to the participants are no different than those faced in everyday social life. Generally, I am asking about common life experiences. All comments and identifying information revealed during the interview were kept confidential to the best of my ability, and I made clear both my intentions for the study (exploring the anatomy of Cleveland fandom) and my expectations for the final product (a finished dissertation).

Participants were free to voluntarily withdraw from the discussion/study at any time. I invited each participant to sign a consent form before formal interviews, and was clear about my intentions when having informal discussions with others at the Parkview.\textsuperscript{82} No one other than myself heard the audio recordings or read the transcripts. All of my notes, recordings, and original transcripts remained solely in my possession. In all printed notes or transcripts, I identified participants by their first name or a code name and coded or removed any other identifying information, though every participant ultimately gave me permission to use their real name in the final product. At the end of the study, all digital recordings were destroyed.
Data Analysis

Anselm L. Strauss and Juliet M. Corbin refer to three interwoven phases of data analysis: open coding (developing concepts as data are labeled and categorized, where questions get asked and comparisons made), axial coding (the process of piecing data together to make initial main categories and sub-categories), and selective coding (integrating the categories into a story-line, constructing core categories and sub-categories which potentially form theoretical paradigms).  

Using their paradigm, I took the printed transcripts and open coded within the margins, identifying and naming at both the sentence and paragraph level. I strove to maintain a mental openness while naming the ideas and concepts in question, allowing the phrases and ideas to define themselves without projecting preconceived words or categories onto them. I took great care at this initial stage since names come with many connotations and once a sentence or paragraph became labeled, a host of other meanings could potentially distort (rather than clarify) intended meaning. This labeling process took place for every sentence spoken by participants for each interview, and acted as the first phase in opening up lines of inquiry about the data.

Once two or three formal interviews were completed, I began axial coding by analyzing themes, ideas, and the general tenor of the interviews compared with one another. Having several bodies of data now available, I began comparing the content, looking for similar thematic words, ideas, and concepts while searching for links and relationships between the open codes. This stage began to identify relationships between the categories while also initially constructing a web of meaning produced out of the data. For example, as the open code word “loyalty” presented itself, further analysis of the appearances of loyalty produced nuanced axial codes like “loyalty toward the teams more than the players,” “loyalty as a function of character,” and “loyalty as a function of character.”
Finally, once I completed all the interviews, I constructed a narrative reflecting the themes which arose from the interviews and interactions. I used the implicit religion rubric—“commitment,” “integrating foci,” and “intensive concerns with extensive effects”—as my highest order codes/themes which initially helped guide and order the narrative, but underneath those themes I arranged the axial codes into a story-line, adding fuller anecdotes from the bar which enhanced and further colored the formal interviews themselves. I brought the entirety of the ethnographic research to bear on this narrative—including my field notes, informal conversations, and general observations—to produce the final results chapter.
Notes

1 Vikki Krane and Shannon Baird, “Using Ethnography in Applied Sport Psychology,” Journal of Applied Sport Psychology, vol. 17, no. 2, (2005): 87 and Karen O’Reilly, Key Concepts in Ethnography (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: SAGE Publications, 2009). Robert R. Sands in his book Sport Ethnography (Champaign, Ill.: Human Kinetics, 2002), refers to time in the field as “the great equalizer.” Sands notes that “notwithstanding the obvious limitations of profession, travel, and time, doing good ethnography requires a commitment from the ethnographer to spend an extended time in the field.” Exactly how long a researcher must experience a group within its natural setting is relative to the study being done. At one extreme, Sands cites ethnographers who literally spend years living among a cultural group as “insiders,” while at the other end reside those who do “git it and go” ethnographies—short studies that are composed from beginning to end in days or weeks. See 42-44.


3 Barbara Sherman Heyl defines ethnographic interviewing as “including those projects in which researchers have established respectful, on-going relationships with their interviewees, including enough rapport for there to be a genuine exchange of views and enough time and openness in the interviews for the interviewees to explore purposefully with the researcher the meanings they place on events in their worlds.” See Barbara Sherman Heyl, “Ethnographic Interviewing,” in Paul Atkinson, Amanda Coffey, Sara Delamont, John Lofland, and Lyn Lofland, eds., Handbook of Ethnography (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: SAGE Publications, 2001), 369; see also Barbara Tedlock, “Ethnography and Ethnographic Representation,” in N.K. Denzin and Y.S. Lincoln, eds., Handbook of Qualitative Research 2ed. ed. (Thousand Oaks, Cal.: Sage Publications, 2000), 456; Krane and Baird, “Using Ethnography,” 88.

4 Antony J. Puddephatt, William Shaffir, and Steven W. Kleinmkeht, Ethnographies Revisited: Constructing Theory in the Field (New York: Routledge, 2009). See also 1, where in tying ethnography to theory the editors suggest that “Great ethnographic research lies not in the rigid execution of prescribed methodological procedures, but on the unrelenting cultivation of theoretical ideas.”


6 D. Soyini Madison, Critical Ethnography: Method, Ethics, and Performance (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 2005), 35. See also Steinar Kvale and Svend Brinkmann, Interviews: Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2009), 174-175, where they further suggest that “A good interview rests upon the craftsmanship of the researcher, which goes beyond a mastery of questioning techniques to encompass knowledge of the research topic, sensitivity to the social relation of interviewer and interviewee, and an awareness of epistemological and ethical aspects of research interviewing.”

7 Kvale and Brinkmann, Interviews, 29, 116.

8 Kvale and Brinkmann, Interviews. See also Martyn Denscombe, The Good Research Guide: For Small-Scale Social Research Projects, 3rd ed. (New York: Open University Press, 2007), 176, where he further explains that in semi-structured interviews “the interviewer is prepared to be flexible in terms of the order in which topics are considered, and, perhaps more significantly, to let the interviewee develop ideas and speak more widely on the issues raised by the researcher. The answers are open-ended, and there is more emphasis on the interviewee elaborating points of interest.”

9 Kvale and Brinkmann, Interviews, 29. While a therapeutic interview approach within these settings would be acceptable, and further acknowledging that a Socratic confrontation is neither necessary nor beneficial for this study, my demeanor as an interviewer will lie between the two possible extremes. Kvale notes that “qualitative interviews
seem to have the potential of being both doxastic and also epistemic; that is, they can elicit important descriptions and narratives of people’s experiences, narratives, hopes, and dreams (the *doxa*), but they can also be employed as conversational ways of producing *episteme*, knowledge that has been justified discursively in a conversation.” As such, I am after a “softly” epistemic approach; while not confrontational for the purpose of squeezing knowledge out of participants, I want to help interviewees explore their own narratives by imploring thoughts and feelings that mine beneath the surface of immediate answers. See also Kvale and Brinkmann, *Interviews*, 37.

10 See Anthony P. Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community* (New York: Tavistock Publications, 1985), 115, where he suggests that “(cultures) only ‘need’ to formulate a sense of themselves as coherent and distinctive because they confront others,” and “people see their own culture from the supposed vantage point at which they imagine others to view it.”

11 See Cohen, *Symbolic Construction*, 98, where he states that “Meaning, of course, is ethnographically problematic. It is not susceptible to objective description, but only to interpretation. In this matter we can only aspire to informed speculation. Community exists in the minds of its members, and should not be confused with geographic or sociographic assertions of ‘fact’. By extension, the distinctiveness of communities and, thus, the reality of their boundaries, similarly lies in the mind, in the meanings which people attach to them, not in their structural forms…this reality of community is expressed and embellished symbolically.”


13 M.V. Angrosino and K.A. Mays de Perez, “Rethinking Observation: From Method to Context,” in Denzin and Lincoln, *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 673-702. See also Krane and Baird, “Using Ethnography,” 90-91. Ithiel de Sola Pool further states that “The social milieu in which communication takes place (during interviews) modifies not only what a person dares to say but even what he thinks he chooses to say. And these variations in expressions cannot be viewed as mere deviations from some underlying ‘true’ opinion, for there is no neutral, non-social, uninfluenced situation to provide that baseline.” Ithiel de Sola Pool, “A Critique of the Twentieth Anniversary Issue,” *Public Opinion Quarterly*, vol. 21, (1957): 192.


15 Harry F. Wolcott, “On Seeking—and Rejecting—Validity in Qualitative Research,” in E.W. Eisner and A. Peshkin, eds., *Qualitative Inquiry in Education: The Continuing Debate* (New York: Columbia University, Teachers College Press, 1990), 146. While recognizing that “in postmodern epistemology there is a shift from the individual mind to relations between persons,” and that every individual finds herself within a “fabric of relations,” nevertheless I continue to value the agency of individuals in both choosing and interpreting for themselves their lived world, while still embracing the complications posed by relational communities. Seeking to avoid a radical Postmodernist approach, where “the focus on language shifts attention away from the notion of an objective reality, and also away from the individual subject,” and where “there is no longer a unique and sovereign self who uses language to describe an objective world or to express itself; it is the structures of language that speak through the person,” I equally reject the “hard objectivity” of pure positivism, where a value-free ontological nugget exists within the Subject, untainted by social interactions and contextual variables.

I embrace a position that lies somewhere between these polarized extremes—subjective truth is socially constructed and something softly objective is happening within the individual Agent. I continue to maintain that “the lived social and historical world of human interaction is itself something constantly produced by humans,” being also “relational, conversational, contextual, linguistic, narrative, and pragmatic or action oriented,” yet in the context of an interview, I am also not opposed to historically Objectivist language like “mining,” “discovery,” or “uncovering” when properly tempered. The “truth” of a person’s lived world is thus both something socially constructed (even immediately between interviewer and interviewee) and something to be found or mined within individual Subjects. In a more nuanced form, these ideas need not be mutually exclusive. See Krane and Baird, “Using Ethnography,” 90, for a categorical listing of different epistemological positions; also, Kvale and Brinkmann, *Interviews*, 52-54, 217.

16 Cohen, *Symbolic Construction*, 75. However, I would also argue that observing actions within a group is an equally interesting and telling declaration of “culture.”
Marshall and Rossman, *Designing*, 78. While archival data played a negligible role in this study, I did consult previously written textual material concerning the plight of Cleveland fans and all that exists regarding the Parkview as a bar, including hard copy and electronic sources: books, articles, chat rooms, blogs, and news writing. E. W. Eisner calls this “structural corroboration,” the relating of multiple types of data to support or contradict an interpretation, “seeking a confluence of evidence that breeds credibility,” allowing for confidence in observations, interpretations, and conclusions. Although the interviews both inside and outside the Parkview have credibility unto themselves as expressions of personal experience, in full disclosure I confronted their responses (at least mentally) and their subjective experiences with those from other sources to investigate common and unified themes, or to perhaps reveal contrasts with common mythologies surrounding Cleveland fandom. This use of archival data operated not as validation for the Parkview voices, but rather as a foil against which to further understand them in their context. See E. W. Eisner, *The Enlightened Eye: Qualitative Inquiry and the Enhancement of Educational Practice* (New York: Macmillan, 1991), 110. See also John Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Traditions* (Thousand Oaks, Cali.: SAGE Publications, 1998), 198.

However, we should note Gary Alan Fine’s honest assertion concerning ethnography: “Ethnography is ultimately about transformation. We take idiosyncratic behaviors, events with numerous causes, which may—God forbid!—be random (or at least inexplicable to us mortals), and we package them. We contextualize events in a social system, within a web of meaning, and provide a nameable causation. We transform them into meaningful patterns, and in so doing, we exclude other patterns, meanings, or causes. Transformation is about hiding, about magic, about change. This is the task we face and is the reality we must embrace. We ethnographers cannot help but lie, but in lying, we reveal truths that escape those who are not so bold.” Gary Alan Fine, “Ten Lies of Ethnography: Moral Dilemmas of Field Research,” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, vol. 22, no.3, (October 1993): 290.


Krane and Baird, “Using Ethnography,” 94, and Schensul et. al., *Essential Ethnographic Methods*, 95. Note also Wolcott, who advocates an “engaged seeing,” suggesting that “We are ethnographic observers when we are attending to the cultural context of the behavior we are engaging in or observing, and when we are looking for those mutually understood sets of expectations and explanations that enable us to interpret what is occurring and what meanings are probably being attributed by others present.” Harry Wolcott, “Ethnographic Research in Education,” in R.M. Jaeger, ed., *Complementary Methods for Research in Education* (Washington, D.C.: American Educational Research Association, 1988), 193.

As N.L. Holt and A.C. Sparkes summarize, “The ethnographic insider has the task of making the familiar seem strange in order to maintain analytical distance” whereas “the ethnographic outsider has the problem of making the strange seem familiar.” In this case, I am tasked with both sides of the dilemma: I must separate myself from Cleveland fandom while ingratiating myself to those at The Parkview, a bar that is new to me. Quote from Krane and Baird, “Using Ethnography,” 93.
With sardonic wit, Yvonna S. Lincoln and Egon G. Guba quip that “the trouble with generalizations is that they don’t apply to particulars.” Indeed, this study will not attempt to discover the truly universal, unrestricted as to time and place, always and everywhere the case. Rather, this project will focus on a particular city with a particular history among a particular group of people living at a particular moment in time. However, these “particular” instances may have contributive value toward understanding a broader concept like “Cleveland” or “Rust belt sport fans” or “sport fandom as a religious experience.” I do not feel pressure to provide “nomic generalizations on the one hand,” nor “unique, particularized knowledge on the other.” An intermediate position realizes the potential of studying particulars without positivistic pressure to generalize, while finally exploring how categorical, soft generalizations might make their way into other similarly “particular” contexts nationally. See Yvonna S. Lincoln and Egon G. Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry* (Beverly Hills: SAGE Publications, 1985), 110-128. See also Creswell, *Five Traditions*, 120, for further explanation of criterion sampling.

30 This means that if a game scheduled to be broadcast by ESPN does not sell out, it will not be broadcast locally within the radius of the blackout zone, in neither homes nor bars.

31 Ely, *Circles Within Circles*, 57.

32 David M. Fetterman, *Ethnography: Step by Step* (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1989), 42. See also Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson, *Ethnography: Principles in Practice 2nd ed.* (New York: Routledge, 1995), where the authors offer a broader based sense of “criteria” based on gaining perspective over time concerning the social life of the group, seeking people representative of the culture sharing group in terms of demographics, and developing sensitivity to the contexts that lead to different forms of behavior.


34 See Appendix B for a list of the participants.

35 See Appendix C to read the official script.

36 Though examples are voluminous in the literature, see Irving Seidman, *Interviewing as Qualitative Research: A Guide for Researchers in Education and the Social Sciences, 2nd ed.* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1998), 63-78, for an excellent summary of effective interviewing technique.

37 Ely, *Circles Within Circles*, 57.

38 See Appendix D.


40 Marshall and Rossman, *Designing*, 82.


See Appendix E for a list of questions used.

Patton, *Qualitative Evaluation Methods*, 211-212. Denscombe elaborates further on the importance of open-ended questions by asserting that “Open questions are those that leave the respondent to decide the wording of the answer, the length of the answer and the kind of matters to be raised in the answer. The questions tend to be short and the answers tend to be long…The advantage of ‘open’ questions is that the information gathered by way of the responses is more likely to reflect the full richness and complexity of the views held by the respondent.” Denscombe, *Good Research Guide*, 165-166.

de Sola Pool asserts that the interview situation “activates” opinion, such that “every interview is an interpersonal drama with a developing plot” involving the interviewer, the interviewee, the social setting, and the language used/exchanged; each interview is a unique social interaction, involving negotiation of social roles and frames of reference between strangers. Indeed, differences in social backgrounds may change the meaning of the question for each respondent, as interviewees respond differently not only to the wording of questions but also to interview situations on the whole. However, while taking care not to assume meaning transfers from one situation to another, it is this very divergence of thinking across interviews that makes this study potentially interesting. I want to explore both the common and the divergent answer among participants, allowing the open-ended nature of the questions to stimulate subjective expression—wherever that leads. See de Sola Pool, “A Critique,” 193; Charles L. Briggs, *Learning How to Ask: A Sociological Appraisal of the Role of the Interview in Social Science Research* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 24.

See Appendix F for a copy of the consent letter.


Patton, *Qualitative Evaluation Methods*, 238.

However, note Seidman who confesses “I have never been comfortable with that word [probe]. I always think of a sharp instrument pressing on soft flesh when I hear it. The word also conveys a sense of the powerful interviewer treating the participant as an object. I am more comfortable with the notion of exploring with the participant than with probing into what the participant says.” Seidman, *Interviewing as Qualitative Research*, 68.


Creswell, *Five Traditions*, 142.

See Creswell, *Five Traditions*, 112-113, for a chart on various data collection activities relevant to the five main qualitative traditions: biography, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study. See also Ely, 7, *Circles Within Circles*, who prefers the metaphor of “circles within circles” when describing the ethnographic process: action, reflection, feeling, and meaning making.

Seidman, *Interviewing as Qualitative Research*, 107-110. Indeed, Kvale suggests that “the ideal interview is already analyzed by the time the sound recorder is turned off.” Kvale and Brinkmann, *Interviewing*, 190.

Schensul et al., *Essential Ethnographic Methods*, 114-120.


Kvale and Brinkmann, *Interviewing*, 192. Clifford Geertz, in his *The Interpretation of Cultures*, describes the anthropologist’s job as one of struggling for “thick description,” recounting not simply the behavior of a particular group of people but also striving to understand the context within which those behaviors take shape. For Geertz, “thin description” describes only the behavior itself without taking into consideration surrounding circumstances. Thus, thick description acknowledges that a behavior’s meaning may change as its context changes, and resists stripping behaviors of their original contexts. See Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 5-6, 9-10.

Ely, *Circles Within Circles*, 58.


Berg, *Social Sciences*, 139.


Sands, *Sport Ethnography*, 36.


Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture,” in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 3-30.


Seidman, *Interviewing as Qualitative Research*, 32.

Ibid., 33.


Ely, *Circles Within Circles*, 165.


Krane and Baird, 100-101.

Ibid., 101.


Ely, *Circles Within Circles*, 124-127. “Deliberate naivete” within a context of reflexivity presents the demanding dual challenge of being intentionally aware of one’s biases and their role in methods embraced, questions asked, and ultimately interpretations gleaned (how the researcher effects the research), while also intentionally distancing the researcher from the culture being studied for the purpose of an honest inductive appraisal. See Krane and Baird, 100-101.

Seidman, *Interviewing as Qualitative Research*, 80.

Bowen, “Lessons Learned,” 214.


See Appendix F for a copy of the consent form.

CHAPTER 6

RESULTS: THE PARKVIEW NITECLUB CULTURE

“One Part Sports Bar, One Part Blues Club, 100% Cleveland”¹

This chapter offers a thick description of the social setting of this study, an introduction
to the Parkview NiteClub as ethnographic site. Foregrounding the history and culture of the bar
and its patrons properly frames and situates the semi-structured and informal interviews that
arose within the ethnography; indeed, the Parkview as a social location is intimately interwoven
with the patron’s own personal and collective narrative, ethos, and overall sensibility. Sources
for the Parkview location and history include my own observations, interviews with the owner,
manager, help staff and patrons, along with select books and articles as cited.

The Location

The Parkview NiteClub, at 1261 W. 58⁰ Street, is situated just three blocks north of
Detroit Avenue in the trendy Detroit-Shoreway neighborhood, around the corner from the
historic Gordon Square Arts District to the west and further down the road from the famous West
Side Market bordering W.25⁰ to the east. Located on a corner where the neighborhood ends and
boasting a view of both the Lake Erie and the Downtown skyline, the building is a classic
Cleveland neighborhood bar, with a brick first floor holding up a wooden second story. Branded
as “A Cool Place for Shady People” and “the joint at the end of W. 58⁰ street” on its website, it
exists just off the main artery between downtown Cleveland and the western suburbs, an area
that continues to maintain broad ethnic diversity while reflecting the varied characteristics of
Cleveland’s two-hundred-sixteen year history.² As “a dive with authentic Cleveland blue-collar
soul,” the area immediately surrounding the bar sitting on a bluff overlooking Edgewater Park
and the Shoreway just west of the city is “more light industrial than residential and looks like it
hasn’t changed much in the last 50 years.”

Quite simply, except for the silencing of the massive Westinghouse factory building directly across the street to the northwest—it hasn’t.

The Décor

Upon climbing the three awning-covered stairs at the main entrance and opening the door, a visitor gets immediately confronted with lacquered newspaper pages from the 1930s and 1940s, along with posters, memorabilia, and “garage sale” items from every decade through the new millennium. A large wood bar with sixteen stools traces one wall to the left; four fixed, vinyl-cushioned booths cover half the wall to the right, with a sixteen-tabled dining room spread around the middle. The far end wall has four openings: a servers’ window, a kitchen entrance, a door to the basement, and a narrow hallway leading to the bathrooms and outdoor patio. The back right corner hosts a small dance floor in front of a classic bar bowling game, while the entire floor and wall space is dark wood.

Amid a dim interior ambiance, the Parkview walls and ceiling host a bric-a-brac mix of music royalty and sports memorabilia, pop cultural iconography and Cleveland history, a bricolage that defies singular narrative or thematic description: Babe Ruth, the Three Stooges, and a stuffed wild boar head with an OSU pennant between its teeth; the 1944 Parkview baseball team, the “Rat Pack” partying above an upright piano, and a pair of antique phone booths (actual, not photographed); Louis Armstrong blowing his trumpet, Joe DiMaggio, and a large caricature of Jackie Gleason, Jimmy Durante, and Bill Cosby; the 1964 Browns championship team, a skinny, bespectacled John Lennon, and a full size operational traffic light; John Wayne, Olivia Newton John, and the actual 15-minute time clock from Cleveland Municipal Stadium; an early 20th century arcade bowling game, a Limited Edition Metaphysique sculpture by Hollywood special effects artist Robert J. Marino, and a picture of Marilyn Monroe. One regular patron
suggests that “it”s like walking into a time capsule, full of nostalgia”—but defying any clear thematic conclusion.

As one food critic writes reflecting on the jumbled interior, given that “the only feature that the mismatched wooden chairs have in common is their wobble…this vintage west-side watering hole isn”t the place for those who value conformity, either in décor, clientele, or menu offerings,” since it offers “an atmospheric hangout that even a confirmed pack rat (or an Applebee”s corporate decorator) would find impossible to duplicate.” 5 While plenty of bars and restaurants attempt to communicate authenticity (or at least consistency) through their decorative simulacra, The Parkview succeeds in not trying to be anything—it just is. As one regular patron observes concerning other bar”s attempts to reflect the Cleveland vibe: “You can”t just hang a bunch of Cleveland shit on the wall and be Cleveland…this place [Parkview] has history and respect…there”s no bullshit and people know that.”

While sports get plenty of attention at The Parkview and on each of its four main TVs above the bar, to singularly call it a “sports bar” fails to encompass its composite character, especially given its recurring blues bashes every Wednesday and Saturday night. A typical fall Saturday captures well the juxtaposition of harmoniously coexisting themes: catch Ohio State Buckeye football on one of two wall-sized screens at the far end of the barroom during the afternoon, and return later to imbibe the hottest of local (and some national) blues bands regularly playing past “final call.” Mix in Friday fish fries and thick gambling (featuring the usual baseball, football, basketball lines plus golf tournaments, the Little League World Series, even the National Spelling Bee), clam bakes and Polish festivals, “Gangster night” and golf outings, Limited Edition beers and an appearance on “Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives,” shake it all together—and the result is a hard-to-define, ultra eclectic Parkview NiteClub.
The Parkview as currently experienced, however, owes much to its mythological past. Its anecdotal history, like a specter absorbed into both the walls and the patrons themselves, continues to hover over the current Parkview experience.

**The Mythology**

The first cook I meet avoids going in the basement because of a persisting myth that “bodies might be buried within the walls,” citing the local history of bootleggers running liquor through underground tunnels during Prohibition. According to verifiable legend, located just a mile or so from the Lake Erie shoreline, the Parkview basement became an exit for one of three underground tunnels making their way into the Detroit-Shoreway neighborhood, ready for distribution among the locals. As one patron of the Parkview since 1961 recalls, “Sometimes they’d break open the barrel in the streets and people would come with a glass and fill up. That’s how the Parkview got on the map.” This heralded act of defiance, besides cleverly framing the history of a local drinking establishment, also positioned the Parkview as an agent of resistance to the daily grind of “governmentalized” life within Cleveland, an implicit role it still plays today. Part of the Parkview’s charm flows from the antinomian spirit that pervades the clientele—even the police—who frequent the place. Not an overt, anti-establishment rebellion, but rather an understood, almost palpable “don’t ask/don’t tell, just leave us the hell alone” ethos.

While the provision of illegal liquor may have ingratiated people to the Parkview during the 1920s, its history extends at least to 1907, being the site of one of Cleveland’s most notorious unsolved murders. On the evening of January 2, 1907, Parkview owner Thomas John Martin (who entertained himself by sitting on the bluff overlooking the riverbed originally outside the bar and shooting lunch pails out of the hands of weary men walking home after their factory shifts), was shot dead by two .38-caliber bullets—one to the head, one to the stomach—at the far
end of the bar in front of the kitchen entrance. After refusing another drink to his apparently drunk soon-to-be assassin because of an overextended bar tab, the unidentified man either pulled out a gun directly or returned to the bar shortly after the rejection to shoot Martin, killing him almost immediately. Only two other patrons were in the bar at the time of the shooting, one a blind man and both drunk, and neither could later identify the killer nor corroborate their stories concerning the events of the evening. While Cleveland detectives several times thought they were close to identifying Martin’s killer, the case remains open to this day.

Ironically, when it was reported to current owner Norm Plonsky that “X” (a guy who had at least a $100 running tab in a bar that doesn’t carry tabs over to the next day) had arrived, Norm watched the front door with a concerned look while saying he could come back in if he paid his tab. When I asked about the guy and why he had such a high tab, Norm said “Let’s just say I don’t have any problem with the ‘hoods,’” implying the guy’s presence and circulated reputation helped maintain civility at the bar—although now his unpaid tab created some tension for Norm. Being a proud historian of the Parkview narrative, Norm fully understood the irony of extending a tab to this particular character, and knows the consequences exacted upon a previous owner over the issue of a maxed-out tab. Indeed, as he apprehensively watches the door while talking with me, Norm stands on the very spot where Martin was shot 105 years ago.

Adding to the intrigue surrounding the location of the Parkview, one of Cleveland’s most infamous underworld celebrities, Thomas “Black Jack” McGinty, lived down the street from the front door of the bar. McGinty, then known as Cleveland’s biggest sports and gambling promoter, built the famed Mounds Club in East Cleveland in 1930 and ran it until it was closed by authorities in 1949. He was a known associate of the Cleveland Gang, a mafia group that controlled gambling enterprises in Cleveland during the two decades that McGinty operated the
Mounds Club. Alongside the illegal sports gambling, the high-end Mounds Club further expanded its reputation by hosting some of the best entertainment—both singers and comedians—in the Cleveland area. Once flushed from Cleveland, McGinty started the famed Desert Inn in Las Vegas. According to Norm, plans for a “Gangster Night” are currently in the works, a carnevalesque evening of homage to Cass Avenue”s own “Blackjack” McGinty and the groundwork he laid.

Correspondingly, the Parkview essentially operates today as a working class Mounds Club, minus the Hollywood talent and underworld corruption, but mirroring (on a lesser scale) the gambling and live performance, the sports and music. A quiet but pronounced flow of money crosses the bar almost daily to cover various gambling games, another way to exact more enjoyment from the competitions projected from the TVs above the bar. While there, I am invited to play “33,” “Squares,” and “Knockout,” all pools surrounding the upcoming NFL season, and watch the Major League All-Star game with a group of men and one woman in a pay-to-play Fantasy Baseball League. The U.S. Open golf championship draws a huge intake as does the Little League World Series, and Mike (the owner”s son, Parkview manager and default bookie) explains to me that “if you get Canada, Europe, or North Africa/Middle East teams, you”ll never get your money back…immediate loss.”

During one afternoon while the Little League Series is on, I am sitting at the bar when a team from California scores ten runs in the bottom half of the sixth inning to tie the game, before Tennessee comes back to score nine runs to win in extra innings, making people around the bar crazy—some cursing, some cheering—with everyone watching yelling loud toward the TV and one another. This prompts several customers to reflect on the intensity of the betting population at the Parkview, recalling the line for a recent National Spelling Bee competition, and arguing
whether the rumored inception of a Lingerie Football League team in Cleveland will draw betting cash at the bar. They laughingly conclude that “hell yes it will,” and everyone acknowledges their appreciation for the orderly and convivial way that gambling takes place under the watchful eye of Mike—and presumably the police authorities—at the Parkview. While The Mounds Club was famously robbed by fellow cons and habitually raided by governmental powers, the Parkview quietly and courteously keeps both Vegas insight and otherwise monotonous games relevant throughout the year.

According to several regular patrons, through the middle decades of the twentieth century the Parkview existed under the eccentric ownership of “Ma” Socatch—of whom many current regulars still speak fondly. One patron of over fifty years explains that during Cleveland’s most trying years in the last half of the 1900s, while “many bars were closing, the Parkview survived because it was family owned.” Socatch kept the Parkview stable and thriving during the darkest days, a respite for the working class population among the still flourishing (at the time) factory life just outside the bar. Cathy proudly explains her previous role as Socatch’s personal hairdresser, and brags that she was in Socatch’s confidence, a rather exclusive circle since “Ma could be abrasive and didn’t like many people.” Socatch cluttered the walls with animal life, hanging turkeys and ducks and moose heads as decoration; Bill points to a spot just behind the bar where a refrigerator now rests, and says she used to have her poodle sitting in that spot all day. He remembers how “she would wipe the dog’s ass in the middle of the bar and let it run around.”

Being a tireless worker, she only took her vacations when she would get shut down weeks at a time for serving underage patrons. Her biography among current customers regularly includes variations on the “strange lady, tough as shit” theme, and although several known owners preceded Norm (including her son, Virgil, and another man named Joe Corrino), she
alone receives canonization from those who talk of such things at the Parkview. After running it for decades, she built another and still thriving bar—fittingly called The Happy Dog—on the corner of 58th and Detroit for her son, who became recognized for murdering his wife before meeting his own grisly end when he drove his car head-on into an embankment, thus adding to and extending the stranger-than-fiction backdrop of the Parkview narrative.

More recently and considerably less morbid, television host Guy Fieri popularized the Parkview as a destination site nationally by filming an episode of his show *Diners, Drive-ins, and Dives* there in Fall 2009. Airing on October 26, 2009 under the title “Dives Worth a Drive,” Fieri praised the Parkview’s down-home Cleveland atmosphere and celebrated the smoked salmon dish and fried asparagus strips, drawing a whole new wave of attention to the bar, its people, and its history. A large picture of Fieri hangs above the kitchen door, along with photos of his visit scattered around the bar area.

**The Owner**

The current Parkview aura reflects the 20-year ownership of Norm Plonsky, who also owns a popular bar a couple of miles to the east, right next to the Columbus Bridge just west of the Flats and the Cuyahoga River, called Major Hooples. The Parkview attracted Plonsky because the business at Hooples was flourishing and he needed a place to hang out, since “when you’re in the business, Cleveland is a small, big town, and I couldn’t go anywhere without knowing somebody.” (One waitress concurred about his anonymity problem by testifying that in Cleveland, “everybody knows Norm, and he knows everybody—I mean everybody!”) He says, “every once in awhile you want to go somewhere where you can just sit…this room has character and when it went up for sale, I bought it.” When I ask him what he changed from previous ownership, he says, “I got rid of the cockroaches,” and proceeds to explain the three-
year war that took place to remove them. Other patrons tell me that when Ma Socatch owned the place she had animal heads on the wall and more of an outdoors décor, so obviously Plonsky also changed the interior wall furnishings, but the basic structure of the layout and tables have remained largely unaltered for decades.

The clientele at the Parkview want to be there and have to seek it out, an implication of its location at the dead end of the neighborhood. According to Plonsky, the Parkview’s positioning makes it an intentional locale—“I’m not a drive-by, I’m a destination”—especially given its location in a seedier area of the Detroit-Shoreway district and the competitive attraction of other area sites like Gordon Square. Plonsky notes that “people who like this (waving his hand around whole NiteClub), like this, and understands his ownership role as a form of stewardship, since “when this place goes away, a piece of Cleveland goes away too.” He doesn’t worry about expansion or growing numerically or trying to make a bigger profit, for as he says, “if you count every seat in here there’d be about 100. Cleveland has around—what?—350,000 people these days? I only need 100,” and he loves being sequestered in the back corner of a street, where he and his clientele can be “left alone.”

The labeling of the Parkview as a “Cleveland bar” pertains to more than geography alone for Plonsky and the regulars who attend, and even suggesting that it’s primarily “Clevelanders” who patronize it implies something about the character of the person more than just his or her city of origin. Plonsky says,

The people that come in here are…they’re Clevelanders, whether they be, you know…I always said the only person I don’t allow in here are the assholes and I don’t care if they wearing $1000 suits or work boots—they gotta go. If you’re an asshole I’ll kick you out. So, I mean this is, this bar is a good cross section of Cleveland whether they be sports fans or not.
Thus, the Parkview caters to all socio-economic, racial, and personality types as long as they don’t make trouble for Plonsky or others at the bar—submitting to a general but understood ethic of “not being an asshole.” Though I suspect asking what it means to be an “asshole” will probably qualify me as one, I nevertheless surmise from discussion and observation that to avoid the label one shouldn’t draw too much attention to oneself at the bar by being excessively loud or otherwise ostentatious in an ongoing fashion, start fights, leave without paying, disrespect the female workers, talk endlessly without letting others get a word in, make a ruckus about gambling lines, or get drunk and create disorder.

