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BOOKSHELF

'Fans' Review: Fanfare for the Fanatic

The link between sports fandom and physical and mental health is well documented. But the greatest benefit is an appreciation for fair play.



PHOTO: ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

By David Papineau

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The main message of Larry Olmsted's informative "Fans: How Watching Sports Makes Us Happier, Healthier, and More Understanding" is that sports fandom is good for you. People who support a sports team are on balance less depressed, less lonely, less angry, less tense, more extroverted and more satisfied with their social lives. And this mental buoyancy is by no means the end of it. As Mr. Olmsted explains, fans are also smarter, richer, more educated and physically more active. By the end of the book I was starting to feel sorry for all the poor saps who can't see the point of sport. How do they live?

Mr. Olmsted, a journalist and the author of “Real Food/Fake Food,” has plenty of scientific references to back up his claims. Still, as he is aware, it is not always clear which is the cause and which is the effect. Are the benefits due to the fandom, or the other way around? It isn't hard to see how rooting for a team might raise your spirits—it enrolls you in a ready-made community and keeps you entertained through the long winter evenings. But in other cases the story is less straightforward.

Take the association Mr. Olmsted cites between fandom and higher academic grades. Perhaps watching sports does do something to quicken your wits. But it seems just as likely that a sharp mind is a requirement for signing up in the first place. Football, for instance, can be daunting in its complexity. As someone who did not grow up with the sport, I can testify to the commitment and study needed to appreciate its finer points. It is a wonderful game, but it is not designed to appeal to those with limited powers of analysis and concentration.

The same question about direction of causation arises with fandom and physical fitness. Mr. Olmsted describes how the Olympics and other high-profile sporting events lead to increases in the number of people who go running, cycling or skiing. But he doesn't extend the argument to the main American spectator sports. One can see why. It is a curious quirk of history that the U.S. has ended up with leading sports that are not only intellectually demanding but simply too physically difficult for ordinary mortals to play. Perhaps it is true that football fans have above-average fitness. But that is certainly not due to their fandom's moving them off their couches and onto the playing field.

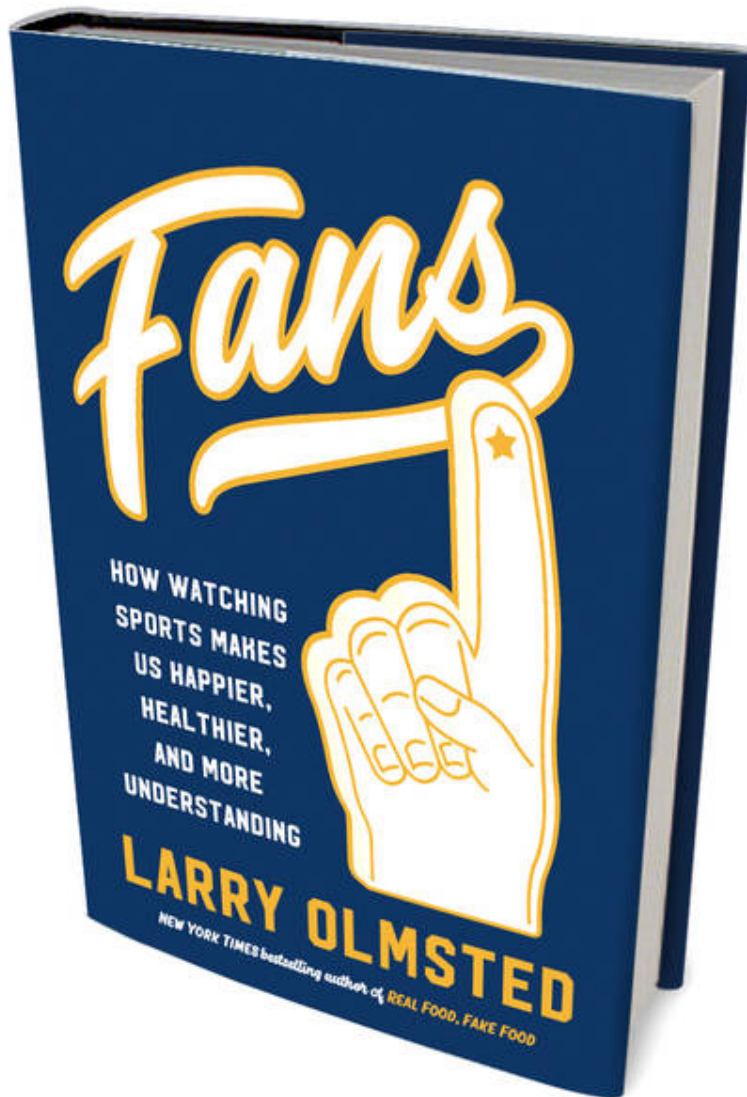


PHOTO: WSJ

FANS

By Larry Olmsted
Algonquin, 310 pages, \$25.95

The rest of the world provides an interesting comparison. Mr. Olmsted's focus is by no means exclusively American, and he notes more than once that soccer and cricket are the dominant sports world-wide. But he fails to observe that, by contrast with American spectator sports, both soccer and cricket are open to anybody who is able-bodied, and are supported by huge pyramids of amateur leagues, with millions participating well into their middle years. It would have been interesting to know if any comparative data show that this international contrast matters to the connection between fandom and physical fitness.

Mr. Olmsted does not shy away from the dark side of sport. As he recognizes, the sense of community that comes with fandom inevitably engenders rivalry, and this can all too easily spill over into hatred—as when fans irrationally turn on players who are traded, often against their wishes, to an opposing team. The author sees an antidote to this tribalism in the rise of fantasy leagues. You might be a die-hard Red Sox fan, but you'll end up at the bottom of your fantasy table if you allow your prejudice against the Yankees to influence your player picks.

Still, I fear the dangers of rivalry go deeper than this, especially when different countries compete on the sporting field. Mr. Olmsted spends some time emphasizing the power of sports to pull nations together, describing how Nelson Mandela embraced the mainly white South African rugby team to kick-start his “rainbow nation,” or how many Middle Eastern countries are ready to forget religious differences in the interests of strengthening their soccer squads.

But the corollary of this unity is passion. Americans have few opportunities to root for their nation on the sports field, but in the rest of the world international competition is a regular occurrence and can inflame emotions far beyond those roused by local team rivalries. Often the history between two countries adds fuel to the fire. When England met West Germany in the 1966 soccer World Cup final, or when an estimated one billion people tuned in to watch India play Pakistan in the 2015 Cricket World Cup, few spectators could have had recent military conflicts far from their minds.

In 1945, shortly after the end of World War II, the Dynamo Moscow soccer team visited Britain, attracting huge partisan crowds. This early manifestation of mass sporting chauvinism dismayed George Orwell. As he saw it, international sports “is bound up with hatred, jealousy . . . and sadistic pleasure in witnessing violence: in other words it is war minus the shooting.”

I would say Orwell was missing the point. It is in the nature of sports to mend the hurts of war. A sporting contest inevitably puts the two sides on an even footing. You might be cast down if your side loses, or elated if it wins, but any sane fan can see that the other team is equally entitled to succeed, and that the right result is that victory goes to the more skillful side. Sporting contests force you to see the other side as moral equals.

So that's another string for Mr. Olmsted's bow of fandom's benefits. Not only are sporting fans happier, wealthier and wiser, but they are naturally pressured into fair-mindedness. All in all, then, let us be grateful for these many rewards. The world is a better place for having sports fans in it.

Mr. Papineau is a professor of philosophy at King's College London. He is the author of "Knowing the Score."

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