Sports and Their Fans: The History, Economics, and Culture of the Relationship Between Spectator and Sport.

By Kevin G. Quinn. Copyright 2009 by McFarland & Company, Inc. Publishers. P.O. Box 611, Jefferson, NC 28640 ($35 soft cover, 271 pp.)

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In contemporary American culture, a discussion of the relationship between sport and its fans would be remiss without an examination of the role the media (both broadcast and sport coverage, and online fantasy sport leagues) plays in shaping the current structure of sport and the fan/spectator experience. Kevin Quinn, an economist at St. Norbert College, sets out to explore how history, culture, and economics shape the relationship between spectator and sport. While this book could be used in college courses, the author admits that it was written for a general, non-academic audience. As such, the tone is informal and, at times, similar to the tone of sports journalist commentary. Perhaps in an attempt to appeal to a general audience, the text also lacks critical argumentation and/or empirical support for many “common sense” claims (e.g., men like football, women like figure skating, sports fans like winners). In addition, the author acknowledges that, “rather than provide new insights, the book primarily seeks to synthesize academic and popular writing from disparate fields for the benefit of nonacademic audiences.” (p. 1). Given the above acknowledgements, this review will focus on how well the author achieves his stated goal.

Given the sub-title of the book is “history, economics and culture of the relationship between spectator and sport,” one may anticipate a thorough discussion of cultural differences in the relationship between the spectator and sport throughout history, and how economic forces shape that relationship over time. Several chapters include a detailed history of the development of sports such as professional baseball, professional football, and collegiate athletics, which might interest fans who wish to learn about the evolution of their favorite pastimes. However, as the text focuses on the history of sports, the relationship between spectator and sport is never fully addressed or explained. For example, cheating, the use of statistics, and other sport phenomenon are linked to ancient civilizations in a way that leads the reader to assume what we see in sport today is an inevitable part of who we are as human beings. In a discussion of celebrity culture and fans, the author writes, “They love to see them rise, and better yet, fall . . . Such is the human condition” (p. 144). In a discussion on cheating, he explains, “Occasions of temptation have faced people since the dawn of human sapience” (p. 172). “A propensity for fandom is hard-wired into our heads, and then culture installs the software that makes us demand more and more.” (p. 28). While these “common sense” claims might resonate with the book’s intended audience (non-academics), this simplistic, essentialist, and universalized perspective on human behavior and
fandom is surprising given the title of the book, which suggests a focus on the role of culture in the spectator/sport relationship.

Given that the book is written by an economist, it is not surprising that the relationship between sport and fans is frequently reduced to supply and demand. As such, cultural differences are often glossed over or ignored. Furthermore, the author presents, but does not fully explain, statistical trends regarding sport fandom and what role culture plays in these trends (i.e. men are more likely to be fans than women; whites are more likely to bet on sports than racial minorities; young white upper-class males are more likely to participate in fantasy sports leagues). Therefore, the book raises more questions than it provides answers with respect to why we watch the sports we do, who watches sports and why, and how sports leagues and the media construct interest in sport. For example, the chapter titled “The Community of the Opium Den” explains that 10% of European soccer matches involve fan violence, which the author notes is higher than any parallel American sport. The author does not explain why this may be, or how it relates to cultural differences, the structure of sport in Europe versus the United States, what sport means to different groups of fans, or the culture of fans themselves.

When the discussion focuses on fan behavior, the book presents contradictory arguments that may confuse lay readers. For example, in the chapter on cheating the author claims that fans value fairness and equality in sport and that this is part of human nature (he notes that primates cheat as well!). However, the chapter later discussed major dynasties in basketball, football, and other sports. This leaves the reader to wonder, if sports fans truly want and embrace fairness and equality, how and why do sport dynasties like UCLA men’s basketball in the 1970-80s or the Chicago Bulls in the 1990s become and remain so popular among fans. Clearly there are explanations, but the book does not address or attempt to explain these glaring contradictions in fan behavior.

This is not to say that some “why” questions are not addressed. Indeed, the author briefly discusses the role sport media coverage plays in increasing sport interest and gate attendance at sport events. The role of the media in shaping fan experiences/spectatorship seems to be central in the discussion of the relationship between sport and spectators and this is discussed, albeit superficially, throughout the book. Unfortunately, the argument regarding the media’s ability to construct interest in sport, in other words how social institutions can shape cultural values, is contradicted in previous sections that detailed the history of sport and spectators, which rely on assumptions regarding the ‘naturalness’ of sport fandom. If, as the author notes, the Egyptians kept statistics, if random number generators date back to the third millennium B.C., and if “watching sports is deeply programmed into our genes”, this leads one to conclude that sport fandom and interest in sport transcends culture, history and society (p.31). This conclusion has been refuted in empirical research in the fields of sport sociology, sport anthropology and sport history. Yet, in the same discussion, the author acknowledges, “Not every advanced culture has embraced sport as a positive or even benign social force” (p. 31). However, the book could explore these assumptions in more depth or provide examples or supporting evidence for the reader. Without an explanation of these seemingly contradictory perspectives, the reader may be left wondering how culture and economics shape sport spectatorship.

Sport psychologists, and academics in related fields that wish to learn more about why people watch/attend sport events, what their experiences are in viewing