When asked to describe further the “Clevelander” that comes in to the Parkside, Plonsky said, “Clevelanders…you don’t screw em,” before explaining,

(Clevelanders are) tough. I mean you got to be tough. It’s a tough town…I mean it’s a tough town. It’s a tough town to live in. I mean we’re one of the poorest cities in the country. It’s a tough town to be as sports fan in; if you think about it, we should all leave. But we don’t (laughter). And those that leave come back. You know, a lot of them come back.”

He further describes the typical Clevelander as “a hard working person, I mean basically, hard working people that are very loyal…there’ll be guys sitting down at Hooples that’ll be coming in there for thirty-one years that I’ve owned the place…If they find a place they like or whatever they’re loyal and they are loyal to their teams to a fault.” The notion of “loyalty” comes up repeatedly in discussions with bar patrons—a sense of loyalty to the area, the history, the teams—functioning almost as a sensibility, a devotion to an idea about a way of life, a culture. Norm takes pride in being the longest standing “same named” bar in Cleveland, and as one regular reflects, “the Parkview is an old name that goes on and on for generations, and that’s why people still come here”—suggesting patron loyalty that spans decades.
Norm says that Clevelanders love both their sports and their music, which makes for a fitting combination at the Parkview, since “for me, a good game or a good band are both [the deal]…it’s just an extension of what I like.” He booked Cleveland guitar legend Glen Schwartz to play at Hooples for twenty straight years which put Plonsky’s establishment on the music map, a reputation that carried over to the Parkview. On Saturdays, Norm schedules both local and national bands like Color Wheel, the Numbers Band, the Bad Boys of Blues, Butch Armstrong and the Bearcats, the Juke Hounds, Blues Chronicles—bands and personalities well known within the blues band sub-culture. Wednesday night features the Blues Jam, hosted by one of several blues personalities that Norm trusts. The host for the evening sings/plays for the first hour, then basically emcees an open-mike time for visiting talent for the rest of the evening. Musicians and “blues heads” from around the area get in line at the Parkview to try new music and riff on classics.

For my first Wednesday Blues Jam experience, I get treated to legendary Becky Boyd, whose long hair, round Lennon glasses, flowing hippy shirt, roundish body, psychedelic dance moves and deep, soulful voice reminds me of a young Big Mama Cass. The sound throughout the evening, richly textured and bespeaking a “working class” and largely Caucasian soulful expression reminds me variously—like all good blues music—of someone trying to rid themselves of past and present demons, heartbreak, and existential angst.

Music is functional entertainment, but the sport teams represent something more to those at the Parkview who care about them—something more personal, centrally located, fundamental. As Norm says referring to those who come to the Parkview, “I think, I think everybody in Cleveland down deep is a sports fan, except some women. That’s the way we grew up. And I
think we’re all are bound together maybe by the sports teams I don’t know. You know, that’s our common bond but we’re also ah, tough…resilient…and stupid [for following the teams].”

We discuss the psychological effect of the Browns leaving at the end of the 1995 season, and he points me to a poster with pictures of graffiti on it, explaining that during the last home game the Browns played in Municipal Stadium before leaving for Baltimore, he took a camera and went around the stadium photographing the “street art” painted on walls, knowing that the stadium would soon be demolished. He says, “My favorite was written right above a ticket window at Gate A—it said „Sold Out,‟” reflecting the double edged irony of Modell’s defection and the sentimental hunger for tickets that took place surrounding the final games.

As an example of his own loyalty to both the city and the teams (in this case, the Browns), he says

I used to go to the Browns games…shit (pause)…probably twenty years in a row. I sold score cards there, and I’d keep my pass and I’d go into games. And when my kid got old enough he would go into games. And we stood…we didn’t have seats so we stood in section seven, which was the 50-yard line. We were there so long that we’d get phone calls on the pay phones and gave out their numbers before cell phones. So, (laughing) we got phone calls on pay phones in the stadium!

He tells me about attending the infamous Indians “Ten-cent Beer Night” back in 1974, a game when the fans got so drunk and unruly, a mini-riot broke out with fans spilling onto the field, culminating in the Indians forfeiting the game in the ninth inning because order could not be restored until the arrival of the Cleveland Police riot squad. He describes organizing bus rides from the bar to the Richfield Coliseum for Cavs games, and his speech to the riders would be “„There are forty-two‟—or whatever the hell the bus held—„people on this bus. You have a half hour after the game‟s over to get back to this bus, because I am not going to hold up forty-one people for one asshole,‟” which worked well until one of his best friends was late, finding him upstairs talking with the cheerleaders. “He got a pass,” Norms explains to me.
Regarding Cleveland sports, Norm’s been faithful through the good and the mostly bad. I ask him if he ever considered aligning himself with another city’s teams, and he crisply (offendedly?) shoots back: “Why would I?” I suggest maybe to hook up with the “winners” for once—to feel better about himself, instead of feeling like crap every sport season. He shakes his head the whole time I speak and says, “No, because if they ever win in my life time again it would be such a euphoric thing. When you win too much it becomes expected…You know? It’s…If any of our frigging teams would win, this town…” before trailing off and wistfully shaking his head. “Yeah. It would be great if it happened here. We’re patient. Stupid. (laughs) Tough. Dumb. Loyal. I mean, I never thought about rooting for anybody else. And if I would move, I would still be a fan. So Cleveland fans are loyal. I mean, they move but they are loyal.”

Norm describes a friend of his who lived in Cleveland for decades, had to move to Raleigh, and now was back in town for an event. While shopping at Cleveland’s famous West Side Market, a bazaar-type farmers market specializing in ethnic foods, she exclaimed over and over again, “Oh…we’ve nothing like this down South,” reflecting on the diversity of taste and offerings in Cleveland by saying that “the people where I live now are all nice but they’re all Southerners and that’s all there is.” But Norm says in Cleveland, “you go to that West Side Market and you want some Czech food and or you want some Chinese food, or you want this or you want that—there is little bitta everything in this town. And I think we’re all bound together maybe by the sports teams, I don’t know,” before laughingly reiterating, “I guess the teams are our common bond, but maybe because of that we’re tough, resilient, and stupid.”

The Patrons

The Parkview’s patrons include “suits” from Downtown—both men and women—along with those in more traditional “working class” attire. For example, my first experience at the
club reflected what I learned to be a daily occurrence: sitting next to three men in classic suits are two other guys waiting for a third, all in flannel shirts and looking like they just finished a shift in a factory. As one writer accurately summarized, The Parkview “draws its guests from across a wide spectrum, including the young and colorful as well as the middle-aged and bland.”

On any given day the clientele remain diverse and demographically unpredictable: a family of twelve celebrating Grandma’s eighty-fifth birthday; three judges in a booth discussing their case load; a regular group of teachers who gather for weekly dinner; the solitary man or woman having a post-work drink; Hispanic gang members in early for “blues” night; a trio of “30-somethings” stationed beneath the far TV to watch the game; elderly men drinking in a corner while eight-year olds play the “Family Guy” pinball machine; heavily tattooed friends catching Sunday brunch; the constant visitation by friends of the help staff; a man with his escort service date.

When I ask bartender Libby to describe the people that visit the Parkview, she says “It’s indescribable. There’s no way to answer that question. We have judges who sit next to cons. You know, there’s always one bar in a city that becomes that „place.“ I think this might be it here.” She refers to a line from the movie Kill the Irishman, a bio-drama about notorious Cleveland Irish gangster Danny Green who took down the Cleveland (and some would say national) mafia before being blown to pieces by a car bomb in 1977. (The actual line from the movie is “It was only a matter of time before he [Green] started hanging out at the Theatrical Grill. Every city’s got a Theatrical—the one place where crooks and cops sit side-by-side.”)  

Debbie, another waitress, says that “It’s hard to say who comes in. All different people, but we’ll kick your ass if you act up.” As an aside, she offers “My gay guys didn’t come in last night…missed them,” as though the question triggered something in her mind to offer an
example of accepting diversity after her harsh threat. Laura, a recently hired waitress, agrees and says that the Parkview is “Perfect because you have a little bit of everything here: all different ages, races, people that come from money, people that come from no money…everyone is welcome.”

Bill, a regular at the Parkview since the 1950s, tells me that even if the clientele can’t all be considered “working class” anymore, they are all “working people,” suggesting that the Parkview hosts “some non-professional, some professional, some highly professional, some riff raff, but they carry themselves differently when they’re in the Parkview…they [all] know how to maintain themselves.” He implies that those who work in traditionally “white collar” jobs lose their “uppityness,” while those who typically labor at the lower ends of the socio-economic spectrum don’t act like “criminals”: in both cases, as already mentioned several times, at least while being at the bar those who enter the Parkview can share “not being an asshole” with each other, a highly regarded trait within this Cleveland establishment.

Over the course of six months, I sporadically ask the waitresses and bartenders several questions: “Why do people like it here?” and “How would you describe people who come here?” The second question seems to take everyone back every time it gets asked, as though it’s an offense: “A person doesn’t try to analyze the people that are here—you just leave them the hell alone and let them be.” When I ask him to describe a character from the Parkview, John, who has been drinking there since 1961 (his wife worked there for twenty-seven years until she died four years ago) says, “You don’t make a story out of someone; you live with them, and they become part of your life.” Like the décor, the patrons offer resistance to categorization, even a non-invasive or non-judgmental surface version.
Yet many of the regulars have nicknames: Dann-O, Parkview Pat, Tower City Mike, Gay Billy (who just moved to New Orleans), Big Rich, John the Mailman, Gary the Mayor. Receiving a nickname connotes longevity and a certain amount of likeability. Nobody gets nicknamed if they don’t like you, and the nickname works in two directions: it gives the bearer a measure of internal, Parkview celebrity status while also communicating an established and fortified client base for other newer Parkview patrons. The Parkview doesn’t exist merely as a transient venue for food and drink, as a generic sports/music bar—rather, it cultivates and maintains a discernable culture of its own, forged by the collective memory of its own history and the regulars who call it “home.”

Bartender Emily concludes there are two primary types who regularly visit: the “die-hard” vs. the “never been here before but very happy to be here.” Maybe they saw it on the *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives* broadcast or just heard about it through the grapevine, but the place is full of people who either grew up here or are just visiting. She says

> It’s very “family like,” very laid back, everyone knows everyone…there’s a very personal atmosphere, and it’s a place with a long history. Dive food but awesome. There are set groups that try to come on your shift and who expect you to know what they want and their preferences. You can come by yourself and you’ll always know someone here. The people that come here are set in their ways, but they want to be here and are happy to be here.

Bill says “This is a place where people working the bar know who you are and take pride in knowing what you want. They don’t say, (gruffly) „What are you having?” they say, (invitingly) „Hi, Bill, scotch on the rocks?” developing the notion of “family” put forward by Emily. Bill suggests that like other bars, folks come to the Parkview to get caught up on “family” news: “People like to come in and bullshit a little bit, see what we missed during the week. See who hit the lottery and got rich, who got a DUI and went to jail.” In this way, it
functions appropriately as that urban “corner hangout” where “everybody knows your name” and timely gossip remains in fluid circulation.

His friend, drinking silently but heavily on my right, in response to the question “What kind of people come to the Parkview?” immediately shoots back: “Working folks!” He talks about the old Westinghouse building (visible just outside the front window) that would have 12,000 workers go through it a day until it closed a few years back. He says that workers liked the good food and the very big lunch offered at the Parkview, and they could get their checks cashed from the register at the bar. Indeed, the whole neighborhood was working class, and lots of steelworkers used to come in the Parkview before the steel industry virtually collapsed. As he recalls, it was “in fact a friend from the ore loading docks where they used the old Hulett loaders—there used to be four in operation on the docks—who brought me here,” and he proudly describes for me the transformation of the Great Lakes dock unloading industry caused by the local invention of the Hulett crane loader in 1898. As he continues to talk, this 73-year-old hails both the working ethos of the people—still so central to the identity of the community—along with the historical contribution of the region, made during Cleveland’s by-gone era of industrial dominance.

Ryan, a kitchen worker, reaffirms the role of the bar help in making the Parkview attractive by suggesting that “it’s because so many people like Jason, who has garnered „Bar Tender of the Year” honors and such from local magazines…he draws people to the bar.” But he also says it’s because “there’s no rules, it’s out of the way, and people know each other. Even if you come there for a first time and don’t know anybody, you’ll know people after that and make your way back,” re-emphasizing the isolated building, the antinomian ethos and the relational connections that characterize attendance at the Parkview.
A 24-year-old acknowledged that the first time he and his friends came to the Parkview, they realized “it was like a church for some people,” and that they immediately had “a measure of respect for the place because of its age and authenticity and they [the young guys] know their place when they’re there. No bullshit. If anyone gets to cause a problem here, it’s the old guys…they’ve earned the right.” Thus, even within an establishment that prides itself on exuding maximum acceptance toward all visitors, a hierarchy of status and decorum crystallizes around age and longevity, around faithfulness to the establishment and a history (as was repeated to me on multiple occasions) of “not being an asshole.”

Even with the rich mix of cultural history represented at the Parkview, it is obvious that Cleveland professional sports contribute a major refrain for the bar’s soundtrack. As Norm said, “the teams are our common bond,” and the nature of this bond becomes apparent with each conversation. One long-time Parkview patron both summarizes and laments that

We all have that dream; we want that championship like in 1948. We’ve always had great football players—we had fuckin’ Jim Brown, Lou the toe Groza, Kevin Mack (a prolific running back from the 1980s) who used to hang with crack-head whores on the East Side. But every time we get something good we get rid of it; same with the damn Indians. Look at how they snatched the Browns team out of here and took it to Baltimore. Then our superstar up and goes to Miami.

Capturing the feistiness that seems to hover over every conversation I have with patrons about the teams, NormB says “the thing about Cleveland fans is one, we don’t do betrayal well and two, we don’t like when management tries to blow smoke up our ass,” themes that repeatedly manifest themselves in the interviews I conduct. At the Parkview, the beer and the blues fortify a context within which the sports fandom narrative unfolds, the three coalescing to form an emotional concoction loaded with affect, passion, and drama, with each fresh game contributing its own details to the “history of the Cleveland sports fan” archive. Fuller, extensive interviews with patrons (both formal and informal) provide another layer of data revealing the
lived world of patrons at the Parkview, particularly in their relationship to one another as fans of the Cleveland teams.
Notes

1 As declared by Scene Magazine webpage review, at http://www.clevescene.com/cleveland/parkview-nite-club/Location?oid=1431001.


4 After multiple visits to study its contents, I am struck by the sense of impossibility created by the prospect of doing a complete inventory of the interior of the Parkview. Eclectic doesn’t seem a strong enough word. How it manages to be so Old School while at the same time being a late-modern case study in non-thematic curiosity is part of its alluring charm and practical intimidation. It refuses typical categorization, and yet, forms a genuinely unique category unto itself. It’s known and unknown, familiar and strange, all at the same time.


6 Perhaps this accounts for The Parkview being one of only 17 bars in the Cleveland area that received permission to sell Limited Edition “Batch 19 Pre-Prohibition Style Lager,” produced by Miller-Coors and made from a recipe found in the Coors brewery archives, supposedly lost when Prohibition first started in 1919. See WKYC Web Staff, “Cleveland: lost beer recipe makes its way to city,” found Wednesday October 10, 2012 at http://www.wkyc.com/news/article/2449073/Cleveland-Lost-beer-recipe-makes-its-way-to-city.

7 “Governmentality,” a notion developed and popularized by Michel Foucault, connotes the organized practices by which subjects are directed to behave and act, including the conscious and unconscious promulgation of mentalities, rationalities, and techniques which “keep people in line” at every level of society. See Mitchell Dean, Governmentality: Power and Rule in Modern Society (London: Sage Publications, 1999).

8 See John Stark Bellamy, Death Ride at Euclid Beach (Cleveland: Gray and Co. Publishers, 2004), 17-20.


10 Indeed, a kitchen worker named Ryan got drunk after the annual golf outing, returned to the Parkview where he punched and broke the CD jukebox and threw a door out of line by slamming it, before being immediately fired by Norm outside in the parking lot. Despite the objections of his manager son, Mike, who saw it as an isolated indiscretion and understood the toll his firing would take on the kitchen help, Norm has no patience for—as he repeatedly said over the course of my six months at the bar—“bullshit.”

11 Often compared with Jimi Hendrix, Schwartz became a member of the nationally known Cleveland band The James Gang, before leaving and being replaced by Joe Walsh, who most know as a leader of the super-group The Eagles. Plonsky had Schwartz, The James Gang, and Joe Walsh all play in his bar, prompting a Southwest Airline ad to suggest music lovers visiting Cleveland should frequent his bar to “go hear Glen on Thursday night.”

12 Cicora, “Funky-Town’s Finest.”

13 See Kill the Irishman, directed by Jonathon Hensleigh (Beverly Hills: Anchor Bay Films, 2011), DVD, at the 19:05 mark. The Theatrical, an actual Cleveland restaurant opened in 1937 by Morris “Mushy” Wexler on a notorious single-block in the middle of town called Short Vincent, became the favorite haunt of entertainment and sports celebrities—along with central mob figures, racketeers, newspapermen, and lawyers. Losing its clientele
since the late 1980s, the downtown Theatrical became a parking garage in 2002, while The Parkview continues to serve its own “crooks and cops”—minus the celebrities—daily.
CHAPTER 7

RESULTS: DATA ANALYSIS/EMERGENT THEMES

An Initial Investigation into the Data

Sitting at what has become my regular spot at the far end of the counter, I watch the opening ceremonies of the London Olympics for awhile with Gary and Pat, before turning the Indians game on. I remind them that the last time we watched a game together the Indians were down 8-2 right away and that maybe we’d have better luck tonight. As it turns out, they are down 8-0 before the end of the third inning. Pat and I have a cathartic laugh about the deju vu nature of this moment, though he disgustedly asks Joe to turn the channel to something else—another game, poker, women’s golf—he can’t stand watching them be horrible. At one point he says to me, “I used to be mad as hell when the Indians would lose. I don’t let it bother me now. It’s not good for you. I’m worn out. This whole town is worn out. I guess that’s the question, isn’t it? Why does it bother us so much?” before turning back to his bowl of chili and third bottle of beer.

The data analyzed here include ethnographic notes and informal interviews acquired during 112 hours on-site, along with fifteen semi-structured interviews I conducted with regular patrons of the Parkview NiteClub who met my selection criteria. I set out to understand the “lived world” of this particular group of Clevelanders as fans in relationship to their three professional sports teams. Data from the formal interviews were open and axial coded into working themes, a process which resulted in the higher order themes reflected below.

Loosely holding to the conceptual framework outlined by Bailey’s theory of implicit religion, I found my results to be consistent with the highest order themes “commitment,”
“integrating foci,” and “internal beliefs with external results” (though with significant overlap between the three), proving to be a helpful scaffolding to help organize and catalog my higher order themes. Out of my open coding came five higher order themes under “commitment,” five higher order themes under “integrating foci,” and three higher order themes under “intensive concerns with extensive effects.”

**Commitment**

Through the interviews, the nature and the contour of the *commitment* that this group of fans has toward the three teams emerged from the data. Five higher order themes surfaced from this articulated and lived *commitment* by fans: Loyalty as a valued priority, Topophilia, Nostalgic memory, Durkheimian (totemic) projection of self, and Symbiosis of suffering/hope.

**Loyalty as a Valued Priority**

No other term reaped as much attention as “loyalty” in my discussions with bar-patrons regarding their fandom. In general, “loyalty” meant an unwavering, steadfast obligation to the Cleveland teams themselves, with multiple respondents testifying that even amid tremendous amounts of losing, “I’m still a fan of the teams and always will be…I can’t have allegiance with another team. No matter what.” As Katie said, “Nothing, absolutely nothing could get me to change my allegiance from Cleveland teams. There would have to be a catastrophic event for me to say I’m not a Cleveland Browns fan anymore; I’m not a Cleveland Cavs fan anymore; I’m not a Cleveland Indians fan anymore. We would have to lose the teams for me to stop cheering for them.” Caroline affirmed the same sentiment by saying “The only way I wouldn’t root for Cleveland teams is if we lost all of our teams. I’ll never *not* root for them. I might like another team, but no matter what, a Cleveland team takes my first everything: first baseball, first
basketball, first football. It’s just what I’ve always had.” “Loyalty” as tied to commitment revealed itself through at least five different sub-themes in the interviews.

*Loyalty toward the teams more than the players*

An important distinction quickly arose between loyalty to the players versus loyalty to the teams. As Taylor argued, it is not so much the players who hold the attention of fans, but rather the teams themselves, suggesting that “[Clevelanders] always complain about the teams, but we’re do or die for our teams here. They might say they like the players, but they love the team,” since “players come and go, but as long as the team’s name and everything is still there and you can still see the hard work from the team, that’s what really gets them [the fans] going.”

Or as Henry reiterated, “We’ll love the teams until the day we die. But we don’t necessarily love the players. We love what the team represents. The players are just a variable in an equation.”

As repeatedly described by participants, at a basic level this dogged dedication to the teams manifests itself in a number of general ways. For example, Pat suggests, “I don’t think you have to dress up to be loyal…I don’t think you have to be that kind of person that gets drunk and does stupid things to root for your team. I think it’s wanting them to do well, and being angry at them when they don’t do well, but also talking about them day to day, caring how well they’re doing.” Further, he described loyalty as fidelity despite dark feelings, “getting pissed off at them a lot, feeling negative about them, but still sticking with them.” As one fan named Steve put it, “you hang in there during the seasons that are barren, you keep plowing your field, you keep dropping your seed; you keep showing up and wearing your jersey. You hang in there and celebrate the four wins you got during a [Browns] season. That’s the true, loyal fan.”

Indeed, particularly surrounding the Browns, whose season is considerably more compact, loyalty involves watching every game, regardless of the team record or player’s
performance. As Caroline says, “I will never not watch the Browns. Even if they’re losing, I would be disgusted, and I will not turn it off. I will be mad, but I will not turn it off. The Browns, I’m going to watch them no matter—they could lose every game this year and I will watch every single one.” For her and others, a correlation exists between this kind of loyalty and being a “true” fan, since “a true fan knows the history [of both winning and losing]—but, they’re not going to turn it off, no matter what…heartbreak after heartbreak, loss after loss. I mean, we're going to say we suck. We're going to talk shit, but then we're going to turn around and still go back. And I think that's what makes Cleveland so special, you know?”

The same fan, Steve, describes his experience watching a guy in the most rabid Browns bleacher area—the “Dawg Pound”—yelling at fans already leaving with 10 minutes left in a game the Browns are obviously going to lose, saying “there’s something crazy about the guy doing that but something right as well.” I ask him to explain and he says, “Where are you going? You don’t leave. You stay to the end. You’re loyal. Loyalty bonds us. We kind of respect each other’s journey of pain and suffering and delayed gratification. You know that’s part of it. That’s what bonds you a little bit and you’re going to hug a stranger when you get the fumble recovery and when you do the fake punt at fourth and seven and you get nine and you’re going to celebrate man. But you have to suffer together first.”

Loyalty as a function of character

Some participants conceptualized “loyalty” to the teams as a function or statement of personal and collective character. Dave suggested that civic character gets strengthened through the years of losing, arguing that “it builds the character of the city, you know, when you’re constantly dealt a shit sandwich. And you just live with it and you’ve got to keep going. Try again—you always get back up and keep trying.” Caroline, who personalized the discussion by
saying that “the teams are a big part of who I am,” further said, “To me, it shows that you have character, that you have integrity— that you are loyal. That you can say you like something and whether or not the rest of the country likes them, it doesn't matter to you.” In using the terms “character,” “integrity,” and “loyal” practically synonymously, she positions loyalty to the teams as a statement of personal ethics.

Indeed, Henry made it a function of personal and collective righteousness as compared with other fan bases that regularly win when he agreed that “The teams are losers, but I think it says something about the people that are fans of those Cleveland teams. There's that dedication that we're not pussies—like, I'm not a Yankees fan. There's almost a certain satisfaction that comes from loving a team that sucks.” Tim further positioned fandom loyalty as a moral responsibility when he said

I feel like you should be a loyal fan regardless. Like you can't be rich and live in Westlake and just because the Indians are in the playoffs, you're going to go see a playoff game, but haven't been there since '99, since the last playoff game. Like why would you do that? You know what I mean? Like you have to be loyal to your team, win or lose, because as a sports fan that's your duty. You know what I mean? That's your duty as a sports fan...Win or lose, you're supposed to be there for your team and have your team's back. But it's just you have to stick with them through thick and thin. You can't, just because they're losing, doesn't mean, "Oh, they suck this year. Oh," and like, get down on them. That's still your sports team. (emphasis added)

Katie expects that if players coming to the Cleveland teams understood the Midwestern value system and the importance of “loyalty,” that perhaps “if they knew about the history of the city and its sports fans, then I think that the end result would be that they might have more integrity.” When I ask her to explain what she means by “integrity,” she says “they wouldn't pull a LeBron James.” When I remind her that LeBron James knew the history of the city and that he grew up in the same Midwestern cauldron that she did and yet he pulled a “LeBron James,” she acknowledged that truth but nevertheless continued by saying, “I think that if they
understood how deep it goes, they may think twice about some decisions they make, as far as
loyalty.” She admits in a confessional way that

I have too much loyalty. I have too much loyalty! And because, you know—you stick
with something. If you believe in something, you stick with it! And you don't let that go.
If I believe that this is going to happen and this is going to work out and there definitely
will be a positive end to it, I won't turn my back on it unless, you know, you take it away
from me. Which would mean taking the team away from me, and I would like to believe
that I would still be loyal, even then.

Loyalty as reflective of a Midwestern sensibility

Repeatedly, “loyalty” arose in the discussion surrounding the idea of “Midwestern
values,” what George called “the things that are important to people, certain core values…I think
family and loyalty are the big ones that I see.” Mike explained that team loyalty may be a
commitment to the region and a way of life as much as anything, suggesting, when I asked him
to describe a Cleveland, that she’s “One maybe who has more of an allegiance or tie to just the
basic qualities of, I guess, what this place stands for. If you are born here it seems like it—maybe
for my generation and those older than me—you felt some sort of allegiance here.”

Caroline expounded on this same idea by saying “I think Midwesterners are not worried
about what other people think about them. They're not trying to be the next big thing. They aren't
putting on a show. They're just being themselves and they're loyal, hard working, regular people.
I don't know, it's just a feeling I get, you know.” She further stated that a Cleveland’s
willingness to stand by their teams reflected a regional ethic, forged in the monotonous grind of
daily living on the North Coast. She says, “When you get down to the real world (or the world
outside the Midwest), you feel that people are fake, they're whimsical, they're wishy-washy and
they're fair-weather. And I think that the things we have here, being grounded, being true,
staying loyal, that says more about us than just football taste to me. That says a lot about your
personality as a human being.”
Katie says that Midwesterners continue to invest themselves even when the return wouldn’t seem to justify continuing on. She says that Clevelanders “care very deeply about things that...I mean as far as even sports, we haven't won anything, but we still care very much about doing it—about rooting for our teams and them winning. Even though they haven't won—we haven't had anything to show for it—we're still, it's unbelievable to me, really, that people are still going out there and rooting and care so much. They get so angry about things and we've got nothing to back us up, but we still do it.” She again acknowledges that Cleveland fans are “die hard” almost as a badge of honor in keeping with their Midwestern roots, and that “maybe that's because we don't win or we haven't won the 'big kahuna' in any of them (the three major professional sports) since I've been alive, since my parents have been alive. And we're still very gung-ho about it. Most people would stop caring or would root for other teams. We don't do that.”

Loyalty to not be labeled a “bandwagon fan”

This Midwestern steadfastness anticipates a future victory/championship, and recognizes that to merit being part of the celebration, loyalty is a prerequisite—the membership card for maintenance of legitimate Cleveland fandom. The prospect of being “fake”—of somehow violating an understood regional ethos by switching team allegiances because they’re losing then coming back later—perturbs Caroline, and she reminds me that “I”m a very loyal person. I'm very true and I also believe that one of these days, the pay off will be there and it will be so big.” This “payoff” looms large in the background for loyal Cleveland fans, since many agree with her that “personally, I could never go away from them and then when they got good, come back. Like, I just think that would be phony. I really would not have respect for people who've done that. I can't. I don't know why. It's just in my heart. Like, don't fake it. You know, pick something
and go with it.” In other words, as Henry suggested, “You can't be a fan and then when they suck ass, you know, tell them to go 'f' themselves. You need to be able to stick with them when they are 3-13 or, you know, fourteen games out of first place or whatever the story is, you know.”

Thus, this version of “loyalty” precludes ever switching allegiances to another team just because they are winning or happen to appear more presently promising. As NormB suggests, being a real fan means “supporting the team good, bad, or otherwise…not bailing and becoming a Pittsburgh Steelers fan because they win lots of games and they win championships. Or becoming an Indianapolis Colts fan when Peyton Manning was there. Or becoming a Cincinnati Reds fan because they have Joey Votto or a bunch of other upcoming stars. You stay loyal to your team and you lament their fortunes until they have another mini-run of success.”

Indeed, those who make such a switch are anathema—permanently stained and labeled turncoats under the harshest language. For example, MikeF reflects the strength of this emotion when he says “I have always found it quirky that a native Clevelander would be a Dallas Cowboy fan or a New York Yankee fan. It is almost seems unnatural, it is an unnatural act (nervous laughter), almost a sodomy. At least at that level; I am not sure what the sin would be but it would be the same category of crime or sin as sodomy for a native Clevelander to root for another team.” Less dramatically, Gary said that “It's like being a traitor or something. It's like, you know, being a spy or something. It's in that category.”

Caroline admitted that while “it [the losing] does bring you down. You do want to give up from time to time. And you really do want to say, "Fuck this shit. This fuckin' shit sucks. I'm so done with you," she just as quickly reminded me that “there's no way I could walk away from these teams. I couldn't go live with myself if I walked away and then came back when they were
doing good. I'm just not that type of person.” She self-reflectively acknowledges the irrationality of waiting for this point before enjoying another team, drawing a parallel to dating by saying, “I wouldn't wait until my relationship with my boyfriend was dead and gone. I mean, I would do something before that. But the Browns [and by implication, the other teams] have to be gone before I'm going to give up.” Thus, it is far better to ride over the falls with the teams rather than wading to dry ground with another team until Cleveland starts winning—the understood ethos simply does not allow for the “bandwagon” fan. For, as Katie says, “That's my team and I'm not going to be disloyal to them, as far as I’m not going to jump on a bandwagon. I'm not going to start rooting for New England or the Giants or, you know, people that are winning. Because to me, where is the sweetness in winning if you just root for teams that win all the time?”

*Loyalty as a reflection of devotion to the “hometown”*

Loyalty as a reflection of affinity for “home” elicited the strongest of emotions and language from participants. As ChrisB suggests, “I was born and raised here and this is where my loyalties are. I mean, when they moved the Browns, I didn't start following Baltimore. I waited for our team to come back because I knew they would,” while Gary adds that commitment to the teams makes the most rational sense, since “It’s your hometown; it’s loyalty to your friends, to your hometown.” Thus, a very clear tie exists in fans minds between the teams and the city they live in, the teams functioning as an extension of the city and—almost by necessity—the individuals inhabiting the city. ChrisB, again distancing herself from the possibility of being a “bandwagon” fan, elaborated further by concluding “I mean, sometimes you question why you're a fan…They're horrible, they're not even trying. Why do I follow them?” But, because it was born and bred in me, it's here, it's in my blood. It's what I do. I would never follow another team just because my team sucks, you know.”
While respondents disagreed as to whether it was legitimate to move from Cleveland to another city and begin rooting for that city’s teams, they were unanimous in their condemnation of the current Cleveland dweller who supports another city’s teams—especially if that fan grew up in Cleveland. As Dave told me with exasperation

The only thing that bothers me is the people that live here that root for other cities. That fucking just grinds my gears, man. It's like you're rooting against your own city, where you're from. Like that doesn't make any, it doesn't even make any sense to me. Like, „I'm a Pittsburgh fan, why, oh, because they win all the time.” OK, great. If you like Pittsburgh so much, why don't you move to Pittsburgh and be a Pittsburgher? You're from Cleveland and you're rooting against yourself. You're rooting against yourself! You're saying that we're pieces of shit! If you don't like your city, then leave the city…I don't even comprehend it.¹

Henry placed these “traitors” at the top of his despised list, saying, “What I really can't stand is when there are people that are from this city that are Steelers fans….I hate those kinds of people.” When I ask him what’s wrong with that, he says “Loyalty—there is a lack of loyalty. You live in this city. There's absolutely—and I'm sorry I'm getting upset about it—there is absolutely no reason, if you live in this city, and this is where you grew up and you are a Cleveland, you don't root for fucking Pittsburgh. What are you a Michigan fan, too? Only an asshole does something like that. I don't mean to swear on your tape, but good Lord, it's just like, I never understand people like that…That's almost like a slap in the face.”

