The Ethics of Supporting Sports Teams

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ABSTRACT This paper examines two common motivations for supporting a team. Is either one of these motivations morally superior? More fundamentally, is any sporting team a worthy object of allegiance?

The “partisan” is a loyal supporter of a team to which she may have a personal connection or which she may have grown to support by dint of mere familiarity. The “purist,” in contrast, supports the team that he thinks exemplifies the highest virtues of the game, but his allegiance is flexible. The ideal attitude for fans is that of the moderate partisan, who combines the admirable loyalty of the partisan fan with the purist’s realization that teams that violate the rules or spirit of the game do not deserve our support.

In response to objections that no team deserves our support, I argue that loyalty to a team is, like other particular allegiances, a prima facie good that entails no negative attitudes toward other teams and their fans. Moreover, teams that moderate partisans support are worthy objects of their fans’ allegiance. Such teams strive for physical, intellectual and aesthetic excellence, while restraining their actions by the demands of morality. To support such teams is a positive virtue.

Many people devote considerable amounts of time and emotional energy to following their favourite sports teams. However, the role of the fan or supporter of a team has received surprisingly little attention in the literature on the ethics of competitive sport. In a recent paper I defended an attitude of “moderate patriotism” on the part of supporters of their countries’ national teams [1]. This paper addresses more fundamental questions about the ethics of supporting a team, whether it be local or national. Why do fans support a particular team, and are any reasons for doing so more worthy than others? Indeed, is any sporting team a worthy object of allegiance? I will defend the view that, provided certain conditions are met, loyal support of a team is not only permissible but also positively virtuous.

1. Different Motivations of Fans

I distinguish two main categories of fan: the “partisan” and the “purist.” The “partisan” is a loyal supporter of a team to which she may have a personal connection or which she may have grown to support by dint of mere familiarity. The “purist,” in contrast, supports the team that he thinks exemplifies the highest virtues of the game, but his allegiance is flexible.

The most grassroots level of partisan support occurs among fans of a local amateur team, whose players may include friends and relatives of the fans. The reason for support is a pre-existing relationship with the team’s players. Fans of school or college
teams may either fall into the previous category or else have a direct connection with the institution, as is the case with current or past students. Both these two types of fandom are straightforwardly explicable by reference to a concern for the wellbeing of people for whom one cares or institutions with which one identifies. Support for regional and national teams seems similar to support for school and college teams, in that fans may feel enlarged, albeit slightly, by the successes of teams representing the region or country to which they belong.

The motivation for supporting modern professional sports teams such as football clubs is more complex. While many fans support their local team, the link between fan and team is more tenuous than in the case of local amateur teams, school, college, regional or national teams. The professional team may be located in a fan’s hometown, but players are typically not homegrown. In the English Premier League, for instance, the majority of players are not English, and many of those who are did not grow up in the club’s area. North American professional sports teams — baseball, basketball, American football and hockey — also draw the majority of their players from other states and countries. Their fans cannot, then, feel enlarged by their team’s success in the same way as fans of school, college, regional or national teams, since there is no obvious group to which fans and the majority of players both belong, allowing the players’ credit to reflect on the fans.

Yet the absence of this kind of connection clearly does not prevent millions of fans from supporting professional teams in Europe, North America, and throughout the world. The basis for their support seems to be simple proximity and familiarity. The local team gets more coverage than others in local media and is the easiest one — for purely geographical reasons — for the local sport enthusiast to see live. The local sport enthusiast gets to know the local team’s players and their strengths and weaknesses. She grows fond of her team’s ground/stadium, which she starts to associate with the pleasure of the exciting moments she has spent there watching the sport that she enjoys. Even when players retire or are traded and new players arrive, a sense of continuity remains by virtue of the core of remaining players and also the club’s style of play and its tradition. These factors combine to lead her to identify with the team by “adoption,” as it were, as opposed to the first type of partisan fan who has more of a “family” connection with her team. This process of adopting a team is no more mysterious than the increasing concern for the wellbeing of another that is central to the beginning and deepening of friendship. It also parallels the very process of becoming proud of one’s town, region or country, which usually develops gradually over a person’s life, that underlies support of local amateur, or regional or national teams. Whereas support of such local amateur, regional or national, or school and college teams is based on a pre-existing loyalty to a region or institution, support for modern professional sports teams is more likely to be based on an organic allegiance that originates in and grows with familiarity with the team.

