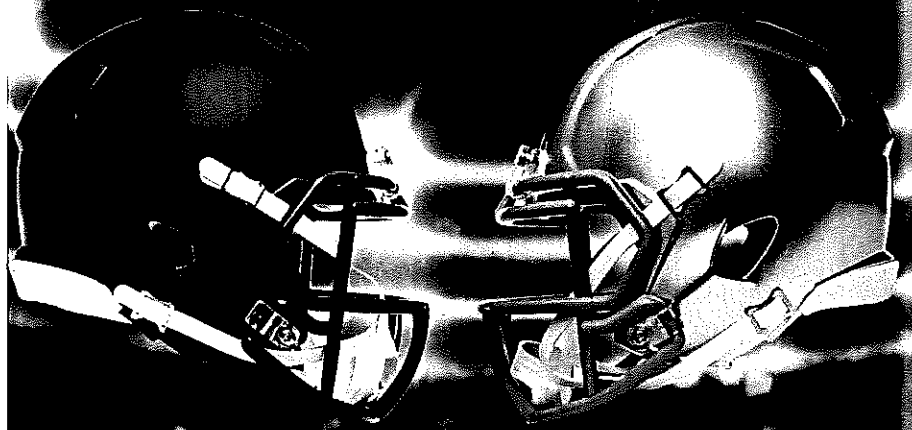


THE POWER OF SPORTS



**MEDIA AND SPECTACLE
IN AMERICAN CULTURE**

Michael Serazio

Ignoring [mediated sports] today would be like ignoring the role of the church in the Middle Ages or ignoring the role of art in the Renaissance; large parts of society are immersed in [it] . . . and virtually no aspect of life is untouched by it.

—Michael Real, sports scholar

KEEPING THE FAITH

The Elementary Forms of Sports Life

We recognize that sport is the religion of the western world . . . So we decided to use the Olympics, the most sacred ceremony of this religion, to make the world pay attention to us.

—Black September Organization
on its 1972 Munich Games attack

OWARD THE END

OF MY GRANDFATHER'S LIFE,

we did not—beyond genetics—have a great deal in common. He was six decades older and lived 2,500 miles west, on the other side of the country. But I loved him dearly, yearned to connect, and wanted to have something to talk about when I dialed him up every few weeks. So we talked, as many men do, about sports. Specifically, we talked about what, besides family, might have been the last vessel that united us in faith and love: our hometown San Diego Chargers.

We harrumphed about local sportswriters' pulling their punches in covering a perennially disappointing franchise; griped about team ownership trying to shake down taxpayers for a sweetheart stadium deal; and lamented the infestation of advertising that was consuming sports media. But we also reminisced fondly—stories of my grandfather taking my uncles to games at the old Balboa Park field and my own dim, sweet memories of the 1994 season. Whenever I was back in town, I felt an inexplicable urge to pick up a cap or a shirt with the lightning bolt logo on it. After my grandmother passed, I recall my mother remarking that fall seemed to go faster for Pops because

football was in season; it got him through the week and filled the days with something to think about and look forward to. I suspect that, though the details will vary for other teams' fans, the fundamental texture of this ambivalence—economics and culture pulling us in different directions—will feel true and familiar. What mattered most is that my grandfather and I were talking, period. Nowadays, that is no small accomplishment.

In an era of cultural fragmentation, political polarization, and the relentless distraction that comes with living amidst media abundance, sport represents one of the last institutions of unifying mass ritual—bringing together enormous audiences, focused on the present, live moment.¹ In that, it retains a timeless “totemic” cultural power long ago revealed to be at the core of religious worship, but given new import in the DVR and smartphone age. Yet, conversely, that power is being strained, co-opted, and artificially manufactured. A variety of media convergence trends are revolutionizing the way that sports are packaged for us: an explosion in opinion-oriented, “hot take” journalism formats; branded content commercializing and corrupting new frontiers; and social media accelerating news cycles and displacing traditional gatekeepers. And because—not in spite—of its escapist value and its (allegedly) apolitical sheen, sports can smuggle in powerful but subtle ideological messages about inequality, war, and labor, even as signs of racial activism reemerge. Simultaneously, the shifting dynamics of gender roles and masculine power, writ large across society, are being reflected in the experiences of female sports journalists, the coverage of violence against the male body, and the ascendance of analytics as a labor ideal.

Through in-depth interviews with dozens of high-profile leaders and professionals in sports media and journalism as well as those in the business and marketing of sports, *The Power of Sports* explores, maps, and critiques the cultural production of today's lucrative, ubiq-

nitous sports landscape. The book reflects life in contemporary America, technological disruption, commercialism, military hawkishness, and manhood in sports, we see the realities of the world that those myths of “escapism” represent.

At my grandfather's funeral, my faded blue Chargers hat that Pop wore for decades now rests today on my aunt's fireplace mantel. Sport thus helps us endure in ever-changing times, palliatively—but it does so at an enormous cost among stakeholders about the value of the game. This book is an attempt to understand the glue—its causes and consequences—that holds it together. Many of these dimensions and their history are true for decades—even centuries—today given the transformations brought about by evolution, market necessity, and the rise of the game in the games and the wider societal context. A testament that swirls beyond the box office and the NBA commissioner David Stern to

It's a natural flowing dynamic: You see 20,000 perfect strangers come together to root the home team onto victory. They don't even know each other are his winning performance. As life gets into our homes and we get—we can't buy our cars, we do a tremendous amount of our smart devices in a chair at home. The people most likely to gather are going to be . . . sports worship. No doubt about it.

uitous sports landscape. The book is about how sports explain and reflect life in contemporary American culture: our spiritual experience, technological disruption, commercial greed, economic disparity, military hawkishness, and manhood ideals. If we hold up a mirror to sports, we see the realities of the nation staring back at us—despite what those myths of “escapism” might like to suggest.

At my grandfather’s funeral, my cousin brought up to the altar a faded blue Chargers hat that Pops had worn for many years, and it rests today on my aunt’s fireplace mantle as a reminder of him. Sport thus helps us endure in every sense of the word—existentially, palliatively—but it does so at an enormous cost and without naïveté among stakeholders about the value and purpose of the spectacle. This book is an attempt to understand that “medium,” that social glue—its causes and consequences: economic, political, and cultural. Many of these dimensions and issues of sport’s power have held true for decades—even centuries—but the subject feels newly urgent today given the transformations both within and beyond: the media evolution, market necessity, and ideological consequence embedded in the games and the wider societal upheaval, discontent, and contestation that swirls beyond the boundaries of simple play. As former NBA commissioner David Stern told me:

It’s a natural flowing dynamic: You build a building where 18-to-20,000 perfect strangers come together for the communal purpose of rooting the home team onto victory, where people who sometimes don’t even know each other are high-fiving a spectacular shot or a winning performance. As life gets more impersonal, as we retreat into our homes and we get—we order our food, we get our EKG, we buy our cars, we do a tremendous amount from the comfort of our smart devices in a chair at home—the last places that people are likely to gather are going to be . . . houses of worship and houses of sports worship. No doubt about it.²