Dorigen explains that her affinity for the Cleveland teams (as teams located in a particular locale called “home”) runs as deep as a national heritage, with perhaps similar effects. When I ask her why she’s so committed to the teams, she says, “Because it's what you grew up with. It's like it's the same thing as „I'm an American and I'm proud of it’’ type of thing. It's your home-base. It's your…It's what you've experienced your entire life, the pains, the joys…If I grew up in an Italian family and I'm eating Italian food all my life, I'm not going to switch over and be like, „No, no, no. I really think Chinese is the best.” It's my growing up. It's my heritage.” As
Henry summarized, “there is a certain amount of pride that you should take—even if it’s true that we suck—in the fact that this is my city, this is where I live, my home, and so therefore, Browns, Indians, Cavs: Let’s go!” But loyalty to “home” extends even further to include a commitment to a more generalized “place” called Cleveland.

Norm tells me about Betty, his most famous barmaid, who used to arm wrestle patrons at the bar. I ask him, “Did she ever beat anybody?” He nods his head, squeezes my own arm a little, then pulling me close says, “You could probably beat her, but then she’d breathe on you and kill you—rotten teeth,” before laughing hysterically, and I’m not sure whether it’s the image of Betty possibly beating me or breathing on me that’s got him in stitches. I turn his attention to a sculpture hanging on the wall right above our heads in the space above the cash register. A metallic-looking face with the smooth texture of a Blue Man Group performer protrudes as though pressed through the wall, its suffering facial features grotesquely contorted in a Munchian-screaming agony—eyes squeezed tight, mouth agape. Unnerving through its stark simplicity (and a strange piece to have hanging in a bar), Norm tells me he traded with an art dealer friend who had it lying around his place, but doesn’t know much about its history. (I discover it is titled “Metaphysique,” a rare 1994 piece created by Hollywood science fiction special effects designer Robert J. Marino, whose work attracts a cultish online crowd.) Norm says, “I don’t know what it’s called, but I know in the summer, that’s an Indians fan. In the fall, it becomes a Browns fan. And in the winter, it will be a Cavs fan.”

Topophilia

Every interview contained some version of the “born and raised…this is where I’m from,
so these are my teams” theme. When I ask Dorigen why it’s so important for the teams to finally win after years of losing, she says, “I think all of us consider it a part of our identity.” I ask her what she means by that, and she says “We're Browns fans. We're not Steelers fans. We're not Patriot fans. We're not Lakers fans. We're from Cleveland! We love Cleveland and we're Cleveland fans and I don't think any of us could even fathom not being a Cleveland fan…I hate people from Cleveland that say they're a Steelers fan. Really? Like, I don't get that. To me, it’s almost like you’re just doing it to be a kind of a douche. I don’t get it.” While reiterating distaste for the “bandwagon” fan and a notion of loyalty to “home,” Dorigen further describes the embracing of a significant regional identification, a self-understanding both projected and amplified through the teams—a love of “Cleveland” proper.

Zealousness (re: jealously?) for Cleveland itself—an aggregate of the land its buildings reside on, the tumultuous and colorful written and verbal history, the embodiment of all this within diverse inhabitants—gives shape to another major theme founding fans” commitment to the teams: “topophilia” or a “love of place.” Repeatedly, interviews produced data corroborating a consistent sub-theme—that Cleveland is a “place” scarred by losing, scarred by economic upheaval, scarred by any number of sociological flaws. But as Dave said explaining his support of the teams within that charred space, “I grew up here—family, friends—I mean, it’s just hometown pride in Cleveland…and those are the teams that are supposed to represent you, win or lose. It’s us against them [the rest of the world].” Dorigen explains the passion of people who live in Cleveland for both life and for the city. She says, “People are proud to be Clevelanders. Clevelanders that stay in Cleveland are proud to be here and they fight for it and they really don’t let others kind of bash them and they’re always up for making a case for the city.” George reiterates this idea and adds, “I think people take a lot of pride in what they do in this town. And
I think a lot of folk’s frustration is when they don't see things going right [whether with the city or the teams]."

*Topophilia as a function of climate and lifestyle*

I asked Tim if he’d still root for the teams here at home if there were no other Cleveland fans around, and nodding, he immediately said, “It's the way I was raised. You know what I mean? It'd be like turning my back on my parents. You know what I'm saying?” But when I poke him about the direct link to his parents and whether his fandom is really just something he received from them, he tries to get me to understand that it’s deeper and broader than his parents, having more to do with the region, the place where it all happens. “Like, it's just instilled into me here [rooting for the teams]. You know what I mean? It runs through my veins now…I think it has to do with being from Cleveland.”

For him, rooting for the Cleveland teams has become synonymous with the changing of the seasons on the North Coast, and just as natural—the climate patterns themselves wed with the teams and their seasons—though he struggled to describe the depths of the parallel to me. “It's just because in Cleveland, the weather's always changing. You know what I mean? When the weather changes, you know a sport's coming. So it's this, I don't know. It's weird. It's like that. It's just—it's normal. It's like repetitions. It's just when the weather changes, you know this [sport] is coming in Cleveland.” Perhaps more clearly, Henry picked up this same idea by saying, “You spend thirty-four years in a city, there’s an attachment, you know. The Browns and the Indians have always been a part of my summers and falls and winters. Those have been major parts of my personal life. They are like an unhealthy girlfriend that you may try to break up with, but never really goes away.”
The participants in this study describe the life-shaping challenges presented by the rugged Cleveland climate, gasping economy, and general lifestyle. As Taylor explained, the people are “hardnosed” in their commitment to Cleveland, whether from the Eastside or Westside, exemplified by their rugged willingness to corporately “power through the winters.” Though it makes people “grumpy,” nevertheless “they just continue to live in Cleveland, even though most of them could change it if they really wanted to. They like to both complain and brag, and just go with the city as the city goes.” The struggle of living in Cleveland not only forges a particular toughness in its inhabitants, it galvanizes the commitment those who stay feel toward the place—and, by extension—the teams. In discussing this reality, Caroline explains that

I just think that's another thing that makes Cleveland truly special, when I say that we're real people. We're not easily swayable—like, we're real. We're grounded. We're here. We have shitty weather. We have a shitty economy. We have a shitty team. But, I love Cleveland. And I think a lot of people do. Even though a lot of people also like to put on that they hate Cleveland. That's another thing we have in common. We pretend that we're going to leave Cleveland. But, we don't want to leave Cleveland. We love this place and the teams that play here.

She goes on to explain why in her opinion the city has a certain “soul,” saying, “I love the old buildings. I love the historic neighborhoods. I just like the feel and the look of Cleveland. And I like that it has an industrial past. I guess that gives it soul to me. It’s not just a new city. It wasn’t just born. And it’s not plastic, you know?” For her, supporting the teams equates to supporting the city and its history. ChrisB also draws a correlation between the toughness of the place and the connection to the teams. “Clevelander can have it pretty rough here. And I think they, you know, they understand it’s rough but they keep persevering. We just keep going for it. And so, you know, if you're raised here, I'd say eight or nine out of ten people, it's just like it’s in your blood [a love for the teams]. You can't help it, your passion about it. It's just there.”
George points to the symbiotic relationship that develops between a community and its teams, saying, “Any city that’s had a legacy of teams for a long time, well, I think it gets ingrained in the fiber of your community.” Following this trend of thinking, over time the teams are woven into the fabric of the land called Cleveland, and people’s passion for the team becomes a statement about their passion for the city itself—a commitment to the place that conspicuously doubles as a function of “loyalty.” He explains that this local ethos should ideally carry over to the players themselves, for being a “true Cleveland” player demands that a player “embraces the culture of the area…gets down to earth, is hard working, has a „don’t give up until it’s over attitude,“ where playing and living somewhere else might produce something different in a player.” Perhaps this expectation explains a predisposition evident throughout my discussions with interviewees for players who champion the city/“place” while they are playing and who embrace it further by living there when they retire.

*Topophilia in defense of a place perceived as irrelevant*

As it turns out, the perceived ignoring of the place by “the rest of the world” only adds to fans’ desire to support “their” teams. The teams become a site of resistance to the outside nation which overlooks or mocks the place called Cleveland. Ironically, their incessant losing, which may indeed add to the generally negative perception of Cleveland, only bonds the locals to the teams more. Caroline poignantly explained the connection when she says

To me, personally, they [the teams] definitely represent home. They represent a sense of my community. I have a lot of pride in Cleveland and I'm really sick and tired of people not giving us the props that we deserve. And even when we had LeBron James, it wasn't Cleveland—it was LeBron [that media talked about]. And I thought that was bullshit. Like on a national scale, we mean nothing, but…that just gives me more pride in our teams. You know, if they don't care about us, we don't care if they don't care about us. We're going to be here for our team anyways, you know.
Dave affirms this perception of Cleveland being ignored by the national media when he said, “Oh yeah, it’s always if the Indians are in the American League Championship game against Boston, it’s never what Cleveland’s doing good to get there, it’s what Boston’s not doing good, that’s letting Cleveland beat them. It’s never Cleveland beating them, it’s what Boston’s doing to let them beat them…It’s not what Cleveland’s doing right.” Andy adds, “Sometimes I’ll listen to a telecast, you know, and like a Cleveland team will be playing whoever. They’re gushing and talking about the other team, the franchise, the city. Cleveland’s barely mentioned. I will admit I’m kind of thin-skinned and sensitive to it.” In this sense, the teams become projections of the city writ large in sport headlines, and ignoring or overlooking the teams—especially when they are doing well—equates to a national disregard of the city as a whole.

*Topophilia in defense of a place misunderstood*

Thus, given this perpetuated “ignorance” regarding the true nature of the city (at least in the participants’ own minds), Cleveland is a place that continues to be misunderstood by outsiders. Henry reminds me that although historically Cleveland had the “stigma” of being a “steelworker type town where everybody was blue-collar,” today Clevelanders aren’t given enough credit for the development of “the restaurant scene, the art scene, things like that.” Gary says that ironically when people come into town from various media outlets, in his experience he regularly hears them say, “Oh, I had a good time,” and that people who “come here just to spend some time, get out and about in the neighborhoods, always have a good time.” He tells me about a woman from Boston he almost married who absolutely loved Cleveland, and most respondents have similar stories. This perspective represents their version of the “Cleveland now” narrative, and while they are certainly not oblivious to the dark parts of their history, they feel protective of a considerably more positive drama unfolding in their midst. Unfortunately, the teams—charged
with extending this narrative to the rest of the country through their performance—too often have contributed further to the dire perception already established.

Consequently, amidst poor media coverage in general and poor team performance specifically, these Clevelanders feel they are fighting a losing battle concerning the perception of the “place” they call home, but are still somewhat mystified as to how they continue to wallow while other less desirable places (in their opinion) thrive. For example Caroline, reflecting on the generally negative view that outsiders have of Cleveland compared to other cities, says, “I mean, like, when I was in Phoenix, I'll tell you this, Phoenix is a shit hole! It is an absolute shit hole that is on a concrete slab in the middle of a disgustingly dry and hot desert. Yet, people would shake my hand and I'd say I'm from Cleveland and they'd say, „I'm sorry.” And, I'm like, „Do you even know where Cleveland is?” „No.” „Then why do you have this in your mind?” I'm like, we have fresh water. We have a lake. We have beautiful trees. We have a lot of parks. We have nice buildings. We have a great art museum. We have history.”

When I ask her where she thinks that perception comes from, she says, “I don't know. I think it probably is the media crying over Cleveland fans and also just always cutting us down. Like, no matter what, no matter what—I just don't see the recognition of any of our teams or any of our specific players as much as they'll kiss ass about anybody else.” She looks away before coming back with more intensity, “And, another thing that pisses me off, again, because my brother and my dad will be like, „Well, no one wants to come to Cleveland.” Who the fuck wants to live in Oklahoma City? But people play there and they're in the [NBA] playoffs! OK, so I don't get it. I feel like this thing is not warranted. But, it's there.”
Topophilia and the subsequent importance of the teams

In various ways, the participants explain that a tear in the fabric of Cleveland’s identity occurred when manufacturing jobs left by the hundreds-of-thousands, increasingly so in the latter half of the last century. In essence, a signifying mark of the culture and community went with those jobs, leaving behind a vacuous crater still only partially filled today. Thus, the teams—being ingrained in the community long before the jobs started leaving—became even more important to the security of the people who remained. Caroline endorses this theory when she says, “America became the America we have because of the industrial revolution, and Cleveland was at the center of it. Without it, we are nothing. We didn’t get as strong as we are [as a nation] without it. And it all just went away. It makes me so sad. That’s another thing with Cleveland, too. They may sell our jobs and you can take away our factories. You can give it to the Chinese or the Koreans or whatever, but don’t take away my teams.”

Along these same lines, Dorigen feels that at least a portion of her fandom commitment and desire for the teams to win is economic. She says, “I really want Cleveland to do well more than anything else, and I think we have a lot of things going for us—with the arts, with the sports teams, with our food, with our cool little communities—all of that. When the teams win, because they reach such a huge mass of people, we have excitement downtown. People go down there and want to buy a jersey because we have the next ‘LeBron James’ type thing. I just think if there is excitement behind them it helps the economy and to have excitement you have to win.” Again, commitment to the teams indirectly reflects devotion to the city itself, a place longing to be received differently by the outside world, but with fans content to triage together against the world for as long as necessary.
Whatever else may be inferred, Cleveland continues as a “place” that knows hurt, and when I ask 24-year-old Tim to explain why the area seems to be so plagued by loss, he wistfully says, “I don't know. I mean, I don't really believe in curses and all that, but it's just—there's just something in that Cleveland dirt, man. You can't get your cleat out of there for some reason. I don't know what it is.”

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I sit with Gary, Pat, and Andy at the far end of the bar anticipating the start of another Indians game, filled with the hope that accompanies the fresh start of any Cleveland game. They go down by six or seven runs before we can finish half a plate of food, and with their anemic offense promising no comeback potential, another loss is almost certainly imminent. At one point early on bartender Joe comes out of the kitchen and starts clapping mockingly without even looking at the TV, talking about “Great fucking baseball team” and “Why do we watch this shit?” He’s vile in his approach, but he’s got a point, and while he’s screaming and cussing on his way to the other end of the bar, Pat motions to me and says, “write that down.” Several times between batters we lament what a lousy game it is tonight, and Andy says that “there’s nothing worse than watching bad baseball, because in football there’s at least a chance that your team can get the ball and create a drive or something—baseball just goes on and on.” Not sure I agree entirely with him: bad football and bad baseball are equally unwatchable in my opinion, but I understand what he’s trying to say, and for this evening, bad baseball is what we’ve got.

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**Durkheimian (Totemic) Projection of Self**

A persistent theme that arose regarding fans’ commitment to the teams harkened the Durkheimian notion of “totem worship.” In Emile Durkheim’s work studying totemic religion in aboriginal Australia, he observed that the totem of a particular tribe (for example, an animal, an astrological signifier or other sign, an artifact) marks that which is most sacred among them. In a much more sophisticated argument than will be presented here, he concluded that the totem also represents the tribe as an extension of itself and its ancestral heritage—in the minds of worshippers, they are virtually the same. A tribe or clan essentially respects/worships that which it aspires to be itself, which embodies its ideals and values as a people, their ancestral history gathered together in one totemic sign. Under much different circumstances, similarities arose in the interviews between fans’ attachment to the teams in Cleveland and Durkheim’s summation of the role of the totem. In this case, the teams and the players comprising the teams play at least a partially “totemic” role in the lives of highly identified fans.

For example, in multiple ways this particular group of fans expressed their anticipation that the teams should be “an extension of us.” When I asked one fan what he expected of the teams as a fan, his expression became that of a man receiving a sudden burst of awareness.

> You know, I don’t know how this happened and I don’t understand it. I’ll just say that I feel like I want to be—someone of a certain character. *The things that I like about Cleveland’s teams and players are things I want to be. Things that I want to be true of me and the things I’m a part of.* Meaning, I don’t want a lust for attention and the limelight. I want hard work, a team. And toughness. My identity in the teams are things that I want to have be true about myself” (emphasis added).

Perhaps this sheds light on Henry’s earlier proclamation that “we love what the team represents.” Indeed, applying the “totemic” principle to his fandom, the teams ideally “represent” something of himself and all other Clevelanders to the outside world, and he directly admits, “I think this is very unrealistic, but I think that there is a notion that we want our players
to somehow represent *us*, and therefore, have the same mentality as a "blue-collar worker" does."

Though he recognizes the unrealistic nature of the expectation, if for no other reason than most players are not from the area and only find their vocational life in Cleveland, he nevertheless articulates fans’ desire for the team to embody something of their own ethos.

MikeF explains his affinity with the teams by remembering, “When I was growing up, I saw people playing these sports that I could relate to. They were like, sort of like, *me*...and I feel that the professional athlete now—the few that I really feel like I've got a relationship with or really want to follow—are people that are like me. Or I think they're like me.” He then listed qualities that he values within himself: they’re not “aloof,” looking for “self-glory,” or a “paycheck.” They value “team,” “hard work,” and not doing anything to embarrass “themselves, the organization, or this part of the world.”

MikeF is hardly alone in his expectation (or at least desire) for these qualities to be present in Cleveland players. This insight becomes most apparent when I ask fans to discuss the players from each of the teams that they think best represent the team and reasons why they pick them. Allowing them to pull from any season of their life, respondents frequently brought the same players to the table—and certainly the same type of players. Without divergence across all three teams, every participant lists the same brand of player, ones whose personal and competitive style aligns with “blue-collar” qualities, as this partial list indicates: “nothing flashy,” “plays with heart and soul like us,” “no attitude,” “don’t half-ass it,” “show perseverance,” “be scrappy,” “be reliable and clutch,” “be solid,” “never give up and never quit,” “get the job done,” “flat-out hustle,” “stretch your talent,” “be down to earth,” “hard-nosed,” “hard-working,” “hard-playing,” “don’t give up until it’s over,” “be tough,” “gritty,” “roll up your sleeves,” “play over your heads,” “have some class,” “no glitz or glamour,” “bring your
lunch bucket,” “be civic minded,” “be competitive.” As Gary summarized, “People in Cleveland like the hustler in general. Blue-collar. Down to earth. Normal. No pretentions (or not many). Speaking for Cleveland, it’s just what we like. You look at a lot of the players that were famous through the years. Maybe not that well known, but you know they came to play. You know what I mean?” These fans want the players, in totemic fashion, to reflect their own competitive and lived persona, ethos, and values, and through the years have pieced together and constructed a vision of each team that corresponds to that standard. Consequently, to insult the team is virtually to insult the fans themselves.

For example, when I ask Taylor how he felt toward those who talk negatively of Cleveland and its teams, he said he took it personally. I asked him to explain further and he said, “If someone talks bad about your family, you take it personally. Like this is the city you live in…This is your area…So, if someone talks bad about your team, your team is like an extension of you. So kind of like, you want your team to be a representative of you” (italics added). He explained that he wears Cleveland logos when he travels, since “as much as they’re an extension of me out there to the rest of the country, I also want to be an extension of my city and my teams and show my support.” When I ask him to help me understand what it means that the teams are an “extension” of him, he says “you want to see them put forth the effort that you feel like you put forth every day as you’re living in the city. Sports are supposed to represent the emotion of the city and the excitement. If the sports teams are down, the city’s in a lull. When the sports teams are up, the city’s more productive. There’s a relationship there.” He elaborated even further by suggesting that when outsiders view the Cleveland teams as unmotivated or unproductive, that perhaps the people associated with them may not be either, that “if the team plays this way, maybe the rest of the city acts this way, too.”
Katie adds her own theory of team success producing civic success, with both being a projection of the people who call themselves fans, saying, “If we have that much passion about our sports teams, and those sports teams take off, in that respect, I think everything else will, too. Maybe because we identify with the teams as an extension of ourselves, maybe when that [the winning] does happen, the extension of ourselves will then flow into the government, flow into the school system, if that's the analogy that we're going to make.” She doesn’t explain exactly how that will work, but she clearly promotes the teams being an extension—quasi-ontologically?—of those who support them in Cleveland. Correspondingly, as another example of the totemic relationship and affect the losing teams have upon the fans, Henry makes a connection between losing teams, a losing city, and a losing mentality among the people. He says that because the city has struggled in the past, “We look like a bunch of poor people rooting on our shitty team. So, they almost go hand in hand. You know, we're the mistake on the lake with a bunch of classless people that live here that root on teams that don't win. That has its effect, ultimately, I think [on people]. I think there are people who, sort of, identify with that and they're happiness is based on the success or failure of that team.”

I ask participants how they feel when they hear others talking about Cleveland as a “loser,” and Tim characterizes several responses when he says, “It pisses me off, because I don’t want to be thought of that way. That’s like somebody calling me a loser. You know what I mean? It’s like somebody talking shit about your little brother or a family member.” He gets reflective before saying, “The saddest fact is that it’s almost the truth, which sucks and I don’t want to believe it. Losing all the time and being around fans from other cities that win is like being the fat girl in the bikini around super models.” When I push Tim on this response, he struggles to position himself relative to the term “loser.” He says, “It’s hard to explain. I mean,
I don’t think anybody actually *thinks* they’re a loser because the teams lose, but I understand the question. It’s just like, „Yeah, I feel like I’m a loser sometimes. Because I put my heart out there and it’s always getting broken. So yeah, I’m a loser.” Taylor says, “They’re an extension of me, so I feel that they’re calling me a loser then too…truthfully, I would probably hold a person, based on their team, based on what I know about their team and the way their team plays and probably kind of hold them at the same level as their team.” Thus, according to this logic, the character of the team becomes a reflection of the character of the city and its fans.

When I ask Dorigen why people have such emotional responses to the teams, she says, “I think because we feel that we’re a part of the team. Like it’s because it’s a part of us and I don’t know if it’s unique to Cleveland, but sports fans take everything so personally here and so when they do lose, it’s almost like „What are you doing to *us*?” So it’s that you get so angry at them because you want them to just do what you know they should do and when they don’t it’s sort of that „Why are you doing this to me?” feeling. And it becomes personal… I think all of us consider it a part of our identity. Sports and these teams are about our *lives.*” Again, she struggles to find language that captures the “totemic” dynamic that exists between the fans and the teams, but she is clear that one exists.

MikeF further explained that some fans think if the team loses, the loss becomes a reflection of their own character, that some folks “feel they’re being personally singled out, and being told that they’re less valuable” because they are so vested in the performance of the team as a projection of themselves. While at 58-years-old he says he doesn’t feel the personal intensity as acutely anymore, he recalled being in Pittsburgh’s Three Rivers Stadium many years ago for a Browns game, listening to the Cleveland broadcast feed on a transistor radio. When Cleveland announcer Gib Shanley said, "It's halftime, fans, and that is the first time the Browns
have crossed midfield all day, as they head to the locker room," MikeF reflects, “I thought that was very clever, but realized I was being called a loser, in Pittsburgh, during that game, and I was embarrassed by that.” I ask him to explain why, and he says, “I was embarrassed, in a way, to be a fan of such an inept team that couldn't cross the fifty-yard line except to get from their bench into the locker room at halftime. And for some reason I equated my own self-esteem with the fact that, man, I made a bad choice. I made a bad choice. It's not like I made a bad choice and drove drunk; I made a bad choice, and I'm rooting for a shitty team.” Thus, over the course of their lives as Clevelanders and Cleveland fans, MikeF and others grapple with having both an intense connection to the teams as a totemic projection of themselves while also attempting to maintain a healthy internal distance from them, recognizing the teams are actually business ventures that fans ultimately have little say in.

For example, Dave said, “I don’t take it personally…I don’t define my life by my sports teams. I love them and I watch them all the time, but at the end of the day, it is what it is…It’s just the playground of life.” But when I asked him how he connects with the teams, like so many others, he said, “I kind of like the fact that they’re always an underdog team and that they’re always underestimated. I always felt like I was underestimated growing up, too. And I relate to it that way.” Dave also spoke most passionately of all fifteen participants in formal interviews about those who would live in Cleveland and cheer for another team—that he took personally, and it would seem that in his mind some identification between himself, the city, and the teams exists, even if tempered.

Dorigen added, “For me, yeah it’s a part of us and it’s a part of our identity as Clevelanders, but I can’t let it ruin my week. It can ruin my night and the next day I can be really just kind of pissed about it, but am I going to go off on my co-worker because I’m pissed
off at this? No, I”m not. Somebody might, but I”m not.” NormB made it clear that whatever identification and expectation he has for the teams, they are still in an outer-circle of his life values; thus, the teams” winning or losing has no bearing on how he feels about himself, yet he still desires the teams to perform as an extension of his own value system. If they do not, at least according to his testimony, his life remains unchanged, unlike some fans who would qualify more as “fanatics.” The fanatic cannot separate herself from where she ends and the team begins, and almost every participant is careful to distance themselves from this particular type fan. Regardless of degree, in practically every conversation, participants indicated a totemic projection of themselves and the community upon the each of the teams, another layer explaining their ongoing intensity of commitment.

I have a long conversation with Sarah at the bar after she gets off work. We talk for awhile about why the teams are so important to Clevelanders, and she says, “Personally, I want the teams to win for my Dad. He”s been loyally watching them for what, 52 years? I think he deserves to see a winner.” With rising emotion, she describes for me the devotion her dad and his friends pour out toward the teams, with little payoff in return for their investment. Somehow the topic of James leaving comes up, and she describes the disgust she and others felt because of his lack of loyalty, performing exactly the opposite of her family and friends. She tells me the Cavs hardly matter anyway, since Cleveland is a Browns/football town, but everyone thought maybe James would help end the drought—until he just “gave up and quit.” I ask her why she thinks Cleveland is so committed to football compared to the other sports, and she quickly shoots back “Midwestern toughness.” Before I ask anything more, she continues, “I mean, look at the guys that are working here. They wear t-shirts. Look around this place.” She points to a single
guy wearing a nice button down dress shirt and says, “That guy probably likes baseball. But look at everyone else. Tough guys.”

Nostalgic Memory

Daniel J. O’Rourke, III, suggests that “a sports team can become a repository for a community’s hopes, dreams, and frustrations. The stories of winning and losing, of challenge, and of upsets can weave a mythic web through a people and create a community of believers known as fans.” Indeed, a powerful fourth higher order theme grounding Cleveland fans’ commitment to their teams flows from nostalgic memory—both individual and collective. Fans at The Parkview easily recall romanticized memories of the past specifically related to the teams, and those memories play a significant role in their current commitment to the teams. Even the décor at The Parkview frames a practical museum of nostalgia, constantly reminding patrons through black and white and faded color photos of moments in their fandom past and the airbrushed memories that go with them.

Nostalgia for childhood/family moments

Every participant recognizes their family and friends as instrumental in their becoming a Cleveland sports fan, and their earliest “good” memories of being a fan include those groups. Whether listening on the radio, watching on TV, or attending games in person, participants acknowledged that often friendships and family relationships were developed around the teams, creating some of their favorite fan memories. Variations on the theme of “my favorite Cleveland sports memory” included “watching with my dad, on black and white TV” or “watching Browns games with my mom who was just hootin’ and hollerin’,” “growing up with brothers who liked sports, talked about it, and collected trading cards,” appearing in almost every conversation.
As George suggests, “I think there”’s a legacy, a history there that”’s handed down through the families,”—indeed, fandom in Cleveland almost functions like an heirloom that passes through the generations. Pat goes even further in suggesting, “It”’s like somehow you pass this gene down to your kids, and so here they are living and dying with the teams again, just like we did. I feel bad they have to live this disappointment…somehow just by living it and thinking it, it rubs off on people around you…and it”’s both a curse and a blessing.” Tim says regarding his and his brother”’s Cleveland fandom, “It was just natural; we didn”’t become fans, it was like we already were fans, but didn”’t know it,” and he still carries fond memories of his early days as a young fan. Cleveland fandom functions as a natural part of childhood and thus combines with and forms nostalgic memories that indelibly bind the teams to a fan”’s personal history.

According to participants, though perhaps not recognizable until adulthood, the passing of the Cleveland fandom “gene” always traces itself back to a family/friend connection, and it always originates in childhood—in the memory of a hat/helmet, a first game, a particular friend or family member. As such, current fandom always makes its way back to the fans”’ youth; I did not talk with a single person who spoke of a conversion to Cleveland fandom—by their own testimonies they were all born into it. Consequently, longings for something of fandom-past continue to infuse the passion of fandom-present.

The passing of this “legacy” in childhood involves not only clearly identifying your teams, but also openly naming the enemy. Caroline explains that her dad would have the Browns on the radio which gave her a natural affinity for the home team, but a specific memory was perhaps even more influential in creating team-affiliated boundaries. She remembers at five-years-old having a Browns winter hat “with the poofy thing on top,” while her next door neighbor wore Steelers winter gear. At that moment, she “thought that those were the only two
teams that existed and I always knew, at that point, that I was for the Browns. That was it.”

Creating an almost tangible “us versus them” dynamic strengthens the nostalgic hold a team has upon its fan, as childhood memories become infused with a sense of righteousness and jealousy for the home teams, a passion that continues to work upon the fan to the present moment.

*Nostalgia created by specific combinatory moments*

Sometimes the memory simply recalls the general presence of friends and family around games, at others it gets tied to a particular occurrence whose combined affects shape the recollection. For example, Dave remembers being at a Browns game with his dad as a young boy, when “this guy tried to pass us a joint, and you know, my Dad declined it and I was like, „What the hell?” It was one of my first experiences at a Browns game with my Dad, and that was cool. And I remember it was snowing and it was surreal.” The stadium, his father, the snow, the passer and the joint itself, all relatively peripheral to the game, collectively collude to form a nostalgic “sense” that brings the moment to life even twenty-five years later, helping bind Dave to the team that provided the experience in the first place.

ChrisB remembers frequently going to Indians games with her mom (since her mom would buy “20-packs,” partial season ticket packages) and sitting on the first base line to cheer for Boog Powell, a popular Indians first baseman during the 1975-1976 seasons, distant moments that have “ingrained so many good memories.” Indeed, she says being a sports fan has always “just been about the relationships and building and expanding on that,” making special moments between friends and family, just like when she was a young girl. In this case, her mom, a particular Indians player, and a location at the stadium combine to once again create a “sense,” one that she tries to pass along to her children today.
Interestingly, MikeF, who admits that his fandom passion has waned in the past two decades given the immense heartbreak levied by each of the teams, acknowledges that “I sort of regret not having the passion and the devotion now that I did back then because I know that I didn’t instill that in my children and that’s one of the regrets I have.” When I ask him to explain the strong word “regret,” he says that although he stopped going to games during his kids’ youth, now he and his adult children have a great time watching games, and he realizes that he missed out on creating memories with them in specific settings at games when they were younger the way he did with his siblings—and he can never get that back.

_Nostalgia for “sacred” moments with other Cleveland fans_

Beyond the joy of bonding with family and friends and the sweetness of particular combinations of circumstances at an event, some moments were so intense as to become set apart from ordinary participation—indeed, they became “sacred” occurrences specially shelved in the memory. Sacredness takes shape around particular game circumstances with specific groups of people, encompassing either victory or loss—and sometimes both.

For example, JohnP vividly recalls a game from the 1997 baseball playoffs, saying, “I remember when we were playing the Yankees. Again, I think it was the year we went to the World Series when we hit a home run against them to win. And, here's the other thing, the bad side about it—it's the same night that my wife died. So, it was a little bittersweet, there, right there. That's always going to be a sacred type of thing for me—both ways.”

ChrisB remembers being at “a game on July 18, 1995, against Chicago, bottom of the ninth, bases loaded, two outs, full count, and Albert Belle hits a grand slam. Win the game. That was so awesome! It was with my ex-husband on our anniversary.” On the other end of the win/loss spectrum, Henry remembers watching the Indians lose Game 7 of the 1997 World
Series, recalling that “I was home and I was with my girlfriend and we were watching the game. And in that moment I could remember thinking of my mom just literally screaming at the TV during the Byner fumble many years before, as if the TV was a person, and now me doing something very, very similar. I don’t remember if I was physically throwing things, but it was a physical reaction and I’m up and yelling and screaming at the TV myself, very upset, very disgusted.”

In almost every case, the moments called “sacred” happened in a crowd of Cleveland fans (perhaps more accurately, as a result of the crowd), where a perfect storm of circumstances produce a “collective effervescence” that cannot be manufactured on demand. The longing for this excitement gets described repeatedly among these fans. Being with one another as a crowd—whether in the stadiums, tail-gaiting outside, or watching in a bar or home—not only comprises a significant part of their fandom commitment, but also contributes to the “sacredness” of particular moments that stand out to individual fans. As Katie explained generally regarding the moments that have meant the most to her and that she longs to experience again, “It could be at a game that means absolutely nothing, but let’s say they hit a walk off homerun, you know. And everybody is going crazy, even though the game meant nothing…but there’s still this sacredness to the emotion of it, experienced collectively.”

Caroline vividly remembers the scene created by the Cavs winning a playoff game that put them in the NBA Championship for the first time in 2007. She describes it as a “sacred” moment that became “one of the best moments of my life” because of the environment created by the crowd.

I was on West 25th. I was at the bar, it was called The Garage. We were outside watching it and everyone was watching it. And they won that game and we knew we were going to the championship and West 25th literally became a parade! I mean, people were driving five miles an hour. There were people sitting on their cars. We were high-fiving and
screaming for two hours straight, just on the corner. Like, I couldn't believe it. Everyone is friends—Black, White, Puerto Rican—we don't care who you are, right now you're my best friend because Cleveland just went to the championship. No matter that we lost, that was probably one of the best memories of my life was being there that day. It was awesome. I mean, it was insane! It really was.