An interesting feature of modern professional sport is that a team’s fans are no longer confined to inhabitants of its region. Famous clubs like Manchester United, the New York Yankees and the Chicago Bulls have avid supporters throughout the world. Now some of these long-distance partisan fans have doubtless become supporters by means of the same process of gradual familiarity as home town fans, thanks to satellite television and other worldwide media coverage. The fact that the world’s most famous, successful teams — i.e., those that are more likely to be featured in the
world’s media — have far more long-distance fans than their more modest rivals supports this hypothesis. And other long-distance fans, just like some local ones, are doubtless motivated by apparently trite, superficial reasons for becoming supporters: the desire to support a winning team, infatuation with a matinee idol who plays for the team, etc.

However, national and worldwide television coverage of team sport has increased the probability of another motivation for becoming a fan: namely, admiration for a team’s skill and style of play. Free from local, regional or patriotic biases, this second type of fan chooses his allegiance on purist grounds [3]. While the purist may well have a favourite team, he effectively watches each game as a neutral: his main desire is to see an exciting, skilful contest in which the better team prevails.

2. Evaluation of Partisan v. Purist Fans

I turn next to a moral evaluation of the two main motivations for supporting teams that are outlined in the previous section. I will focus on support for professional clubs and high-profile American college teams, since this level of sport attracts far more fans’ attention than any other. How does the purist fan, who chooses his team based solely on admiration for the quality of its play, compare to the partisan fan, whose allegiance to her team arises from a person or geographical connection or by virtue of gradual familiarity with the club?

The purist appears to have staked out the moral high ground, since his choice of team is based only on sporting excellence. His allegiance is flexible and will switch if his team falls short of the high standards that he expects. His is the attitude of the neutral fan who genuinely wants the best team to win in an exciting, skilful contest. In contrast, the partisan will stick by her team even when it is performing badly. She would rather see her team win, even when playing poorly against a far more talented, attractive side. We are tempted to call the purist, but not the partisan, the true “fan of the game,” since he is untainted by hometown bias and desires only to see an excellent contest in which the team that is superior in the central skills of the game prevails. Alongside him, the partisan appears superficial and parochial. When we teach children that playing the game fairly and to the best of our ability is more important than winning, the attitude we are nurturing is parallel to that of the purist, whereas the win-at-all-costs mentality that we discourage is more akin to that of the partisan.

However, in another respect the attitude of the partisan seems preferable and that of the purist curiously lacking. To elucidate this desirable feature of the partisan’s attitude, let us consider a surprising analogy with romantic love. Our love for our partners begins with an appreciation of their good qualities. However, with time, our love becomes less dependent on our partners’ qualities and fixes instead on their unique instantiation of those qualities: in other words, on their special identity. As Robert Nozick says, “[A] romantic mate eventually comes to be loved, not for any general dimensions or ‘score’ on such dimensions . . . — but for his or her own particular and nonduplicable way of embodying such general traits.” [4] Our love becomes, as it were, imprinted on the particular person, just as a duckling regards as its mother the first living being that it sees, even if (as has happened on occasion) that being is a human. Two considerations give strong support to this characterization of romantic love.

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First, a person in love does not seek to “trade up” to a different partner who scores higher than her current partner on the most significant evaluative scales. In other words, even if we meet someone who has even more of the good qualities that we admire in our partner, we will not reject her in favour of this new person. Even if objective appraisal of our potential new partner’s qualities reveals that she really does score higher on the scales that we consider most important, a willingness to trade up to her would indicate that we were not, after all, in love with our original partner.

