

Philosophy Bakes Bread, Episode Sixty-Nine, with Dr. John Lachs

The Good, the Bad, & the Ugly of Sports Fandom

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Weber: Welcome everyone to a special short edition of Philosophy Bakes Bread, which we call a Bread Crumb.

Cashio: Crumble crumble... Philosophy Bakes Bread is a production of SOPHIA, the Society of Philosophers in America. In our Bread Crumb episodes, we include snippets from past episodes or more substantive responses to your feedback that we received on Twitter on Philosophy BB, and Facebook at Philosophy Bakes Bread, or by email at philosophybakesbread@gmail.com.

Weber: And also, we get feedback from people on our voicemail at 859-257-1849. You can leave us a voicemail message there, and we may respond to it like we will today. So today we've got a fun Bread Crumb episode for you titled The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly of Sports Fandom. We have Doctor Erin Tarver who was our guest on episode 31, called Sports Fan I Am.

Cashio: Welcome back Erin.

Tarver: Hi. Thanks for having me again.

Weber: Thanks for coming.

Cashio: Those of you who listened to that episode may remember that Erin is the author of the book, *The I in Team: Sports Fandom and the Reproduction of Identity*, which came out last year with the University of Chicago Press. For more information about Erin, head over to philosophybakesbread.com and listen to episode 31. So again, thank you for joining us.

Tarver: Yeah. Thank you.

<https://www.philosophersinamerica.com/2018/12/31/084-ep80-bc14-the-good-the-bad-and-the-ugly-of-sports-fandom/>

Weber: So we're so glad to have you with us again Erin. As you know, we received a great listener voicemail in response to your episode. From Julia from New Hampshire. What we thought we'd do in this short bread crumb episode is to invite you to remind everyone in short what your episode was about, to tell us again what that question was that you asked at the end of the episode, and then we'll play Julia's message, and ask you what you think about it. Does that sound good?

Tarver: Absolutely.

Weber: Excellent.

Tarver: So the last time we were talking about, basically, the topic of my book, which is a philosophical analysis of sports fandom. So briefly what I'm interested in, in my book is trying to understand why it is that people care so much about sports when those people very often, are not playing the sports themselves. They have very little in common, if anything, with the people on the teams that they follow. But nevertheless, they are deeply invested in practices of sports fandom.

And what I try to argue in my book, is that sports fandom is a means of individuals today understanding ourselves, of telling ourselves who and what we are as an "I" that is part of a particular "we". So sports fandom is one of the primary means that we understand ourselves in relation to human communities around us and as beings who are in fact gendered and racialized in all sorts of ways.

So, my suggestion, ultimately is that sports fandom, well number one, is quite a bit more complicated than it originally appears. So what I suggest though is that sports fandom is not entirely innocuous. In fact, that sports fandom is one of the primary locations, in this country at least, where norms around gender and race are often reinforced, and they are reinforced in ways that are damaging and hierarchizing. So they reinforce social hierarchies.

Now the interesting part of it though, is that I end the book and the episode in fact, on a bit of a more optimistic note by looking specifically at women's sports fandom. And by that I mean both women fans of men's mainstream sports and also fans of women's sports. And I look at some examples of this, and suggest that instances of women's sports fandoms showed that perhaps there is something valuable to the possibilities of sports fandom after all, and that we might use it to subvert rather than reinforce these social hierarchies.

Weber: Right. Very nice. Very nice.

Cashio: Can you-

Weber: Go ahead.

Cashio: I was going to say can you repeat the ... Do you remember what your question was you had that you were able to share with everyone?

Tarver: Right. So in your You Tell Me segment, the question I asked was, "Should colleges and universities be in the business of essentially underwriting minor league sports teams in the United States?" Which is effectively what we have with the NCAA.

Cashio: Right. That's a really good question, especially this time of year with college football and all the other sports fans starting back up, right at the beginning of the school year. Well thank you for that really beautifully succinct and I thought enlightening summary. So we have a message from Julia, from New Hampshire. She called and left a sort of response to your episode as a whole, and in part to your question as well. So shall we play Julia's message?

Weber: Let's do it.

Tarver: Absolutely.

Weber: Here it is. Here's the message from Julia Nye from New Hampshire.