THE BOX SCORE

The spectacle is, simply put, big-time. Perhaps the defining feature of sports culture over the last quarter-century has been how it has ballooned in slow motion before our eyes: more interest, more outlets, more money. Ours is an age of sporting excess right down to the amount of statistical information that now crawls across the ticker updates during TV broadcasts. Depending on which estimate one consults, the global sports industry is pegged somewhere between \$200 and \$700 billion.³ Given that this was, by one count, 60 percent more than the value of the film market, News Corporation overlord Rupert Murdoch not long ago observed, "Sport absolutely overpowers film and everything else in the entertainment genre."⁴ Within the United States, nearly a quarter of all Americans spend money at least once a month on sports, contributing to nearly \$70 billion worth of tickets, broadcast rights, sponsorships, and apparel.⁵

That figure has been projected to grow by another \$10 billion over the next half-decade, thanks to a media rights bubble that has yet to burst and has proven mostly immune to the traditional gravity of financial cycles: The past decade saw three straight years of double-digit growth, following a whirlwind of major TV deals.⁶ Fans' voracious appetite for sport has pushed it to the center of the pop culture buffet; just a few years into the new millennium, the explosion of networks (and sub-channels) dedicated to airing sports content meant that viewers could pig out on some 645 hours per week.⁷ Of the 25 highest-rated broadcasts in American television history, 22 have been sporting events and, on average, sports-related newspaper stories online outhit all other subjects combined.⁸ The intensity of that attentiveness made the NFL into an unparalleled economic juggernaut and, for a time, the most popular and powerful television programming of any kind. By 2016, league games accounted for 60 of the top 100 Nielsen scores and Super Bowl XLVIII set a record

with 112 million viewers, which was broken only by Super Bowl XLIX, naturally, which saw 114 million Americans tuning in.⁹ And pro football is not alone in this recent dominance: At the peak, in 2015, 93 of the top 100-rated American TV shows in a single season were live sports programs—up from just 14 in the top 100 a decade before.¹⁰

The durability of sports' widespread, mainstream popularity—at a time in mediated culture when such blockbuster successes, especially on television, are ever harder to come by—has been a boon to providers pushing the product. ESPN is, by far, the “worldwide leader” in cable revenues, pulling in nearly \$8 per household in monthly subscriber fees and representing, at one point, the “principal cash spigot” for parent corporation Disney, when it topped out with some \$10 billion in earnings.¹¹ It was called, at that time, “the most valuable media property on the planet,” and as former CEO Michael Eisner joked, “[Disney] would not exist without ESPN. The protection of Mickey Mouse is ESPN.”¹² Live sport is, simply put, the biggest reason your cable bills have exploded (and, fittingly, if you do like sports, chances are decent it's the only reason you haven't cut the cord yet). Beyond ESPN, regional sports networks are also some of the most expensive channels for distributors to maintain in the lineup, and sports programming is said to be “keeping the lights on” at ABC, CBS, NBC, and Fox, accounting for more than one-third of all ad sales.¹³

Although awash in revenues, sports media are not, necessarily, awash in profits (an issue vexing ESPN especially). Acquiring all that live content has become more expensive than ever, with sports rights exceeding half of all TV programming costs.¹⁴ This is what's making leagues, teams, and players fantastically wealthy and American football is, as usual, the apotheosis of such excess. By mid-decade, the NFL was bringing in \$13 billion in annual revenue, with commissioner Roger Goodell ravenously aiming to double that figure within

10 years.¹⁵ Franchise values had already doubled under his tenure, with 20 of the 50 most valuable teams worldwide hailing from the league, including the top-ranked \$4 billion Dallas Cowboys.¹⁶ (It should be caveated, however, that winning is not necessarily everything when it comes to revenue generation—rather, as we'll see shortly, something deeper and more enduring actually churns all that commerce. Coming off a 4-12 campaign, for example, the Cowboys' net worth still grew by 25 percent and the similarly woeful New York Knicks—they of the .390 winning percentage—posted their own 20 percent increase.)

It's not just the NFL, though, that is finding its boats lifted by this rising tide. Even at the "amateur" level (the great Orwellian double-speak of sports labor economics), coffers are flush, with the top 20 college football programs pegged at a collective \$3 billion value.¹⁷ Football—as the vast majority of the world knows it (i.e., soccer)—remains by far the single most lucrative sport, registering some \$35 billion in annual revenues, as the rights to England's elite league have skyrocketed 3,000-fold over a half-century.¹⁸ Even baseball, regularly lamented as a fusty cultural relic, seems hardy enough on paper, raking in a record \$10 billion in revenues, with more than a third of its teams recently ranking first in prime-time home markets.¹⁹

Clearly, then, sport still makes it rain. And sport's apparent immunity from macroeconomic gyrations also makes it a fairly sure thing as an entertainment investment; not only has there never been a crash in the sports media market (unlike other industries such as tech or housing, it just keeps going up), but even in the midst of the last cataclysmic global downturn, sports' 7 percent growth rate still exceeded that of almost every nation's GDP.²⁰ In sum, little seems to have changed since communications professor Robert McChesney declared, some 20 years ago, that sport was "arguably the single most lucrative content area for the global media industry."²¹ What is curious, though, is just how much of this commerce seems built upon

... stimulated by a fundamental economic (if not cultural) irrationality; this is manifest in the accommodation of swindling cartels, the production of profligate venues, the staging of lavish mega-events, and the thoughtless consumption of branded merchandise.

IRRATIONAL EXUBERANCE

"Sports is a way of life, like eating. People say, 'You should pay to feed the homeless.' But the world doesn't work that way."²² So sayeth Carl Pohlad, late owner of the Minnesota Twins—and a member of the rarefied elite that stands to gain from that spending—encapsulating the way in which the attachment to sports drives all those revenues and grossly disfigures public priorities. That attachment is the reason why, in the 1970s, the only paved road in southern Sudan apparently led from the airport to a stadium.²³ That attachment is the reason why, of 340 Division I colleges, only 23 athletic departments actually operated in the black and, at Rutgers, a \$20-million-a-year sports deficit was allowed to eat into library costs, faculty hires, and student fees.²⁴ Owner Art Modell of the Baltimore Ravens (and crusher of dreams in Cleveland) put it even more bluntly than Pohlad: "The pride and presence of a professional football team is far more important than thirty libraries."²⁵

None of this makes sense from a "rational" standpoint, but the cultural logic of sports, I submit, overwhelms any fidelity to rational judgment. A. J. Maestas, CEO of Navigate Research, a sports marketing agency, explains further: "The marketing world, for the most part, and the sports marketing world in particular, now has woken up to: You know, it isn't about a rational trade-off with fans with season tickets or yelling at a television screen because a 23-year-old doesn't go left versus right. It's very irrational. It's very emotional. . . . That means the rules of classic economics don't necessarily apply. . . . I think that the lesson is that people's motivation, especially related

to marketing and completely related to sports, is emotional. Not economic: cost-benefit, reward-incentive, risk-reward. It's just not. It's communal and tribal and emotional."²⁶

