

Erin C. Tarver

*The I in Team: Sports Fandom and the Reproduction of Identity*

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*Reviewed by Pam R. Sailors, 2018*

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Discussion of sport has been largely absent from feminist thought. This is surprising, since sport is clearly one of “the most male identified of all cultural domains, a turf upon which male privilege and patriarchal constructions of masculinity are carefully cultivated, and women’s inclusion and images are meticulously monitored” (Castelnuovo and Guthrie 1998, 91). Yet a review of *Hypatia* turns up very few articles about sport, almost exclusively connected only to Iris Marion Young’s 1980 essay, “Throwing like a Girl” (in Young 2005), for example, Dianne Chisholm’s “Climbing Like a Girl” and Daniel Brennan’s “Surfing Like a Girl” (Chisholm 2008; Brennan 2016). Exploring a bit further afield reveals additional philosophical offerings (see Howe 2007; Sailors 2014; Daly 2015; Burrow 2016), although sparse and still most often connected to Young, for example, Susan Leigh Foster’s “Throwing Like a Girl, Dancing Like a Feminist Philosopher,” and Charlene Weaving’s “Cage Fighting Like a Girl” (Foster 2009; Weaving 2014). I take this to be a regrettable state of affairs as there is much to be gained from more overlap between feminist philosophy and sport. Erin C. Tarver’s *The I in Team* is a welcome contribution to such an intersection.

The book contains three main elements. First, Tarver considers sports fandom in general, distinguishing fans from spectators, and partisans from purists, before going on to argue that sports fandom is constitutive of personal identity. That is, through participation in practices of sports fandom, fans create their identities as members of particular communities. In Tarver’s case, for example, practices like wearing Louisiana State University (LSU) attire, knowing the LSU fight song, and cheering for LSU teams in sporting events work to make “LSU Tiger” a part of her identity. They also work to make her a part of the community of LSU fans, “an ‘I’ who is part of a particular ‘we’” (5). The community depends for its existence on the sports of which its members are fans, just as the sports, of course, depend upon the community of fans for support.

One of the primary ways the two are connected is through the symbolic instantiation of the team, its mascot. Tarver makes a convincing case that mascots function to unite individual fans into a community. A team’s mascot is the means by which a team’s identity is unified. Mascots act as markers that —draw together disparate persons, events, plays, losses, wins, riots, championships, ticket sales, and so on, into an artificial unity—a team—that is then, in Foucault’s language, understood as that which *underlies* all of these things, or is their causal origin. The institution of a mascot (as name and symbol) is a discursive practice that makes possible

the sense of the numerical identity of a team and thus contributes to the constitution of it (67).

Although this may be a positive phenomenon, it is not always so. This is because mascots have an instrumental existence: their purpose is to create a community that relies for its cohesion on their exclusion. As an example, Tarver argues that Native American mascots are racist because they imply that Native Americans exist for fans. Their value is instrumental—to unify the fan community—while being excluded from that community, since their actual existence would be undeniable evidence of the falsity of the stereotypical and degrading mascot images.

This brings us to the second element of the book: the argument that mascotting practices both reflect and create racial and gender inequality. Tarver uses chapters 4 through 6, the heart of the book, to make this case through application of the concept of mascotting to individual athletes. Some have argued that white fans' support of black athletes is a sign that sports can contribute to positive race relations. Tarver distinguishes between hero-worship and mascotting to show that things are much more complicated than this optimistic story. Hero-worship tends to be reserved for white athletes, like Tim Tebow, where fans think of themselves as sharing positive character attributes with their athlete heroes, who are granted status as representative members of the community. Fans may cheer for black athletes, but they do so only for the reason, and to the extent, that the athletes function as mascots, unifying the community without being a part of it. Further, Tarver shows that the association of black masculinity with hypermasculinity, violence, and heterosexuality works to perpetuate masculinist white supremacy. When players act as autonomous agents who have an independent existence apart from being mascots they are vilified and rejected by fans. Although Tarver's book was completed before Colin Kaepernick's symbolic political protest exploded into societal debate, he serves as a perfect example for her discussion of fan rejection of previously mascotted athletes.

After presenting a devastating critique of sports fandom, Tarver makes an attempt to rehabilitate it in the final chapter of the book, arguing that women do sports fandom in a way that offers a morally and politically superior alternative. In the ways that they enact fandom for mainstream men's sports and in the ways they act as fans for women's sports (basketball and softball), women fans undercut the misogyny, racism, and heterosexism that mascotting perpetuates. Women who participate in sport, either as athletes or fans, face unique expectations, negative stereotypes, and inequity as a consequence of their gender, as Jane English argued in her seminal examination of inequality in sport (English 1978). Still, Tarver shows that sports have much to offer women and women have much to offer sports. Sports offer an opportunity for women to experience themselves as bodily agents, subjects rather than objectified "others." At the same time, to the extent that women's sports fandom valorizes social bonding and feelings of connection to community, sporting practice itself becomes more positive. Tarver gets to this position in part by arguing that those who dismiss sport as irredeemably adversarial and masculinist make two mistakes. First, they fail to understand the necessarily cooperative nature of sport, its entailment of a mutual quest for excellence. Second, they maintain a form of gender essentialism, identifying athleticism as masculine and incompatible with femininity, a view belied by the mere existence of women athletes. Tarver also shows, through the example of the WNBA (Women's National Basketball Association), that women's sports can provide a site of community for queer women. In addition, the WNBA, with 70% of the players and a substantial

number of coaches and staff being women of color, serves to resist the sexualization and objectification of black women's bodies. Tarver is very careful here not to claim that all women sports fans refuse the practices of mascotting. She is also restrained in her estimation of how much of an impact women's sports fandom might make on mascotting. What she does establish is that there is a way to be a sports fan that does not contribute to racism, misogyny, or heterosexism.

*The I in Team* is an impressive and careful piece of scholarship. Although the book will be of greatest immediate interest to people working in the philosophy of sport, its import goes beyond disciplinary boundaries. The book makes a significant, original, and much needed contribution to feminist philosophy. Dismissing sports as unimportant, unavoidably sexist, or unworthy of our attention may prevent feminists from studying one of the most powerful forces in contemporary society. Moreover, it deprives sport of the feminist influence essential to transforming that power into a more positive force. Catherine MacKinnon recognized this more than thirty years ago, asserting that "women as women in a feminist sense have a distinctive contribution to make to sport that is neither a sentimentalization of our oppression as women nor an embrace of the model of the oppressor" (MacKinnon 1987, 123). Erin C. Tarver has done a fine job of uncovering the oppressive ills of mascotting and sketching the outline of an alternative feminist model of fandom.

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