Dorigen tells me of her attendance at a Cavs playoff game, recalling the volume, the intensity, the surreal feeling of being part of the crowd. I ask her to describe the internal feeling that makes it “sacred” for her, and she says, “It's happiness, because everybody's so happy! It's just that you can feel it! There's almost a feeling of perfect contentment because nothing else matters at that point….It’s ecstasy because in your heart you just feel light and just tingly and it's just, it's a great feeling. I mean, I'm smiling about it now just thinking about it, because it was amazing. And that was with my ex-husband, and I can't stand that guy, but that moment was great.” Taylor says he experiences this same emotion when tailgating at Browns games because “the energy is always just a little bit higher, there’s camaraderie with everyone, and an interaction between everyone in the whole city. I hold that energy as something sacred when I experience it.”

Andy describes the affectively “sacred” dimension of preparing for and watching Browns games not with the mass crowd, but instead with family and friends, recalling a random collection of games that had the same effect in his life. He says

It was always with my buddies, maybe with family, maybe cousins, uncles, father, mother—it was always like a group setting that included family and friends. And it was special. You know, it’s like you got there early, and everyone’s together, you know…just thinking about it I almost get chills now. I remember going cross country skiing in the morning then lighting a little fire together—it was all part of the ritual. And then I’m thinking about some of the games that they won, that were really dramatic and exciting games…Although we all remember the heartaches, I’m thinking about the wins because those are the games where the feeling and the camaraderie just kind of made it really special….There's something really unique, win or lose, you know, that becomes a part of you.
Nostalgia inspired by team logos

Other than Andy and George, every participant talks of wearing team gear—shirts, hats, sweatshirts—boasting the Browns, Indians, and Cavs logos. Most of the participants are wearing team logos when I interview them, and the logos represent not only alignment with the team currently but also hail moments and players from the past, in line with A.P. Cohen who argues that “in our everyday discourse, the past, itself symbolic, is recalled to us symbolically.”

I ask the participants to play word association when I show them a picture of each team’s logo, one at a time. Again, in almost every instance, the words uttered reflect something of a past memory, visual connections with an emblem that stores nostalgia-tinged recollections and sensations. In some cases, the logo causes them to think of certain players who contain a particular ethos within their style of play, perhaps even hailing a certain team era: Austin Carr, Bingo Smith, Mark Price for the Cavs; Rocky Colavito, Jim Thome, Charles Nagy for the Indians; Jim Brown, Bernie Kosar, Josh Cribbs for the Browns. All are players who embodied a blue-collar ethos, all proclaimed a love for Cleveland and several made Cleveland their home or continued to work with the team after retirement. But the logo almost always hails a word pointing to the past; only the most recent Cavs logo caused people to respond with words like “anger” in relation to the 2010 James situation.

For example, showing the Indians “Chief Wahoo” logo produces words like “first cigar,” “going to the old stadium,” “family,” “friends,” “Bat Day,” “being a kid,” “good memories from childhood,” “old uniforms,” “channel 43 (the old TV broadcast),” “father figure,” and “history.” The Browns orange helmet logo prompted words like “autumn,” “truth,” “honesty,” great tradition,” “fond memories,” “heartbreak,” “snow,” and “disappointment.” The Cavs, who have changed their logo at least four times since their inception in 1970, drew the most tepid
responses, but still pulled forth words like “Miracle of Richfield,” “history,” “fun as a teenager,” “excitement,” “heartbreak,” “sadness.” The emotive words are obviously wed with specific moments in the past; thus, with thousands of people walking around Cleveland wearing logos of the teams, Clevelanders are constantly (if unconsciously) being tingled by their sports history, igniting nostalgic yearnings for sport moments in the distant past.

Manager Mike and I talk about going to the Indians game since he had just been there on Thursday with vendor’s tickets. At one point, I ask him if I can do interviews upstairs and he says, “It’s not nice but you can look at it.” After awhile we go up there and look around. Steep, cluttered stairs open into an even more chaotic room, the first of several along the hallway. The rooms are piled with boxes and newspapers and old computer equipment and who knows what else. The first room has a desk and we talk about me doing interviews there. Then Mike takes me further into other rooms and starts showing me all the memorabilia he’s collected over the years. A box with a dozen autographed balls: Kenny Lofton, Lou Boudreau, Bob Feller, plus other Cleveland and non-Cleveland legends; pictures of the 1995 Indians; a complete original copy of the Plain Dealer the day after the 1964 Browns championship; C.C. Sabathia bobblehead dolls; poster-sized schedules for teams from a two decades ago; various team promotional items circulated through vendors; game programs—it goes on and on. All of it just kind of thrown up there, with the walls covered in pictures and posters and various sports kitsch. I tell him he’s sitting on a goldmine of stuff, and he says, “Yeah, I need to do something with all of it, I just don’t have time to mess with it all. I don’t give a shit about it.” It’s virtually a museum of Cleveland sports hopes and history, a time-capsule lying dusty just a floor above real-time life below, scattered within the maze formed by storage boxes of Jack Daniels and Kentucky
bourbon, perhaps an appropriate tomb for the dark memories of loss and fleeting moments of victory they embody.

Symbiosis of Suffering/Hope

A final higher order theme that enhances commitment to the teams is a symbiosis of suffering and hope—a suffering that begs for resolution tied to a hope promising to absolve it. Repeatedly participants referred to the “we came so close only to have it fall apart” nature of their team’s championship runs, and articulated a need to have closure brought through just one championship by any of the three teams. As an example, ChrisB describes Cleveland fans as “longsuffering,” and when I ask her to explain this word she laughs and says, “Can we ever catch a break? I mean really. It’s just always heartbreak after heartbreak. We just can’t get it done. Great things happen but we just can’t get it done.” But she also says that “no matter what, we’re going to be there. We believe in them and heartbreak after heartbreak or great win after great win we’re there to see what might happen next.”

Thus, part of the fan’s commitment to the teams involves a need to see it through—they’ve lost for so long and hurt for so long that the thought of turning their back before getting to “the promised land” pains them even more. After talking about the intensity of the hope that exists among Clevelanders, Katie says, “I've noticed a lot of people that, you know, year in and year out, they'll be like, „I can't take it anymore. I can't take it anymore.” But they're right back at it the next season. And there is just too much pride to say I can't do it anymore, because, when it does happen—and I say when—it will be that much sweeter for us.” Or, as Andy added, what characterizes the Cleveland fan above all else is “hope,” saying, “You know, we all have that hope coupled with belief that it is all going to come around and there’s great
anticipation for when it does, you know, we’re going to be there—we’re going to be a part of it.”
In almost circular fashion, the emotional suffering produces hope that things will change, and
hoping for a change that never arrives produces more suffering. In all this, the commitment (and
exasperation) toward the teams intensifies.

Katie described for me her feelings on the night before this year’s Browns opener saying,
“I’ll be up tomorrow at 6:30am going downtown with probably a guarantee of a probably 4-12
season, but I don’t care.” When I ask her why, she says, “There’s just this certain amount of
hope and there’s a certain amount of pride that, we know that if there is a glorious end, it will
just be amazing to be a part of it. So, we just keep going at it and going at it and I’ll go at it until
the day I die.” Katie refers to the thrill of the actual game accompanied by the pain experienced
around losing as an “addiction,” saying, “It’s an addiction in a way that you keep going back to
the drug even though you’re not getting a result. You wake up with a hangover, but you still
keep drinking the next day, you know? There is a huge hangover with Cleveland sports—
HUGE! But we keep drinking it in. It’s not an addiction where you say, „Oh, this feels really,
really good.” I’m referring to the pain that comes with an addiction, but you still keep doing it.”

Henry describes an “emotional attachment” that forms with the teams in spite of (or
perhaps because of) all the losing, and calls the desire for a championship almost “a physical
need.” Winning, in his opinion, will bring resolution for the seemingly futile investment made
through the years, suggesting that a championship will bring “validation” to their commitment.
He says, “You put all that effort in, you need to get some sort of fulfillment out of it,” and that
perhaps winning will help dissipate “the black cloud that just sits over this city no matter what
we do.” Andy suggests that “Cleveland fans are becoming almost obsessed—the need to have a
champion is like a bubble. It’s almost like a pimple, you know, that needs to pop. It’s like the
longer it goes, the anxiety level you can almost feel increase, and people try to draw themselves away but they don’t want to go too far because they want to be there when it happens.”

The persistence of hope in the midst of such longsuffering leads George to suggest that Cleveland fans are all a bit “neurotic,” and he reviews the close calls that all three teams experienced over the decades. He says the fans are going crazy because “they’ve had that carrot dangled so close so many times and never get to grab it, never get to taste it. I think the lack of reaching that pinnacle has just built over the years and it’s now, you know, it’s the five-hundred pound gorilla in the room. Whenever things go well people are always waiting for the other shoe to drop.” Nevertheless, MikeF says in spite of the shared experience of frustration, “for some reason, we keep hoping…you’ve got to have hope to live. Tomorrow’s going to be a better day,” and it’s the prospect of a “better day” that keeps Cleveland fans coming back.

Efforts to justify such commitment in the face of suffering often became philosophical. ChrisB, waxing axiomatically, says “Bad things happen. Life sucks and then you die. In sports, the season’s over, then there’s next year. It’s just ultimately a game. But we believe next year is going to be the year (or two years).” Indeed, as Tim says, “I know one day that we’ll eventually win. It’s mathematically statistical that there’s going to be a day where we’re going to have a winner. The odds are in our favor now, but it just, I don’t know,” before shaking his head and trailing off.

Katie concludes that although the persistent hope seems baffling, she believes it bonds the city together, collectively pointing toward a day of redemption.

I don't know why [we still hope]. It really doesn't make any sense...How can, collectively, one city have that much loyalty? Maybe we're all sitting in the same spot. And maybe it's, you know, getting so close sometimes and losing and thinking, ,Oh, well, then maybe we'll go the next step, next time.” But, it never happens like that. I don't know. It's a giant carrot dangling. We're still trying to grab it. I don't know. It doesn't make sense to me, but it will be unbelievable when it happens.
Surrounded by the post-work crowd on a Friday night, with the Indians game blaring above our heads, Andy and I begin talking about the three teams and their significance to the community. Without hesitation he says, “The Browns are kind of the soul of the community. Football is a very passionate game, fought in the trenches, and the Browns are to me, kinda the soul of what Cleveland is. I think it’s a football town because of the blue-collar mindset and because of the fact that football originated from this part of the country. Cleveland was always right there, you know. Paul Brown and the Cleveland Browns being such a formidable team in those days. The Browns are really the soul of the city.” By now I’ve heard that same language used multiple times by other Parkview patrons, but I’m curious to hear what he’ll do with the other two teams.

“And what do the Cavs mean?”

He says, “The Cavs are our flash, you know? The Cavs are our glamour, like everything associated with the NBA which is a little bit more of a high-flying sport that markets player superstars. So they bring “flash” into the city.”

“OK. How about the Indians?”

As though he’s thought about this question and its answer a hundred times, he finishes by saying, “Well, if we’re going with flash and soul, maybe the Indians are the heart. Because they’re there—182 games out of the year they’re gonna be there. Beginning in February with spring training, through the fall when football picks up. You know, it’s the heartbeat of the city. It’s there. You need it to kinda keep the city going. It’s consistent. Throughout the summer—the dog days of summer—they’re gonna be there. It’s the pulse, the heartbeat of the city, you know, because it’s there and you need it to be there to keep the city alive.”
Andy, a professor at Cuyahoga Community College, shows not a hint of hyperbole in measuring the teams with dramatic words like “soul,” “flash,” and “heartbeat,” and everyone I ask quickly follows suit. Barely ironic given its hegemony, the team charged with keeping the city “alive” is losing once again on this August evening, a metronomic excuse to drown another night in food and drink and whatever blues get offered up by the juke box.

Integrating Foci

Integrating foci, defined in this case as those nodes of understanding or experience that become the centralizing focus of individuals among a particular group of people, revealed five higher order themes that fans both share and gather around—consciously and unconsciously—including an understanding of the teams as “symbolic capital,” a blue-collar sensibility, a common history, an identifiable enemy, and a particular character developed through loss.

Shared Sense of the Teams as “Symbolic Capital”

Cleveland fans view their teams as a form of national “symbolic capital”; that is, having major league teams equates to being a major league city (even if those teams consistently lose), and contributes to a perception of being a “major player” on the national scene. In spite of the negativity perpetuated by losing, JohnP says, “I love living in a town that has major league sports. I can’t imagine living in some place that doesn’t have baseball, basketball, football.” Andy reminds me that although Cleveland has been losing population for years, yet “we have three major franchises and we’re considered a major league city, you know? So clearly the teams help to kind of, you know, shape us, define us, and are a big part of us. It’s a year-round thing, you know, and it’s important”—both for those living within the city, and presumably among this group of fans, for those watching Cleveland from outside. An unnamed fan focused
the potential connection between having teams and their function as symbolic capital by saying, “I think people will elevate their view of a city's stature, even if marginally, based on how their pro sports teams do. They might even determine that it's a viable place to live and raise a family, as crazy as that is. I myself think if teams have success it's a better place to live. It's a more credible place. There's something going for that city.”

Considering the macro socio-economic problems that exist, not everyone believes that outsiders will necessarily view Cleveland as a great place if its professional sports teams win; nevertheless, most participants suggested that having winning teams would be beneficial toward restoring the reputation of the city and creating positive vibes nationally. Arguably, people see their own culture from the supposed vantage point at which they imagine others to view it, and the Cleveland fans in this study almost unanimously agreed that outsiders in general viewed Cleveland negatively as a region, with its teams regularly contributing to the negative perception because of their incessant losing. Tim summarized a majority of comments when he said, “I think Cleveland is just viewed as like a piss-on city. I think that’s what it is. I mean, that’s how most other cities view us. And we hate that.”

They perceive that among national media, as Andy says, whenever “Cleveland comes up, you know, they kind of laugh—they kind of make a little snide remark. And that bothers me. I’m sensitive to it as a Clevelander.” Symbolic capital associated with a locale can work both for and against a particular community. By its very definition it “symbolizes” an assessment based on a particular matter of history, a material reality, or a random perception derived through any number of other means. Andy argues that the various economic displacements that occurred in the twentieth century hit Cleveland as hard as anywhere in the country, and the “loss” represented by these upheavals, while certainly more important on many levels than what
happens with the sport teams, nevertheless “kind of correlates with the teams” and the way outsiders view Cleveland. In discussing the role of the teams on both the Cleveland psyche and national perception, he says

For a long, long time Cleveland has gone without having a winner. And I think it’s almost wearing on the city. It’s becoming like a badge that you don’t wanna be wearing…I think that people have developed their own insecurities from viewing ourselves as the laughing stock. Cleveland fans think we’re viewed on the outside as losers and people don’t like that. People are looking for anything to turn that around and feel good, not only about themselves, but the city and the perception about the city.

Caroline believes the teams” winning has become a civic pride issue because “people have just talked so much shit for so long or just completely ignored us” and winning would both restore and enhance pride in the city for those who live there (though she also acknowledges that just because the teams start winning people won’t necessarily say, “Hey, I would love to take my next weekend off and fly to Cleveland.”) Nevertheless, as Katie expects, the teams winning would help set the “hate on Cleveland, hate on Cleveland, hate on Cleveland” bandwagon on fire, perhaps snuffing out the constantly circulated reputation that “nobody wants to come to Cleveland.”

Thus, for some, the symbolic importance of winning primarily affects how Clevelanders feel about themselves, while others emphasize the potential change in outsiders” view of the city. For example, Dorigen suggests that winning “makes Cleveland people happier and it’s good for the overall morale of the city. People are nicer.” Andy becomes almost mournful when he says, “I was in Pittsburgh the other day, and I”m looking around and I”m thinking how great it must be to be a Pittsburgh fan…you just imagine on Sunday morning, everyone must be really happy in the neighborhoods, you know? People are probably happy.” Others describe the “good feelings” that they experience the day after wins, mostly for the Browns but certainly with all three teams, and the lousy feelings that accompany Cleveland losses. Thus, they perceive that winning
produces a positive “happiness” vibe among locals which necessarily bolsters the internal image of the city.

Others articulated that the losing reputation of a city changes among outsiders nationally when its teams win, given the swelling popularity and ubiquitous publicity of professional sports, like Andy who suggests that “people look at a city and they do relate a city with its teams, saying, „You’re a winning city because you’ve got winning teams vs. losing teams,“ so the success of a sports team carries the perception of the city.” After pining over the perceived rubble of Cleveland’s reputation nationally, he passionately says, “I hate it and I think that’s part of what drives my want and need to see a winner is to shut that up…you just want to say „Shut the fuck up,” you know?” He cites the positive vibe that surrounded the media throughout the 1990s when the Indians contended for six straight years, as well as the obvious lift having LeBron James gave the area, when “people viewed Cleveland a little bit differently.” Taylor amplifies this notion by telling me that “I think when they (non-Clevelanders) see any of the Cleveland teams play a good game, play hard, and do it with class, I think people look at the city and the rest of its fans like, „Alright. You guys played a good game. Cool. Your city is doing well. Cool.‘”

Indeed, the reigning thinking among the participants—“if the teams win, then the city wins”—manifests itself in multiple other ways. Winning enhances symbolic capital by creating cognitive dissonance in the minds of those nationally who continue to use Cleveland as fodder for jokes. Henry says, “winning is everything because we have this reputation for being „the mistake on the lake,” and I love this city and hate that it has that negative reputation, and that on sitcoms whenever they use a city to poke fun, we’re always one of the first ones.”
participants believe that having losing teams only perpetuates the propensity to make fun of Cleveland, and that winning could redirect the punch lines toward a different city.

Winning enhances symbolic capital by creating what ChrisB calls “bragging rights.” When I ask her to explain, she says, “Yeah, you know, we could finally say to the Steelers, ‘Kiss my ass. We finally got one, too,’” you know?” Dorigen also mentions the Steelers, saying she feels “jealous” of how much they’ve won, saying, “My thing is we’re supposed to be rivals, right? But we’re not really competitors. I long for the day that we’re at that level to be a contender.” In these terms, winning teams allows one to look a rival in the eye as equals, and not merely as a tolerated neighbor.

Winning enhances symbolic capital by transforming itself into the most commonly understood form of capital—cash. Dorigen directly links team “success” to economic expansion in the city and wherever they play around the country. She says, “I know that the better they do, more people are going to come out, and more people are going to spend money. The more coverage we have nationally, the more we’ll get carried on better networks,” a reality that also brings higher investment, and she contends if the city got more national clout from its three major teams, it would certainly benefit the city and enhance the city’s reputation nationally. For Dorigen, if the teams field winners, she believes people outside Cleveland will enjoy having the Cleveland teams in their own stadiums more, and in turn they [opposing teams and fans] will enjoy coming to Cleveland to play, in both cases expanding economic reach. Winning produces respect—and money—not just for the teams themselves, but for the community from which they come and the stadiums around the country where they play. Henry summarizes Dorigen’s concern for economic expansion by saying, “Winning equals relevancy because you matter. Winning equals money. It equals financial opportunities that we wouldn’t have otherwise.”
However, ChrisB downplayed the role the teams have on others’ perception of the city, saying that although the teams winning could possibly earn some respect in people’s minds and that some would say, “Oh, ok, maybe they’re coming around and they might be a force to be reckoned with,” in general “the teams don’t define our city—the city defines the city.” Dave went further with this idea and said that no matter what the Cleveland teams do, media from the East coast will “always think Cleveland’s a little hick town and nothing is going to make it change.” He points to the success Pittsburgh experiences through its teams, and yet the media “still think Pittsburgh is a piece of shit town.” In other words, as George contends, “you can’t fix the infrastructural problems within the city by winning football games,” so even though winning may alter national perception somewhat, nevertheless the problems remain. Indeed, for George “the only thing you can know about a team or city when you’re watching on TV is what their stadium looks like,” and that shouldn’t effect perception of the city much. But the participants unanimously agree that Cleveland teams winning is a good thing for the area, and they all congregate in various ways (and to varying degrees) around the teams as a form of symbolic capital.

I talk with an older, leathery, short-statured man wearing a baseball hat pulled low who sits next to me watching golf. Says he works at Spring Valley Country Club, at one time a beautiful and well-known small club in my home town that has fallen apart in recent years, and says that the owner plans on putting some “foreign money” into it. I ask him what he does there, and he tells me, “I’m the guy everybody hates…I move the pin-holes.” He chuckles after that and I can tell he’s actually quite proud to be “that guy” and he keeps making insider comments in golf lingo as we watch the TV. Without prompting, he tells me “one day the boss wanted me
to put the pins in a difficult spot for a tournament," how “the pins are supposed to be eight feet inside the perimeter, two feet on or off a ridge,” but he’s talking more to himself than he is me and I can’t hear the rest of it. He speaks a little louder and says that later on the day of the tournament he hears a guy inside the pro shop say, “Who’s the dumbass that put the holes by all the divots?” and again, he is proud to have been the guy that takes his work seriously, because he knows if the holes are by the divots, players will fix the ball marks, preserving the greens. He flashes me a fulfilled, knowing grin as he looks away from me and takes another swig of his beer.

Randomly someone mentions the Browns further down the bar and he fires at me without invitation, “When they moved I took every bit of Browns shit I had and threw it in the trash: hats, sweatshirts, caps, shirts, everything. I had tons of shit. Where do I collect the two million dollar bounty on his [Modell’s] head? I guarantee you I could hit him. That was it…broke my heart.” Turning back to his beer, he mumbles something about how he acquired his sharp-shooting capabilities and I ask him why he doesn’t watch the new Browns. He slowly, disgustedly shakes his head and doesn’t say another word.

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Shared Blue-collar Sensibility

Lawrence Grossberg calls “the particular relationship that holds any context together, that binds cultural forms and audiences, a „sensibility.”” He explains that “a sensibility is a particular form of engagement or mode of operation” that “identifies the specific sorts of effects that the elements within a context can produce; it defines the possible relationships between texts and audiences located within its spaces.” Thus, “a sensibility of a particular cultural context (an „apparatus”) defines how specific texts and practices can be taken up and experienced, how they are able to effect the audience’s place in the world, and what sort of texts can be incorporated
into the apparatus.” Correspondingly, “different apparatuses produce and foreground different sensibilities.”

The “sensibility” fashioned by the comingling of this particular audience (Cleveland fans), text (Cleveland teams), and cultural context/apparatus (Cleveland city), reflects a consistently pronounced and practically saturating ethos called “blue-collar.” Second perhaps only to “loyalty,” no other theme arises or gets referenced as frequently in these interviews as “blue-collar.” As Andy explains to me referencing the blue-collar backdrop of Clevelander’s point of view, “there is a culture of certain values and traditions and things that are done within the Cleveland community and northeast Ohio which is different from other cities…Cleveland has those Midwestern values of just being regular people—what you see is what you get and (as a result) there is also a sports culture here that is unique.” George builds on this notion by suggesting that “after you get away from all the fluff and all the hype…there are certain core values that everyone sort of lives by around here. I think Cleveland is down to earth in that respect.” Indeed, based on the interviews, the vibe around the “sports culture” in Cleveland is indistinguishable from the surrounding culture of Northeast Ohio, an area with a “blue-collar” sensibility and expectation for life.

*What does a “blue-collar sensibility” mean in this context?*

Because blue-collar gets mentioned so often, I find myself regularly asking for a working definition of the term. Caroline summarizes for others by saying that “most people in this city do not work at corporate America jobs. They’re not in a bank. Even though we’ve lost a lot of our industrial factories, I still think most people, especially in this neighborhood, they’re like brick layers or house builders or they work in a factory or they drive a truck or whatever.” Or as Henry defines the mythology surrounding the typical blue-collar employee, it’s someone
“working at LTV Steel or working at the Ford plant, Joe Blow making a good buck who works hard all day until it’s time to drink come Sunday [during Browns game].” While nobody I talk with has exact demographic statistics, and recognizing that such all-encompassing generalizations about civic-centers quickly become blurry in light of actual data, nevertheless those I talk with assume that Cleveland still tilts toward the blue-collar job market—perhaps more accurately (and importantly), they all assume a blue-collar “sensibility” pervades the ethos of the city.

Therefore, whenever someone mentions “blue-collar,” I ask them to further explain what they mean by the term, and the socio-economic vocational assumption quickly gets weighed down by a host of broader value-laden terms. Variously, I hear words like “down to earth,” “real Americans,” “live with heart and soul,” “real people,” “no pretenses,” “just being themselves,” “regular people,” “solid,” “gritty,” “centered.” Thus, blue-collar means far more than just “works the night shift at a factory”; indeed, for these participants blue-collar encompasses a history, a way of being—an attitude toward life itself. MikeF says the type of person Cleveland promotes is

a person that is not going to be beating his own drum, someone that just tries to be a good person, gives the benefit of the doubt to others, and is hard working, not snooty or elitist, one-for-all, all-for-one sort of a musketeer attitude. I would hope it would not be a discriminatory person, does not expect handouts but, is yet willing to provide for those that are needier than himself. That seems more of a spiritual description. One maybe who has more of an allegiance or tie to just the basic qualities of, I guess, what this place stands for.

Within Cleveland for this slice of fans, then, the notion of “blue-collar” quickly becomes a function of virtue, a reflection of one’s adherence to the proper genetic code of the Western Reserve.

NormB expounds on the connection between “Cleveland” and “blue-collar” by calling
Clevelanders the “backbone of America.” Like others, he emphasizes Cleveland’s role in the origins of the industrial revolution as it took place in this country, and he extols the attributes of those who embraced working-class values both then and now. He further praises Clevelanders as “the salt of the earth, hardworking, straight-dealing. They don’t either take a lot of bullshit, put up with a lot of bullshit, or give a lot of bullshit. Straight-forward.” Not only is Cleveland a “hard working, blue-collar town,” but “if you live in Cleveland you better be a little bit thick-skinned—can’t be thin-skinned. You’ve got to be tough.” But in spite of the toughness (or perhaps because of it), NormB says Clevelanders are “a bunch of good, warm hearted, blue-collar people.” Most importantly for this study, this generalized ethos among participants easily extends into and through their fandom toward the teams themselves.

The blue-collar sensibility/ethic affects the way fans attend games

For example, Andy says, “I think Cleveland fans have those blue-collar, Midwestern values of just being regular people—what you see is what you get. You know, you go to a game like on Wednesday, and people weren’t all dressed up just to watch a baseball game. People are what they are—nobody’s trying to impress anybody.” When I ask Dorigen to explain the difference between Cleveland fans and fans in other cities, she says, “I think we’re grittier. When we go to a Cavs game, it’s not about getting all dressed up and going. It’s about putting on your favorite jeans and t-shirt and going down and pre-gaming the best sports bar or whatever. We’re not going there to make a scene.” From this vantage point, the games cannot be seen as a venue for self-promotion or to draw attention to oneself. The event is about the competition itself or the collectivity of fans—but “it’s not about you.” Katie acknowledges an almost “workforce-like” atmosphere that happens among the gathered fans, saying, “There’s something about the camaraderie with everybody being in the same boat as you, doing the same
things as you. And I feel like that’s why a lot of times I go. I like to go somewhere to watch a game or go to the stadium or go tailgating because all these people are in the same exact position that you are and there’s a certain connection there and that feels good to me.”

_The blue-collar sensibility/ethic affects the type of players fans support_

Andy says, “We don’t want to see flashy players. We don’t like Terrell Owens diva kind of players. I don’t think we relate to those kind of players. We want to see hardworking players, physical players, who are also playing smart.” Bernie Kosar, a Browns quarterback who led the team to multiple playoff appearances in the 1980s and who grew up near Youngstown, gets mentioned more than any other player as representative of the Cleveland vibe that fans appreciate. Katie says, “he wasn’t the prettiest player, but he provided that „work hard” thing…he wasn’t that great, but he worked hard and produced for us.” He perfectly reflected what she called “the down-home guy,” the player who disparages “glitz and glamour,” but is successful simply because he works hard and never gives in to circumstances.

MikeF recalls the old Browns teams of the 1950s and 1960s, teams “that came to work with a lunch bucket or briefcase, were organized, efficient, not flashy—they just went out there and got the job done. Nobody was looking for individual accolades or looking to move on to greener pastures.” These statements regarding the favorite players on past and present Cleveland teams manifested themselves throughout every interview: “he’s a class-A person that played his heart out,” “he did what he could for the team,” “he gave it his all and was a class player,” “he puts his heart and soul into it, you know,” “he lived in Cleveland, he liked Cleveland, he stayed here in the off-season and married a nice girl from here.”
The blue-collar sensibility/ethic affects what fans expect from the players on the field of play

The players should value the team over the individual—“there’s no ‘I’ in team; it’s not about me, it’s about us”—and as JohnP reminds me, Cleveland players should be “hard working, gritty, roll up their sleeves type of people. We may not have the best, but we will play up to our potential and over our heads a little bit.” Indeed, Katie says it’s not the talent level that becomes a barometer for success in this city, but rather effort, saying, “For me, I want the same intensity that I provide you when I root for you. I'm very intense...I give a shit. All I want is intensity from the players. All I want is 110%, because I root for you 110%. So, that's what I want.” Similarly, Taylor agrees that he wants the team to reflect the working class intensity of Cleveland since he feels that “a lot of Clevelanders put in 110%. They're working hard to help the city bounce back and so they're giving a 110%. So they want to see their team give 110%...they want to see their own work effort and ethic also in their teams.” With true Cleveland intensity, Dorigen says without exaggeration, “we expect them to run themselves into the ground. We expect them to be determined to win. We expect them to fight!”

Dave is more specific about what he wants to see from Cleveland players, suggesting it should be expected for players “to frickin’ run out a ground ball. To not gator-arm a fucking pass across the middle. To give it your all—not to fucking half-ass it. Not to showboat—don’t fucking do a dance just because you scored a touchdown.” Tim summarizes the blue-collar approach to the game that every participant said they expected from their players.

When we're down 17-3 in the fourth quarter, don't half-ass it. I'm not paying a hundred dollars for my ticket for you to half-ass. You know what I mean? I feel like that's how every Cleveland fan feels. You just you can't half-ass it. Go out there and give a hundred and ten percent. Leave it all on the field. Leave everything on the field! When you're taking your pads off at the end of the game or if you're taking your jersey off or if you're putting your bat down, you have to be able to say I gave it all I could.
The blue-collar sensibility/ethic affects fans self-understanding as the perceived “underdog”

Taylor explained to me that the Browns actually exemplify the blue-collar spirit of the city because the Browns are always the “underdog” and people consider the city an underdog-type city.” As such, Dave draws a parallel between the teams and the city itself when he says that just like the city, “the players always seem like they’re out to prove something, because no one ever believes in them. So, they always, in some way, shape, or form, they feel like they have to prove it, prove that they’re worthy to be rooted for.” Just like Cleveland, its teams are “always the underdog, always underrated, and never given credit for anything,” and yet, always scratching and clawing toward a goal—striving to outwork the competition. ChrisB summarizes this perception when she says, “I”m all about the underdog. Because I’ve been the underdog—who hasn’t? And it’s good to see the underdog win; it’s good to see good triumph over evil is another way to say it. And who hasn’t been the person that nobody is believing in or counting on or whatever?”

Indirectly keeping with the “underdog” theme, Katie says Cleveland is a “very unpretentious city” where “everybody has to work for something.” again mirroring Dave who explains that in Cleveland, “people just always seem to be struggling to make ends meet, you know? You always have to fight for your keep, to earn your keep, you know?” Fittingly, fans view their teams through the same scope, assuming that those outside the city disparage both the fans and the teams” blue-collar ethic, casting them as a perennial “runner up” that must grind every day to make a living, to earn respect, to be relevant. Thus, on multiple levels, their blue-collar “sensibility” becomes a point of focus that grounds not only their perceived civic identity, but also their assumed collective expectations as fans in relation to the teams.
Gary and I talk about different players who made their mark on Cleveland, guys whose work ethic and attitude toward the fans endeared them to the “blue-collar, no bullshit” approach to life that Midwesterners value. He starts laughing to himself, and I can tell he’s remembering something significant. He leans forward and says, “You’ll get a kick out of this one. Andy and I were kids and we were waiting after a game to try and get autographs and Chuck Hinton and Chico Salmon [Indians players in the 1960s] come out. We politely asked for an autograph and they wouldn’t give it to us. It wasn’t like there were a hundred kids—there’s like nobody in the parking lot—and through the years I held a hell of a grudge against Chuck Hinton. Well anyway, one day I’m working and I decide to stop in this place, and what do I see on the wall but an autographed picture of Chuck Hinton. So I wait and I wait and like now there’s nobody around and I reach over, grab it, pull it down, look around, pay the bill and no one knows I got it. I called up Andy and told him, ‘You gotta come over! There’s something we gotta do!’ He comes over, you know, and says, ‘What’s going on?’ So I get this picture, take it out, and we burn it.” Gary sits back relishing his memory with a satisfied chuckle, still projecting voodoo-like retribution on the person of Hinton, a vengeance apparently efficacious in his mind to this day.