Cities are just as prone, collectively, to that magical thinking as the individual fans that populate them and therefore vulnerable to the emotional exploitation leveraged by sports' stakeholders. Nowhere is this more apparent—and appalling—than in the construction of sports venues. Recall that, up until the 1950s, most sports facilities were paid for by team ownership; by the 1990s, however, that ratio had flipped and more than three-quarters of arenas and stadia were being publicly financed.²⁷ Some \$10 billion in municipal largesse was diverted to subsidize venues in the first decade of the 21st century and 2017 capped an “unprecedented” three-year period where \$17 billion was spent to create or improve stadia; in just one recent example, the Minnesota Vikings were able to extort from residents half the cost of their \$1 billion U.S. Bank Stadium (with its apparently necessary “state-of-the-art corporate suites”).²⁸ Why is it so rare that a local government or referendum voters will oppose team demands for new or renovated facilities?

On one hand, the basic laws of supply and demand (more cities want franchises than leagues provide) means that those franchises can negotiate from a position of inherent strength, while cities can only and ever “play defense” against threats to elicit tax credits, property rights, luxury seating renovations, and unsold ticket compensation, among other perks.²⁹ Those supply-and-demand conditions are distorted thanks to a monopoly advantage few fellow industries enjoy. Following a 1922 Supreme Court ruling, Major League Baseball and, later, other leagues were granted immunity from anti-trust laws, affording these cartels near total control over both the allocation and placement of franchises.³⁰

One might expect more teams to go around, given Americans' insatiable appetite for sports and steady population growth—and were

professional sports a theoretically “freer” market, there might well be—but, with the artificially depressed supply, cities are all the more likely to acquiesce to blackmail for those extravagant subsidies.³¹ One expert argues that, because of those factors, big-time sports leagues have “established [themselves] as some of the most powerful firms in the history of America.”³² (And as detailed later in this chapter, it is the same monopolistic structure of production that fortifies sport against the forces of consumer fragmentation that have so besieged other pop industries and American culture overall; in other words, without that cartel swindle, the “field” for forging community might be impossibly spread asunder.)

Franchises are, moreover, merely mirroring a broader corporate pattern evidenced across industry sectors, by extorting public capital and government welfare with regular threats to pull up stakes and move elsewhere.³³ Indeed, “strip-mining” cities in this fashion becomes even easier if teams don’t actually *own* their own home fields, while those municipalities that are most ripe for abandonment (i.e., blighted and cash-strapped) can usually least afford to compete with sexy rival suitors across state lines.³⁴ In the most infamous instance of infidelity, when Mayflower moving vans squirreled away the Baltimore Colts’ equipment to Indianapolis under cover of night, it was not for lack of local love; the team had set a regular season attendance record just months earlier.³⁵ Fans are loyal to their teams—irrationally so and often to a fault, given the economic realities that so consistently betray them.

To be certain, though, it is not only sticks, but carrots as well that drive stadia economics—benefits touted that typically turn out to be more magical than monetary. During the stadia boom of the past few decades, projects were often packaged as urban “renewal”—an antidote to years of inner-city decay and white flight to the suburbs. Conventional wisdom held that a quirky, charming ballpark complex like that of Camden Yards could spark a downtown renaissance,

drawing tourist interest, entertainment venues, and retail chains: Call it the city-as-theme-park planning schemata.³⁶ And here was yet one more triumph of branding—a way for cities to project, through spectacle, an air of cosmopolitan liveliness in the global competition for capital.³⁷ Having a “big league” team somehow symbolizes and communicates the (apparently very necessary) image of being a “big league” city—that shopworn cliché that mayors and other self-interested boosters (like financiers, developers, and other members of the local business elite) often drop when spinning constituents on multimillion-dollar boondoggles.³⁸

Yet the research findings are unequivocal: It simply doesn't add up. According to Robert Baade, a leading scholar of sports economics, stadia and arenas (which often fall prey to higher construction costs and yield lower rent and tax revenues than estimated) make almost “no significant impact” on cities—providing, at best, a minor bump to the local economy or, more likely, detract from existing competitors, as all that entertainment spending would simply happen elsewhere in town.³⁹ Adding insult to injury, teams are now abandoning “old” new stadiums at an accelerated pace—the kind of wasteful planned obsolescence long endemic to consumer goods like iPhones but seen recently with the Atlanta Braves disposing of Turner Field after just 19 years and the Texas Rangers finding Globe Life Park inadequate after 22 years.⁴⁰

A similarly illogical and fraudulent game of economics also plays out in the hosting of global competitions. Cities will pay a small fortune—typically, upward of \$100 million—to bid for the privilege of paying a large fortune to host the Olympics (including a \$15 billion tab for London, \$40 billion for Beijing, and \$50 billion for Sochi).⁴¹ Enormous investments are made in facilities that then usually sit unused—the “badlands of modernity,” as they've been aptly called—and, contrary to boosters' claims, tourism actually goes down during these mega-events, making profit improbable and fi-

material burden inevitable.⁴² Justifications here, too, tend to hinge on the ethereal and ephemeral, with promoters hyping an “improved national spirit and mood” and “greater social inclusion”—qualities that are, by definition, immaterial and incalculable even as they are accompanied by a multibillion-dollar price tag.⁴³

Yet, as I will argue, this collective effervescence *is* true, real, and necessary, though perhaps not at the foolhardy economic cost it tends to elicit. The identity of a team *is* a source of unrivaled symbolic power—and therefore *also* a means of capital manipulation. Given the intimidating emotional hold that teams retain over followers, it becomes harder to formulate a civic identity through other, more productive and public urban emblems.⁴⁴ A polis can, regrettably, imagine itself (and its health) more easily through a playoff berth than those “thirty libraries,” to borrow Art Modell’s callous comparison.

And even if you haven’t signed off on an (economically) wrong-headed stadium deal, you’ve likely felt the weight of this illogic any time you’ve ever made a purchase of branded sneakers or other sports-logoed merchandise. This was the real genius of Nike founder Phil Knight: He realized that he wasn’t even “in the shoe business. . . . He was in the entertainment business.”⁴⁵ The power and allure of those \$100 Air Jordans is wholly imaginary and symbolic rather than material and functional; most consumers at the checkout register neither contemplate the bleak conditions of sports merchandise production nor can they actually (consciously, rationally) believe that, in purchasing them, they, too, can fly “like Mike,” even as this is precisely the con job that all branding is predicated upon.⁴⁶ And because fans worship, blindly, at this altar of sports myth—myself included—Nike doesn’t actually need to “make shoes,” as its SEC filing reveals, but rather makes *meaning*.