Second, love can endure a considerable amount of change. Some changes in our partner would doubtless make the continuation of our love impossible: attempted murder, chronic abusive behaviour, significant betrayals, etc. However, people change significantly in the course of long-term love relationships and this clearly does not prevent all such relationships from continuing. The very qualities that led us to fall in love may diminish or even disappear; they may be replaced by new qualities that we come to love; and even those qualities that we originally considered as minor faults in our partner may gradually seem endearing. The constant nucleus that remains the object of our love throughout all these changing attributes is our partner’s identity.

The surprising conclusion of the analogy between this analysis of love and the attitude of fans is that the purist barely qualifies as a fan at all. His support for a team is purely conditional. He trades up at the drop of a hat: namely, whenever a rival starts to play better than his current team. The partisan, in contrast, is willing to stick with her team despite significant changes in personnel and fortune. Nor is she tempted to “trade up” to a more successful, skilful team, except in unusual circumstances discussed below. Indeed, we regard the willingness to continue supporting a team despite hard times as a sign of admirable loyalty. Granted, the purist is no fair-weather supporter who jumps ship in the superficial pursuit of a winning team. His changes of loyalty are based on love of the game and admiration for attractive, skilful play. Nonetheless, and unlike the partisan fan, he lacks an allegiance that is imprinted on a given team and remains in spite of changing qualities. A loyalty that is so contingent is a fleeting, tenuous type of support.

Lacking the commitment to support flesh-and-blood players, despite their losses of form, the purist’s support for his team is too ethereal. Just as retaining affection for one’s partner despite changes and disappointments is essential to love, a certain amount of unconditional loyalty — the kind that the partisan has — is essential to genuine support of a team. Rather than being a genuine fan, the purist approaches each game as a neutral, hoping that his team will continue its excellent play, so that he will be able to continue supporting it.

Perhaps, analogous to a rule-utilitarian, a purist could recognize that even the best team will occasionally falter and fail to live up to its usual high standards. He would then choose to support the team that on the whole plays the most skilfully and entertainingly. However, as has been famously pointed out in criticism of rule utilitarianism, a consistent utilitarian must favour breaking the optimizing rule on those occasions when obeying it would have negative results [5]. Similarly, the fan who is truest to his purist principles would confine his support for his team to those occasions when it really does live up to his high standards. And even a rule-utilitarian purist would be prone to change allegiance from season to season, as the talent and form of different teams wax and wane.
Such tenuous, contingent support is unlikely to sustain a team that requires, for purely financial reasons, a solid base of loyal fans. And it may well be psychologically impossible for actual fans to maintain such a detached attitude toward games. The allegiance that arises from familiarity in the case of the partisan fan is a perfectly natural human response that may be hard to suppress even in the case of the purist fan. The purist fan may find that, in spite of himself, his concern for his team’s wellbeing will continue even when it falls below his expectations of athletic excellence.

Having criticized the attitude of the 100% purist fan, we need to realize that the attitude of the purely partisan fan is also problematic. Admirable loyalty and a willingness to stick by her team during hard times can spill over into stubbornness and overzealous partisanship. If allegiance to her team is the only motivating factor, she may continue to support her team when the team’s actions are not worthy of support. By analogy, while continuing to cherish a partner even after he or she has undergone considerable changes can be a worthy sign of true love, such love need not be unconditional. A person who was genuinely in love can lose that love in the face of betrayal or abuse on the part of the partner, and indeed self-respect may require that we withdraw our love from such mistreaters. Similarly, a genuine fan may nonetheless withdraw her support if her team starts to engage in such indefensible practices as violent play or other forms of cheating, or even if it starts to use cynical, negative tactics, which may be within the letter of the law of the game, while violating its spirit. A modicum of the purist’s attitude will provide a healthy safeguard against any tendency the partisan may have toward blind allegiance to a team that is unworthy of such support. Such withdrawal of support is far removed from the fair-weather fan’s abandonment of his or her team when it hits hard times. It is based instead on love of the game and a belief that how it is played is more important than achieving a good result at any cost.