Shared Common Enemy

Another shared focus among this fan base involves a sense of a “common enemy” that stands in their way of winning. Though fans mention various players who underperformed through the years and certainly acknowledge specific rivals like the Steelers and Yankees, they reserved their most passionate vitriol for the primary faulty guidance behind their teams: owners and the leaders they hire.
Gary matter-of-factly suggests that the long history of losing in Cleveland exists because “with rare exception, there’s never been strong ownership,” among any of the three teams, and winning eludes this city because “good organizations make their own good luck, building on a foundation which to a large extent we’ve never had.” Andy continues in this same vein, saying that the perpetual losing comes from “a mentality that starts at the top, a mindset from the owners that says ‘Well, we’re Cleveland, so we can’t do this, we can’t do that,’” and it translates into the product that gets placed on the field. Indeed, NormB articulates Cleveland fans’ shared “desire to see the teams run in a professional way by people that are committed to building a winning team and have an inkling of what they are doing.” He says that when it comes to coaches and leaders, “we always get either the ‘retreads’ or the ‘un-trieds,’” and that contributes to the minor-league performances so often presented by the teams.

Dave tells me that “ownership is the most depressing part about being a fan” because throughout his own life “it just feels like the ownership and front offices are inept.” He says they never seem like they care if they win or not—they just want to make their money—and ChrisB feels that’s why instead of trying to develop the team, they just “bring in washed up, has-been players and look where they’re at now!” Katie laments that the teams are like minor league teams for the rest of better-run organizations, stating, “We develop a player and then don’t maintain that player on our team,” before wondering aloud, “Why can’t we ever keep anybody here?” Indeed, management among the three teams is blamed for “the never ending, perpetual sense of rebuilding,” filling their time by “always trying to change things around,” which then “kills the chance for consistency.”

Henry seems almost offended when he says, “When you’re a shitty team and you continue to put a shitty team on the field, and the owners make no effort [to change that
reality]…it’s like you’re literally stealing something from us, as we put our own money into cable TV and into paying for tickets.” Winning takes second place to making money—though it could be argued they work together—so “bad owners make half-assed moves just to get by,” moves which repeatedly reveal themselves on the field. The fan base in Northeast Ohio, like NormB suggests, “begins to resent when you’re trying to tell me that what I’m looking at is a good product in the making and we know different and that really you’re tinkling on my head and telling me it’s raining.” Thus, a shared resentment galvanizes fans in their focused disdain for those who run the teams and continually produce more losing chapters to the history. They long for an owner to begin a fresh chapter which they can support with pride.

As a lone voice of support, JohnP defends the owners suggesting that they don’t live in a big market that generates the same money as the coasts, the primary reason they cannot keep talent in Cleveland since they have to work with what they have available. “Cleveland has always operated on a shoestring,” he says, and sometimes you don’t realize that until you visit another city, which he has frequently done in his sixty-five years. But others scoff at this idea, pointing to small market venues in the same vicinity of Cleveland—like Pittsburgh and Detroit—which have kept their players and become destination sites for big-name talent in all three major sports.9

Some more radical conspiracy theories provided by participants suggest that the front offices of each team have purposefully sabotaged their respective teams from winning during different eras: Ted Stepien for the Cavs in the early 1980s, Frank Lane for the Indians in the 1960s, even Art Modell, implicated when Pat suggested that the despised “Bill Belichick was brought in like a poison pill by Modell to make the fan base turn off to the Browns organization so it would be easier for Modell to plot and do what he did.”10 Though entirely conjecture, these
historical theories only add to the overall suspicion regarding Cleveland team leadership, both past and present.

A lesser version of front office conniving comes from George, who for many years worked in the old Browns internet technology department, saying that while he understands how things work from the business side, he nevertheless gets disgusted from “the constant spin of everything that is done by the teams where they’re not honest at all…they give you this constant drumbeat to buy a ticket but they’re not really serious about competing.” From his perspective, the front offices of each team exist to make money alone, and part of their approach toward fans includes attempting to equate genuine fandom with buying a ticket, even if the product on the playing field is sub-par. The need to sell tickets prompts management to construct narratives of hope each season, when fans know the players involved are not good enough to compete.

NormB expounds on this idea by saying

Our displeasure, I think, as a collective fan base, comes with management and ownership that is trying to sell us that Player X is better than what he is. You know, trying to sell us that, hey, he's a great glove and he hit .300 last year and with him and a good, tight defense and good pitching, we can make the play-offs. Who the hell you trying to sell that to? They should be on the car lot with that shit.

NormB and I discuss comments made by the President of the Browns at a recent press conference, in which he makes critical remarks regarding the fan base. Having obviously struck a nerve in NormB by reminding him of the interview, he raises his voice to say, “Who the hell is he to tell us how we should feel and how we should support the Browns? There has always been a patronizing by sports management in this town that your average fans—again taking into consideration the blue-collar ethic and ethnicity of the town—collectively tend to reject. Don't tell us what we should think. We're fairly knowledgeable about sports.” Indeed, for NormB and others, part of the reason they continue to support the teams is “because we don’t blame the
players—we blame the idiots that are in charge,” a focusing narrative that binds them together as a fan base.

Later, while waiting for the Blues Jam to start, a guy doing a story on the Parkview for his own blues magazine sits next to me at the bar. I learn that Chris spent the past seventeen years in Florida and just moved back to Cleveland, his original home. I ask him the biggest difference between Clevelanders and Floridians, and he says, “It’s more of a cultural thing. Here you’ve got a strong blue-collar, working class element—not laid back, Jimmy Buffett-bullshit like in Florida. Down there, you’ll never see people in flannel shirts, boots, and a beard like you do here tonight.” The conversation turns to Cleveland sports teams, and he says, “There’s been a lot of suffering over the years, and this James thing is just the latest added to the pile.” We discuss the origins of the suffering, and unexpectedly and unprovoked he begins to defend ownership, saying, “Fans need to understand it’s a business—you don’t make money, you won’t spend money,” before adding, “but I do understand why everybody hates on ownership.”

We watch a set together and I can tell he really likes it, and again without prompting he tells me about the importance of not letting “self” get in the way of the music, of not becoming too much the center of attention. He comments on “Ms. Butterscotch,” a local legend scheduled to play here this Saturday, and how she always seems to make it too much about herself. Chris describes how good band mates, like good sports teams, “give each other a piece of the action without playing over one another or hogging all the solos.” He says, “It’s about team, and about diverting attention, not taking it,” and I realize presently the representative intersection of “blue-collar,” “blues sensibility,” and “expectations for Cleveland teams” manifesting itself in
A fourth integrating focus among these fans is their “shared history” as fans. One aspect of their shared history involves the notion that “no one chooses to become a Cleveland fan—you are born into it.” As Caroline says, “I don't know what it is, but I don't have a choice…people act as if it is a choice and I don't understand that. I really don't. It's almost like, if you're born Italian, you're born Italian. You can’t not like spaghetti. Like, it's ,I'm born in Cleveland, I like Cleveland sports.”” Tim says it’s “like a heritage,” and that for he and his friends, “It was always the Brown's, always the Indians, always the Cavs. It's like a Zippo that's always lit. You know what I mean? Just always there.” Thus, “Cleveland fandom as a birthright” becomes an understood backdrop to their current experience together.

But a shared sense of suffering around the teams shapes the most significant aspect of their focus as fans. Just as Cleveland’s geographical center emanates an aroma of loss, of pain, of needing consolation, the fans radiate that same outlook with each other related to their fandom. Certainly, they huddle around moments of victory and eras of nationally relevant teams, regularly citing, for example, the 1960s Jim Brown or 1980s Bernie Kosar era Browns, the “Miracle of Richfield” or Lenny Wilkens led Cavs, or the mid-1990s Indians teams—indeed, while still a raw wound, even the successful James years get some attention. The scattered moments of victory and pride fuse into an important part of their shared history, energizing a clamoring for more, for a “return to greatness.”

But fans participating in this study reflexively recite the major losses and collapses from each of the three major teams like their own family history, and knowledge of these dramas
produce a majority of the stitches in the fabric of their shared experience and narrative. Caroline explains that “Cleveland fans—they have a bond—like an unspoken sort of thing. Like if you're a fan and I'm a fan and we have both shared tears, joy, pain, sorrow, embarrassment, so all of those things have been shared and it's almost like this unspoken bond. You're ,in,” you just know you're in…And it's like, somebody who is not a fan and didn't grow up here, they wouldn't know. They couldn't understand it, I think. So there's a bond that our history creates.” Katie says the fans share their history like a “minority group,” a fraternity who walks down the street giving knowing nods to one another because of their common pain.

They know that you’re living that pain. That’s what I share in common with every single Cleveland fan in this city and even abroad. You've felt that sunken feeling that I’ve felt. You've felt that countless times...It may not have been at the same time. It may not have been in the same place, but I experienced what you experienced. And that was, „Oh.” That sinking feeling of „we lost.” And nobody's experienced that as much as Cleveland fans. So, we don't have to talk about that—we just know. We know that everybody has that feeling. Everybody has experienced that feeling if you are a Cleveland fan.

Henry explains that the shared history of losing becomes strangely “identifying” for the fan base, almost a part of their personality as a fan base. He says, “There's almost a certain satisfaction that comes from loving a team that sucks,” perhaps because “we've been so trained to [expect to lose].” The irony of this “satisfaction” lies in the reality that while everyone despises the losing, a practical sense of ownership—again, perhaps an identifying narrative—surrounds it. “Whatever it is, but we're just so used to it at this point, it's almost like we love to hate it. We hate that we're losers but it's sort of our niche, our thing. I think there's a part of us that kind of, it's ours. You know what, yeah, our teams do suck but guess what—I've still got brown and orange hanging in the whatever.” Several participants reflect upon this irony, that although the stated desperation is for a championship, actually winning would permanently change the narrative they have sorrowfully embraced for so long, and they wonder what affect it will have
upon them as a fan base.

Yet Caroline sees this constantly perpetuated response to their history—that is, the expectation to lose—as a prime reason why the losing continues. She suggests that collectively the fans actively share and foster a “negative energy” in the city and around the teams, and that “the curse could be real only because the more you give something energy—the more you spend time thinking about it—the more it manifests itself.” She recognizes that until Clevelanders stop assuming loss, they will never change the negative energy in the city, and thinks that “all of this negative energy coming from such a strong emotional population is going to maybe keep that black cloud in the sky.” After acknowledging that her theory is undocumented, she retreats to the less abstract but most commonly repeated refrain, that their shared history of losing is tied to having “shitty luck with players and shitty luck with coaches,” an agreed upon gathering point for every fan in this study.

The three TVs broadcast typical summer Saturday afternoon fare: the Indians, a soccer match, tournament golf. The TV sound is muted, and though several tables away, I can clearly hear three men at the left corner of the bar talking about the “fucking ridiculousness of having Shelley Duncan as the starting left fielder,” making for an extremely coherent conversation given the level of intoxication already experienced by the three. One guy wears an old school Browns sweatshirt, with block lettering and the Elf mascot, while another wears a tattered “Sack Time” bombers coat, and the third has some other Cleveland logo on a t-shirt. Though hardly universal, I see this combination repeatedly at the bar: a small cluster of people drinking deeply, cursing while watching a game, wearing Cleveland sports paraphernalia and post-work exhaustion.
What sets this particular scene apart from others—indeed, what labels its performance as metaphorically sublime given my stated task at the bar—begins when the man in the Browns sweatshirt slumps over onto his older friend, obviously beginning a slow descent toward alcohol induced unconsciousness. The older man struggles to hold his friend afloat, bracing the drunk(er) man’s face against his ribcage, standing against the bar to keep his own balance. I decide to help when the quasi-conscious man begins sliding to the ground, and with both of us grabbing him under the arm pits, we get him mostly standing, though his legs offer little support at this point. The man is strong and muscually heavy, with leathery, worn hands fresh off a shift. It appears he’s spilled the last of his beer on his pants, but quickly I discern the embarrassing truth: he’s peed himself—significantly. Stepping around the now pooling urine and aware that more alcohol could spew from him at any moment, I notice the peculiar aroma created by the admixture of liquor, mechanics grease, and urine. Nobody adds chaos to the scene by getting frantic; his loyal friend simply holds the door while I move forward a step or two every thirty seconds, and everyone else keeps to themselves—eating, working, and generally minding their own business.

Finally, we get him outside and as I place him in the passenger side of a car, trying not to get pee on my own clothes, he looks up at me through blurry eyes, exhausted but grinning, and mumbles that he owes me one. As the man and his friend drive away, they dramatically caricature (with a conspicuous dose of tragi-comedy) the entire scope of my project jumbled into one moment: the working-class Cleveland fan, cursing at the TV while medicating himself to the point of incontinence, buoyed by friends in the same boat who are all prepared to repeat the process as needed tomorrow.
**Shared Character Forged through Loss**

Fans in this study cited a shared strengthening of “character” which results both from living in Cleveland and supporting losing franchises. A man named Steve blatantly proclaimed, “I want to think there’s something better, more noble, more consistent in the character of a Clevelander, just because of his history, life, hardship—the river on fire, syringes on the shore, being a punch-line on Letterman.” According to this theory repeatedly developed by participants, shackled by a history of loss yet loyally committed to the home base, the Cleveland fan develops a particular depth of character forged through losing, an attribute shared by all who submit to the journey in Cleveland.

Katie uses the word “principle” to describe the character enhancement that comes with being a Cleveland fan. She says fans develop principles like “hope,” the “integrity of steadfastness,” “taking pride in something even when it’s broke.” She says fans’ steadfast commitment through the struggle of losing only strengthens them in their daily life, and that satisfaction emerges because “even though you may not get the result that you want, you still worked hard and stayed committed to it, so there’s pride there,”—an intangible compensation shared by all Cleveland fans in this study. By contrast, fans in other cities (particularly in warmer weather climates), lack this character because of the softness created by their surroundings and having a sense of “winners entitlement,” as Steve reminds me only partially tongue-in-cheek while referring to Los Angeles fans as “wimpy, less rugged, less tough. They are a more comfort-loving people. They’re pussies.”

When I ask Taylor whether he would encourage a young Clevelander to support the teams knowing what he knows about their history and prospects for the future, he says, “Definitely, because it’s going to give you a good base for living life well.” He says in
Cleveland, “you lose and you win and it’s just kind of representative of how this city is”—with its historical peaks and valleys—but even on a grander scale, “That’s just the way life is, you know, you have your ups and downs.” He argues that “If you're always constantly used to winning, you're just going to be a little jerk. If you keep a nice, even keel, I feel like that'll give a person character.” He explains that Clevelanders share this trait “because I think that's the way the fans are. They have a nice, even keel. They win. They lose. Their heads aren't too big. They're not too far in the dumps, most of the time. They're like, „Alright.‟ (exhale) They have good character to them.”

Henry dabbles with the possibility that losing has become built into the fiber of both Cleveland and its fans, a shared attribute that ubiquitously hovers over the region. He says, “I think there is something about the losing thing. I hate to say that we, like we cherish the fact that we lose, but there is a certain part of that, that you can't help but go, „Does it fit our stigma? Does it fit our whatever?‟ I'm not saying I would love the Browns less if they won, clearly, I would love them as much, if not more, but again, losing is our thing.” Perhaps ironic given the intense passion for winning articulated by the participants, but what Henry hesitantly suggests I sense other interviewees fear but will not admit: That losing may be in the DNA of the region as much as lake water, industrial ghosts, and the teams themselves. The interviews reveal that while living in Cleveland does not turn a person into a “loser,” it may develop those character attributes unique to a people who consistently experience loss, marking them in such a noticeable way as to become practically stigmata. As Caroline reminds me, “It's so weird, because, like I said, we know it [if you’re not one of us]. That's the thing I'm saying, if you're not from Cleveland and you moved here, we will spot you out in an instant. Maybe the way you even wear
that shirt. We will smell it on you. You haven't cried enough. You haven't freaked out enough.
You haven't lost a hundred bucks on the Browns.”

Tonight I get the double feature: the Indians game starts early and should be finished just
as the blues band begins their first set. Tonight features Jack Charlton and the Sweet Meter
Band and they are working-class Cleveland good. Charlton favors Joe Cocker in his voice, with
the rugged look of a native Clevelander whose shift at the factory begins after the final set. The
lighting seems to have changed from previous shows (or at least a new light is turned on that
normally isn’t) that puts thousands of individual small blue reflections on the band area. It’s a
cool look. The band plays with the old Municipal Stadium time clock—not a picture, but the
literal clock—behind them as a background, with a banner-sized Indians schedule partially
covering it and bordering an early twentieth-century bar bowling machine. A traffic light hangs
above the bowling game in the corner, and the musicians are three across with the drummer in
the back. Tonight the crowd includes more Hispanics than usual with a smattering of Black
folks, but mostly the usual working class, somewhat average, somewhat hippie, late-night
Caucasian crowd.

A guy wearing a shirt with faintly printed golf bags and sporting a Panama hat sits next
to me, watching a game as we wait for the band. Together we witness former Cleveland legend
Jim Thome hit another home run against the Indians, this time to put Baltimore up 2-1, and
between cussing sounds and lots of head shakes from others, I stoke the fire and verbalize aloud
what I imagine others are thinking: “Thome should be ashamed of himself.” Thome, who
Clevelanders loved as much as any sports figure this town ever produced, left the Indians as a
free agent in 2003 after playing twelve years with the team and proclaiming that “they’d have to
rip the jersey off my back before I’d leave Cleveland.” Recently, the Indians announced plans to put a statue of Thome outside the centerfield wall, and I think about the crazy irony of this as he rounds the bases to beat his former team. The guy in the Panama hat, quiet until now, angrily says, “He doesn’t even think about it. He’s on a different team every year now. He’s just playing for money. It’s bullshit. No loyalty.” The Indians wind up losing 3-1 just before the music starts, and if ever there was a perfect ending to another losing Cleveland evening, it’s the gravelly sound of Jack Charlton and the bluish rhythms pouring from the Sweet Meter Band.

**Intensive Concerns with Extensive Effects**

Devotion to the teams carries internal beliefs and feelings that find expression in the lived world of these fans, literally stirring the flow of their lives. Apart from the external/behavioral implications created by the “commitment” and “integrating foci” categories, fans also experience their fandom directly influencing the rhythm of their week, tangibly altering their emotional condition before and after games, and at a lesser level, by expending effort to separate themselves from being considered “fanatics.”

**Rhythm of the Week**

That sports noticeably affect the weekly rhythms of “highly identified fans” in Cleveland comes as no surprise to Dave, who suggests that “people in other cities are preoccupied with other shit. They have more to do—in Miami they go to the beach, New York never sleeps and they can do whatever the hell they want—whereas here, especially in winter, all you’ve got is your football and basketball.” Consequently, a common refrain from every participant includes variations on the idea that “every day there’s at least one part of my schedule that has something to do with the Cleveland sport teams,” and discussion about the individual teams and organizations, their players, and specific games all contribute to the flow of the day.
Following the teams becomes a positive addition to the daily grind of life, as several mentioned their habit of “reading about the teams for thirty to sixty minutes every day,” “posting something on Facebook,” or “getting updates through apps on my phone.” JohnP explains that “the games give you something to talk about for days before a game, playing ‘armchair quarterback,’” in any sport, then the next day you get to see what all the other ‘arm chair quarterbacks’ came up with,” keeping a constant bi-way of communication. Social media makes information about the teams a constant throughout the day, as does the 24/7 news cycle on sports talk radio. For example, Henry represents the habits of most of the participants when he says, “I’m talking about Cleveland sports constantly throughout the day, always listening to sports talk radio and constantly talking about the teams, whether in person or on Facebook or whatever.” Thus, whether passively absorbing information either through traditional or social media, or actively engaging others through conversation, these fans share a common testimony like that of ChrisB, who says, “I spend maybe an hour and a half each day reading about the teams and talking with people about them, talking with people at work or at the bar after work,” almost a necessity since the teams just “constantly come up in conversations throughout the day.”

But actually watching games—or better still, attending games—brings a different level of life-affecting gravity. JohnP notes his pre-game excitement and the amount of mental energy that goes into preparing for a game he’s attending or going to watch with others, saying, “I get excited. I get real excited! I love to get ready to go. What jersey am I going to wear? Is it the guy with the hook-nose on? Is it the Bob Feller one? Is it a new one, you know? I get excited to get ready and go down to the stadium.” Henry similarly reflects, “When we know we’re going to go to a game, we’ll start to make plans a week ahead of time: which jersey we’re going to wear, where we’re going to meet, where we’re going to drink.” The event itself almost becomes
secondary to the planning that precedes it and the amount of mental energy expended on preparation. MikeF offers an outline of the news study that takes place the week leading up to a Browns game on Sunday.

A couple of days before you get revved up for the next Sunday game. Thursday comes and you are seeing what the real odds are in the paper. You are getting a little bit closer, and maybe learning a little bit more about who is hurt, who is not going to play. Friday is probably more of a closer look at what the strengths are for the opponent. Then Saturday comes and oh my god it is tomorrow! Then Sunday morning you get that paper opened up and it has the rosters with the numbers of the players and you cut that out and you put that in your coat, you get up, you have breakfast…You get your beer and then head down to the stadium.

Particularly during football season, participants in this study have the rhythm of their week affected by the weekly Browns game. Henry makes it clear to his boss, for whom he works as a personal assistant, “you know I’m not available on Sundays in the fall, right?”, and others clarify that when possible, they are intentional to create a work schedule that allows them maximum participation with the Browns games—whether actually attending the game or, more often, watching it with a group at a bar, someone’s house, or tailgating. Gary notes that since they only play ten home games a year (counting preseason and assuming no playoffs), “people plan their days, their weeks around the Browns…you know, it’s a big event.” He says that by Thursday, he will “start thinking about the game more and begin wearing my Browns shirts with the logo—I start gearing up and planning for it.” Dorigen reiterates the impact of the Browns season on her life, saying that during the fall, “football sets my social calendar: Thursday nights, Monday nights, Sundays.” She remembers that when she and her former husband were trying to set a wedding date, they wound up choosing Friday because she wouldn’t mess with the Browns on Sunday and he didn’t want to miss Ohio State on Saturday, a compromise that satisfied both of their football cravings. Even George, who emphasized his lack of emotional attachment to the
teams since his work days with the old Browns, states that “Sunday is still a ritual for me…I love the entire day.”

The Indians and Cavs, privy to considerably fuller home-game seasons, usually only receive such emotionally-charged attention when a big game arrives or when the teams are in the playoffs. For example, when the Indians were last in the playoffs, Andy says, “It was like the whole week before and then the week that they played, it was like you couldn’t wait for the next couple days. You did your work and you did the things you had to do, but then everything centered around the game.” The games consume mental space by becoming the focal point of the fans’ schedule, with all other events orbiting around the contests themselves. Party planning, team logo gear purchasing, and general conversation about the games all increase surrounding the notion of a “big game,” whether regular or post-season.

But even a seemingly peripheral event, like the NFL Draft, can directly affect and supersede vocational life, as Dave recalls occurring at a conference in Las Vegas last April.

I was in Vegas for the draft for a catalog convention and it was hysterical because our whole Cleveland team—our catalog team—we’re sitting there, we’re in this meeting and the meeting is just going on and on. And, I’m like, „Dude, the fucking draft is about to start.” These people are just, „Oh, we’ve got one more guy coming up.” Doesn’t this guy realize that the NFL draft is about to happen and we’re in Vegas? And everyone is on their Blackberries—„The Browns just took Trent Richardson.” It’s like everyone’s phones were going off while this guy is talking. Nobody’s paying attention to him; we’re all caught up in the draft and what’s happening with Cleveland.

But beyond affecting the rhythm of their week by redirecting mental energy, adjusting schedules, and being the topic of multiple conversations, fandom more acutely affects the internal emotional state of highly identified fans, producing tangible external results.

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Tim and I happen to arrive at the patio simultaneously as the sun begins to set—he for a smoke break, me for some fresh air. Tim works in the kitchen, and at twenty-four is the youngest
worker at The Parkview. As a self-proclaimed Cleveland sports fanatic, he and I have talked plenty in the past few weeks, and now he excitedly tells me about going to the Browns vs. Ravens game in November—who he’s going with, where they’re sitting, what time they’ll start the tailgate. I ask him why he takes the games so personally, and he says, “I take it personally because I put so much into it. You know what I mean? It's like being in a relationship. You put so much into the relationship and then somebody else doesn't give a shit and it just makes you so mad that you care for something so much that they don't care as much as you care. You know what I mean? So it just, it like it makes me mad.”

His tone continues to rise and he’s visibly angry at this point, but he’s got more to say. “It pisses me off. You know what I mean? I feel like I'm not getting back what I'm putting into it and, of course, human nature is going to be mad at that. You know what I mean?” I tell him I do know what he means and he starts to back off, suddenly aware that he’s getting loudly aggressive, and he apologetically calms himself with, “That's about it, brother. It's not the question that gets me mad, but just the thoughts. The memories being retrieved. You know?”

Again, I tell him I do know, and when he says, “It just gets me mad.” I say, “Maybe that’s why I’m doing a project on it—because I’ve been living it twenty years longer than you.” He says “Yeah, you’ve seen twenty more years of bullshit.” I can’t disagree with that summary, and as he puts his cigarette out and heads back to the kitchen, he forlornly offers, “I know it's crazy, but like, I would love to go back. I would love to be alive to see the Browns in the AFC Championship where the whole world was watching it. You know what I mean?” I assure him I do, and he walks away shaking his head, mumbling “It's crazy” before disappearing inside the kitchen again.
Emotional State

Fans mention the extreme emotions contained within wins and losses, and Caroline summarizes the games’ influence by saying, “I guess it’s just like any other stimulant—it picks you up...People go up, people come down and it really has a big effect.” She represents the constantly repeated extremes experienced by fans vicariously through the games, saying, “A bad loss, an embarrassing loss can really mess me up, but after a win, I might party all day. You just get this uplifted feeling.” NormB and I discuss the difficult socio-economic circumstances faced in our country right now, and he suggests that one of sports’ roles in the midst of those conditions is to provide an “emotional outlet”; that is, he believes sports help fill and exercise an emotional tank, since “people turn to things that make them not focus on the negative and make them feel good.” Yet, as we further discuss, for the highly identified fan, they also have the potential to make you feel worse—particularly in Cleveland—a latent, almost unavoidable irony.

Again, because of the short season relative to the other two major sports, the Browns seem to elicit the strongest emotions per average game. Katie says that when the Browns win, “the sun is shining. You are ready to start the week. Everything is great. There are no dark clouds hanging in the mind. It’s bright and sunny in there. And then you can wait until next Sunday and it happens all over again.” But Gary explains that after a loss the mood in the city is dark and “everybody just kind of pisses and moans for days,” feeding into what he called the “Cleveland habit of complaining,” while Tim directly calls his post-loss emotion one of “deep depression.” Fans describe the “funk” as lasting anywhere from 1-3 days after a loss, while the fumes of a win can be energizing until the next game. The tendency to dwell on the wins occurs because “it feels good” and “you feel more positive” so it becomes much easier and preferable to savor the game longer. After losses, participants said they tried to move on to next week or the
next game as quickly as possible and tried to stifle or ignore the negative feelings, a reflexive muscle particularly well-exercised among participants fifty and over.

The emotions surrounding a game may be amplified by direct attendance at the game. For example, MikeF describes the emotion created by being “with 82,000 people and the Browns drive down the field and win by three points in the last minute, I don’t know if there’s any greater feeling you can experience. I remember crying at those games, tears of joy just flowing.” He also labels the intense emotional outpouring of the sport experience as “religious,” saying, “Maybe if the human is always looking for a place where you can feel happy and fulfilled, like you had an objective and you worked hard, and you got there and all is right with the world, if that’s what religion strives to get you to—to that place where everybody is accepting and good and right—maybe that’s what being a sports fan does, it gets you to that place.” Others suggest that this “religious” sense, while more pronounced within a full stadium, also gets experienced in smaller venues, like watching at the Parkview, in a friends’ packed home, or watching on TVs while tailgating.

Predictably, feelings become more intense during watershed moments. Andy remembers when the Indians were two outs away from winning the 1997 World Series, when he was “literally like in a daze, in a coma, and something was telling me this is really going to happen and I couldn't believe it. It's almost like someone had to pinch me to wake me up.” But as the game infamously slipped away, he describes how “it slowly unraveled and it went from being that close and the excitement that I was starting to feel—from that close, just to lose it? Then I couldn't sleep. I could not sleep that night. Just felt absolutely sick about it for days.” Gary recalls the excitement generated by the Browns winning an overtime playoff game against the Jets in 1986 as “just a tremendous party,” contrasted with the agonizing loss to the Broncos the
next week, which national media immediately (and callously) coined “The Drive,” producing a scene so “subdued it was absolutely extreme—like night and day.” JohnP goes back even further, saying, “I remember when we had Jim Brown and we lost the championship to the New York Giants in the 60s. God! You were running around like you were sick to your stomach for a few days—really!”

But even when the conditions are more placid surrounding a game, fans describe an internal emotional commotion that takes place after every game in all three sports, with a measure of emotional vestment accrued to each contest regardless of the games’ import. JohnP, who says his job can’t be emotionally affected after a loss since he’s in construction and “come 7:00 a.m. you’ve got to rock and roll,” just as quickly says that the games still “drain your mind.” I ask him to explain and he says that after every game he “reads the paper in the morning and begins surgically taking apart the game, and it begins draining my mind: Why didn’t we do this? Why did we do this? And why didn’t that guy bunt?” While he enjoys this aspect of being a fan, he acknowledges that it plays with his inner emotions, eliciting multiple feelings along the way—joy, anger, contentment, happiness, frustration—all part of the pleasure of being a highly invested fan. When the teams play, emotions are disrupted to varying degrees—depending on the team playing, the competition faced, and the import of the game—but everyone counted as a highly identified fan feels something both pre- and post-game.

Dealing with the intensity of “dark” feelings surrounding the teams and their losses by employing emotional coping mechanisms and cutting off experienced/anticipated misery became a noticeable trend, especially evident as the fans in this study increase in age. As already noted, the oft-stated position that “if they are doing well, I kind of live off that high the whole week until the next and if they don’t do well, I feel crappy all week long,” leaves fans with a need to
compensate for their “depression.” While Dave says, “The losing sucks, but you almost get used to it, numb to it at some point,” others verbalized more proactive approaches to create separation.

For example, Katie describes getting “completely annihilated [with alcohol] so I don’t remember this” as an effective way of dealing with the losing, saying “Yes, the next day will be hell, but what are you going to do? You’ve got to erase it [the loss] out of your mind.” She says she’s trained herself to “get used to the cycle,” and instead of being miserable until late in the week after a loss, she usually gets over it within a day or two depending on the hangover. Taylor suggests the importance of mixing a game with the surrounding experience of people and parties, since “that way when they lose, I can still say I had a good time and have good feelings.”

Others take the more rational, philosophical approach of NormB, who says, “I don’t live and die with them [the teams] because it’s something I don’t have control over. And the things in life that you don’t have control over, how can you stress over them? If you do, then you have other issues to me.” Andy concedes an appreciation for the reality that “it’s almost better when they lose, because then you don’t have the emotional investment that you do when they’re playing well and you don’t get set up for a crash,” embracing a form of mental gymnastics to get ahead of the incumbent feelings produced by loss.

Older fans in this study (those over 50) repeated a common theme, that “as a younger person I used to cry sometimes after a loss or after a bad loss, but now it’s like I’ll get over it, you know.” JohnP, at 65 the oldest of the participants, who says he mentally interacts with the teams “a good hour per day,” who saves the sports page for last so he can experientially “savor it,” nevertheless says, “I don’t think it’s life or death any more if the team loses, I’m not going to jump off the bridge anymore. I used to, but I think you grow up a little bit. I think you take
things in stride better—you have to around here.” Pat, 58, represents the intentional, emotional guarding of his heart reflective of long-time Cleveland fans. He admits

I must say, I’ve gotten a lot more skeptical as I’ve gotten older. I mean, I stopped going to every Browns game back in probably ’89. It was after one of those Denver losses. I got tired of putting so much emotion into the Browns. When they would lose on a Sunday, I’d be pissed all week long. So now, I kind of don’t put as much emotion into any of the teams as I did when I was younger just for that reason. I don’t want to be let down—there’s only so much of that you can take.

MikeF explained his need to separate emotionally from the teams since “I couldn’t sleep after a Browns loss. It would affect me for days. But, thank God, I don’t have that reaction anymore because I would be in a nursing home with the last thirteen or fourteen years. Hell, even since 1990.” He, like others, cites Modell’s announcement in November 1994 as the breaking point in his “Cleveland fan psyche.” While it’s impossible to measure the effect of the Browns moving on the emotional status of fans toward all three teams, anecdotal evidence suggests that it had a significantly negative impact across the board, as multiple participants articulated variations on the idea that “maybe the Browns moving jaded my outlook on pro sports in general when it happened.” MikeF traces his tepid emotional connection to the teams to the press conference announcing the move eighteen years ago, saying, “Through tears, I just decided from that point forward ‘I am not going to invest my heart, soul, and mind in this experience because look what it has done.’” Participants went out of their way to assure me that in spite of the appearance of what a non-fan might consider habits of rabid fandom, they viewed the teams as “just a form of entertainment,” “just a game, after all,” and “an outlet”—and were willing to invest emotional energy toward maintaining that appearance. Indeed, herein lies a central irony of their fandom—the substantial affective energy invested by fans trying not to get too emotionally involved with the teams, a proactive defense to protect themselves from getting hurt.
MikeF, who acquired fame as a youth for spray painting “Go Browns” at the stop line of avenues all over town, is a competent lawyer who repeatedly assures me that he's given up on the Cleveland teams—especially the Browns since they left—but still grudgingly (contradictorily?) considers himself a fan. As he nears sixty, he admits that thirty years ago he probably would have considered a Cleveland championship the greatest thing in life, saying, “Isn’t that crazy? It’s nuts. It really is crazy that people would do that,” but he seems almost mournful that he’s been practically forced by their ineptitude to refrain from going “emotionally overboard” these days. He gives me a copy of a three page reflection he wrote the day after the Browns left, an ode to the demise of the franchise, and we flip through a scrap book he made full of newspaper articles and essays as we stand outside the Parkview by his car. I can tell he’s thought deeply about his life and experience as a Cleveland fan, and when I ask him why fans persist in spite of the disappointment, he says, “Maybe because, you know, we don’t put enough value in the ordinariness of our own life. We perceive what we do as just being ordinary, but we perceive what these athletes do as extraordinary.” At this point, he gets unexpectedly philosophical with me, and I listen carefully as he explains, “Maybe they’re fulfilling some of the ambitions you had as an athlete or the ambitions that you had in some job or other location that you never achieved yourself. You never got to that level of ultimate satisfaction, that point where there’s no other opponent to vanquish, you know. You’ve met every challenge. There’s an end. I’m done. There’s no more games. I’ve done my job. The season—is life a season?—the season has X number of games, and if you have met a certain standard and you go on to another level of competition with the best, and if you’ve been able to succeed and beat all of the other bests, you
now are the best. And maybe that is sort of—is it your spirituality?—maybe that’s what your
own self is striving for, and you do it vicariously through the teams.”