As with other apparel companies in the \$170 billion sporting goods industry, its symbolic labor force (e.g., M.J., and Nike’s agency

of record, Wieden+Kennedy) add the “real” value and reap the cushiest rewards here, not those who are subcontracted to make the actual, *tangible* goods for “slave wages, forced overtime, and arbitrary abuse,” as Knight himself once acknowledged.⁴⁷ We think not of that exploited garment worker in Dhaka when interacting with the Swoosh or Chicago Bulls logo that she sewed on, but rather of the seductive wonderment and social power those icons supposedly offer us in the developed, postmodern world.⁴⁸ (Much the same whitewashing and willful ignorance occasionally accompanies the production of sports facilities, too: When the 2022 World Cup kicks off in Qatar, global attention will no doubt be focused more on the pitch than those migrant worker deaths that went into constructing it.⁴⁹)

Thus, as should be clear by now, sports are big money—a “highly lucrative, multi-branched transnational economy of enormous scope and influence” and an increasingly central component in the “culturalization” of contemporary economics.⁵⁰ And, yet, as also shown here, all that commercial exchange appears to be dependent upon a somewhat “fuzzy math”—one that does not add up when considered in the empirical, verifiable language of cost-benefit (for nations, cities, and consumers). It seems like we do not act *financially rationally* in the presence of sport—but why is that?

THE SPORTS TOTEM

The answer—and the esoteric essence of fandom—might just be found in a context far removed from sports.⁵¹ Almost precisely a century ago, Émile Durkheim, a pioneering figure of early sociology, pondered along similar lines. He wrote in the wake of the industrial revolution and the tumultuous reshuffling of culture that it had wrought—a *zeitgeist* perhaps not so far removed from our own, as the increasing specialization of economic roles within the division of labor threatened to tear

he “real” value and reap the cushions subcontracted to make the acres, forced overtime, and arbitrary work acknowledged.⁴⁷ We think not of Dhaka when interacting with the at she sewed on, but rather of the power those icons supposedly offer the world.⁴⁸ (Much the same white-casuals occasionally accompanies the production of the 2022 World Cup kicks off in doubt be focused more on the pitch as that went into constructing it.⁴⁹) Now, sports are big money—a “highly rational economy of enormous scope and highly central component in the “cultural economics.”⁵⁰ And, yet, as also shown, the game appears to be dependent upon a logic that does not add up when considered in terms of cost-benefit (for nations, cities, and individuals): do not act *financially rationally* in sports that?

sense of fandom—might just be found in sports.⁵¹ Almost precisely a century ago, in the wake of early sociology, pondered along with the wake of the industrial revolution and the culture that it had wrought—a zeitgeist of our own, as the increasing specialization and the division of labor threatened to tear

traditional communities apart and freight individuals with the dread of what he called “social anomie”: that feeling of normlessness, disorder, and alienation that seems to characterize and plague the modern age.⁵² Durkheim felt that individuals needed to be stitched together by “a strongly held common morality . . . a strong *collective conscience*” and he endeavored to explain how complicated societies cohere—how, in short, we manage to get along.⁵³

To do so, Durkheim went back to the beginning: religion in its simplest form, digging through accounts of “primitive” cultures like the Arunta tribe of Australia, hoping to excavate ancient sources of the ties that bind.⁵⁴ His theoretical conclusion, as revealed in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, remains as profound and relevant today as it is elegantly efficient: Whenever a society worships a divine form, it is, in fact, also simultaneously worshipping itself.⁵⁵ Religion is not, then, about the “cosmic order” (despite the claims of religious authorities); it is about *social* order and the imagined bonds that unify a group.⁵⁶ Through faith, we transcend atomistically rather than metaphysically, for religion is, ultimately, the “enduring source” of—and, indeed, invention for—“human social identity and fellowship.”⁵⁷ As more recent surveys have shown, it remains “the single most important repository of social capital.”⁵⁸ For Durkheim, this all hinged on what he termed the “totem”:

On one hand, it is the external and tangible form of what we have called the totemic principle, or god. But on the other, it is the symbol of that particular society we call the clan. It is its flag; it is the sign by which each clan distinguishes itself from others, the visible mark of its personality, a mark that embodies everything that belongs to the clan in any way. . . . The god of the clan, the totemic principle, must therefore be the clan itself, but transfigured and imagined in the physical form of the plant or animal species that serve as totems.⁵⁹

In other words, religious totems, while officially symbolizing deities, also implicitly offer vessels for fellowship, licenses to congregate together. As human beings are social creatures, there is something universal—and still enduring—in that tribal yearning. Yet community is often more abstract and imagined than concrete and identifiable. The totem, then, gives believers a physical representation, legitimation, and coordination of that need for identity and unity: a Star of David hung from one's neck; a Ganesh figurine placed on the dashboard; the St. Christopher medal that's tucked inside my wallet. Theological justifications are really just incidental; what matters is that through our faith in these common artifacts—and participation in the rituals that surround them—community is forged. As an emblem of and for the group, the totem helps differentiate insiders from outsiders.⁶⁰

Durkheim acknowledged, however, that because religion's centrality was waning and fewer collective practices yoke tribes together, "many modern, social institutions are religious in character."⁶¹ What totems, therefore, survive and persist in contemporary American culture? The Red Sox. The Packers. The Lakers. And so on.⁶² Rereading Durkheim's depiction of aboriginal practices, one can't help but be struck by the ancient echoes of today's fandom habits: "It often happens that the whole clan does not reside in the same place . . . [but] its unity is felt even without any geographical basis."⁶³ Think here of the jersey-clad fan diasporas fanning out to NFL Sunday Ticket bars every autumn. "In most societies, the child has the same totem as his [parent]."⁶⁴ Recall how routinely we speak of being "born" into a particular fandom and treat those who change allegiances to rival teams with the same ostracism familiar to heretics and apostates. "Totemic images are not only reproduced on the walls of houses . . . they are also found on the bodies of men. . . . It is imprinted on their flesh. . . . It is a general rule that the members of each clan try to give themselves the external appearance of the totem. . . . When the totem is a bird, the individuals wear feathers on their heads."⁶⁵ Behold, the

grandstands at Philadelphia Eagles, St. Louis Cardinals, and Chicago Blackhawks games—replete with drunk weirdoes in bird costumes.

