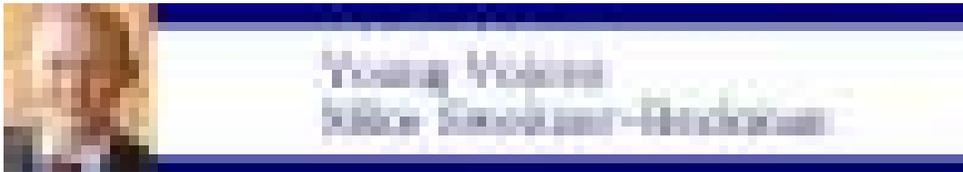


Lambeau Field as church: Losing a sense of time

Mike Sweitzer-Beckman | Jan. 8, 2009



There are many arguments about the

comparison of sports and religion, and whether sports in the United States can be constituted as religious practice. Some would argue that sports could never serve the same purposes as religion. However, there are comparisons to be made. The sociologist Harry Edwards and the theologian Michael Novak sum up the comparison between religion and sports quite well:

Superstar athletes correspond to religions? gods and deceased players serve as saints; the coaches and executives who sit on boards and commissions and make and interpret the rules are like religious patriarchs and high councils; the reporters and broadcasters who chronicle sports events and tabulate their statistics are like the scribes of religious traditions; sports trophies and memorabilia are like religious icons; the formally stated beliefs that are commonly accepted about a sport are like religious dogmas; sports stadiums and arenas are like houses of worship, and halls of fame, both the facilities for different sports as well as the most local of sports ?shrines? -- trophy cases -- are religious shrines. ? (T)he faithful or devoted fans of sports (are like) the true believers of a religious tradition.

The psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi defines *flow* as ?the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it.?

The lens that sociology offers to theology is that the idea of *flow* (or *kairos* time) is an ideal, but is not always attained. When a Mass is done well, the most devoted Roman Catholics will lose a sense of time and place, and be in this state of *flow* that Csikszentmihalyi describes. When something is off about the Mass, the people in the pews will be looking at their watches (*chronos* time) and counting down until they can leave (perhaps right after the Eucharist).

Similarly, when a sports team is organized and plays well, it captivates the truest fans to the point where they lose a sense of time and place. When a team doesn't hold the commitment of its fans, people will look for a moment to exit to the parking lot as soon as they can (perhaps during the next timeout).

Sports fanaticism in Green Bay has thrived for decades, and a lot of it has to do with how the ownership of the team is structured. The Packers have captured the hearts and minds of the people of Green Bay (and throughout Wisconsin, sometimes crossing the Illinois and Minnesota borders) since the end of World War I. The Packers have the most championship titles in NFL history (12), and the team is the only non-profit, community-owned major professional sports team in the United States. As of June 8, 2005, 112,015 people own shares of Green Bay Packers stock. Nobody owns more than 200,000 shares to ensure that no individual has majority control over the team?s future. The Packers? season ticket waiting list has 74,000 people on it as of May 2007, with a

wait time of approximately 35 years. This creates a situation where the fans are able to participate more in the *flow* of the team because they have more self-interest.

The fan's *flow* of the Green Bay Packers exists outside of rooting for the team on NFL Sundays. It is also recognized simply in keeping the team in Green Bay. It is hard to imagine how a city of 100,000 residents is able to keep an NFL team without threats of moving to larger markets. After the 1996 Super Bowl season, it became clear that Lambeau Field needed to be upgraded if Green Bay was to remain competitive with other NFL cities and teams. Proposed renovations were unveiled in 2000, to be partially funded by the team and partially by the residents of Green Bay with a 0.5% sales tax increase in Brown County. The voters approved the sales tax increase in September 2000 and renovations began the following year.

Simply put, people in Green Bay and throughout Wisconsin are hooked on and invested in the Green Bay Packers football team. It is more than going to eight home games a year for Packers fans; it is a lifestyle that has its own norms, signs, symbols, nuances, community gathering, decision-making process regarding the future of the team, and long-lasting impact over the generations.

The Packers bring people together, from liberal schoolteachers in Madison, to factory workers in Janesville to hunters from northern Wisconsin. The Packers help the people of Wisconsin to transcend their everyday social interactions, creating an environment where you might share a brat with someone you might otherwise despise. Similarly to the ideal form of the Mass for Roman Catholics, being a fan of the Green Bay Packers allows fans to lose a sense of themselves and time in order to participate in the *flow* that goes along with being a Packers fan.

It is interesting to hear the professional and academic critiques of why sports cannot function as a religion. Let's go back to the definition given by scholars trained in literary critical procedures who claim religion is characterized by transcendental, sacramental, and uplifting social elements.

The Green Bay Packers carry elements of these three characteristics, perhaps even better than some of the ways that religions designated as official by society carry them out. It is preferable to look to the fans, how invested they are in the team and culture surrounding the team, and how their sense of *flow* within their daily lives revolves around the team.

(Mike Sweitzer-Beckman recently moved to Madison, Wis., after graduating with a Masters of Divinity degree from the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley, Calif.. He has interests in workplace justice, restorative justice, socially-responsible investing, and community organizing, as well as sociological perspectives on the Roman Catholic church. In his free time he likes to cook, bike and play tennis.)

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