In sum, a completely purist fan has an admirable concern for sporting excellence and a commendable disdain for blind, parochial support for one’s own favourite team. However, his support for the team that he judges to be most excellent is so contingent and tenuous that he barely qualifies as a fan at all. The completely partisan fan, in contrast, exhibits the great virtue of steadfast allegiance to her team even if its fortunes decline. The downside of her approach is that it can easily degenerate into blind support of a team whose conduct is unworthy of it. The ideal attitude for fans, then, appears to be the tenacious loyalty of the partisan, tempered by the purist’s realization that teams that violate the rules or spirit of the game do not deserve our support. Let us call such a fan the “moderate partisan.” In reality, many fans already contain elements of both the partisan and the purist. The purpose of this section has been to show which elements of each motivation are worth preserving.

3. Should We Be Fans of Particular Teams at All?

The previous section made clear that, if conventional fandom is desirable, then the loyalty of the partisan fan is an essential component. If, however, we have good reasons to believe that persistent allegiance to a particular team is undesirable, then the purist paradigm of fandom — i.e., that we should support athletic excellence wherever it occurs, rather than a favourite team — may be, for all its limitations, the only one that is morally permissible. In this section I consider, then, several arguments against loyal
support of a particular team and respond on behalf of the type of fan defended in the previous section — the moderate partisan.

The first objection concerns immoral actions and attitudes that partisan fans sometimes perform and hold. Little doubt exists that partisan fandom can sometimes lead to atrocities, for instance the acts of violence that have sometimes been committed by supporters of club and national teams. And some partisan supporters have a hostile attitude toward rival teams and their supporters, which is indefensible, even if it never leads to any tangible harm. However, there is nothing inherent in supporting a team that requires its fans to act violently and it would be unfair to tar all supporters, the vast majority of whom never act violently, with the same brush that we justly apply to hooligans. Similarly, merely being a partisan fan — identifying with and having a special concern for the success of our team — in itself implies no negative attitudes toward rival teams and players, just as people’s special concern for their loved ones does not preclude having moral respect for strangers. Even though some fans fail to live up to this ideal, being a fervent, committed supporter of a team is perfectly compatible with showing respect for opponents and even admiring the excellence of their play. The moderate partisan fans defended in this paper expect their teams to maintain high ethical standards and are especially unlikely to be so hypocritical as to act violently or disrespectfully toward rival teams or fans.

Torbjorn Tannsjo has criticized the attitude of sports fans, but not because of their hostility toward rival teams and fans. He argues, rather, that the admiration we have for Olympic champions and other “sports heroes” necessarily goes hand in hand with contempt for athletes who do not achieve such dizzying levels of success [6]. While Tannsjo focuses on champions in individual sports, we can nonetheless extend his argument to team sports and ask whether our admiration for elite clubs like Real Madrid or the Michael Jordan era Chicago Cubs is accompanied by morally indefensible contempt toward their less illustrious rivals. However, to the extent that Tannsjo’s argument succeeds — and his central claim that admiration for outstanding athletes entails contempt for others is highly controversial [7] — it is a problem for the purist, not the moderate partisan defended in this paper. When Tannsjo describes our attraction to and fascination with Olympic champions he is describing the attitude of the purist, who admires athletic excellence wherever it occurs, regardless of the athletes’ nationality. The corresponding fan in team sports is the one who watches a team competition like the European Champions’ League as a neutral and is won over by the excellence of the winners. The moderate partisan, in contrast, observes competitions as anything but a neutral. While she is able to appreciate good play by other teams, her defining feature as a partisan is support for her own team, whether or not it performs better than other teams and whether or not it wins. Since her support is contingent on her team’s performing fairly and within the spirit of the game, her loyalty is unobjectionable and even commendable. Moreover, in contrast to the fans whose attitude Tannsjo criticizes, the moderate partisan’s primary motivation for following sport is loyalty to her team rather than a fascination with winners.

