

The Social Aspects of Sports Tailgating

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Abstract

A favorite activity of many sports fans involves tailgating at sporting events. Tailgaters have been interacting with one another in large numbers for over a century and yet academic discourse on this communal activity is nearly nonexistent. The sociological study of the social aspects of tailgating reveals that tailgaters form a cohesive bond with one another and develop and reaffirm a sense of community to the point where a distinctive subculture is formed based on a number of social activities. This article provides a brief introductory insight into the social world of sports tailgaters.

Introduction

Among the most joyous aspects of attending certain sporting events is the tailgate party. This is especially true if the fans involved are cheering for a team with a losing record and/or little chance of winning. At least there is fun to be had at the tailgate party!

Even America's favorite (animated) family, the Simpsons enjoy tailgating. In the "Any Given Sundance" episode, Homer Simpson is driving his family to Springfield Stadium where arch-rivals Springfield University and Springfield A&M will meet on the gridiron. It is early in the morning and most of the family members are quite sleepy, but not Homer, he is wide awake and quite excited about the prospect of tailgating. Reflecting the sentiments of all but his father's, Bart complains aloud, "Why are we arriving so early? The game doesn't start for hours." Homer laughs at his son's complaining and decrees, "We're not here for the game. The game is nothing...The real reason we Americans put up with sports is for this. Behold, the tailgate party! The pinnacle of human achievement. Since the dawn of parking lots man has sought to stuff his guts with food and alcohol in anticipation of watching others exercise." Homer goes on to explain that eating "trunk meat" is a glorious thing. And we all know that Homer

loves to drink beer! (Note: Trunk meat refers to meat that has been packed in a cooler in the trunk of one's car.)

Perhaps summing up the sentiment that all we tailgaters share, Homer proudly proclaims, "What could be greater than eating and drinking for hours in a drizzly parking lot?!" Indeed, Homer, indeed.

The Shared Features of the Tailgating Community

Homer Simpson enjoys tailgating for a number of reasons, both manifest and latent. As described by sociologist Robert Merton (1949/1968), a manifest function refers to the intended, or planned, outcomes. For Homer Simpson, and many other tailgaters, drinking alcohol and eating food is motive enough to enjoy tailgating. Drinking alcohol during tailgating helps to loosen up participants and prepares them to yell and scream during the game. For others, tailgating provides the manifest function of serving as an outlet, or forum, for friends, family members, and fans to discuss the upcoming sporting event and dissect such important details as strategies the preferred team needs to take in order to assure victory, review of the injury report and its possible affect on the outcome of the game, and of course, which team will win.

However, as Merton discovered during his study of the Hopi Indian Raindance, the communal gathering of the tribe also provides important latent functions. Merton's concept of latent functions refers to the unintended, or unplanned, outcomes associated with certain social gathers. The latent function of tailgating is centered on the social aspects of this parking lot neighborhood. "Tailgating America" (2008) describes the tailgate scene as the last great American neighborhood where no one locks their doors, everyone is happy to see you, and all are together sharing fun, food, and sport. It's families, friends, and fans, all coming together in a social community. Fans that support a losing team still enjoy the tailgate party because they enjoy hanging out with other tailgaters regardless of the outcome of the game. In this regard, it could be argued that the tailgate party itself has become the primary purpose (manifest function) of the gathering and attending the game (latent function) has been relegated to a secondary role. Thus, the importance of tailgating cannot be minimized as many sports fans form

a sense of community by tailgating with others.

The Tailgating Community

Social interaction plays an important role in an individual's life. Everyone wants to feel as though they are a part of a group, or community. Individuals want to experience a sense of unity with others. Group membership allows an individual to become a part of a community. Group members are still individuals but at the same time the group provides them with a distinctive group identity as a result of their membership (Lee, 1993). Group membership via tailgating provides an opportunity for, and a sense of, community (Delaney and Madigan, 2009).