Julia Nye: Hi Eric and Anthony, this is Julia from New Hampshire. I am calling in response to the question posed by Erin Tarver regarding sports in college. I played sports in college, and enjoyed, and still do enjoy being a sports fan. As a feminist though, I've always struggled with the reality that society is pumping a lot of money in to watching grown men play sports. I was surprised that Doctor Tarver concluded that there was some good to be found in sports fandom. I appreciated her efforts to hold on to the possibility, that it could be good, but you never addressed the problems that sports create.

Among other things, they perpetuate the need to have an "other" to be against. And they perpetuate the patriarchal values of competitions, and the zero sum notions of living. That some of us deserve to be the best. For an example of what life would look like without sports, I would point to a story I heard about a school in Texas who abandoned sports. Either by choice or by budget. And surprise, students interest in academics and community went way up.

So, also I would be interested in hearing someone talk about the value, or lack thereof of sports competition to creating a good life. While I recognize physical activity in group or alone is beneficial, should it be done where there is a winner or a loser? Thanks for all you do, and I love the show. Bye.

Weber: Well let me start by saying thank you so much for such an awesome message, Julia.

Cashio: Yeah thanks, Julia, that was fantastic.

Weber: So those were some rich thoughts.

Tarver: Yeah. So, I absolutely love this question so I'm really grateful to Julia for asking it. When I first started writing about sports, this is something that I struggled with. Because I'm a feminist, and very often, when we think about competition and defeating our opponents, and we even use this language of beating our opponents, which seems violent and destructive in ways that bring to mind war and this sort of thing. So I understand that concern. So I worried as a feminist, should I be interested in competition, period? Shouldn't I be more hopeful about things that are collaborative rather than competitive?

And I struggled with this because not only am I sports fan, but if I'm being honest, I'm pretty competitive as a person about sports and also in other areas of my life. So I suppose the caricature, if I can put it that way, the caricature of feminists who sit around in a sort of kumbaya circle was something that I struggled to get myself excited about. Despite a decent amount of effort in that direction.

So, I want to deal with this particular question about competition and athletic competition specifically. So I want to make three basic points. One, is sort of quasi-Hegelian and a little bit-

Weber: Uh oh, what's that?

Tarver: I know.

Cashio: That's quasi-Hegelian...

Tarver: Yeah, quasi. More honestly, interested in the feminist philosophy versus Simone de Beauvoir's appropriation of Hegel. And so that part is going to be a little abstract but it's going to quickly move into some more concrete stuff.

Weber: You're going to make it plain for us, I'm sure. I'm not worried.

Tarver: So, one sort of abstract point, one more concrete point that I'm going to talk about, specifically the philosophy of sport. And then my third point is going to be more explicitly feminist. So that's where I'm going.

Weber: Okay.

Cashio: Excellent, hit us up.

Tarver: Okay. So first of all, I would say to the point about, we could call othering, basically the setting up of an us-them dichotomy. So, I think that Julia is concerned that one of the negative things that can come from the emphasis on sports and sports fandom is the idea that it sets up this sort of "us versus them" sort of antagonism way of looking at the world.

So to that point, I would say, I am broadly speaking in agreement with this point that the German Philosopher Hegel makes when he says basically, that we as human beings become self conscious, that is we understand ourselves as an I, only in relation to other people.

So, this position is taken up by lots of philosophers who followed him, including, as I mentioned, the French feminist, Simone de Beauvoir. But basically, what we're saying here is that I don't get to know myself in the full sense, as an individual without differentiating myself from that which is not me.

Cashio: Right.

Weber: Right.

Tarver: So, there's no sense to an "I" or even a "we", without a "you" or without a "them". So it turns out, even though Hegel is ridiculously abstract and difficult to read, that this is basically borne out by empirical studies of developmental psychology. So as children grow, a major part of their becoming self-conscious, developing self-consciousness, is differentiating themselves. Both from their surroundings, from their parents, from others around them.

So basically, what I would say to the general point about us and them, I think that we always develop more complex and robust understandings of selfhood by becoming conscious of other forms of belonging and exclusion. So, what I mean by that is that there is this real sense in which what we could call othering, or the setup of the "us and them" is at the heart of what it is to be a human consciousness.

Tarver: Now some people I think, will hear this and think, "Wait. Wait, wait, wait I thought we were like ... We're against exclusion, right? We should do something to change this. We should be interested in including and not excluding."