A more fundamental concern is that even moderate partisan support of a team appears to do precisely what impartiality rules out: it involves giving special treatment to a favoured group of people. And impartiality — giving equal respect to the interests of all people — is central to all non-egoistic moral theories. In this light, the purist fan’s approach seems preferable, since he only favours teams whose quality of play merits...
their being singled out and treated differently from other teams. In response: impartiality is primarily a restraint on our behaviour that prevents us from harming those who are not part of our “in-group.” It dictates that in the pursuit of our own interests and those of the people whom we specially favour — including a fan’s favourite team — we may not trample on the rights of outsiders. However, giving special preference to certain people is in itself unobjectionable. If I choose to bestow benefits on a particular person or people, I am morally free to follow my whim, as long as the cause that I support is not itself immoral. Thus the undoubted preference that partisan fans give to their team in no way violates any moral duty of impartiality, since fans do not owe their support to any team at all. The moderate partisan fan’s moral concern for her team, like any other exercise of moral regard for others, is a prima facie good. Its goodness is not diminished by the fact that she does not extend it to other teams, provided, of course, that it is unaccompanied by negative attitudes toward or violations of the rights of rival teams and fans [8].

So not only is the moderate partisan fan’s support for her team unobjectionable, but it is also a positive good. Moreover, while no one is obligated to become a supporter of any team at all, we have reason to be wary of the completely purist fan who has no lasting attachment to a single team. A fan who regularly watches a local team but never identifies with its fortunes fails to exhibit the perfectly natural, healthy tendency to form a bond with those with whom we are familiar. While this is innocuous enough in the case of a sporting team to which no one owes any allegiance, it may betoken an inability to develop empathy for other people. A person who lacks this ability may have difficulty forming friendships and lasting romantic attachments. Granted, no one has a moral obligation to form such close personal relationships in the first place, but being unable to do so seems to be a character flaw that would be condemned from a standpoint of virtue ethics.

The completely purist fan who has no ongoing allegiance to any team resembles the moral fanatic parodied by Richard Taylor [9]. This fanatic is perfectly obedient to moral rules, to the point of obsession, but his tangible lack of empathy for others makes him a moral monster. The purist shows a commendable appreciation for the fine points of the game but seems to lack the passion and commitment that is the lifeblood of competitive sport. As does the moral fanatic, he seems to appreciate the cognitive elements of the enterprise but not its emotive force.

However, even if we grant that the capacity for empathetic identification with individuals and groups of people is morally permissible and even desirable, the purist or other critics might still object that being a moderate partisan fan is an inappropriate exercise of a generally desirable capacity. Isn’t sport too trivial an entertainment to justify making teams of highly-paid professionals the object of fans’ devotion? In the absence of a morally worthy object of allegiance, doesn’t the support of even moderately partisan fans amount to a form of tribalism: the division of sports fans into arbitrary opposing factions? At a time when tribalism is manifesting itself in ugly ways in conflicts between ethnic groups such as those in the former Yugoslavia, we hardly want to encourage the formation of cliques that further divide populations.

I have three responses to this criticism of moderate partisan fans. First, the objection gives no support for its assertion that the pursuits of sporting teams are too trivial to make them a suitable object of fans’ allegiance. Teams provide entertainment and excitement for spectators, which is already enough to take their enterprise out of the
category of the mindless. More important, their displays of physical excellence — skill, conditioning, etc. — can be comparable to those of performers, such as ballet dancers, whom we are far less tempted to dismiss as unworthy of devotion. Athletes can also display mental qualities, such as astute strategy and coolness under pressure, that are fit objects for fans’ admiration. Some philosophers have argued that sport has an aesthetic element [10] and this suggests an analogy with other practitioners of the performing arts, such as musicians and actors. Supremely fit and skilful athletes who perform efficiently and gracefully seem to be ennobling of human nature and hence worthy of admiration and support for similar reasons as artistic performers. Furthermore, just as the partisan fan has her favourite team, so the patron of the arts may well be a regular supporter of a local orchestra or theatre or dance company. The artists lover may well have his favourite performers and follow their careers with interest, looking forward to each new role or piece that they perform. Thus the artists lover’s allegiance to the local performing arts company may well develop by the very same process of increasing familiarity as the partisan’s support for her team. Consistency requires that we extend to the moderate partisan sports fan the same admiration, or at least respect, that we accord to the loyal supporter of a local arts group.

