

An Introduction by Jack Burnham

Honestly, New England sports radio is one of the oddest discoveries of my pandemic life. It's not something I was expecting in the slightest. I always played sports as a child, all the way through high school, but I never loved them in the way that some folks do. I was a fan in the same way most people are fans of Hallmark movies or apple pie. Sports weren't an everyday occurrence, but in the nebulous void that fills our minds, they seem to trend more positively than the mean. That changed once I went to university and needed ways to spend my evenings. It started with hockey but expanded rapidly to basketball, then football, and then Canadian football, and then baseball. Fast forward to the beginning of an apocalypse, and there I was, listening to sports talk radio for the first time in my life and finding myself both entertained and severely confused.

Talk radio is not exactly a new phenomenon in my life. I've listened to NPR since before I could talk and moving to Canada, the CBC became a constant companion. I can hum the Ontario Morning intro better than I can hum any top forty hit. Sports radio though was a new discovery, and an accidental one. Suddenly, I found myself brought into a world of juvenile on-air prank calls, semi-serious debates about Division Three local high school teams, and guests ranging from Boston sports legends to the average caller. Moving between discussions over Nancy Pelosi, Donald Trump, Marcus Smart, Tuukka Rask, and Stevie's mom in a single morning, I found myself alternating between groaning and cheering every other statement. It felt as though I was watching the Maple Leafs play an entire seven-game series against Boston, circa 2014, all over again. It was clearly something different than All Things Considered. McLuhan had been correct the entire time. The medium had truly become the message.

Being a fan is an entirely different experience than anything else in the world. Its existence is perfectly predicted by any sociology student. Fandom is based on mutual admiration and hatred, defining the fan by whom they love just as much as by whom they detest. It elevates the passions that most would associate with religion or patriotism. Belief, desire, contradiction, all of these can be found on the gridiron, the rink, the links, or even a poorly lit bowling alley. What else can make our pulse race just so, other than perhaps gambling or dope, both of which have their own places in the sports pantheon. More to the point perhaps though, being a fan is a covenant between latter-day gods and us mere mortals. When we watch those athletes take up their positions, those individuals upon which we lavish so much wealth and influence, we feel a solemn connection to them. For myself and those that are part of Sox Nation, or Celts Nation, that means losing our collective minds whenever Big Papi or Tacko Fall would enter the game, respectively. We fans are simply upholding our end of the bargain.

And so, following the birth of the fan, sports talk radio was born in the desire to create an industry around the addiction. What is most interesting to me though is not the hosts, who seem rather interchangeable, nor the opinions, which range from reasonable to clearly outlandish. No one gets upset when Charles Barkley predicts something and it doesn't happen. If his predictions did come true, he wouldn't be nearly as entertaining. The most interesting part are the callers. Whether they rant and rave or try to interject some humor or simply come to say their piece and leave, each one is a critical part of the show. Imagine not a hotline to God, but rather, a hotline to someone that knows God pretty well and hangs out with Him on the golf course some weekends.

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That is sports talk radio, part therapy session, part revival meeting, and part community outreach effort. After all, nations need structures in order to facilitate communication and social cohesion.

It is this environment that seems aching for a story. The arc of fandom is one that holds in itself the arc of humanity. Fandom and factions can be found across all cultures across all of time. It is little wonder that virtually all excavated ruins include references to sports and to supporters of one side or another, one athlete or another. Before we were Habs fans or Chargers fans or even AFC Richmond fans, we were fans of chariot racing or horse handling or Greco-Roman wrestling. To make a story about sports talk radio is to write a story about all the emotions that animate our daily lives. As said so eloquently, “football is life”.