Weber: Yeah.

Tarver: That's what feminists are up to right? We're trying to be cultivating inclusive communities not exclusive ones.

Cashio: Right. Back to our, kumbaya circle, is that what you called it?

Tarver: Right. Yeah. But I think that this is actually a mistake. I think that in addition to ignoring some basic facts about human consciousness, I would say that this view of things tends to erroneously reduce all forms of differentiation into what we could call like "invidious discrimination", or to that which is harmful or degrading. So the mere fact that I say, "I'm me and you are not me." That in itself is not necessarily denigrating of that other, right?

Tarver: So, to try to explain this a little bit more robustly, I guess, I want to think about the way the feminist Simone de Beauvoir talks about this when she discusses Hegel. So basically, what Beauvoir ends up arguing in her book is that human self-consciousness isn't satisfied, doesn't become all it can be, essentially, by just any form of self-other distinction.

Weber: Which book are we talking about?

Tarver: *The Second Sex*.

Weber: *The Second Sex*. Thank you.

Tarver: Yes. Simone Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. So, but what's to say that human beings aren't fulfilled when we have any old form of self-other distinction. So what we need, ultimately is not just an "other" that's outside of ourselves, but recognition from that other. And here she's partly following Hegel. In other words, what I need to experience myself as fully human is that there is someone out there who sees me as such. Who recognizes me as a full human being with my own desires and projects and possibilities and actions on the world that are outside of their control, right?

So, we need this recognition from others, and also they need it from us. So we become dependent on one another in a kind of reciprocal relationship, even if it at times looks like that's antagonistic.

Weber: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Right.

Tarver: So Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*, what she ends up arguing, or one of the primary ways that Beauvoir argues against the subordination of women under patriarchy, is to say that what patriarchy does is it constantly diminishes women to the status of an object. So the title of the book is "The Second Sex", what she means by it is to say that women, by being described as this secondary sex in relation to men, means that we will always be other, without that reciprocal relationship. So it diminishes women's capacity to understand ourselves as full selves, and at the same time, Beauvoir wants to argue, this is harmful to men too. Because what it results in is this situation where men, in their relationships with women, don't get that full human self-consciousness that they could have ... that both of us could have, right? Insofar as women are being set up as unworthy givers of that recognition that we all crave.

Cashio: They deprive themselves of possible relationship.

Tarver: Exactly.

Cashio: It's... in a sense, that's good.

Tarver: So basically, human beings need an other, but we need an other that's worthy of being recognized by. And so, if I can go from there, this is what brings me to competition in fact.

Cashio: Okay I was going to ask. Alright.

Tarver: I know, I know. So philosophers of sport have tons of stuff to say about what makes a competition good, right? But I think actually the most important thing, when we're talking about quality competition, is actually derived from this Hegelian or Beauvoirian point, if I can put it that way. So competition is only desirable when we think our competitor is worth defeating.

Cashio: Aha.

Tarver: So typical adults don't get excited when they beat their six year old in a foot race, right?

Weber: That exactly the ... the example that came to mind for me.

Tarver: Yeah. So we respect our competitors by giving them our all. By finding them worthy of our efforts. So even though there's this antagonistic relationship, insofar as we recognize that person as worthy of competing against, there's a more collaborative and reciprocal relation than might initially appear. This, by the way I think, is why fans would say competition between top 10 teams and FCS teams ... so like ...

Weber: What does that stand for?

Tarver: Football Championship Series, I believe. So, the former D2. If we wanted to say it this way. So, like top 10 D1, division one teams. And when they play against these teams that are significantly less well-funded, and don't have the kinds of caliber athletes that they have access to in these top 10 teams. When Alabama, the University of Alabama plays ...

Cashio: Louisville, this was last Thursday, wasn't it?

Tarver: I know, I was going to mention Louisville, but honestly people from Louisville get upset about that so ...

Weber: I imagine.

Cashio: I've got a college here so ...

Weber: Yore talking first to listeners from Kentucky.

Tarver: Yeah. So anyway, the reason that competition between top ten teams and these teams that they populate to fill their schedule with easy wins, fans often think that these source of victories ring hollow. And this is the reason. Because we want competition to be competition between people who are worthy competitors.

Cashio: And is this one of the reasons ... I know we were just mentioning football, the championship game is so exciting, because they're both supposedly worthy competitors. The best.