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**Rejection of “Fanatic” Label**

Though perhaps the most subtle of the “intensive concerns with extensive effects,” the
need to keep things in balance—that is, to not appear being “too” vested in the teams—appeared
too many times to ignore. Representative of this position, NormB says it’s important to
remember that sports are “ultimately no more than a diversion from the day-to-day grind…they
are a nice, convenient, relaxing, and fun thing to enjoy away from the workplace and away from
the mundane grind of day to day life.” But he separates himself from “the people who live and
die with different sports teams and different athletes”—what he calls “fanatics”—caricatured as
that person who “lives and dies with sports because they are filling unmet emotional needs
through the teams.”

Participants indicated a persistent need to forge a clear separation between the fan
committed to the teams while still developing other aspects of their life, versus the fanatic who
remains one-dimensional in their fandom and cannot create space between themselves and the
team. Like NormB, everyone seemed to know at least one person they considered the “fanatic”
that they used as a foil—a roommate, brother, friend, co-worker—a personification of the
overboard fan and certainly of a breed different from themselves. Dave says, “I don’t define my
life by my sports teams like some people do. I love them and I watch them all the time, but at
the end of the day, it’s just the playground of life.”

Reflecting on his past almost confessionally, MikeF laments that Cleveland sports (and
the Browns in particular) had become “the number one thing in my life, literally to the exclusion
of a lot of other ordinary activities of a human being,” and part of his renaissance as a human began when he saw the futility in such fanaticism. In another example, George says his time working “in the business” freed him of the “rah rah inclinations” of his youth, making it clear when we talk that the teams are “just another form of entertainment,” and “as for getting wrapped up into them and being in a bad mood on Monday because we lost on Sunday, I’m kind of beyond that.” Others note the importance of “the need to keep sports in that separate category of entertainment,” to “keep it in its own little compartment,” and to avoid becoming that fan described by several in this study as “a screaming obnoxious idiot” who “cusses out co-workers because she’s so upset about a loss.” While every participant interviewed describes a significant devotion to the Cleveland teams, everyone also envisions a mental line they will not cross as a fan, an intuitive straw-man that keeps them from going too far, from “getting a little too carried away with the teams.”

Andy cringed at the idea of being perceived and labeled as a “fanatic,” saying, “I try not to have it consume me because I think I’d be a pretty boring person. I do enjoy talking about them [the teams], but I don’t want to beat it to death, and I’ll avoid people that do. I try to have a balance. As soon as I think people are going too far, I avoid them.” This person has nothing more to their life but sports, a distasteful superficiality for those who make it clear that “Sports are a big part of me, but they’re not all of me.” Henry too suggested that “sports in general means so much to so many people and often times I think it’s almost a little too much.” He criticizes “a guy who sits there and watches SportsCenter all day, but doesn’t even click on MSNBC or CNN,” who by doing so shows he has no “balance” to his life. While still deeply devoted to the teams, both Andy and Henry made it clear that “we have a life apart from these teams,” and despised being categorized otherwise.
Some fans separated themselves from the fanatic because they think it adds to an ugly view of Cleveland. For example, they mentioned being bothered when James left by national reporting that featured one fan burning his jersey, not wanting the entire city to be viewed as “fanatical,” and certainly not wanting to be seen as vested so heavily in just one player to the exclusion of the team. Andy explains that “If I go to a football game and I see fans getting ugly after a loss, yelling and wanting to start a fight—just yelling obnoxious obscenities—that turns me off. I’m thinking we don’t need that. To me, those fans make a bad mark on Cleveland.” Indeed, when asked to measure their devotion, almost every respondent was careful to assign well-kept limits and rational boundaries for themselves, separating themselves from what they perceive are fans gone wild, like JohnP who says, “I’m not gonna let a team, personally, pull me down. I don’t feel that great when they lose, but like I said, it’s not like I’m gonna go and jump off the bridge about it. They’re not curing cancer, they’re not mending people up—it’s a sport.”

On my final visit to the Parkview, the Browns serve up another dose of familiar history in their much anticipated 2012 season opener: They play their butts off on defense, but their offense is beyond awful, with rookie quarterback Brandon Weeden making his debut posting a 5.1 rating while missing several wide open touchdown opportunities. The defense, holding the Eagles to 10 points through most of the game, gives up the game winning touchdown on a 91-yard drive that eats almost 6 minutes off the clock and leaves the Browns with one chance left in a minute fifteen. Then Weeden throws his fourth interception and the air goes out of the room. The cussing is rather muted, under the breath, “same old shit” kind of analysis. Fans in the Parkview hardly give energy to the complaining—they are too worn out with the same routine and have learned to protect their emotional center. Kenny, a guy I met during the game, said
when the Eagles scored at the end of the first half after Cleveland couldn’t get a first down with a minute to go, “That’s Cleveland right there—piece of shit,” and now most of the fans are beyond even griping post-game. They move on.

Tom, who I am supposed to meet for my final formal interview, comes in as I am going out. I come back in to sit with him, but it is obvious he is drunk as his speech is slurred. No way pursuing this interview can be a good use of time, so I tell him I’ll get him another time if I still need more later. He apologizes and swears he wants to help, but had spent most of the day drinking outside the stadium, and was now coming to the Parkview to finish it off.

I notice as I walk out that owner Norm is wearing a “Save Cleveland/Lose Bill” shirt with a picture of Bill Belichick crossed out in a circle. It amazes me that almost twenty years after Belichick coached the Browns, the hex-conjuring shirt remains in circulation, and even after Belichick has become known nationally as a “genius,” he is still vilified in Cleveland. No short memory in Cleveland—as Katie said regarding the perceived sports slights, “we work at remembering that stuff”—and as I experience the all-too-familiar but still virtually indescribable funk that settles on the populace after another Browns’ loss, I realize the aggregate memory creates a power of its own within the Parkview.
Notes

1 Italics added. Though Dave also articulated a moral tension within himself regarding the current Baltimore Ravens, a team he called “the purple Browns,” since they are essentially the Browns displaced franchise—the real Cleveland team. He said he sometimes still rooted for the Browns as the Ravens and struggles to embrace the new Browns even though they are currently in Cleveland. We might read Dave’s tension, which other participants held to varying degrees, as team loyalty to the extreme; however, as the “team” and the “city” are supposed to remain bound indefinitely, the rupture created by Modell’s move to Baltimore created a “loyalty” dissonance still being felt in some fans seventeen years later.


3 See also Anthony P. Cohen, The Symbolic Construction of Community (New York: Tavistock Publications, 1985), 115, where he says “This intimate relationship between community and identity has been described as „cultural totemism” or „ethnognomony” (Schwartz, 1975). These terms suggest that community, and its refraction through self, marks what is not, as well as what is, emphasizing traits and characteristics, „at once emblematic of the group’s solidarity and of the group’s contrasting identity and relation to the groups within its ambit of comparison” (Schwartz, 1975, p108).” See Theodore Schwartz, “Cultural Totemism,” in George deVos and Lola Romanucci, eds., Ethnic Identity: Cultural Continuities and Change (Palo Alto, Calif.: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1975) and Theodore Schwartz, Cultural Totemism: Ethnic Identity, Primitive and Modern (Walnut Creek, Calif.: AltaMira Press, 1995).


6 Pierre Bourdieu contends that “capital” is “any resource effective in a given social arena that enables one to appropriate the specific profits arising out of participation and contest in it.” Thus, beyond the common forms of economic, cultural, and social capital that may be accrued, “symbolic” capital reflects any form of capital that may exist overtly but nevertheless functions virtually undetected in forming opinion and perception. See Pierre Bourdieu, Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984), and Rob Stones, Key Sociological Thinkers 2nd ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 7.

7 Cohen, Symbolic Construction, 115.


9 Though Pittsburgh does not have professional basketball, they have professional hockey and have some of the league’s best players.

10 Belichick was the Browns coach in the final years leading up to Modell’s move, and his surly disposition—combined with cutting quarterback legend Bernie Kosar—never endeared him to fans.
CHAPTER 8

DISCUSSION OF THE EMERGENT THEMES

How the Use of Theory Provided Insight into the Life-World of These Fans

In this work, I am concerned with how sport shapes the life-world of a particular group of fans situated and rooted in a particular locale—that is, how allegiance to three professional sports teams helps construct both personal and collective self-understanding (which Thomas Luckmann predicted would become the locus of a late-modern spirituality) among a slice of Cleveland sports fans. I sought to answer the following research questions: Why the collective fetishization of pro sports teams in Cleveland, in spite of losing regularly, and in some memorable cases dramatically, since 1964? Why do these teams matter so much to Clevelanders and what do they hope to get from them even after years of disappointment? Given that every human makes certain “demands” of the fetishized, what is it that Cleveland sports fans hope to receive from their teams? In short, how might the fan experience in Cleveland constitute a kind of neo-religious (re: “invisible” or “implicitly religious”) experience that both shapes their view of themselves and influences how they journey in this life? In pursuing these questions, I sought to utilize a less prejudiced and parochial perspective than typically characterizes discussions on “religion” when exploring modern social manifestations of religious life, beginning with empirical data itself instead of and apart from pre-determined idealized systems of ideas (re: historically “religious”) within which they must fit.

While seeking to avoid the entrapment of traditional religious categories, I relied on a particular combination of socio-religious theories based on Luckmann’s abstract notion of “invisible religion” and Edward Bailey’s more practical “implicit religion.” While Luckmann provides the theoretical grounding, Bailey supplies a more praxis orientated lens through which
to examine and explore his thesis: Luckmann suggests people will look increasingly inward to
discover spirituality and the sacred, and Bailey provides a method to ascertain both the internal
and external lived world of individuals and the communities within which they live and have
their being. Apart from their declared allegiance to a particular “religious” system as historically
defined (or lack thereof), this study adheres to the notion that an “invisible” (Luckmann) or,
more contemporarily, an “implicit” (Bailey) religion gets exposed by asking not simply what
people say they believe doctrinally, but rather how they actually live and make sense of their
place in the world: How do people conceptualize and maintain their self-understanding/identity
in a late-modern, technological society? What norms hold sway over their priorities,
relationships, and thought processes? How do people actually order and live their lives?

Bailey’s concept of “implicit religion” proved helpful toward my stated aim: exploring
the life-world, the “mattering maps” generated through the fandom of a particular group of
Cleveland sports fans. I used his three heuristic hangers—“commitment,” “integrating foci,” and
the more bulky “intensive concerns with extensive effects”—as highest order themes to initially
organize the data. Specific to this study, the first category—“commitment”—asks of the data,
“What are these fans really devoted to: is it just the teams, or do underlying concepts somehow
more stringently ground their commitment? To what is their allegiance actually anchored?” The
second highest order theme, “integrating foci,” drew out the focal points shared by the
participants as fans—those matters that they collectively point to as significant within their
fandom—asking, “What do these fans share that acts as a symbolic horizon for their experiences
as Cleveland fans? What do they focus on and embrace together (ideas, memories, people)?”

The third highest order theme, “intensive concerns with extensive effects,” asks, “What do they
think about (or believe) on the inside that results in visible behaviors on the outside? How is
their day-to-day reality affected as a result of their fandom?” I found these three lenses useful and effective for investigating fandom by allowing me to explore these fans’ devotion to the teams (both as individuals and as a community) through their internal thoughts and their external behavior, through their latent ideologies and their experiential histories as fans—offering a process that allowed them to describe the origins of their intensity toward the teams on their own terms.

Pursuing questions associated with the highest order themes—“commitment,” “integrating foci,” and “intensive concerns with extensive effects”—helped expose the underlying nature of the participants’ fandom. This theoretical framework helps us understand highly identified fans by revealing the interior thought processes behind their exterior behavior as fans, exposing a significant source of their self-understanding as both individuals and as a community. To be considered “implicitly religious,” the data should (at minimum) demonstrate that the fans’ devotion to the teams provides a substantial contribution toward their situated self-understanding relative to the rest of the world, operates as a bonding agent among the devotees, and gives shape to their actual daily lived experience. Indeed, as an organizing rubric and conceptual hanger, “implicit religion” revealed itself as efficacious toward both discerning and understanding the inner shape and external gyrations of the fan experience among this group of participants.

Organized under the “highest order” themes supplied by the implicit religion concept, multiple “higher order” themes arose inductively from the data forming the core of the study. Final coding of the data produced the multiple higher order themes and sub-themes, helpful toward both revealing and labeling the contours of these participants’ fandom.
These participants are “committed” to the virtue of loyalty and their perception of what constitutes genuine fidelity. They are enamored by both individual and collective nostalgic memories associated with the teams while waiting upon imminent redemption for their “suffering” as fans. The teams reflect something of their home “turf,” and passion for the teams extends directly from a zeal for home itself. These sources of their allegiance became apparent as they discussed questions related to the highest order theme “commitment,” and revealed the extent to which their allegiance toward the teams flows from a commitment to a particular understanding of themselves. Indeed, the teams exist as something far more than mere entertainment outlets—in the fans’ minds, they function as an extension of their own perception of their ideal self, a perception they want projected to the rest of the world outside Cleveland.

Concerning “integrating foci,” the template helped organize data that demonstrates how the fans collectively gather themselves around particular core “shared” conceptions: their association with a blue collar civic history, their assumption that the teams carry symbolic weight with non-Clevelanders, and a shared history as both fans and Clevelanders. They believe their character gets forged through loss, seeing themselves almost as superior to other fan bases that know little suffering, and enjoy congregating around and conjuring vitriol for their common enemy—the perceived originator of much of their suffering—team ownership. Exploring “integrating foci” revealed what the fan base centers on together relative to the teams and as a direct result of their fandom, mental fixations that help congeal their experience as an “imagined” community.

Finally, the “intensive concerns with extensive effects” aspect of the rubric organized data that exposed how what the fans think and feel relative to the teams manifests as behavior in their daily lives. It exposed how the teams’ game schedules directly affect the shape of the fans”
week, and how their dedication influences their personal emotional status. It also contained data disclosing the energy expended toward protecting themselves from emotional stress related to the teams. As revealed in the data, the fans’ ongoing thinking about their relationship to the Cleveland professional teams produces affected emotional, psychological, and physical behavior—core components of anything we might deem implicitly religious—helping regulate their everyday lived-world.

While the higher order themes offer sufficient nuance to justify themselves as separate themes, nevertheless overlap among the categories exists. Bailey himself suggested that this would always be the case when using his tripartite method, arguing that like turning a singular diamond to see different aspects of its cut, one might expect to observe multiple dimensions when studying particular phenomena related to a subject’s implicitly religious inclinations. I expected that those dimensions might display a measure of liminality relative to one another—and they do. I found that a particular consideration categorized under “commitment” could arguably, with an intentional tilt in perspective, fit also under “integrating foci”—indeed, in the final analysis, border blurring is present throughout the interview results. This does not call into question the efficacy of the higher order themes or their placement within the implicit religion template; rather, it emphasizes the difficulty (impossibility?) of constructing the partial knowledge of interviews into a conclusive and categorically closed system. Indeed, this work demonstrated once again that all categorizing rubrics are finally arbitrary and malleable—even if sufficiently useful for a moment.

This overlap between the categories produces a particular messiness along the thematic borders, a messiness that I would like to discuss now by reconsidering the higher order themes as “complications” of the participants’ fandom, hailing a “Venn diagram” overlap between the
themes to act as a template for discussion. How do these themes relate with one another, draw upon one another, and mutually depend on the historical energy of each other? In analyzing and discussing the results, I will reference the higher order themes as complications under the following categories: place as an extension of self, hegemonic sensibility, persistent suffering, collective memory, and emotional turbulence.

**The Complications of Place as an Extension of Self**

During the interviews, I became impressed by the level of articulate engagement each participant—whether young or old, male or female, kitchen worker or lawyer—accessed regarding both the city and the teams. They unanimously admitted that among subjects they could speak about with authority, “Cleveland and its teams” reside at or near the top of their list, topics invested with significant meaning for their lives. The intensely emotional and symbiotic relationship created by the interplay of specific place (Cleveland), specific people (Clevelanders), and specific teams (Cleveland Indians, Browns, and Cavaliers), at least partially emanates from a theoretical mooring called “place attachment,” or “the symbolic relationship formed by people giving culturally shared emotional/affective meanings to a particular space or piece of land that provides the basis for the individual’s and group’s understanding of and relation to the environment.”

Collectively, they profoundly understand and repeatedly communicate “culturally shared emotional/affective meanings” about Cleveland and its teams as though each had received a manual to read explaining what to believe about the city and its history, along with their place in it. On several occasions during interviews, when I pointed this phenomenon out to participants, they both laughed and marveled at the ubiquitous nature of their shared feelings and beliefs related to Cleveland, but were unable to articulate how it happens, offering only variations on the premise that “it”’s in our blood.”
Relative to the notion of both “invisible” and “implicit” religion, the importance of this initial observation—the forming among these fans of a visible “symbolic public” and corresponding tie to a historically founded civic narrative located on the soil they call home—should not be underestimated. Luckmann argued that with the weakening of religious-institutional influence on society, the chief concern of late-modern spirituality would not be legalistic morality or dogmatic belief but rather identity formation, an issue that would essentially become a “private phenomenon” since the “primary public institutions” would “no longer significantly contribute to the formation of individual consciousness and personality.” He argued that since the “overarching biographical context of significance is undetermined,” people would be left to their own devices to formulate a realization of “self,” a quest whose results constitute the locus of individual spirituality.\(^2\)

Among the participants in this study, it would seem that the “primary public institutions” were replaced—or at least are superseded—by a “primary public”; that is, as individuals, they identify themselves as a symbolically formed community of people (Clevelanders/Cleveland fans), allowing the history of both the city and its teams to draw the boundaries for their “overarching biographical context of significance.” While they may still work out the nuances of their sense of self in private and certainly derive meaning from other sources, at least for this group of fans some significant measure of their identity gets worked out together—as fans, located in and tied intimately to Cleveland. Beyond Luckmann, they also illustrate (and achieve) Sean McCloud’s contention that the subjective religious work of individuals in this cultural moment demands focused attention toward developing “new identities, achieved communities, and authoritative ontologies,” with evidence of all three occurring among these participants specifically related to their Cleveland-based fandom.\(^3\)
Place Attachment and the Development of Personal and Collective Identity

Already the temptation exists to correlate this “primary public” with some historically religious, superficial notion of “congregation,” but this inclination should be resisted (or at least moved beyond) lest we miss the arguably more significant and broader applications available regarding the development of “self-understanding”—the locus of late-modern, neo-religious proclivity—in this case tied to place. As Irwin Altman and Setha M. Low surmise, “place attachment may contribute to the formation, maintenance and preservation of the identity of a person, group, or culture.” Hence, when Dorigen says, “We're Browns fans. We're not Steelers fans. We're not Patriot fans. We're not Lakers fans. We're from Cleveland! We love Cleveland and we're Cleveland fans and I don't think any of us could even fathom not being a Cleveland fan,” she betrays her love for the city itself, manifested in a love for the team that represents the city—and by implication, herself. She directly concludes, “I think all of us consider it [pulling for the teams] a part of our identity,” illustrating Altman and Low’s contention that the identity of a person or group may be directly tied to the dirt they call home—and transferred to the texts produced upon that same earth.

Gary succinctly captures this same position when he says that commitment to the teams makes rational sense because “it’s loyalty to your friends, to your hometown.” He draws a line between all three—hometown, friends, and the teams—suggesting the teams are connected to both the ground he calls home and the intimate relationships with friends (and family) that develop there. While Gary describes the emotional attachment he feels toward Cleveland as home, Roger C. Aden and Scott Titsworth further contend that, within a particular locale, “sports would seem to provide a means of enacting and perpetuating such an emotional attachment,” regardless of the on-field success historically experienced by the team. Accordingly, personal
and collective identity construction may take place using texts provided within and produced by the place itself—in this case, professional teams birthed within the confines of the city proper—and connections with both the place and text (each contributing to an identification of home) may “constitute a vital source of both individual and cultural identity and security, a point of departure from which we orient ourselves in the world.” Hence, the teams and the place are intimately connected, and highly identified fans—treating one as equal to the other—derive a sense of self from both.

**Devotion to the “Soul” of Cleveland**

These fans, then, demonstrate a commitment to the “place” containing the teams by supporting the teams themselves. Regarding their commitment to the teams, wins and losses become secondary issues at best, except as contributing to a positive branding effect, exemplified in Caroline’s declaration that “I’ll never not root for the teams, even if they lose every game.” To reject the teams becomes in effect a rejection of Cleveland proper, a rejection of the “soul” of the city, a soul these fans feel within themselves. An aggregate sense of what makes Cleveland— the Terminal Tower, stadiums, ethnic villages, hospitals, West Side Market, Euclid Avenue, the lakefront, not to mention the teams themselves—forms a collective whole in the mind of these fans, creating a shared sense and identification of “home,” what Relph calls “the foundation of our identity as individuals and as members of a community, the dwelling place of being.” As such, their zeal toward the teams might be interpreted as a protective jealousy for their native soil, the locus of their identity both as individuals and as a community.

Simon Anholt observes that “the identity and image of the places we inhabit are really a seamless extension of the identity and image of ourselves.” He further argues that since “it is a natural human tendency for people to identify themselves with their city, region or country,” it
becomes reasonable to conclude then that an intimate “sense of self” may also be derived specifically from a city or region”’s teams and the players that comprise those teams, producing an unspoken but still axiomatically understood syllogism: “Rejecting the teams equals a rejection of the city. Rejecting the city equals a rejection of me. Thus, rejecting the teams equals a rejection of me.”8 Put positively, to embrace the teams is to embrace the city, and to embrace the city is to embrace themselves; therefore, to embrace the teams is to embrace themselves.

**Place and Symbolic Capital**

As P.M. McGuirk and David Rowe contend, “Places have come to be conceptualized as constructed through a dynamic articulation of their material and representational dimensions, and place identity is understood to be mutable, contingent and fluid. *Cultural stocks of knowledge about places can, however, constitute a prevailing, often stubbornly persistent balance of forces that name, interpret and project place meanings.* A place in this sense is a „text,“ the meaning of which is continually being made, reproduced and re-made.”9 The fans in this study seem to suggest that their teams” winning or losing—a key in the “dynamic articulation of their material and representational dimensions”—plays a significant role in changing the “place meaning” of Cleveland, acting as a form of “symbolic capital” to the rest of the nation.10 They are wearied by the “stubbornly persistent balance of forces” constantly reinforcing a narrative of losing, longing for the “text” of their city to be remade under a new storyline. As Henry said, “Winning is everything because we have this reputation of being „the mistake on the lake,“ and I love this city and hate that it has that negative reputation,” implying that national reputation regarding Cleveland-proper corresponds to wins and losses among its teams. This at least partially explains the testimonies of intractable commitment toward the teams described by these fans: they need the teams to change the way the rest of the nation views them as Clevelanders, and the
teams are the most nationally recognizable aspect of their civic (and by correlation, personal) identity. Again, a concern for national reputation is consistent with Anthony Giddens’ argument that in a late-modern setting, as a component of one’s spirituality, “individuals have to worry about who they are, who they want to be, and how they want other people to perceive them.”

However, the promised change of perception gets challenged when, for example, one of the teams makes the playoffs or receives the privilege of a regular season prime-time broadcast and national media still ignore Cleveland (at least from the perspective of these participants)—as when Andy complains that on national telecasts, broadcasters will be “gushing and talking about the other team, the franchise, the city,” while “Cleveland is barely mentioned.” But whether the rest of the nation feels differently about Cleveland when its teams win may not ultimately matter relative to the significance of the change in the psyche of Clevelanders themselves, since, as Dorigen astutely observes, “I really want Cleveland to do well more than anything else…when the teams win, we have excitement downtown… I just think if there is excitement behind them it helps the economy and to have excitement you have to win and then everybody feels better.” Indeed, the emphasis these participants place on winning a championship seems finally to be substantially tilted toward localized identity enhancement—a desire to feel good about themselves among themselves—and whatever happens nationally becomes a secondary (though still important) by-product.

Daniel Wann reminds us that “Because of their close association with a team, highly identified fans often view it [game outcomes] as a reflection of themselves…the team’s successes become the fans’ successes and the team’s failures become the fans’ failures.” Thus, winning constitutes a potential change in local identity subjectively for those calling Cleveland home: Tim’s vulnerable testimony that “Yeah, I feel like I’m a loser sometimes. Because I put
my heart out there and it’s always getting broken. So yeah, I’m a loser,” contrasts importantly with several others’ contention that, “Regardless of what others think about me, when my teams win I feel like a winner.”

**Personal and Collective “Branding”: A Collateral Effect of “Totemic” Projection**

Nevertheless, regardless of efficacy, these fans want their teams, as a form of “symbolic capital,” to project a positive, winning image of them to the rest of the world outside Cleveland. Practically, they want the teams to act as an advertisement—for both the city and themselves. As Anholt suggests, “Groups of people are subject to the branding effect just as places are: they are perceived both internally and externally as summarizable entities, and thus have ‘brand images’; their wellbeing and prosperity are to a large extent conditioned and influenced by that image.” Thus, a group of people—in this case a collection of “fans”—may be “branded” with the label accorded to their place and the associated texts within the locale, giving them “a public identity which overlays, influences and to some extent distorts their individual identity.”

Hence, at least for this group of fans, the personal importance afforded to the success or failure of the teams abides.

Against this backdrop, Emile Durkheim’s notion of the totem becomes especially relevant in this cultural moment. Whereas his assessment of Australian “pagans” sounded antiquated and quaint in light of the global dominance of major revelatory religions a century ago, intensified secularization certainly brings his analysis back into vogue within twenty-first century North American culture, whose inhabitants are challenged as Luckmann’s “autonomous identity constructors.” “Totem worship” through the teams allows the community essentially to worship itself by being fans, while producing a visual brand through team-texts that project nationally (though internally that “brand” may be continually contested by the fans themselves).
Indeed, the fans acknowledged that they project onto the players something of what they want for themselves, whether image perception, character expectations, or excellence and achievement yearnings, confirming Cornel Sandvoss’ contention that “the relationship between fans and their objects of fandom is based on fans’ self-reflective reading and hence narcissistic pleasures, as fans are fascinated by extensions of themselves without realizing it.” For example, MikeF suggests that the type of player that he embraced in the past was a personal act, since, “They were like, sort of like, me…and I feel that the professional athlete now—the few that I really feel like I’ve got a relationship with or really want to follow—are people that are like me. Or I think they’re like me,” and Taylor can say without a hint of exaggeration that “if someone talks bad about your team, your team is like an extension of you, so it’s like they’re talking bad about you or a member of your family.”

Thus, they both desire and expect the sports teams to become a projection of their idealized self. Identifying with the players and teams allows the possibility—or at least the perceived possibility—of satisfying these longings through the celebrity of others. As Michael Novak observes, “when people talk about athletes’ performances, it is almost as though they are talking about a secret part of themselves. As if the stars had some secret bonding, some Siamese intertwining with their own psyches.” Correspondingly, who they pick as representative of the teams is usually a reflection of how they see themselves. In various ways, they repeatedly say, “When I look at this team, I want to see the self I envision,” an indication that while accurate measurement regarding the relative identity gleaned from the teams remains elusive, a desire to garner a sense of “self understanding” through the teams—specifically, through the players—assuredly exists.
A tension arises, however, when the players themselves do not cooperate. For example, when the desired branding projection requires a “blue-collar” work ethic but the players perform as prima donnas who give uninspired effort, cognitive dissonance occurs that resists easy resolution. As Andy reminds us, “We don’t want to see flashy players. We don’t like Terrell Owens diva kind of players. I don’t think we relate to those kind of players. We want to see hardworking players, physical players who are also playing smart.” Dave represents what several participants said regarding LeBron James” exit from both his final playoff series and the city itself, an example for them that acts typologically for the “anti-blue-collar” approach to living.

You know, he seemed like another spoiled athlete that had always gotten whatever he wanted his whole life. And as soon as he found something that was hard to do, he got out as soon as he could. He wanted to go get it the easy way, especially after he said, „Hey, I'm bringing championships here.“ He didn't produce and as soon as he didn't think he could do it here, he fucking left instead of trying to do it. And quitting in the playoffs, come on, man, come on.

The effort to settle this tension becomes as much a part of their fandom quest as cheering for the teams themselves, since according to these fans plenty more players than James have seemingly “quit” on the team and city before their contractual obligations expired. As the actual players spend less and less time within the community where they work/play, fan expectations circulate—somewhat in vain—among the fan base itself, rarely being communicated to or demonstrated by the actual players themselves.17

Cleveland Fandom as an Inherited Tradition

Fandom gets instilled in childhood such that a love for Cleveland teams becomes hegemonic; nobody feels like they “became” fans—they just always were, as though part of their inherited DNA. No one talked of a specific moment in which they actually decided or chose to become a Cleveland fan, and no one produced a “conversion” story to support their fandom.
“It’s like the air that we breathe”—and for that reason alone one could argue that almost by necessity the attachment to the team forms a part of their self-understanding. Indeed, we could contend that in Cleveland with this particular set of fans, team connection and devotion tie directly to personal self-understanding since with rare exception fan devotion exists concurrently with both family and civic identity, thus becoming part of personal identity without a person even consciously knowing it. As Anholt provocatively summarizes, “the identity and image of the place we inhabit are really a seamless extension of the identity and image of ourselves,” since “we are social creatures, team players to our core, and our core finds meaning and identity almost as much in the team as in the player.” Thus, according to these fans, we might conclude that whatever else gets added to the subjective identity of an individual Cleveland fan over the course of his or her life, it builds upon the foundation of “Clevelander”—and therefore “Cleveland fan”—cornerstones laid seemingly instantaneously at birth.

I sense that some of the fans in this study experience an anxiety created by the tension of not really “choosing” their team affiliation. In a culture where negotiation between subjective identity-construction options remains constant and fluid, these Clevelanders don’t feel they have a choice of teams to support—regardless of the irrationality of the case. In their own minds, they are stuck with what they’ve got, since identifying with another team outside Cleveland betrays a loyalty to home—and thus, as already argued, themselves. Unavoidably, the teams must win, creating a sense of desperation in fans that builds with each losing season—becoming, as Andy suggests, “a badge you don’t wanna be wearing.” Henry refers to the teams as “the unhealthy girlfriend who you try to break up with, but never really goes away,” and I gather, especially among the older participants, that this analogy works well to illustrate their codependent conundrum.
In answer to the question, “If you were the only living Cleveland sports fan, would you continue to support the teams?” they unanimously indicated that they would remain devoted to the teams (albeit in considerably more lonely fashion) because of their relationship to “Cleveland.” Once again, as Alan Gussow reminds us, “we are homesick for places, we are reminded of places…it is the sounds and smells and sights of places which haunt us and against which we often measure our present,” and the place of Cleveland, so intimately bound with these fans’ sense of self, maintains its grip even in the face of the losing teams and tarnished identity associated with it.  

**Collective Effervescence and the Experience of “Sacrality”**  

Fans in this study emphasize the importance of watching and experiencing the games with others, citing the significance of encountering “collective effervescence” with their fellow fans during the most “sacred” moments of their Cleveland sports history. Many previous studies indicate that sports fandom successfully “engenders a feeling of belonging, identification, and group integration for an otherwise alienated and atomized urban mass,” and these fans certainly testify to this reality. In every case where fans described a particular setting as “sacred,” a significant portion of the moment’s gravity resulted from the collected group: Andy watching Browns’ playoff games with family and friends, Caroline describing the exuberance in the streets after a Cavalier playoff win, Dave with his Dad and joint-passer in the midst of the crowd in Cleveland Browns Stadium, ChrisB with her mom sitting on the first baseline at Municipal Stadium, Dorigen describing the ferocity of the fans inside the “Q” for a Cavaliers game, JohnP with his wife and friends on the first Opening Day at then-Jacobs Field. Perhaps C. Wright Mills went too far when predicting that “in due course, the sacred shall disappear altogether except, possibly, in the private realm,” for while the vestments of the institutionally-decréed
sacred are now almost entirely absent from the public square, people are free to declare their own notion of sacred in their lived experience with others—what Pippa Norris and Ron Inglehart deem the “sacralization” of everyday life.\(^{22}\)

Harold Bloom predicted that the late-modern “religion of the self” would universally lead to “solitude and the abyss”; contrastingly, Cornell Sandvoss contends that where the fan text becomes a narrative focal point in the construction of life narratives and identities, one may expect that communities will gather around that same text, declaring and sharing moments as sacred with one another.\(^{23}\) It naturally follows that as persons create and re-create their own subjective “selves,” they will create and seek their own sense of experiential “sacredness,” and as Sandvoss again notes, a fan community may easily perform as “a set of people whose interpersonal relations complete for one another the symbolic expression of religious experience.”\(^{24}\) Thus, ironically, for these individual identity constructors, a certain dependence on the group for moments of sacrality arises, acting as another bonding agent between both the fans and the teams themselves.