Second, this criticism unfairly singles out support of sporting teams when many other allegiances would be vulnerable to the same objection, if we were willing to describe them in similarly unfavourable terms. Romantic love, for instance, is to some extent an arbitrary, irrational attachment to a person. While our love may originate in our appreciation of our beloved’s good qualities, it gradually takes on a life of its own that transcends these qualities. As we saw earlier, our love becomes fixed on our beloved as a person and may remain even if her qualities change quite significantly. The key point is that we do not normally regard such love as groundless or undesirable. On the contrary, we regard the commitment and devotion to another person in romantic love as a prima facie good. To be fair, we should similarly regard a fan’s dedication to her team as in itself virtuous, rather than condemning it as an empty-headed, blind affiliation. Such dedication is no more inherently divisive or tribalistic than is people’s devotion to their romantic partners.

The previous two responses do not depend on any controversial assertions that sport has the same aesthetic and moral value as the performing arts and love, respectively. They assume only that sport has at least some aesthetic and moral value and this is sufficient to answer the objections that (1) sport is such a trivial pursuit that teams are not worthy objects of fans’ support and that (2) fans’ allegiance to their teams lacks moral worth and is an undesirable form of tribalism.

A third and final consideration that helps to further allay the concern that sport has too little value to justify the fierce allegiance of fans to their teams arises from the purist approach to sport that tempers the zeal of moderate partisan fans. While the loyalty of the partisan fan is admirable, it should not be unconditional. Teams that engage in morally reprehensible behaviour — e.g., violent play, cheating, verbal abuse of opponents and referees — do not deserve support and moderate partisan fans will boycott them until the teams end these wrongful actions. Other teams may stay within the game’s laws but play in a manner that violates the spirit of the game and interferes with the emergence of the game’s most skilful, exhilarating features, by using professional fouls or other cynical tactics. These violations of the ethos of games also justify, and in extreme cases require, the withdrawal of support by fans of the perpetrating teams.
Moderate partisan fans’ use of such moral and aesthetic criteria in determining whether to support a team helps to ensure that, even though their choice of allegiance may originally have been made on the arbitrary ground of familiarity, their continued loyalty depends on whether the team’s actions are worthy of it. Furthermore, fans who restrict their support to teams that perform according to certain moral standards are likely to be equally exemplary in their own conduct while supporting their teams. Such fans are unlikely to regard rival fans and teams with hostility and exhibit the tribalism that is currently displayed by some narrow-minded supporters.

4. Conclusion

The ideal attitude for sports fans is that of the moderate partisan, who restrains the commendable loyalty of the partisan by the purist’s insistence that the game be played skilfully, fairly and with style. While partisan support is sometimes accompanied by negative attitudes toward rival teams and their fans, the connection is contingent and being a loyal supporter is quite compatible with treating rivals with respect. Moderate partisans who use ethical criteria in their choice of team are especially unlikely to act immorally in their role as fans. Like any expression of concern for other people, moderate partisan support of sports teams is a prima facie good. Indeed, the inability to give such support may signify a moral flaw. Finally, while sport is indeed a recreation, teams that moderate partisans support are worthy objects of their fans’ allegiance. Such teams strive for physical, intellectual and aesthetic excellence, while restraining their actions by the demands of morality. To support such teams is a positive virtue.

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NOTES

[2] Granted, many American colleges recruit athletes from distant states thousands of miles away, and so U.S. college teams in this regard resemble European professional football teams. However, current and past students of these colleges do at least share a significant identity — that of being/having been a student at the college — with the college’s athletes, who are also, at least nominally, students at the same institution.
[3] Of course, basing support for a professional team on familiarity can coincide with purist motivations. In other words, my local team, or the one to which I have become most accustomed by media coverage, may also be the one that I most admire because of its excellent play.
[8] For more detail on my reconciliation of particular allegiances with the demands of impartiality, see my A justification of moderate patriotism in sport, pp. 76–77.