Tarver: Exactly. Exactly. I think one of the things that always drove me crazy as a sports fan is when I would hear other fans chant about our competitors. "Overrated!" And I was like, "No, no we should think that they are very highly rated, and in fact we have just defeated this very highly and rightly highly rated team. This means that our victory over them is more meaningful. Is worthwhile." Right? So I think most sports fans when they're being objective about it, they would say that the best games to watch are the ones between evenly matched teams. This is why at all levels of sport, we make distinctions between classes of competitors. This is why you don't have older kids playing against younger kids and things like that. Because the competition would not be worthwhile.

Cashio: Right.

Tarver: So, the other thing I like to say about this goes back to the nature of game playing itself. So, this famous philosopher of play, Bernard Suits says that when we are playing a game, this is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles. So whenever you play a game, you choose less efficient means of doing something in favor of being able to follow the rules of a particular game, right?

So, we agree to collectively abide by a given set of rules restricting our behavior. So when we play soccer for example, we agree that nobody is going to use their hands, and this is what it is to play the game of soccer, even though, of course, it would be more efficient if we just picked up the ball and carried it down the field.

Weber: Right.

Tarver: So, basically what I would say-

Weber: Very important.

Tarver: Is games ... games so even games with zero-sum outcomes, right? Where somebody's going to win, and somebody's going to lose. Games are fundamentally, and I would say

foundationally cooperative enterprises. So this is why cheating is such a violation in the eyes of sports fans. This, also by the way is what I would say differentiates the competition of sport from something genuinely antagonistic like war. So at the end of the day, one of my main responses to the question ... so like a feminist philosopher, Victoria Davion, she raises in this essay called, "Do good feminists compete?" I want to say, yes, absolutely. But the reason for this is, I think we need to rethink this dichotomy between competition and cooperation.

Now that doesn't mean that all competitions are equal in their value, and some, of course, are deeply unhealthy. I would have real concerns about the way that contemporary sporting culture has tended to subordinate cooperation and rule following to a sort of "win at all costs", or that contemporary sport culture sometimes gets involved in the denigration of our opponents. But this, I would say, is not an indictment of competition as such.

Additionally, I guess I want to say, along with many other philosophers of sport, I would add that not only do I not think that competition is intrinsically evil or bad, but that rather, I think it actually can be positively virtuous insofar as it tends to extend the possibility of human capacity. So, it's when we compete against someone else that we're able to reach new heights, right? That we're able to do more than we thought we were capable of before. And we actually see this with athletes. So, with runners and this sort of thing, people who run by themselves all the time, they find that regularly when you run in a race you run faster than you would be able to if you were running on your own. Something about the human psyche, that when we get involved with one another, we tend to push ourselves.

Cashio: We push ourselves. That's true.

Weber: Right.

Cashio: That's my experience at least.

Tarver: So that's why I would want to say that competition can actually be a good thing.

Weber: All right Erin, you said you had a third point for us, tell us what that is.

Tarver: Okay so the third point is the explicitly feminist one. So I want to resist a little bit the idea that the ideals of competition are necessarily masculine. So sometimes we talk about this in terms of ... or Julia talked about this in terms of patriarchal values, right? So we're going to do this athletic competition that there's this sort of zero sum winners and losers and that sort of thing. So I say a lot more about this in the last chapter of my book, but I'll just sort of give you my argument and outline here.

So, there's a feminist thinker named Varda Burstyn who wrote this book called *The Rites of Men*. So R-I-T-E-S, rites of men, in which she basically argues that sports are ritual celebrations of masculinity. So when we go to a stadium and everybody is caught up in this, we're involved in this sort of religious celebration of masculinity.

Weber: So just to clarify for our listeners, unlike rights that are like in the Bill of Rights, my freedom of speech, or rights like human rights, we're talking about rites in the sense of performing rites, like a ceremony...

Tarver: Exactly. Like a religious ritual.

Weber: Perfect, thank you.