Moreover, the underlying theoretical functionality is similarly uncanny, as one British sociologist finds in his study of soccer hooligans: “This love which the lads feel for their team is simultaneously also love for the feeling of solidarity which they experience every time they attend the game and participate in the communal practice of drinking and singing. Just as Durkheim suggested aboriginal tribes worship their society through the totem, so do the lads reaffirm their relations with other lads through the love of the team. . . . The team and the love invested in it is a symbol of the values and friendships which exist between the lads.”⁶⁶

Sports are, in short, a force that gives us meaning.⁶⁷ Michael Novak, a philosopher and theologian, makes this case most romantically; the language of sports, he observes, is saturated with religious terms like “sacred, devotion, faith, ritual, immortality, and love”; in its symbolic recreation of a “cosmic struggle” for an uncertain survival and “the hunger for perfection” (and ascetic preparation it demands), sport drives one “in some dark and generic sense ‘godward.’”⁶⁸ Former Washington Redskins head coach George Allen might well concur; as he once stated: “Winning is living. Every time you win, you’re reborn. When you lose, you die a little.”⁶⁹

The “godward” arc that Novak invokes suggests that sports can serve as a vehicle for existential elevation in a fashion that faith formerly fulfilled.⁷⁰ Nike advertising has, in particular, delivered these “homilies . . . of transcendence” over the years, constructing sport as a “conduit to another level of consciousness” and a “secular salvation or redemption” in an otherwise cynical era.⁷¹ But beyond transcendence, sport also furnishes faith’s traditional projections of probity; supplying something clear-cut, an “oasis of stability” that simplifies quandaries of right and wrong amidst the pluralistic ambiguity of a complex, messy world.⁷² We imbue our favorite franchises

with a kind of "moral superiority" and, in turn, sports discourse informs us "what the sources of evil are [and] . . . who the agent of evil is" and the "means by which" it can be overcome (e.g., beating the Raiders).⁷³ "I think that people look at athletes and see, like, better versions of themselves," *Sports Illustrated* senior writer Greg Bishop tells me. "They see things that they wanted to be or things they wanted to do."⁷⁴

To sum up, then, sports and religion are, theoretically, "soul mates," as athletes, fans, and believers alike "recite similar liturgies," "divide the world into winners and losers," "require total commitment of body and mind," and are "bathed in myth and sustained by ritual."⁷⁵ The ultimate point of those rituals is, once more, togetherness: "the feeling of collective participation and sharing of concerns and powers beyond the potential of the individual human," as sports scholar Michael Real discerned of Super Bowl socialization.⁷⁶ And that practice of sports religion actually turns out to be literal for some: More than a quarter of all Americans believe God has some role in determining who wins a game; another quarter have prayed to God to help their team; and more than half think that God rewards athletes of faith with success and health.⁷⁷

Indeed, if religion and sports seem inseparable today, it is because it has always been so. When Pierre de Coubertin, founder of the modern Olympic games, "insisted repeatedly on the religious character" of the competition he had revived, he was, in fact, channeling an ethos evocative of his antediluvian forbearers: "For me, sport is a religion with church, dogma, cult . . . but especially with religious feeling."⁷⁸ Far from peculiar, this nexus between sports and religion has been explicit and strong throughout much of human history.⁷⁹ From the first day of the ancient Olympics being reserved exclusively for pantheistic ceremony to Native American tribes constructing athletic spaces next to religious temples, the prehistoric world offers no shortage of examples and linkages.⁸⁰ (The Redskins' coach

Allen would find ample evidence for his aforementioned analogy of losing as death: Certain players in Aztec and Mayan matches were apparently beheaded and had their hearts cut out upon a sacrificial altar after the game. Talk radio absorbs those impulses nowadays.) Assorted ball games were an essential part of Easter season rituals in medieval Europe and the muscular Christianity movement of the 19th century found Victorians enthusiastically theorizing that “strenuous athleticism, physical dexterity, [and] symmetrical muscularity” was critical to “Christian manliness”—a curious theological equation of physical health as indicative of moral health and vision of Jesus as bodybuilding messiah (e.g., “Blessed are those who can bench 200”).⁸¹

Rare has been the religion that took a puritanical aversion to sports as secular distraction, though, more recently, some radical Islamist groups have banned soccer and punished enthusiasts for precisely that reason.⁸² Much more common has been an unabashed embrace: owners like those of the Colorado Rockies and Orlando Magic aggressively marketing “faith days” to mega-churches; a public prayer preceding the national anthem at Oklahoma City Thunder games; Christian sports books like those of Tony Dungy and Tim Tebow ascending the bestseller lists; the Vatican sponsoring a sports talk radio program in the hopes that soccer might lure wayward Italian Catholics back into the Church; and Pope Francis launching an interdenominational sports conference called, appropriately enough, “Sports at the Service of Humanity.”⁸³ (This, too, came at a commercialized price—the event was subsidized by almost \$2 million in sponsorships.⁸⁴) By contrast, running back Arian Foster hesitated to admit his own atheism, for fear of losing endorsement opportunities.⁸⁵

Yet all of this sports-sited fervor is happening while religion, as traditionally conceived, is supposedly dying. That’s what the secularization thesis holds, at least: that when societies modernize—as seen

acutely in Western Europe—"religious institutions, actions, and consciousness" dwindle.⁸⁶ In America, church membership peaked in the 1950s and an array of participation measures of formal faith ritual (e.g., Bible studies, Sunday schools) evince a similar decline in the years since, along with more "surfing" across congregations by potential adherents.⁸⁷ The latest Pew statistics find that nearly a quarter of all Americans—some 56 million people—are now religiously unaffiliated, including a sharp decline in self-professed Christians, as each generational cohort seems to identify less religiously than its predecessor.⁸⁸ Clearly, religion has, over the course of several centuries, lost its monopoly on cultural life and the public square, no longer so collectively defining reality and forming the basis of identity as it once did.⁸⁹ And, yet, as Durkheim probed more than a century ago, "If religion provided moral solidarity in the past, and if religion has been in a continuous state of decline, what will take its place in the future?"⁹⁰

The answer provided here is sports culture—the definitive "civil" or "folk" faith of our time that fills the vacuum created by the decline of traditional religion.⁹¹ Given that, on Sundays, almost three-quarters of Americans are likely to be in church or watching football (or doing both), even the magazine *Christian Century* conceded that the NFL had basically become "America's newest indigenous religion."⁹² Moreover, many of the responsibilities that once fell to formal religion and the church—"an alternative family, a support system as well as a system of meaning . . . the moral instruction of children, the ritual differentiation of men and women, the worship . . . of a common divinity . . . and the national and international experience of collective bonding around that divinity"—now reside, most conspicuously, within the purview of sport.⁹³ Which means that, as critic Steve Almond points out (in his manifesto *Against Football*, no less), "the only spiritual adhesive strong enough to unite Americans, a modern temple in which neighbors join together during

Sunday services to slake fierce and ancient longings once served by the Church" might just be sports.⁹⁴

A CULTURE IN FRAGMENTS

Perhaps a "values vacuum" has been created whereby many people feel alienated, no longer believing deeply in anything, identifying with anyone, or feeling committed to any cause outside the immediate interests of themselves and their significant others. An opening exists, therefore, for enterprising parties to engage in the "consciousness" trade . . . to help supply the meaning and commitment that rapid social change under . . . postmodernity ha[s] evacuated from many lives. But what phenomenon has the emotional force to bind symbolically the fragmenting constituents of society . . . especially where there is abundant critical self-reflection, cynicism and a seeming "exhaustion" of novelty? Not surprisingly, the answer . . . is media sport.⁹⁵