**The Complications of a Hegemonic Sensibility**

Grossberg refers to the “affective sensibility of fandom” and in doing so, he locates specific fandoms within specific contexts and suggests that each “fandom” becomes infected (or, perhaps more positively, birthed) by the sensibility of that context. Significantly for the participants of this study, a sensibility not only defines how a specific text can be experienced within that context, but also effectually influences the consuming audience’s relative place in the world—or at least their perception of it.
**Vestiges of the “Blue-collar” Ethos**

Overwhelmingly, the “sensibility” fashioned by the comingling of this particular audience (Cleveland fans), text (Cleveland teams), and cultural context/apparatus (Cleveland city), reflects a consistently pronounced and practically saturating ethos called “blue-collar,” best summarized by NormB when he says, “Clevelanders are the salt of the earth, hard-working, straight-dealing. They don't either take a lot of bullshit, put up with a lot of bullshit, or give a lot of bullshit. Straight-forward.” This labeling produces both pride and insecurity for the fans of this study: pride in their heritage as bearers of the North American Industrial Revolution—when the notion of “blue-collar” carried much more favorable connotations—and insecurity for having been largely shelved by the Technological/Information Revolution that progressively moved the locus of national attention to the West Coast in the last decades of the twentieth century.\(^{25}\) When John describes for me the now silenced work produced by the Hulett loaders just outside the window of the Parkview, he does so with a wistful tone that harkens the lost years of Cleveland’s glory—the final decades of the nineteenth century through the first three of the twentieth—and speaks with pride about the clientele of the Parkview being “working folks.” Work and identity continue to merge unapologetically for this group of fans, and regardless of their more recent shortcomings as an economic destination, their history as practical founders of the Industrial Revolution in this country continues to produce both pride and expectation, reminding themselves with Caroline that “America became the America we have because of the Industrial Revolution, and Cleveland was at the center of it.” If the rest of the country chooses to forget this fact, it only inspires these fans to rehearse it more often, more vigorously—indeed, more defiantly.
Perhaps unsurprising given a blue-collar appreciation for unionization, the sensibility of the Western Reserve gravitates toward the communal, where historically the goals of the community itself outweigh individual aspiration; fittingly, these fans reflect an appreciation for “average” players doing the extraordinary, pulling off something as a team that rises above their potential as individual players. Remembering the thick ethnic history of the city, where immigrant populations collected in tight-knit neighborhoods for the purpose of survival—both in general and to preserve a heritage—these fans repeatedly voice their preference for team success and distain for individual showmanship apart from the team, leading to the exultation, for example, of the “Miracle of Richfield” and “Lenny Wilkens-led” Cavalier teams and an almost universally dismissive attitude toward the LeBron James years—in spite of the exhilaration and excitement he generated.26 For this group of fans, winning matters—but apparently, not at the expense of a team-centered approach.

That every participant regularly referred to “blue-collar” ideals, values, and expectations became especially curious given the demographic of my formal interview sample, with no less than twelve of the fifteen participants working in historically “white collar”/service professions.27 Further, data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics suggests that at least two-thirds of the jobs in the Greater Cleveland region now qualify as historically “white collar.” Nevertheless, regardless of actual vocational realities, the “blue-collar” ethos pervades this particular interview sample, both grounding and fueling their commitment to the idea of “loyalty.”28

**Loyalty as the Pre- eminent Value**

Loyalty becomes an aggressive call to “stick together”—no matter the circumstances—and to never abandon one another, even, as Dave suggests, when “constantly
being dealt a shit sandwich.” Perhaps to cope, fans engage in behaviors reflective of what Richard Campbell calls “Basking In spite of Reflected Failure” (BIRF); that is, while the teams continue to lose, Cleveland fans revel in their loyalty, camaraderie, rebelliousness, and various alternative reasons for maintaining fandom. In this way, they can see themselves as a “winner” due to their allegiance as a “true” fan, justifying their level of commitment and devotion while avoiding the dissonance created by the “internal degradation of the self as non-loyal, a quitter, or a fair-weather fan.” Loyalty in this context enhances camaraderie by associating with others holding similar values and opinions, while also becoming an expression of the “rebellious consumer,” that renegade fan who chooses to go against the grain of “success” by professing steadfast fidelity toward a “loser.” As Henry both profoundly and defiantly suggests, “You know what, yeah, our teams do suck but guess what—I’ve still got brown and orange hanging in the whatever,” evidence of his own integrity in spite of the constantly mounting losses his teams produce. Put in this light, even loyalty becomes a function of self-understanding—a chief reflection, as George says, of “the things that are important to Midwesterners, certain core values”—and thus people stick with the teams as though adhering to something of themselves, remaining true to their “nature” as Midwesterners.

This ethic of cohesion frames a largely unspoken but understood “us against the world” attitude, a posture coloring moments within each interview. The expectation of loyalty extends beyond the fan base toward the teams and players themselves. Thus, they celebrate the player who chooses Cleveland (through either free agency or simply choice of words in the media); alternatively, they take offense to the player who leaves the team and the city through his own will. Obviously, this partially explains the offense of Art Modell’s choice to move the Browns to Baltimore and LeBron James’ decision to switch teams—whatever their reasons, fans interpreted
the moves as a breach in their “loyalty” to the city, and by extension, to the fans themselves. More importantly, then, as players (and sometimes owners) largely ignorant of the trajectory of their role within the historical drama of Cleveland sports come and go, the fans express a loyalty to one another as fans, regularly rehearsing and re-voicing their commitment to the shared narrative of their collective experience. They commit to keep the mythology alive, to play their own role in passing their heritage as fans to the next generation, and to stick together through the losing, all while maintaining the aura of a persecuted minority group.

“Blue-collar” amid Other Sociological Issues (Race/Gender/Sexuality)

Discussion surrounding the nature of a “blue-collar” sensibility among an ethnically and socio-economically diverse sample could expect to be influenced further by racial diversity, since race necessarily complicates notions of what it means to be blue-collar in the first place. Unfortunately, while this particular male/female sample reflects both traditionally white and blue-collar vocations, it offers only the perspective of White patrons—leaving a conspicuous hole in the sampling demographic. Thus, as constrained by a White sample, this study expresses a set of values historically linked to a Caucasian blue-collar population, suggesting that there could be distinctive readings from other populations performing different racial identities producing different results.

For example, some research indicates that African-American attitudes toward “drawing attention to oneself” through pre- and mid-game expressions (understood as a non-blue-collar behavior and regularly scoffed at during these interviews) might be viewed more favorably when compared with other White constituents’ attitude toward the same behavior. However, we cannot assume a heterogeneous African-American population and position regarding these
matters, and given the absence of non-Caucasian voices in the data, this study simply does not allow for direct observations regarding these identity constructions.\textsuperscript{31}

However, perhaps we can provisionally draw additional insight from another study done in a blue-collar, Midwestern tavern. E.E. Lemasters, in his ethnography of a working class sample paralleling this one, describes the Caucasion workers at the bar as contentious toward issues of sociological marginality.

His cocktail hour is from five until seven p.m. But he spends it with his working buddies, whom he hasn”t seen for ten minutes, while his wife waits for him at home. The beverage is beer, not martinis. He can”t understand or doesn”t like much of what he sees on television, and so he watches little other than sports events. He loathes or fears blacks, college students, women”s liberationists, and homosexuals. He doesn”t trust businessmen, his own union leaders, politicians, or Jews, and he is convinced that white-collar workers really don”t earn their money.\textsuperscript{32}

LeMasters describes his “blue-collar aristocrats” using stereotypical descriptors that paint his sample as shallow, racist, sexist, homophobic, and generally paranoid. While one might argue that much has changed sociologically since he wrote his book in 1975, and that certainly the Parkview includes more than just a pure blue-collar element, I could easily find specific examples of these same mentalities among my own sample: Owner Norm pausing by my side and shaking his head, wondering aloud why his White jazz guitarists “seem to have a thing for Black women”; Bill connecting Kevin Mack, a highly successful, dark-skinned running back from the heralded mid-1980 Browns teams, with “the crack-head whores he used to hang out with”; Doc describing his one-time dominance of the Cleveland bartender scene, even rising to the top of the challenging “black clubs”; Chris criticizing “Ms. Butterscotch” for making her blues sets “too much about herself”; multiple conversations with random Caucasian people at the bar referencing “that”s how they are” when describing the behaviors of specific Black players. Obviously, whatever racial progress the general “blue-collar” population achieved since
LeMasters wrote, more than just remnants of blatant racism continue to exist (at least within my interview sample at the Parkview), suggesting, once again, that race complicates the discussion.

Further confounding matters, studies show that people in what Victor Turner described as a “liminoid state of communitas” (understood as “any condition outside or on the peripheries of everyday life”) will lay aside their diverse backgrounds and momentarily neglect their personal differences, accepting each other as equals and behaving as a unitary group. These same people may even temporarily embrace a similar value system surrounding the object of their affection (as fans for particular teams, for example) while remaining significantly divergent in their thinking under ordinary circumstances, thereby making it difficult to get a clean read on their lived-world. Thus, interviewing the same “blue-collar” demographic while changing the “race” variable presents another study possibility altogether, revealing different nuances dependent not only on the predominant race of the chosen sample, but also affected by the parameters of the setting within which they are found.

Race is not the only complicating sociological topic revealed in this data, as sundry other cultural study themes rest conspicuously on the surface of the interviews. For example, MikeF’s decision to call abandoning the teams “a kind of sodomy, or a sin like it,” betrays a particular stance regarding sexuality, as does Debbie’s purposeful statement that she “missed my gay guys last night,” and the nicknaming of a certain gay patron (however fraternally) as “Gay Billy.” Tim’s suggestion that being a Cleveland fan among fans from other cities is “like being the fat girl in a bikini around supermodels” certainly requires further consideration, as does Katie’s assertion that others are shocked that as a woman she could be so committed to the teams.

Other women also reflected an absorbed ethos that would support a particular (misogynistic?) orientation toward themselves as women and the embracing of a latent
hegemonic masculinity: Sarah pointing out that men in the bar wearing button-down shirts were baseball lovers, while the tight t-shirt wearing men were “tough” football followers; ChrisB appearing completely unfazed while watching the baseball All-Star game with a table of men talking lewdly about other women at the bar; the acknowledgement by several women that being conversant about the teams makes them potentially attractive to men. From a cultural studies standpoint, sport as a defining feature of a community arrives inherently problematic for reasons illustrated by these snapshots—as Harry Edwards first argued in the 1970′s, sport comes with certain assumptions already built into its scaffolding. Yet, as these issues are not the primary concern of this study, I merely acknowledge their presence here, recognizing them as seeds of other potential work.

The Complications of Persistent Suffering

Participants in this study sought to make sense of their own suffering as Cleveland fans, seeking a meaningful interpretation of their jagged history. Indeed, like human suffering of all varieties—whether real or perceived—the suffering experienced by Clevelanders seeks clarification, as though explanation might diminish its affective strength, captured in ChrisB′s lament-laden query, “Can we ever catch a break? I mean really. It′s just always heartbreak after heartbreak. We just can′t get it done—why is that?” While I never initiated the word, frequently the term “cursed” entered the conversation (though usually with a smirk), and while no one actually subscribed to the reality of a literal hex somehow shackling the city and its inhabitants, participants seemed almost prepared to accept the notion as a viable explanation. In Cleveland, “mistakes are the fans” meat, a „curse” their potatoes, and victimization their approach to life,” a defeatism that according to sports writer Bill Livingston amounts to “the worst lake effect.” In place of a curse, fans are more than prepared to gang up on the one material target
available beyond the players—the ownership—and regularly deposit blame at their feet, a possibility made doubly attractive for fans by the elitist and non-blue-collar implications of owning a team.

**Suffering as a Symbolic Boundary**

Suffering creates a boundary, delimiting the “true” Cleveland fan from all “others.” It becomes what Cohen calls a “symbolic map reference,” a point of orientation providing Cleveland fans an acceptable reference point against which to “formulate, express and evaluate [their own] personal identities,” while also setting a boundary for the community itself. Henry explains that the shared history of losing becomes strangely “identifying” for the fan base, almost a part of their personality as a people. He says, “There's almost a certain satisfaction that comes from loving a team that sucks,” perhaps because “we've been so trained to expect to lose.” The irony of this “satisfaction” lies in the reality that while everyone despises the losing, a practical sense of ownership—again, perhaps an identifying narrative—surrounds it. As Henry continues, “Whatever it is, but we're just so used to it at this point, it's almost like we love to hate it. We hate that we're losers but it's sort of our niche, our thing. I think there's a part of us that we kind of embrace—it's ours.” Suffering is the stigmata of Cleveland fandom: those who bear the mark of vicariously understood misery, acquired through memories both actively experienced and passively received as tradition (re: heritage), constitute Cleveland fandom. All others—if other categories even exist—are imposters.

Hailing what Christian Lundberg calls the “enjoyment of marginality,” Cleveland fans rehearse “ritually repeated narratives” of their own failure—both as a city and as sports organizations—constantly reaffirming and maintaining their own sense of victimization at the hands of perceived “others” outside Cleveland. As Caroline reminded me when discussing the
character deficiencies of other cities, “[In Cleveland] we have shitty weather. We have a shitty economy. We have shitty teams…But we love this place and the teams that play here.” While they publically despise the suffering, the interviews suggest that they privately embrace it, valorizing the collective honor of hanging together through tough times, sharing an identity as a marginalized people patiently enduring their scorn until the teams usher an anticipated day of redemption. Indeed, they revel in being loyal to a loser, touting their association in the face of failure.

**Suffering as an Exclusive Indicator of “Clevelander” Legitimacy**

The shared value of suffering creates a bond, but also, ironically acts as a sort of positively weighted, negative symbolic capital; that is, participants perceive that non-Clevelanders view the city with a sort of pathos that might actually cause others to pull for them when the opportunity presents itself. I am not suggesting that Clevelanders consciously want this sort of pity, because in fact it flies completely in the face of the rugged, gritty, self-determined ethic that historically characterizes the civic identity—but it exists nevertheless, and functions to both separate and mark the Cleveland fan base relative to other constituencies around the country. However, as *Plain Dealer* writer Brett Larkin wrote after the Indians dramatically lost Game 7 of the 1997 World Series (and a position multiple interviews validated),

> Only Clevelanders can comprehend the depth of this disappointment. The fact is, if you aren’t from here, you don’t count. Your sadness over all of this is genuine, no doubt. But it doesn’t mean squat. In order to count, you have to have lived through all the jokes. You have to have felt the sting of default. You have to remember what it was like when a city experienced the municipal version of a nervous breakdown. And you have to remember firsthand the endless heartbreaks this town’s sports teams have visited upon us. Some have already taken that heartbreak to the grave.”

37
Larkin articulates what Edward Relph calls “empathetic insidedness”: apprehending a place as being rich in meaning, identifying fully with it through personal and vicarious experience, then becoming figuratively absorbed with/into it. Thus, a proper appreciation for the Cleveland “passion” story becomes available only to those who have directly experienced the narrative for themselves. Suffering not only becomes a badge of honor, but also leads toward deeper “character,” a privilege only available to those whose first-hand experience indelibly marks them. It also separates them from other fan bases, even those historically mentioned in conversations regarding “suffering fan bases,” as Dave vehemently states.

Any city, pick a city—Detroit, Pittsburgh—any city. You can go to Chicago. Oh, wow, wah, wah, our Cubs haven't won for...Fuck you, your Bears have won. The Blackhawks have won. The Bears have won. Your Bulls have won. So, I don't want to hear any of your crap, you know. We ain't won anything. I'm 38-years old and I've never seen a winner ever and indoor soccer doesn't count. It just doesn't count.

**Suffering as Critical Component of Subjective Narrative**

But what if all the teams started winning—consistently? The participants in these interviews suggest that something of their own self-understanding would certainly be altered. They remain ambivalent in the face of ignorance about winning’s ultimate effect on the Cleveland fan base—whether for better or worse—but without doubt such a change would create some amount of disequilibrium. As Andy pondered, “If they win, I often ask myself, „Is it gonna be anti-climactic?” Is it going to be like, okay, it happened—now what? Or is it going to feel like a whole veil of clouds has been lifted from me? I’m waiting to see.” A welcomed dissonance, for sure—but a shaking nonetheless.

Jacques Lacan suggests that we fear getting the very things we believe will make us whole, for if our goal is finally reached but fails to produce the promised effect, what now?
Indeed, what intoxicates us also poisons us, and leaves us potentially without antidote—a risk and potentially disappointing condition these fans willingly welcome.39

The Complications of Collective Memory

Geoffrey S. Smith suggests that “nostalgia is at once an historical airbrush and powerful socio-cultural glue,” a bonding agent that in this case melds Cleveland fans into an imagined community of consequence—economically, psychologically, socially—throughout the region.40

Nostalgia carries particular significance within the imaginative life and recurring festive rituals of Cleveland fans. Their collective identity amalgamates largely around a shared collective history, relying upon sacred memories of the past to steadily inform the present, with today’s games constantly adding new layers to the narrative of both their individual and civic identity.

Luckmann suggested that one day groups might coalesce to such a degree that they develop sectarian characteristics, forming imagined communities that function to give plausibility and support to a subjectively constructed but now commonly shared belief system. He predicted that these “cliques” would serve as “significant others who would share in the construction and stabilization of „private“ universes of „ultimate“ significance.”41 Indeed, this particular group of fans reflected a singular voice regarding memories of Cleveland sports history; that is, while they each interact with those moments in subjectively distinguishing ways, they nevertheless share at least generic renderings of these past events. In this manner, they both “construct” and “stabilize” for one another a dramatically particular, richly archived and constantly retold history that carries a weight of “ultimate significance.” The memories then contribute substantially to their self-understanding—both as individuals and a collectivity—and while the relative influence of this history cannot be definitively measured, its existence seems almost undeniable from the data collected.
Collective Memory Forged by Retelling the Story

Sheranne Fairley describes collective memory as “recollections that belong to a group as a whole—a shared memory of past events held by members of a social group.” In turn, as a group relives past experiences, “collective memories become more cohesive (or salient) as various fragments are placed back together through communication.”

I notice that conversations about the teams constantly flood the bar and while certainly dynamic, they replay essentially the same narrative on a constantly repeating loop—the names, games, eras acting as fodder for the constantly expanding legend of Cleveland sports. The composite retelling provokes a Geertzian “thickness” among the verbal scribes: they rehash the setting of particular games, decisions made by coaches, the weather, player moves, personal responses to outcomes—even the cultural moment surrounding the game itself.

But perhaps more importantly, the stories about the teams act as reminders of themselves, archiving critical threads of their own history, both personal and collective. This coalescing of a collective, nostalgic memory serves not only to remind them of their past identities and reinforce their current identities, but also holds within them the experiences that led to the construction, the rebuilding, or the confirmation of their identities in the first place. As Fred Davis claims, “nostalgia is one of the means—or better, one of the more readily accessible psychological lenses—we employ in the never ending work of constructing, maintaining, and reconstructing our identities,” and significantly for these Clevelanders, the team annals become storage space for their own sense of self—as individuals and as a community.

Remembering with Family and Friends

For fans in this study, nostalgic memory comes packaged in recollections of family and friends, “sacred” memories created by the energy of feverish crowds and combinatory
moments—with even the ubiquitous logos constantly evoking past pleasures. Tim directly captures this ever-present nostalgic undercurrent when he representatively says, “I know it’s crazy, but like, I would love to go back. I would love to be alive to see the Browns in the AFC Championship where the whole world was watching it. You know what I mean?” The “going back” includes not only the team in a championship, providing an opportunity for the collective effervescence of the crowd, but a moment when “the whole world was watching” and Cleveland is relevant, admired, of consequence. This longing reappears throughout the interviews, and prompts the rehearsal of past moments of remembered and perceived significance. Nostalgia appeals to a past (whether real or imagined), that comforts the soul, declaring “an order that was once natural and whole, against which the present is viewed as hopelessly fallen.”

Sven Birkerts calls nostalgia “that peculiar condition wherein memory fuses with desire to create a pain that is very nearly pleasurable. Or a pleasure verging upon pain.” Indeed, as repeatedly observed during the interviews, for the Cleveland fan, nostalgia “hurts so good”—ironically packaged in memories of both victory and defeat.

**Negotiating the Border between “Fan” and “Fanatic”**

But knowledge of the Cleveland sports history also contributes to an acquired sensitivity toward being seen as *too* committed, with fans attempting to maintain the appearance of a particular aloofness (or at least the appearance of being conveniently disinterested) among one another. They desire separation from the “fanaticism” of the fan performing as one having no life outside the teams, and repeatedly state the importance of keeping the teams in their place, recognizing them as a “diversion,” an “outlet,” a “break from the daily grind in Cleveland.” As MikeF explained on behalf of this view, “everything should be cut to proper proportion, since you don’t want to be too much of this and not enough of that.” The history of losing, while
inducing a persistent nostalgic reverie, also produces an instinctive protective reaction, a
response that often seems to coincide with gaining fresh perspective on what matters in life.

Truly, in spite of extensive interviewing, it remains impossible to calculate accurately the
daily mental space taken up by Cleveland sports among these fans, since we are not computers
and cannot precisely determine how cerebral disk-drive space gets categorically allocated, nor
can we definitively demonstrate one’s level of “commitment” relative to another fan. Yet, in the
case of those who projected an image of cool disinterest related to the concept “fan,” but who
could then fill ninety minutes of audio time with substantive, philosophical explanation
regarding front office decisions, player personnel issues, prognostication of future team success,
and general Cleveland sports team chatter, a paradox (if not contradiction) seems suspiciously at
work. It would appear that regardless of their stated intention to keep their fandom “cut to
proper proportion,” that in the case of the participants in this study, no other social convention
wields as much emotional and life-altering power on their psyche as the teams.

The older fans offer resistance by refusing to attend games or pay money to a losing
team, but still embrace the teams as a slice of themselves. “I’m just not going to deal with them
right now” seems to be the default exit when the teams are particularly loathsome—yet they will
still pay attention to them in the news, still make them a topic of conversation (even if that
conversation is nothing more than a gripe session). They want to cut themselves off, but know
that they can’t fully—it’s a part of them, a part of their unfolding civic (and therefore necessarily
personal) history that cannot be completely silenced. As already stated, efforts to minimize the
teams’ effect on the individual life result more from anticipated pain than genuine disdain, for by
their own admission, the teams, place, and fans are inextricably bound to one another.
The Complications of Emotional Turbulence

Though certainly more diminished for the “older” participants in this study, the outcome of games continue to effect the emotional life of these fans—both positively and negatively—at least until the next day, and often well into the rest of the week, confirming the possibility, as Sandvoss argued, for the “the fan text [to] gain structuring influence over the fan.” Fans in this study display an acute emotional alertness to memories of both wins and losses, and the emotive output described points to a significant level of meshing with their own person, further contributing to self-understanding and enabling social connection while scripting a personal narrative within which to live.

Longing to Experience “Joy”

Wann lists “eustress” (good-stress) as one of eight reasons why people become fans in the first place, and although for these fans an initial burst of eustress almost always resolves itself in defeat and discouragement, nevertheless the emotional stimulation adds “excitement, thrill and wonder” the same way that “herbs and spices improve the taste of a bland main dish.” Katie referred to the “pain that comes with an addiction, but you still keep doing it” in describing her fandom, and like a “druggie” looking for another high, the fans in this study explained the longing they had to feel what surrounds the game: the swelling pre-game anticipation, tail-gaiting camaraderie, game-time crowd ecstasy—even the post-game euphoria (win) or “hangover” (loss).

Each game presents the renewed possibility of experiencing what C.S. Lewis called moments of sehnsucht (loosely translated “joy”), an intensity of longing that produces an overwhelming experience of wanting to absorb moments into one’s whole being, “a desire whose mere wanting is felt to somehow be a delight.” According to Lewis, the nature of the
experience cannot be conjured and certainly not contained—it happens serendipitously, arising of a moment, an unexpected encounter or occurrence—but once undergone, it becomes a focus of desire until experienced again. Using different words, fans repeatedly described longing for something like the sensation of “joy,” explaining that while losing produces a discomfiting ache, the prospect of the thrill of winning constantly dangles itself before their imaginations, drawing them back over and over again. However, “joy” as described here hardly depends on the outcome of the game—it comes of its own accord, arriving randomly among those who participate, producing what Grimshaw calls “experiences of the ineffable,” circumstantially unique dramatizations that transcend the ordinary flow of life.  

In these moments, fans also experience what Sandvoss calls “individualized collectivity,” a sensation that creates a physical and emotional affect like an alternating current—where the fan moves back and forth between a personal, subjective ecstasy and a nirvana-like absorption into the crowd—producing a pleasurable “high” or eustress for participants.  Indeed, these moments most closely parallel the effect produced by ecstasy rituals within historical religions—both in their pietistic individual versions and their corporate “worship” manifestations—and are craved by fans in comparable fashion to the most devoted initiate of institutional religion. Indeed, Charles Prebish calls sport a religion precisely because of this phenomenon, what he phrases the “mystical dimension of sport as a means for inspiring ultimate experience,” particularly when it gets expressed through “a formal series of public and private rituals requiring symbolic language” while occurring within a “space deemed sacred by its worshippers”—as it does with this set of Cleveland sports fans in their stadiums, bars, parking lots, and living rooms.  

Dorigen’s description of a Cavalier playoff game illustrates both the veracity and the attraction of such a moment, when she recalls
Everybody was on their feet. The place was packed. It was so loud! It was what you want out of every sports event you attend. It’s the epitome. They’re jumping out of their seats…It’s happiness. You can just feel it. It’s almost a feeling of contentment, because nothing else matters at that point…Ecstasy in your heart, and you just feel light and just tingly and it’s just a great feeling. I’m smiling about it now just thinking about it, because it was amazing.

I get the impression that one reason fans in this study remain devoted to the Cleveland teams is the anticipation of re-encountering what they all remember as practically an out-of-body experience: the mind-numbing ecstasy in the DNA of a big game, a dramatic comeback, a spectacular performance. As already explained, these fans believe this experience is singularly—or at least primarily, since some of the older participants suggest they now try to experience this “joy” even when a Cleveland team is not part of the action—and most righteously to be experienced within the narrative of their own teams and they stick to them as though, once again, clinging to themselves.

Expending Mental and Emotional Energy as a Form of Escape

Fans repeatedly described the large amounts of time spent thinking about and discussing the teams and their adventures, rehearsing both past anecdotes from the memoir of their collective fan-scrapbook, along with the present dramas daily unfolding among the teams. JohnP talks about starting his day with the treat of a sports page “saved till last,” while almost everybody describes significant amounts of Cleveland sports-media intake and discussion throughout their days. The fans remain devoted to talking about the teams perhaps, as Henry suggested, “because life sucks more in Cleveland; so therefore, this is what we have to buy into. This is our escape. This is our life. Like I said, when people say we bleed orange and brown, it's because that's truly how some people feel.” Whether a result of limited social options or something significantly more complicated, as a discussion topic, the subject of the “teams” constantly hovers close to the surface of consciousness for these fans.
Particularly in a community where life gets repeatedly described as “tough,” the prospect of a game, especially a “big” game, helps fans get through the day, gives them something to look forward to, helps them negotiate the demands of existence in a challenging civic environment. Talk surrounding today’s game hails and stimulates talk about past games lodged in their memory, and as Aden suggests, “Nostalgic communication provides individuals with a means of symbolically escaping cultural conditions that they find depressing and/or disorienting. Using communication to move through time allows individuals to situate themselves in a sanctuary of meaning, a place where they feel safe from oppressive cultural conditions.” In this sense, ongoing shared communication about the teams becomes far more relevant than team performance alone—indeed, having something to talk about becomes more critical than actual wins and losses. While arguably true that “Cleveland teams muddle together in one vast, ugly swamp of ineptitude,” an ongoing narrative exists within that “swamp” that both precedes and follows each game—particularly those deemed “big”—and buoys the community through another season of life in the Western Reserve.

“Cutting Off Experienced/Anticipated Misery” as a Learned Behavior

C.R. Snyder coins the term CORFing (Cutting Off Reflected Failure) to explain a particular coping behavior where fans “sever associations with others who have failed, in the interest of avoiding a negative evaluation by others (and oneself).” They do so in an effort “to make it appear unlikely (or less likely) that one is associated with a group that has failed.” But the fans in this study could hardly be found to have “cut themselves off” from the teams; rather, as already noted, they revel in their commitment and bask in spite of their reflected failure (BIRF), maintaining allegiance even while accruing potentially negative esteem.
However, moving beyond CORFing to save esteem among “others” and BIRFing to justify and coordinate their own devotion, they also engage in what I will call “Cutting Off Experienced Misery” (or perhaps “Cutting Off Anticipated Misery”) by at least verbally distancing themselves emotionally from the teams, protecting their own emotional reserve from feeling and experiencing the agony of defeat. Pat represents this position when he says, “I got tired of putting so much emotion into the Browns. When they would lose on a Sunday, I’d be pissed all week long. So now, I kind of don’t put as much emotion into any of the teams as I did when I was younger just for that reason. I don’t want to be let down—there’s only so much of that you can take.” Indeed, the fans in this study tilting toward the older end of the age continuum resisted language suggesting the teams “represent” them, resulting largely from the years of heartache associated with the teams and a learned protective behavior, guarding themselves against institutions (and players) they no longer trust.

However, the notion of not investing “as much emotion” is entirely relative; ironically, when watching the teams lose, Pat gets angrier than anyone I sit with at the bar, and his friends mock him behind his back for his alleged diminished emotional commitment. At the very least, he is still vested at a level that indicates his self-understanding and psyche get affected, made doubly manifest by the amount of mental and verbal energy expended to appear separated from the teams. While Pat’s stumbling efforts to appear separated focuses attention on him, he is certainly not alone in exhausting energy in this direction, and the success found by others varies person to person—though a complete break with the teams seems elusive to everyone involved in this study.
Conclusion

William Sutton answers the question “What factors increase levels of fan identification?” by suggesting that “the level of identification with an organization depends on such factors as satisfaction with the organization, the reputation of the organization, frequency of contact, and the visibility of affiliation.” But this conclusion becomes questionable when it comes to Cleveland sport fans, especially within the context of this particular interview sample. In fact, there has been every reason to *disassociate* themselves from the teams for precisely a *lack* of these experiences, especially the first three: Their front offices have hardly engendered confidence, the teams have lost, decimating their national reputation, and their direct contact with players is practically non-existent. Certainly, something more intrinsic than professional satisfaction, positive reputation, and direct relational connection powers the fan motor in Cleveland, keeping fans enmeshed in the ongoing existence and drama of the teams.

Later in the essay Sutton continues (coursing a vein I believe both more insightful and relevant to the case of Cleveland) by saying “Community affiliation [with the teams] is derived from *common symbols, shared goals, history, and a fan’s need to belong.* [These expressions] link the team to the community and provide an identity for the team that is inseparable from that of the community. As an embodiment of the community, a fan’s affinity for his or her community is associated and extended to the team.” Thus, moving far beyond the teams themselves, a fan’s devotion becomes dizzyingly complicated when the teams—functioning as texts produced by the literal and symbolically understood notion of “home”—become intertwined with one’s sense of self, an extension of their ego performed in stadiums while being broadcast on sport channels practically every day of the year.
The fans in this study gather around the teams as symbols of their collective history—marked as a suffering, blue-collar fan base—remembering both the glories and tragedies of their past. They communicate first and foremost a commitment to the teams (more than the individual players), but only as those teams project outward from the “community,” from the place called Cleveland itself. Together they yearn for the redemption that winning promises—while continuing to invest immeasurable amounts of energy in the teams like traditional religious devotees—enduring the wait while negotiating their own sense of “self” in the midst of the daily struggles being a Clevelander demands.