Tarver: So according to Burstyn, we should be concerned about sports because it involves this ritual celebration of masculinity. Now of course, one question you have to ask in response to this is going to be something like, "Well what do we think is going on in women's athletics if that's the case?" And the way that Burstyn and some other feminists have tried to deal with this point, is to make this argument essentially that these activities of athletic competition are fundamentally masculinist, regardless of who's playing the game. So like for Burstyn, the increasing popularity of women's basketball, this is not something to celebrate, but rather this is an instance of women being forced to adopt masculine values, or finally taking up masculine values whole hog. So instead of just men being the people who perform masculine values, the women do too and this is how we celebrate them.

So generally, I would like to reject this view, because ultimately, I think that it is question begging. That it assumes too much about what is masculine and what is feminine in the first place. And I think for this reason, I think it concedes way too much to anti-feminists in way that can actually be harmful to women or to other folks who are gender non-conforming. So what I would say is this, why should we think that athleticism, that competition, are gendered masculine? Why maintain that view in the face of actual women, actual feminist human beings who are engaged in athletic competition? So if we do that, we have two basic options for how we support that view, right?

Weber: Good question.

Tarver: We can say that there are these essences of masculinity and femininity which are universal and unchanging, so regardless of who does this thing it's always masculine. I think that's obviously false, given what social science has taught us in the way we observe shifts in gender roles over the past several hundred years. I would also say that it's a view that has in fact, been actively harmful to women, insofar as it's been sort of used by anti-feminists to justify forcing women to play particular roles, right? In the family, or in the workplace or otherwise.

Cashio: Right. Women are not supposed to be athletic and do these things, so your place is in the home. It's playing into that. I Gotcha.

Tarver: Right. So, I think the practical implications of that view, that there are certain things that are masculine and certain things that are feminine, should make us super wary about accepting that view. I would not say itself is evidence against the view, of course. But it is a warning that we definitely should proceed with caution and apply pretty strict scrutiny to the evidence in favor of it. Which as I suggested, is probably not very good, the evidence.

So, that would be one way of dealing with this idea, the other, alternatively, we can sort of treat the masculine gendering of competitiveness as just empirically true in general terms. Meaning that based on observations of men and women, men tend to be more interested in competition than women do. And that's fine actually, I think to a point. But what I would say is that nothing on its own follows from that point. Particularly as we start to see these trends shifting. Like it is just the case that, yeah okay maybe more men tend to be into competition than women do. But that doesn't mean that this thing is masculine, as such.

I would say, more to the point, if we want to move from this general claim, general empirical claim, that women tend to do X and men tend to do Y, if we want to move from there

to the point that X is feminine and Y is masculine, then we just won't be able to account for women who do Y and men who do X without assuming the first thing, back to the first option that we said. That these things are gendered in particular ways, regardless of who does them.

I would say a much more feminist response, in my view, is the response that honors the possibility that we could change gender in ways that make it less oppressive. I would want to say that let's celebrate the possibility that we can remake femininity to include competitiveness and strength. That we can remake masculinity to include cooperation and nurturing. That we can do things to ensure that in our academic institutions, we are giving voice and space and resources to a variety of ways of living and working together and not just the ones that we have typically understood as good, just because men do them.

Cashio: Very well put. I really like that. You know, I have a close friend of mine here, she's the coach of the women's lacrosse team, the UVYs and I guess they won the division championship, it was a big deal. Yeah she's ...

Tarver: Congratulations.

Cashio: She would be very upset to hear that women playing sports was not feminist. She's very feminist. Yeah and it was ... yeah so, pass this along. This is going to ...

Weber: Well listen, thank you so much Erin, that was fantastic.

Cashio: That was super enlightening. Just all that from that ... It was a great message from Julia too.

Tarver: It was a great message. Thanks for letting me respond to it. Thanks Julia for calling in.

Cashio: Yeah indeed, thanks Julia.

Weber: Thank you Julia. Indeed, that was really fun. We really appreciate your thoughts on all this.

Cashio: Well I hope everyone has enjoyed our Bread Crumb this time around.

Weber: Crumble crumble... Thank you. Remember everyone that you can call and leave a short recorded message with a question or a comment that we may be able to play on the show at 859-257-1849. That's 859-257-1849. And you can also reach us on Twitter, Facebook, or email. All that information is available at philosophybakesbread.com

Cashio: And thank you for joining us again, Erin. Thanks again. That was a wonderful conversation.

Tarver: Thank you.

Cashio: This has been Anthony Cashio, Eric Weber and Doctor Erin Tarver with Philosophy Bakes Bread. Food for thought about life and leadership.