I, of course, concur with sport scholar David Rowe here, but before fully engaging the potential of that prescription, those problems that plague postmodernity might well be further enumerated and elaborated: in particular, the persistent disquiets of alienation, polarization, and fragmentation. As to the first, Americans are accustomed to hearing regular reports of diminishing public trust in all manner of large social institutions: Congress, public schools, corporations, the media, and, in fact, organized religion itself.⁹⁶ Simultaneously, sociologist Robert Putnam has charted a wide range of post-1960s measures showing a feeling of communal breakdown across the U.S., including declines in membership in local groups, neighborly trust, and "the sense of shared identity."⁹⁷ Indeed, it is revealing that Putnam chose a sports practice—*Bowling Alone*—for his book title as the metaphor with which to index and illustrate civic vitality (or lack thereof).⁹⁸ Broadly speaking, community has, over many millennia,

gone from a “fixed given,” defined by spatial limits to a flexible, voluntary, “deterritorial[ized]” social product, with populations ever more mobile and migratory, either by choice or necessity.⁹⁹

Our politics and culture, it is regularly lamented, also divide us. The notion of America as a polarized electorate is, by now, that rare shared truth that Republicans and Democrats can agree upon in an age of fake news and alternative facts. For the better part of 50 years, there has been a steady rise in partisanship to the point that Pew calls it “the defining feature of early 21st century American politics,” as centrists dwindle, networks and neighborhoods ideologically self-sort, and negative opinions of political opponents ossify.¹⁰⁰ Some wonder if these trends relate to the ascendance of “information cocoons”—our increasing capacity to filter out opposing views and contrary representations of reality as news arrives via cable channels, blogs, and other social media.¹⁰¹ Communication theorist James Carey once beautifully likened reading a newspaper to “attending a mass,” in that the specific, ephemeral information distributed through it was far less important than the cultural power of a having a common worldview represented and ratified by it.¹⁰² If true, the slow death of daily newspapers could leave localities bereft of not just an investigative watchdog but equally a communal glue.

And, yet, fragmentation is evident not only in public affairs but equally across popular culture: I speak here of the entertainment cocoons that define our time. Smartphone distractions seclude us *Alone Together* in social settings; the digital delivery and algorithmic targeting of pop content has splintered taste beyond blockbusters, once broadly cast to mass audiences, and into the “long tail” of smaller, niche interests.¹⁰³ (Netflix, with its vast and particularistic library, is the quintessential example of this, consuming one-third of all Internet traffic during peak hours.¹⁰⁴) This explosion of media options available to consumers likely means that cultural sensations seem less “sensational” than they might have a generation ago (in terms of audience

size, industry revenues, etc.) and a canon of relatable references and collective memory accumulated through newspaper readership, terrestrial radio hits, and network shows is that much harder to come by.

Spotify carries an infinitely larger variety of artists and sub-genres than the shelves of Sam Goody could ever shoulder and television executives can only reminisce fondly about the late 1970s when, predictable, 90 percent of the U.S. population was tuning into just three channels during prime time. Unlike the “enforced similitude” that broadcast TV’s ubiquity furnished American culture—and the way it pieced together a coherent mosaic of “national identity,” not to mention Baby Boomer collective memory—in today’s profusion of choice, flexibility and abundance, the most popular shows like *Big Bang Theory* and *NCIS* are lucky to draw 10 percent of U.S. households, which would have put them at risk of cancellation in the 1980s.¹⁰⁵ Indeed, “the defining trend of media in our lifetime is fragmentation [and] . . . as media content has become ever more individualized and on-demand,” writes Michael Mulvihill, senior vice president at Fox Sports, “increasingly, we are each a demographic of one.”¹⁰⁶

Moreover, besides shrinking audiences for fragmented content—the *M*A*S*H* finale, for example, drew 106 million viewers (in fewer TV homes in 1983) as compared to the equivalently esteemed *Mad Men* finale, which drew just 5 million—the bewildering complexity of that content perhaps repels casual consumption and therefore common conversation.¹⁰⁷ Prestige franchises of the last two decades like *Lost*, *The Wire*, and *House of Cards* are far more confusing and time-demanding, narratively speaking, than the episodic or even serialized hits of previous eras.¹⁰⁸ One cannot “simply” drop in on the *Game of Thrones* season finale and appreciate it as a cultural form without significant investment beforehand (and, in my case, a Wikipedia connection and pad of paper to keep notes). Game 7 of the NBA Finals, in terms of comparatively attainable dramatic pleasure, would seem to be considerably less befuddling to those

who did not watch the first six.¹⁰⁹ For all of its well-lauded merits, then, the scripted storytelling style of our cable-digital era forecloses easy access and thus looser affiliations as and with other fans. Peak TV is great for art, but less so for widespread social communion. "I think we, in this very fragmented society, need things like that," veteran sportswriter Robert Lipsyte laments in an interview. "If we don't have general magazines, we don't have general popular TV shows, our music fragments us, our sexuality, certainly our politics . . . but not the games themselves—there's something very positive in that."¹¹⁰

WHERE TRIBES STILL AMASS

Supreme Court Chief Justice Earl Warren once remarked, "I always turn to the sports pages first, which records people's accomplishments. The front page has nothing but man's failures."¹¹¹ Warren's sentiments echo the religious themes identified earlier—that sport remains a beacon for hope and the scaffolding for such belief in progress. But it also suggests that sport might represent a counter-valence to the postmodern theory that, amidst a crisis of cultural relativism and the collapse of former sources of authority, "metanarratives" are now otherwise in decline.¹¹² These metanarratives, which represent the accumulation of smaller stories articulating a grand, universal, and eternally enduring idea about human experience within particular ideological contexts (e.g., an Absolute Truth that Christianity, Marxism, or scientific objectivity profess and provide), have been increasingly under assault from particularistic incredulity.¹¹³ More recently—and more partisanly—some detect an outright "epistemic breach" in U.S. news culture, whereby massive amounts of Americans embrace a tribal, conspiratorial thinking that rejects "mainstream institutions devoted to gathering and disseminating knowledge (journalism, science, the academy)—the ones society has

appointed as referees in matters of factual dispute.”¹¹⁴ As one media scholar observes, “In such a world all the traditional institutions that provided the social cement of modern life—most notably the family, the church, the factory or company, mass media, and the state—are nothing but bargaining chips in our individual negotiations with the forces of change that sweep contemporary life. People cannot simply rely on parents, priests, professionals, or presidents anymore—they have to go out and construct their own narrative.”¹¹⁵