For Cleveland sports fandom to be considered “implicitly religious” in the lives of these participants, I would expect that the notion of self-understanding—dressed, for example, in the language of both personal and corporate memories, meaning-making, and identity formation—would emanate from a sizable portion of the data, with repeated evidence in their reflections (whether directly or indirectly) on the significance of the teams relative to personal narratives. In other words, if cultivating “reflexive projects of the self” comprises a chief characteristic of late-modern spirituality, and if these particular fans demonstrate an acute acquisition of a sense of self from the teams and their history, then I would argue that their devotion equals a manifestation of implicit religion. Indeed, the data suggest that for this particular sample of fans, their fandom related to the three professional Cleveland teams satisfies Matt Hills’ quest for “non-institutionally specific religious activity”—a neo-religiosity based on Luckmann’s “invisible religion of the self” and effectively explored using Bailey’s “implicit religion” rubric—offering a “symbolic universe” which acts as “a sacred context through which everyday practical actions can be legitimated or regulated.” \(^58\)
From the aggregate interview samples, the majority of fans in this study believe their lives to be well-rounded; thus, whatever amount of identity they receive from association with the teams, they contend it is only one of many spokes comprising the wheel of their sense of self, one bushel of neo-religious satisfaction apprehended within their own “spiritual marketplace.” However, given the substantial nature of the “bushels” reflected in the interview data, baskets overflowing with their sense of self connected to the teams, I would nevertheless conclude that for these participants—however imperfectly—the teams do provide an experience of implicit religion in their lives, producing for these followers an endless amount of material toward what Luckmann called the “interminable…process of self-realization and self-expression.”
Notes


2 Thomas Luckmann, The Invisible Religion: The Problem of Religion in Modern Society New York: Macmillan, 1967), 97. Luckmann is also concerned that the tendency for “religion” to become “individualized” would eventually lead to social needs going unmet given the subjective preoccupation with inward mobility. However, highly identified sports fandom may actually help a community galvanize. Indeed, as a provocative conjecture, the symbolic community created around a civic sports institution may influence otherwise completely self-interested individuals to embrace a locale more fully, concerning themselves with playing their part in bolstering/protecting the “home turf” in other areas of civic life. That current Cleveland sports talk radio—particularly at night on WTAM and WKNR—mixes both local politics with local sports only enhances the possibility of this reality.


7 Relph, Place, 39.


10 However, see Richard Florida, Cities and the Creative Class (New York: Routledge, 2005), 71-85, where he suggests that today’s “creative class” worker desires a different civic package from the industrial worker. “The amenity package of the industrial economy tended to focus on cultural amenities (the symphony, opera, theater, ballet, etc.) and on big-ticket items like national chain restaurants, nightspots, and major league sports venues. There is mounting evidence that, while still important, these types of amenities are taking a backseat to more casual, open, inclusive, and participative activities…Creative economy amenities typically revolve around outdoor recreational activities and lifestyle amenities.”


13 Anholt, Places, 23. He continues by arguing that “non-geographical groups of people are just as much „nation brands” as places are: being a member of a particular faith, a caste, a social class or an income bracket, a political persuasion, an age group, a gang, a supporters” club, a profession, a gender: all these allegiances consign their individual members to a group branding effect.”
For, as Anholt argues, “reputation in one form or another is the underlying currency of our modern world.” In a 1988 report prepared by a Cleveland marketing think-tank called Cleveland Tomorrow, the researchers conclude that “civic image” is influenced by housing, economy, recreation, culture, sports, and education—not necessarily in that order. See Anholt, Places, 30, and Cleveland Tomorrow Committee, Cleveland Tomorrow: Building on a New Foundation—A Report (Cleveland: Cleveland Tomorrow, 1988), 23.


See Roger C. Aden, “Nostalgic Communication as Temporal Escape: When It Was a Game’s Re-construction of a Baseball/Work Community,” Western Journal of Communication, Winter (1995): 32, where he describes a time when players and fans lived in the same neighborhoods, made the same amount of money, and had more directly in common. Amongst the older fans I interviewed, multiple references were made to “a time when the players lived by us,” and perhaps modern expectations are a residual effect of this latent memory.

Though talking in more generalities, Harold Issacs posits the hereditary nature of one’s history, suggesting that “Before he can .know” it, the baby is tagged with labels and enveloped in the past he has inherited. Before he can .hear” it, he is told the story of his origins…the „facts” about the world he has entered, the „history” of those who have gone before him, the myths to believe about what it all means.” Quoted in David Lowenthal, Possessed by the Past: The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 57.


Wuthnow, Marketplace, 6.

For example, see Thomas M. Kando, Leisure and Popular Culture in Transition (St. Louis: Mosby, 1975), 1-10.


Sandvoss calls this “projection of self-identity onto a collective” an “individualized collectivity.” See Sandvoss, Fans, 64.

Incidentally, antagonistic language was repeatedly employed when referring to the coasts, whether toward their teams, fans, or general ways of life relative to the perceived “values” of the place.

However, this “dismissal” is also undoubtedly influenced by the dramatic nature of his exit from the city and the disappointment that he never satisfied the fan’s desire for a championship.

Occupations represented in this sample: teacher, media researcher, architect, college professor, two sales representatives, personal assistant, college department assistant, IT consultant, lawyer, casino slot attendant, EMT, cook/cable layer, postal carrier, and a plumber.


While I attempted to acquire African-American participants from the Parkview, the majority of non-Caucasian Parkview patrons are there for the music at night. In my six months of observation at the Parkview, while I saw diversity of all sorts participating at the bar, those gathering to watch sports were entirely Caucasian. Apparently, while fans give the appearance of losing all sense of sociological separation while in a stadium, they may continue to divide along racial lines when it comes to bars.


See Christian Lundberg, “Enjoying God’s Death: The Passion of the Christ and the Practices of an Evangelical Public,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, Vol. 95, Issue 4 (2009): 407-408. Cleveland fans comprise what Lundberg calls a “public”—not simply a group of people but “a practice, a ritually repeated and tropologically organized social form that implies an imagined relation to others.” He suggests that a “public” is “inextricably intertwined with an economy of trope defining the lines of affinity and affective investment that produce the conditions for public as a durable, even “enjoyable”social bond articulating conditions for membership, including conditions of inclusion and exclusion.” The text of “Cleveland teams,” while certainly necessary in any equation discussing “Cleveland fandom,” is secondary to the reality of what he calls “already existing affective and tropological logics,” a history of discourses that surround the fan base itself—a predisposition toward “suffering” as an organizing theme arguably present long before the onset of professional teams.

http://www.cleveland.com/opinion/index.ssf/2012/09/cleveland_needs_a_new_indians.html#incart_hbx


Fairley, “Nostalgia Sport Tourism,” 288.


46 Ibid., 36.

47 See Edward R. Hirt, Dolf Zillman, Grant A. Erickson, and Chris Kennedy, “Costs and benefits of allegiance: Changes in fans’ self-ascribed competencies after team victory versus defeat,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 63, No. 5 (1992): 724-738, where the authors report that in accordance with social identity theory, fans’ mood and self-esteem were directly impacted by the outcome of sporting events, even when performing an unrelated task after the sport event. See also Sandvoss, 110-111.


51 Grimshaw, “Postmodern Salvific Moments,” 96.

52 Sandvoss, *Fans*, 64.


54 Aden, “Nostalgic Communication,” 16.

55 Bill Livingston, Thursday Sept 27
   [http://www.cleveland.com/livingston/index.ssf/2012/09/manny_acta_was_far_from_the_bi.html](http://www.cleveland.com/livingston/index.ssf/2012/09/manny_acta_was_far_from_the_bi.html)


59 In all my conversations, I only talked with two people (one man and one woman) who were satisfied with being considered, as Dorigen described those who fall in the category, “the person who makes an ass out of herself because she’s so consumed with the teams.”

CHAPTER 9

CONCLUSION

“For many Cleveland fans, it seems like that is their number one vocation in life—to be a fan.”
Interview participant, Mike F

“The sooner we get rid of losing, the happier everyone will be.”
Phillip Roth, *The Great American Novel*

In *The Myth and the Powerhouse*, Philip Rahv coins the term “mythomania” to describe the predilection toward a nebulous religiosity particular to our moment in history. He argues that the mythic imagination (re: religious imagination) of our age seeks to escape from the wounds of time and from the pain of historical experience, and that it worships “primitivism” and “nostalgia,” shedding itself of moral dogma and prescription of any sort. “Mythomania” bypasses the history of “real” religion altogether, embracing Matt Hills’ theory that what we are experiencing merely reflects a cultural manifestation of a return to the more authentic religious impulse that preceded organized/institutionalized religion in the first place.

While I agree with Philip Sheldrake that, “If history teaches us anything, it is that making assumptions about a complete break with the past is a risky move;” since “even the present moment is ambiguous,” I would nevertheless also contend that the “nebulous religiosity” of mythomania is exactly what we might expect to find among a people living in this American cultural moment. When “enchantment” gets circumscribed by the latest Macworld Expo, when within national media “tradition” barely reaches last week, when historical “religion” as a grand social category regularly reinforces its own implausibility through institutional disappointment alongside its legalistic requirements for adherents, we should not be surprised to find people clamoring for the raw materials necessary to aid their own attempts at myth-making.
A culture soaking in mythomania becomes the perfect site for an institution like modern sport not only to flourish, but also become, for many, a receptacle for the storage of what we historically reserved categorically for traditional religion: a longing to be set free from the ordinary flow of history, to be renewed and stimulated by “sacred” moments, to bring an ordering mechanism to our lives and, perhaps most importantly, to be affirmed substantially as a “self.” Indeed, sport fandom might show itself to be the ideal vessel for satisfying, if only temporarily, the still persistent, untethered religious longings of a “mythomaniacal” culture, its chapters unfolding in dramaturgical terms—offering fans a story bigger than their individual lives, a constantly repeated larger-than-life narrative for consumption. For, as Aaron Smith and Hans Westerbeek summarize,

Sport, like religion, mobilizes communities, forges identity, provides meaning, infuses passion and enlivens the soul. It teaches in narrative, in endlessly entertaining weekly stories. It is mythical yet real. It takes the very source of human vulnerability—the body—and transforms it into a vehicle for vicarious experience, for transcendence, for immortality. Enlightenment is always imminent. Who would not seek to be a god or near to a god? And for those who do not make it, there is always next season.  

I agree with those who argue that pop cultural texts (in this case, sport teams connected to a specific location) do the heavy lifting for a late-modern notion of embodied spirituality: they provide material for self-understanding and identity formation, and they offer opportunity for experiences of “sacrality” within the material creation as they encounter it in their daily lives. If, as Jennifer Porter suggests, “the essence of understanding implicit religion involves uncovering what a person stands for, what they feel they must or must not do, who they feel they are, who they belong with, and how they ultimately situate themselves in their own personal history, their community, the world, and the cosmos,” then I contend that these ethnographic data corroborate these fans’ relationship to the teams as being implicitly religious. The teams become the recipients of their devotional energies in lieu of unseen yet powerful self-structuring forces like
“loyalty,” “memory,” “nostalgia,” “topophilia,” and each team cradles psychological depth for these fans that far surpasses the games themselves. Indeed, I would suggest that professional sports in Cleveland (at least among this sample of fans) do not exist as mere entertainment outlets, but play a substantial role in their lives as subjectively privileged “autonomous reality constructors,” contributing to their sacred cosmos and self-understanding in a way that justifies an “implicitly religious” label.

Obviously, for these fans an incorrigible romanticization saturates the place called Cleveland, its teams, and its people. While their fandom presents a multi-layered tapestry contributing to (if not founding) their self-understanding relative to the rest of the world, the issue of these fans’ relationship to the teams—like “identity” in general—is multi-layered and complicated. Regarding their relative acquisition of self-understanding from the teams, I borrow from Lawrence Grossberg’s assessment of rock and roll fans, where he reasons that, “For some, being a particular sort of rock fan can take on an enormous importance and thus come to constitute a dominant part of the fan’s identity….For others, it remains a powerful but submerged difference that colors, but does not define, their dominant social identities.” While the data upholds these relative differences, they also definitively point to a consistent articulation of the three teams’ importance in the lives of these participants, contributing to their lived-world as substantially as anything else to which they ascribe value.

Assuredly, some will argue that this sample of fans manifest an unhealthy provincialism undergirding their commitment to a particular set of sports teams. One could assert that these fans clearly have too much of themselves invested in both the region and its teams, seeing them practically as living entities dependent upon their fidelity, and not as a business arrangement—albeit one with a deep and broad history—comprised of changeable parts.
Believing that the athletes "owe" them something—whether in their comportment as workers or their ability to be successful as players—seems entirely irrational. Admittedly, so does acquiring "self-understanding"—even if only in part—through an arbitrary sports loyalty. But Grossberg axiomatically reminds us that psychologically, "Whatever we invest ourselves into must be given an excess which outweighs any other consideration"—and this impulse toward excess regarding external “texts” anchors the devotional nature of fandom. Rather than judge its legitimacy or rationality, our task as researchers remains to explore its socially significant contours, which this study has attempted to do.

**Significance of this Research**

First, this study gives voice to a slice of fans who want to share their experience as a Cleveland fan. On more than one occasion, participants thanked me for allowing them an opportunity to “get it out,” describing the formal interview process as a form of cathartic therapy. Midway through the formal interviews, as I stood with MikeF outside his car and he handed me a three-page ode to the Browns that he wrote the day after they left, along with a scrapbook filled with newspaper articles from seasons past, I became aware of the potentially cathartic nature of this process for the participants. One female fan whose data did not contribute to the final results because she ultimately did not meet the criteria for inclusion, answered random interview questions for forty-five minutes before finally inquiring, “Now can I tell you what I really think about Modell?” Representatively, at the beginning of our time together, Katie’s face visibly showed her excitement upon learning of my research interests and purposes, saying “I’m so glad my devotion to these teams finally counts for something important.” As Cheryl Harris notes, “In the discussion around fandom, the authentic voices of fans themselves are rarely heard,” and if
nothing else, this study succeeds in providing these fans an orderly, structured outlet to express their history.\footnote{9}

Those who work in the media (and perhaps those in more academically oriented fields) might glean deeper understanding into the psyche of fans, using the insights gained in this work to develop a more informed and nuanced empathy for fans in different locales, subjects whose commitment to the teams in their city—like those in this Cleveland sample—may be burdened with considerably more meaning than simply as “an entertainment outlet.” Though one might argue that media exist (at least to some degree) to exploit the vulnerabilities of fans—not to coddle them—nevertheless, those working in the business could benefit by expanding their comprehension of the fan psyche. While not a guarantee that acquisition of this knowledge will fundamentally change their approach to their profession, at minimum it may create a pause within reporters before rushing to judgment when fans react with what appears to be undue passion.

Sport marketing research focuses on understanding the psyche of fans, since, as Smith and Westerbeek suggest as an axiom of Western sport culture, “Where there is sport, there is also money.” They argue that since the secular Western world has used sport as a substitute for meaning and identity, business uses the sport follower for financial gain and—like media—exploits the vulnerability of fans toward that end.\footnote{10} Unfortunately, this research adds to the knowledge base of those who wish to market sport to particular demographics. Positively, it might also aid ownership in “ministering” to its fan base, provoking them to intentionally acquire players and leaders that will resonate with fans. While this may seem naïve on my part, I would argue it makes good “business sense” not to simply fill jerseys with random players, but—when
possible—to acquire players who, for example, have a reputation for “blue-collar” work ethics or who at least appear to understand the region.  

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, by foregrounding sport as a site of neo-religious sensibilities while using the “implicit religion” theoretical rubric, this study contributes to the ongoing work of repositioning our understanding of what it means to be religious in this cultural moment. Indeed, the data corroborate that highly identified sport fandom—at least among this sample of Clevelanders—partially satisfies a quest for “non-institutionally specific religious activity,” offering a “symbolic universe” which acts as “a sacred context through which everyday practical actions can be legitimated or regulated.” While sport has been more thoroughly studied as a receptacle shielding nationalistic values and creeds or as a carrier of Judeo-Christian religious sentimentalities and parallels, a Trojan horse accomplishing covertly what had previously been done on the surface of society, little has been written directly connecting sport with the neo-religious “spirit” of our age—the consuming (and religious) work of construction and re-construction of one’s identity. While institutional religion’s monopoly on border control over personality formation and meaning-making may have been significantly diminished within our cultural moment, this work demonstrates that the sport machine ascends to help fill whatever gap remains in its stead, offering highly identified fans the raw material of personality-shaping, myth-sized narratives within which to live life.  

**For Further Research**

While this study obviously focuses on a particular fan base in a specific locale, interesting work could be done using another fan base for comparison: What do fans in Los Angeles or San Antonio or Miami or Boston value as compared with Cleveland? How does their relationship with their local teams compare to the Cleveland fans” experience? While other
popularly written works focus on the history of teams relative to their fans—like Joe Queenan’s biographical depiction of his relationship to Philadelphia professional teams—none use the implicit religion rubric to dig deeper into the nature of their commitment, a void needing to be filled. Useful for exposing the core lying beneath the surface of fans’ devotion, the rubric discloses the interior life-world—the complicated layering of motives which support their fandom.

As previously stated, given the entirely Caucasian distribution of my interview sample, more work needs to be done with racially diverse demographics, particularly among those Clevelanders who identify as both African-American—the second largest racial distribution in Cleveland—and blue-collar. While this could be done with any purposeful sample, a parallel study in a noted blue-collar but predominantly non-Caucasian bar would appropriately balance the work done here.

Further, given the stated and observed affinity these fans have for the Cleveland teams’ ubiquitous logos, how do logo changes, advertising, and annual media constructions combine to affect the emotional state and memory of fans, and does their affinity for a particular logo adjust based on the relative success or failure of the team during that logo’s marketing? How is the team brand affected—and subsequently, the brand fans imagine for themselves—when the logos change?

Given that this research was done during a particularly dismal time for the Cleveland sports scene—with all three teams consistently floundering throughout their regular seasons—we should ask how the responses might differ when any of the three teams are in the midst of winning eras. Would their answers differ, say, after two of the three teams experience 4-5 years
of playoff runs? As it has never happened in my lifetime that two teams were simultaneously “the toast of the town,” this research remains for a time yet to be seen.

Finally, how do prior commitments to traditional religious forms and expressions affect one’s fandom? Given the exclusive nature of the devotion built into the teachings of major Western religions, how do fans identifying both as “historically religious” and “highly identified Cleveland sports fan” reconcile the tension inherent in this juxtaposition?

**Coda: LeBron James as the Anti-type**

As this work began by using LeBron James departure from Cleveland as a representative foil for the experience of Cleveland fandom, asking, “Why did it matter so much to these fans when he left?,” perhaps we should conclude with an answer suggested from the data. By these participants’ recurring testimony, James violated virtually every higher order theme anchoring their persistent devotion to the teams. Indeed, while James’ primary offense is always the same with these fans—the way he insulted the city—their list of grievances stretches well past this perceived indiscretion.

He broke the most sacred of unspoken civic vows revealed in the data by being “disloyal,” and many fans agreed with Henry who said, “With LeBron, there was a betrayal,” since, given his Akron roots just twenty-five miles from Cleveland, “he is the one that should have been loyal—but wasn’t.” Beyond the charge of “betrayal,” they accuse him of violating the “blue-collar” ethic on multiple fronts, chiefly through his perceived quitting in his final playoff series before giving up entirely on the city itself—made more grievous by the method in which he chose to do it. In conjunction with the world’s most powerful sports outlet, ESPN, he etched a new phrase in the lexicon of Cleveland sports misery which other national media scribes regularly repeated for months after the show broadcast—(mockingly?) labeling it “The
Decision.” The show added to the history of grief while leaving behind more of Caroline’s “negative energy,” the energy she believes hinders the city from creating a new narrative for itself.

His decision to leave crushed their hopes for competitive redemption, for a seat at the table of relevance—as Andy says, “He put Cleveland back on the map...we were somebody and it felt good.” He promised resolution to their hope for a championship but instead added his own chapter to the narrative of suffering. As arguably the most fascinating physical specimen in the NBA, they counted on James to be a consistent deliverer of the sacred moments that follow in the wake of sports greatness and when he left, the player called “the Chosen One,” “King James,” and “the Savior of Cleveland” took that “sacrality” potential with him. As Dorigen reminds us again, “The games are a huge part of our lives—we come home at night to watch the team. We plan parties to watch the team and support the team. It's not LeBron. It's the excitement that he brought and the potential and the hope that he brought to us. That it could happen here—can finally frickin” happen. That was taken away. It wasn't him.” Tim’s summary of dejection may capture the essential disappointment of virtually everyone I talked with in the bar, saying

I think everybody in Cleveland took it personally that he left. Everybody, like, felt a certain connection to LeBron. Like he was going to take us to the “promised land,” you know what I mean? And then it's just like, when he left, everybody felt like your wife cheated on you. You know what I mean? That's pretty much how everybody felt. I mean, that's how I felt...Like he screwed us over and then he talked shit about Cleveland. You know what I mean?”

By leaving, he practically removed a key winter diversion, leaving the Cavaliers dismantled and competitively unwatchable, further from the top than before he arrived. As Andy reflected, “I felt betrayed by someone who as much as he put Cleveland back on the map, in one stroke knocked us back down again, below where we started. Because not only did he not stay,
he bolted and showed no respect to the city.” Tim described the “fall” by saying, “We felt like we had such a chance to reach the summit that we hadn't reached in so long—we felt he was going to take us there. So by him leaving, it's like we’re just about to be at Mount Everest and an avalanche comes down. And now you're back at camp two.”

They perceive that he rejected the “place” of Cleveland and by his own choice, destroyed whatever symbolic capital he helped accrue in the previous seven years “by making Cleveland look hopelessly stupid.” As Caroline recalled, speaking with more emotion about this issue than any other we discuss while representing the rip these fans felt in the fabric of their psyche.

It was a stab in the heart. It was a back stab and the way he did it was so disgusting. Like, let's put it on TV and let's break an entire city's soul. Take the whole population and say, "Fuck you." And say it on TV. It made a laughingstock out of us—again. Had he just traded (teams), pretty much your average American wouldn't even know he actually played for the Cavs or wouldn't have even remembered what city he was from. But, now everyone knows and it's a joke—another big joke on Cleveland.

“Another big joke on Cleveland” and “stab in the back”—not so much because the quality of professional basketball would diminish with his departure, but because the city”s reputation would absorb another blow, and both the fans and the place they love to call “home” would need to regroup—again. Thus, James leaving became a summary statement, a lightning rod drawing energy from the latent expectation that “all that could go wrong usually does” in Cleveland, another chapter of misery in the long, unfolding history of civic and sports drama—the fortunes of both wed together, for better or worse, long ago. That he would win a championship in his second year with the Miami Heat—following the model of Modell”s newly-named “Ravens” winning the Super Bowl shortly after their departure from Cleveland a decade earlier—only further exacerbates the obvious, once again: the cruelty of both life and sports within Cleveland, offering more evidence for why this fan base, as long-time Cleveland native and author Tim Long suggests, “deserves to be miserable.”14 Whether that unfortunate privilege
will ever dissipate remains a question currently unanswered, a problem for future players—and fans—to remedy together on the shores of Lake Erie.
Notes

1 As quoted in interview with MikeF.


8 Ibid., 60.


10 Smith and Westerbeek, Sport Business Future, 94.

11 The Browns recently experienced this phenomenon—though unintentionally—when they acquired running back Payton Hillis, a square-jawed, lumbering running back from Arkansas whose blue-collar persona and fierce running style immediately endeared him to fans. Besides buying his jersey and creating a fan club in his honor, a huge push from Cleveland fans got him voted in as the cover athlete for 2011 version of Madden NFL 12, the first Cleveland athlete to be honored in this way. Conversely, when several off-field behaviors indicated that perhaps Hillis did not hold to a blue-collar ethic after all, fans turned against him and he was not given another contract, highlighting my central point: attention, money, and support circulate around players with whom the fans relate.


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Appendix A

Memorable Losses for Cleveland Professional Sport Teams

“The Catch”: The 1954 Indians, carrying a record-setting 111 wins and an All-Star pitching staff into the post-season, were tied 2-2 in the top of the eighth inning with two men on base in Game 1 with the New York Giants, when Indian Vic Wertz hit a ball 470 feet to center field. Willie Mays, running at full sprint toward the wall, made an over-the-shoulder catch to retire Wertz just in front of the wall, before whirling and throwing the ball back to the infield to keep the runners from scoring. “The Catch” became regarded as one of the greatest plays in baseball history; the Indians eventually lost the game and subsequently were swept in the Series.

“Red-Right 88”: The 1980 Cleveland Browns, known as the “Kardiac Kids” for having 12 of 16 games decided by seven points or less in the regular season, were losing 14-12 to the Oakland Raiders in the AFC Divisional Playoff Game. With the ball 13 yards away from a game-winning score with :49 seconds left in the game, facing sub-zero temperature and swirling lakefront winds, All-Pro quarterback Brian Sipe threw a ball for the end zone toward future Hall of Fame tight end Ozzie Newsome, a catch intercepted instead by Raider safety Mike Davis to end the game.

“The Drive”: In the 1986 AFC Championship game, with the winner going to the Super Bowl, the Browns led the Denver Broncos 20-13 with just over five minutes to go, fielding perhaps the strongest defense in Browns history. The Broncos drove the ball from their own 2 yard line straight down the field, completing several “third-and-long” plays to keep their drive alive before tying the game with 37 seconds remaining in regulation. The Broncos went on to win in overtime.

“The Fumble”: The 1987 AFC Championship game featured the Browns vs. the Broncos again. This time, losing 38-31 but with the ball at the Denver eight yard line with 1:05 left in the game, Ernest Byner, playing the game of his life to this point, took a handoff with a clear path to the goal line and appeared to have landed in the end zone for a touchdown. Instead, just before crossing the line, a Bronco’s defender jarred the ball loose, and Denver recovered to run out the clock on the Browns” season for a second consecutive year.

“The Shot”: The Cavaliers hosted the Chicago Bulls in Game 5 of the 1989 Eastern Conference Playoffs. Leading 100-99 with three seconds left, the Cavaliers would move to the second round for the first time since “The Miracle” team. Instead, Michael Jordan took the inbounds pass, dribbled to the left corner of the key, double-clutched, hung in the air longer than Cavaliers” defender Craig Ehlo, and made the shot as the buzzer sounded.

“Game Seven/Jose Mesa”: In Game 7 of the 1997 World Series against the Florida Marlins, a 1991 expansion team with virtually no history compared to the Indians, Cleveland held a 2-1 lead in the ninth inning. With champagne cases already being opened and protective plastic being hung in the locker room, Indian closer Jose Mesa, their most dominant pitcher all season, came into the game and promptly gave up the tying run. The Indians went on to lose the game and Series in extra innings.
## APPENDIX B

**Formal Interview Participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Yrs. in Region</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
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</table>
APPENDIX C

Script Requesting Involvement in Formal Interviews

“I am a graduate student at Bowling Green State University. As part of my research, I am seeking to interview 15-20 people about their life as a Cleveland professional sports fan. If you participate in this research, I would ask you to read and sign a consent form before asking you a series of questions to explore your experience as a fan. I expect the interview to last about 60-90 minutes. There is no risk to you as a participant. I will not use your real name or any other identifying information in my final work. We can meet wherever is most convenient for you and can stop the interview short if that becomes necessary at any point. Would you be willing to let me interview you?”
APPENDIX D

Script to Request Involvement in Informal Interviews at the Parkview

“I am a graduate student at Bowling Green State University. I grew up in Elyria and have been a Cleveland sports fan my entire life. For my dissertation work, I am doing a study on other people’s experiences as a Cleveland professional sports fan. I am doing my main research here at the Parkview, and am interested in the way things work here at the bar, especially for those who consider themselves regulars. Would you be willing to talk with me about life here at the Parkview and help me understand „the Parkview vibe”?“
APPENDIX E

Questions for Semi-Structured Formal Interviews

Age_____ Gender_____ Yrs. in Cleveland area_____ Occupation _________ Ethnicity _________

1. How did you become a Cleveland sports fan in the first place?

2. If I were a person who knew nothing about Clevelanders/Cleveland sports teams/relationship between the two, what should I know about them? Three words to describe them…

3. What qualifies a person as a “true” Brown/Cavalier/Indian fan?

4. How would you describe the importance of the Cleveland teams to you? What do they mean to you personally?

5. What do you do to show your connection to the teams? How would others know that you are a Cleveland fan?

6. Describe the time you spend each day interacting over the teams: thoughts, conversations, reading, etc.

7. What could happen that would cause you to switch your professional sports allegiance to another city’s teams? Have you tried?

8. Was there ever a moment for you as a fan that took on a kind of sacredness in your memory?

9. Of the major moments you’ve experienced as a Cleveland fan, which one comes to mind and what do you remember of it?

10. Describe what the three teams mean to Cleveland as individual teams. Rate the importance of “x” team winning in Cleveland. A difference between them?

11. How would a Cleveland championship compare to other big life events?

12. What does “fulfillment” look like for you as a Cleveland sports fan?

13. What bugs you the most about Cleveland teams in your lifetime?

14. As a fellow fan of Cleveland teams, what do you “share” in common with other Cleveland fans?

15. Why are the teams so important to Clevelanders? Why so committed?

16. What do Cleveland fans really want from their teams?

17. What are three values that a group of Cleveland fans might agree are important for their teams/players to reflect?

18. Explain the difference between a Cleveland fan and a Los Angeles fan; a New York fan?
19. When you think of “X” franchise (Browns/Cavs/Indians), who represents it for you?

20. Holding up picture of three sport team’s logos: What words come to mind when you see this? How would you describe what you feel when you see this?

21. Were you bothered when Lebron James left Cleveland? Why or why not? Why do you think others were so bothered within Cleveland?

22. What’s your response to media people who said that Clevelanders need to “get a life” when they remained angry about Lebron leaving, or even when the Browns left?

23. How do you explain the pattern of horrible losses that have happened to every team in this city?

24. How does it make you feel when you hear other people talking about Cleveland and/or the teams as losers?

25. How does being a Cleveland fan affect your everyday life (leisure time, work, friendships, etc.)?

26. How does how well the teams played affect you after games? Do one team’s losses bother you more than another?

27. How is your job approached differently on Monday after a Browns win? Loss?

28. How do you feel around fans from other cities/teams that have a history of winning?

29. When you go to a game, describe a typical game day for you. (probes: when do you start preparing to go, what do you do, where do you go, how do you feel, etc.)

30. How is your calendar affected by the teams’ schedule?

31. How has the overall losing environment of the teams affected how you feel about yourself as a fan?

32. What would a major sports championship do for the reputation of Cleveland in outsider’s view of the city?

33. Why do some sports fans let teams become part of their identity?

34. Do you carry a grudge against certain players? If you met _____ in the street, what would you want him to know or say to him?

35. If you were the only living Cleveland sports fan, would you still pull for the Cleveland teams?

36. If a 10-year-old Cleveland came and asked you “What professional teams should I root for in the 3 major sports?” what would you say?
My name is Ed Uszynski and I am a doctoral student at Bowling Green State University conducting my dissertation research on Cleveland professional sports fandom. The purpose of my study is to explore the nature of commitment to the sports teams in Cleveland. Your participation will help me understand fandom in Cleveland and will give you an opportunity to express your experience as a fan.

Your involvement in this study includes participation in one to two interview sessions. The first interview will last approximately 60-90 minutes and will focus on your experience as a life-long Indians, Browns, and Cavaliers fan. I will audio record the interview and transcribe it word-for-word at a later time. After reviewing your interview, I may ask you to participate in a second, shorter interview (30-60 minutes) at a later date to allow time for further clarification and further elaboration to ensure your story is being understood as you intended.

The risks of participation in this study are minimal. All comments and identifying information revealed during the interview will be kept confidential to the best of my ability. The interview transcript may be read by my advisor who also will maintain your confidentiality. The audio-recording and transcripts will be kept secured and will only be accessible to my advisor and me. All of my notes, recordings, and original transcripts will remain solely in my possession; they will be password protected on my personal computer or locked in a secure office when printed. In all printed notes or transcripts, you will be identified by your first name or a code name and any other identifying information will be coded or removed. At the end of the study, all digital recordings will be destroyed.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you decide to participate, it is important for you to understand that you may withdraw your consent at any time without penalty or prejudice. If you decide not to participate or to discontinue participation in this study, your decision will not affect your relationship with Bowling Green State University or me in any way. During the interview, you may refuse to answer any questions and I will move on. At any time, you may withdraw from the study without penalty.

If you have questions, please ask them now. If you have additional questions later you can contact me at (937) 623-3412 or by email at ed.uszynski@athletesinaction.org. If you have questions about the conduct of this study or your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Chair of Bowling Green State University’s Human Subjects Board at (419) 372-7716 (hsrb@bgsu.edu) or the Co-Chair of this dissertation research, Vikki Krane (419) 372-7233 (vkrane@bgsu.edu).

Your signature below indicates that you have read the above information, been informed of the interview procedure, understand what is expected of you and that participation is entirely voluntary, and had any questions answered. By signing this form you are indicating that you are at least 18 years of age and you provide your consent to participate in this study.

Signature _______________________________ Printed Name _______________________________

Phone number/email __________________________ Date __________________________
DATE: April 2, 2012

TO: Ed Uszynski
FROM: Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board

PROJECT TITLE: [315573-1] The Highly Identified Cleveland Professional Sports Fan: Fandom as a Function of Neo-Religiosity

SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

ACTION: APPROVED

APPROVAL DATE: March 19, 2012

EXPIRATION DATE: March 18, 2013

REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

REVIEW CATEGORY: Expedited review category # 7

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this project. The Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

The final approved version of the consent document(s) is available as a published Board Document in the Review Details page. You must use the approved version of the consent document when obtaining consent from participants. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document.

Please note that you are responsible to conduct the study as approved by the HSRB. If you seek to make any changes in your project activities or procedures, those modifications must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the modification request form for this procedure.

You have been approved to enroll 120 participants. If you wish to enroll additional participants you must seek approval from the HSRB.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must also be reported promptly to this office.

This approval expires on March 18, 2013. You will receive a continuing review notice before your project expires. If you wish to continue your work after the expiration date, your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date.

Good luck with your work. If you have any questions, please contact the Office of Research Compliance at 419-372-7716 or hsrb@bgsu.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence regarding this project.
This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board's records.