And, yet, sports remain recalcitrant, mostly, to this narrative of metanarrative decline.¹¹⁶ No one scoffs at the objectivity of sports page box scores as “fake news”; a game was played and it had an observable outcome we (usually) agree not to disagree about, at the level of empirical verifiability. Broader than that, though, sport remains a vessel for the simulation of enduring faith and truth when other news tends to troll for our cynicism and resignation. Sports are, after all, timeless as a cultural practice: No society in human history has ever existed without them in some form.¹¹⁷ They are also fairly universal (soccer, especially): perhaps the “only global idiom apart from science”—a language that, because it is encoded in the body, “transcends linguistic” divisions and can be communicable across the widest possible range of nations and cultures “with virtually no dissent, opposition, or challenge.”¹¹⁸ And sport is also embedded *in* our language itself—with as many as 1,700 oft-used metaphors derived from the field of play found in English—framing how the world is seen, not least in the sense that life itself is a kind of “game.”¹¹⁹ The structure of sports are, therefore, an exercise in power that helps define a society’s values; they offer “cultural texts” that generate “meta-social commentaries,” which this book will attempt to unpack for the contemporary American moment.¹²⁰

Sports’ massiveness—in terms of (literally) still aggregating masses amidst those forces of fragmentation—is a considerable part of that power, delivering office water-cooler moments that persist in popular

culture and offering the “glue of collective consciousness” that the acid of modern life has otherwise dissolved.¹²¹ One national survey of U.S. fans finds that more than three-quarters believe that sports brings together “people from different walks of life” (and half of fans rely upon sports as “a link between generations” in their families).¹²² The NFL, in particular, has self-consciously sought to style itself as “a rare national site of unity, stability, and inclusiveness” from the tumultuous 1960s onward—a “lingua franca by which men of vastly different beliefs and standing could speak to one other”—to the point that one league executive can credibly claim, “We’re really in the business of aggregating America around events and around our game. There are fewer and fewer places where you can do that [and] if you can . . . you are going to be more and more valuable.”¹²³

Quite simply, the most people in the history of humankind to share the same experience, at the same time, are audiences for recent international sporting events.¹²⁴ Over the course of two weeks in 2012, more than 150 million tweets were exchanged about the London Games; two years later, 90 percent of Dutch households watched Holland’s World Cup semifinal and some 30 million Chinese viewers awoke at 3 a.m. to catch the final match.¹²⁵ Domestically, 88 percent of Americans call themselves sports fans (with 68 percent saying that being a fan of their favorite team is a “very” or “somewhat” important part of their lives) and, even for those who aren’t, sports media remains “an inescapable reality, forming part of the context of every American’s life.”¹²⁶

A review of the demographic profile of American sports fans shows that, despite this ubiquity, they are also disproportionately likely to be male, black, and have played sports as a youth.¹²⁷ Unsurprisingly, research from both here and the United Kingdom has found that parents and families are critical for nurturing sports participation as a “normal part” of daily life.¹²⁸ Similarly, studies have shown over several decades that peers and friends, families, and fathers, in particular, tend to be some of the key influences that socialize a person

into fandom—a finding that holds true, globally, from Canada to Australia to Greece.¹²⁹ In an important book on the psychology of sports fans, Daniel Wann and colleagues found that the most common motivations and pleasures for spectators included: pure entertainment value; excitement and arousal; the chance to spend time with others; the self-esteem boost furnished; the grace and beauty of athletic movement; the diversion from daily life; and the utility for family gatherings.¹³⁰ When it comes to particular favorite teams, Wann concludes that, of dozens of possible reasons, fans' allegiances stem primarily from a fundamental psychological desire for “belonging and affiliation” and “to feel part of distinctive groups.”¹³¹

Clearly, as discussed earlier, the antitrust exemption that sports leagues wield to maintain their cartel power is a key factor in staving off the cultural fragmentation that has so splintered other pop culture industries asunder. Yet there is also something uniquely deep, tribal, and even existential in sport's capacity to unify—an anti-“centrifugal” force against other dimensions of identity that divide, “transport[ing] fans and players alike into another realm of consciousness.”¹³² On one hand, it epitomizes what political historian Benedict Anderson has called “imagined community,” in that believing in a shared identity is more important than actually knowing all the members of that group conjured.¹³³ But sometimes the ineffable materializes and gooses the believer with chills; ESPN *Outside the Lines* reporter Kelly Naqi evocatively conjures this sentiment in (unknowingly) Durkheimian terms:

When the Red Sox finally won the World Series [in 2004] and I was living in New York City and I still probably walked out the next day with my Red Sox cap and Red Sox shirt. I saw—more than any other time in my life in New York City—a ton of people with Red Sox stuff on. It was, like, you're proud to be one of them, like, “You're one of me. I'm one of you.” You give each other that nod, like, “Yeah, we won.” Even though, we—I—had nothing to do with this team

except that I have poured hours of my life into watching them and listening to them on the radio. . . . There is this connection and there is this escapism: We're all in it together.¹³⁴

Naqi invokes here a curious, though not at all unusual, pattern to sports fandom: that merging of personal identity with team identity. Like war, sport's power is unique in its ability to generate an explicit identification with those on the "battlefield."¹³⁵ When fans talk about their favorite team, language belies logic—that "we" community of followers (united really only as consumers of a copyrighted cultural product) becomes one and the same, "inseparably intertwined," with the professionals at play.¹³⁶

Players certainly spin this yarn in post-game interviews (e.g., "We feed off [the crowd's] energy. They feed off us."); franchises sell it explicitly in commodified form (as elaborated further in chapter 3); and philosophers rhapsodize about its sonic essence (e.g., "cheering 'transform[s] individuality into communion'").¹³⁷ In short, they're called Manchester *United*—not Manchester *Atomized*—for a reason. And, yet, even amidst all these pieties of devotion, we are still just as often fair-weather wimps at heart: Some years back, social psychologists reported the landmark, albeit obvious, finding that fans wear team merchandise and use "we" more after victory than defeat, because a sports team's success enhances one's own public self-image and sense of worth.¹³⁸ (More interestingly, subsequent studies have found that, after watching our favorite team win, we tend to overestimate our *own* ability to tackle challenging physical, mental, and social tasks.¹³⁹)

According to one scholar, sport teaches us to think in those tribal terms that bifurcate a black-and-white world of good versus evil; it teaches us that "the tribe is the paramount unit of social order, the enemy is other neighboring tribes; they cheat and thus are less than human."¹⁴⁰ That mentality colors fans' perceptions and capacity to

objective reality. One classic example of this is an experiment in the 1950s that showed students at Princeton and Dartmouth watching the exact same game between the two schools, with Princeton students identifying more fouls committed by Dartmouth players and Dartmouth students identifying more fouls committed by Princeton players and vice versa.¹⁴¹ Perhaps these tribal loyalties run deep because, historically, the sports club was a key factor in the “structure of feeling” among blue-collar communities—an origin story of civic pride.¹⁴² Or perhaps the human being is a “rooted beast,” needing to express, outwardly, that “rooting” through sports, especially when the enduring American ideal and historical experience of geographic mobility constantly “uprooting” her, anonymously westward and from city to city; the team totem therefore enchants us with the prospect of permanence, even as all else that is solid seems to melt into thin air.¹⁴³ So perhaps it is that—the most basic of human fears, mortality—which drives us into the arms of sports community. This might well explain my grandfather’s hat still resting on my aunt’s fireplace mantle. In one intriguing experiment, researchers found that, when prompted to think about death, fans expressed even greater hope and faith that their teams would win it all, suggesting that we are driven to associate with institutions and cultural groups that live on to help cope with the persistent, anxiety-inducing finale of our own existence.¹⁴⁴ In that sense, it doesn’t really matter whether our teams win or lose on the field; as long as the totem survives, so do we.¹⁴⁵ Our fidelity to it stitches us not just across space, but equally binds us in time, as former ESPN reporter Bonnie Bernstein explains:

One of the things that’s sacred in sports to me is the family bonding that sports creates and extends from generation to generation. My parents were raised differently than my grandparents were raised. . . . We’re going to raise our kids differently than we were raised, but I think one of the common threads is sports. It brings us all together,

it provides a platform for family members—to share stories of their memories when they were watching those teams. It provides rich, historical context that can be shared among everybody in a family. And that's the one thing that I love.¹⁴⁶

THE SACRED POWER OF LIVE

Above all, sport tells us what time it is. Its temporal quality is essential to its cultural power: the ability to anchor participants (players and fans alike) in the present moment; to concentrate a vast, shared psychic energy on events unfolding before us *right now*. It orients observers; synchronizes schedules; coordinates collectivity. “Most of the time, we are time travelers—we are either worried about the future or worried about the past. But how many times are we actually in ‘the now’?” asks John Rowady, president of rEvolution, a sports marketing and media agency. “Sports . . . is ‘appointment now.’ You just are naturally drawn to ‘the now’ and you exist there for a while. . . . It’s really hard to get into ‘the now’ such a complex world. . . . [And] it’s lucrative to be in ‘the now.’”¹⁴⁷

Indeed, “the now” is incredibly powerful and valuable, both economically and culturally. Attendance (either in person or through mediated means) at “the now” is especially lucrative for advertisers—making it a marketable commodity—and never more so than in a DVR-time-shifted era (more on this in chapter 2).¹⁴⁸ But “the now” is also existentially critical for living through asynchronous postmodernity, when people seek mindfulness, individually, and co-presence, socially, against the onslaught of distraction, multitasking, and disjuncture of time and space.

An increasing truism of contemporary pop culture (and an oft-heard sales pitch from providers of it) is that you can watch whatever, wherever, *whenever* you want; but with sports, you can’t—and that’s a good thing. It resists being on demand, temporally at least, and

instead demands our “collective co-presen[ce]” at specifically scheduled intersections with it and each other.¹⁴⁹ Waxing poetic on that experience of sports’ “sacred time,” the philosopher Novak writes, “At moments of high intensity, there seems to be no past, no future. One experiences a complete immersion in the present, absorption in an instantaneous and abundant now.”¹⁵⁰ This is deeply Zen; it also makes mad bank. Cultures (and advertisers) *need* this complete and utter absorption in that present mind-state that psychologists term “flow.” “I think that’s one of the reasons I love sports,” writes *Grantland* staffer Brian Phillips. “Suddenly, there’s two seconds left in the fourth quarter and the Hail Mary is diving toward the end zone, and for that little stretch, the world is pure event.”¹⁵¹

Few cultural practices can achieve the wonder of “pure event” and communal immediacy on such a grand scale—the feeling that, as the scroll of history unfurls, almost everyone, momentarily, seems to be on the same page. Sport can do so, because it is, at its core, unreal. Cultural historian Johan Huizinga makes this argument in his influential theory of play: that play is defined by the freedom to engage in it (i.e., being superfluous, it can be postponed and resumed at will); that play occupies an “interlude” from daily life and takes place in a special, temporary world carved out from ordinary reality; and that play “creates order,” by proffering clear, tidy, black-and-white conclusions whose definitude often evades us otherwise in an ambiguous moral universe.¹⁵² After all, the main, and perhaps only, distinction between the sports fan and non-fan is that the former buys into the (utterly irrational, frankly ridiculous) illusion that it actually *matters* who wins the game.¹⁵³ Because of that, paradoxically, sport is both totally useless and extraordinarily valuable as a cultural good. “It allows you to feel real emotional investment in something that has no actual, real-world consequences,” writes *New York* editor Adam Sternbergh. “You will feel actual joy or actual pain . . . in relation to events that really don’t affect your life at all.”¹⁵⁴

Historically (and relevant to the thrust of this particular chapter), religion has been the “primary vehicle for human forms of play,” as both religion and play alike have aims on ecstatically transcending everyday existence—those mundane mental states and atomistic social structures that divide and depress us.¹⁵⁵ The sports page and sports broadcasts on television arguably create a reassuring regularity and consistency in society against the backdrop of distressing news and current affairs: The world may seem to be on fire and full of uncertainty, but the games go on, just as they always have.¹⁵⁶ Big games like the Super Bowl offer especially “sacred” markers that protrude from the “‘profane monopoly’ of secular time,” providing a “needed psychic relief from the tedium of western linear time.”¹⁵⁷ Against that momentum of “traditionless modernity,” sports “satisfy the most persistent hungers of the human heart—for repetition.”¹⁵⁸ Baseball, in particular—in the words of former commissioner Bart Giamatti—“keeps time fat and slow and lazy.”¹⁵⁹ (This, as we’ll see later, has become sports’ problem, as well.) What matters, religiously, is that the ritual participants are gathered here, together, in “the now.”

That description (and prescription) was essential to sociologists’ Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz’s notion of “media events”—those special, large-scale occasions when modern societies feel united through the mass broadcast of “preplanned history.”¹⁶⁰ For Dayan and Katz, TV was the answer to Durkheim’s century-old concern about the loss of “social solidarity.”¹⁶¹ Such has been the thrilling power and potential of broadcasting since its debut, demonstrated when 300 million radio listeners around the world tuned into the 1936 Olympic Games.¹⁶² These media events fix eyes on a “ceremonial center,” commanding simultaneous and universal attention and legitimating the myth that “there is a centre to the social world and that, in some sense, the media speaks ‘for’ that centre.”¹⁶³

Most importantly, these media events are live—guaranteeing “a potential connection to our shared social realities as they are happen-

ing.¹⁶⁴ In other words, if content is foregrounded as live, it implies that something is real, authentic, and true, countering any inherent suspicion of mediated illusions—that the tableau has been merely arranged for the camera's eye.¹⁶⁵ The specter of performance-enhancing drugs might have tainted the purity of fans' faith in athletic accomplishment but—in an age of spin and pseudo-events—performance amidst uncertain outcomes still makes sports the original “reality TV” genre.¹⁶⁶ As Chris Dufresne, college sports columnist for *the Los Angeles Times*, summarizes: “What makes covering sports, watching sports, different and bankable—what you cannot ever change about what we do is that it's the last unscripted event: You don't know how it's going to end. That's what makes it better and time and time again, it always comes through—the last second, the Hail Mary, the home run. When you don't know how something's going to end—you can't market that, you can't create that in a lab. . . . People will tune in to see how and they don't know—that's the elixir. That's what makes it different.”¹⁶⁷