The search for community is an extension of a lifetime of small-group participation. We are born into a family, form playgroups during childhood and later enter into cliques of primary association, and eventually many will form or establish a new family group of their own. Tailgating provides sports fans with an opportunity to bond with others and form a sense of community. Many tailgaters park in the same area of a specific parking lot year after year and look forward to seeing other regular tailgaters. They also look forward to meeting new tailgaters.

In the tradition of Durkheim (1984) tailgating at sporting events represents a type of secular sentiment that helps to bond fans together in collective action where ritualistic behaviors are the norm. The ritualistic behaviors associated with tailgating leads to a form of mechanical solidarity wherein social cohesion is based upon the likeness and similarities among group members. As explained by Delaney (2005) "Group cohesion promotes the development of consensus on normative standards and the effective enforcement of these shared norms because integrative ties of fellowship enhance the significance of the informal sanctions to its individual members" (p.149). During any given tailgate, individuals within a group may face a wide variety of informal sanctions because of some form of deviant behavior (e.g., forgetting the grill, food, or drink may lead to disapproval in the form of taunts and mild ridicule).

The tailgating community is usually a civil one. Rival fans often tailgate near one another without incident. A few "friendly" barbs are hurled at one another but fist fights

are rare in pregame tailgating. As kickoff nears, however, and die-hard fans put on their “game face” their views of opposing fans often become slightly more hostile. Still, violence is rare. In this regard, the tailgating scene is much like any neighborhood, or community, wherein neighbors generally leave each other alone even if they hold opposing viewpoints on significant social matters.

Tailgating Sports

Homer Simpson seems to realize that tailgate parties at football games seem as natural as opening kickoffs, tackles, touchdowns, field goals, and cheerleaders. So why don't all sports feature tailgate parties? Tailgating at wrestling and track and field meets seems a bit out of place. Basketball and hockey, which are played during the winter months are not conducive to outdoor parties in cold-weather cities. (Although, cold and snowy weather will not stop football fans from tailgating!) Tailgating is not that popular at baseball games either. At the collegian level, baseball, like wrestling and track and field, does not enjoy mass appeal and therefore does not draw tens of thousands of fans to each game that have planned their social calendars around the game. Further, most colleges frown upon the idea of their students gathering in parking lots to eat and drink in excess before sporting events other than football.

Tailgating at professional baseball games is also rare. And there are a couple of reasons for this. First, each Major League Baseball (MLB) franchise has 81 scheduled home games, and although some games are clearly more important than others, it is tough to get motivated to tailgate before each one. Additionally, most MLB stadiums do not allow tailgate parties. The owners want fans purchasing food and beverage products inside the stadium.

Fans do not regularly tailgate before National Hockey League (NHL) and National Basketball Association (NBA) games either. Weather plays a role in the lack of tailgating, but also, ownership frowns upon it. Further, both the NHL and NBA have a greater number of home games (when compared to football) and like MLB are tough to gear up for tailgating before each game. It would seem, then, that there is a correlation between tailgating and the number of home games (in each respective sport).

This is not to suggest that other sports, including baseball, basketball and hockey, do not have fans that tailgate; it's simply not as prevalent as it is in football. I regularly attend Syracuse University lacrosse games where tailgating *after* the game is the norm. What is unique about this experience is that the players and player families join together with the fans in the tailgate celebrations. In this regard, the SU lacrosse program represents a community that bonds players, families, and fans together.

Football and Auto Racing

The two sports most commonly associated with tailgating are auto racing and football. Race fans often show up days in advance of a race. At some tracks, the infield resembles "Spring Break" with drunken men encouraging equally drunk women to "go wild" and proudly display certain physical attributes. The once-a-week format of major auto racing heightens the importance of each race. Furthermore, because the race is held on the weekend, tailgaters can enjoy the weekend partying with friends, family, and strangers, and then go back to work for the week.

As common as tailgating is at auto races, the sport most closely associated with tailgating is football. This is true both at the professional and collegiate levels. (Tailgate parties are a feature at a number of high school football games as well.) As with auto racing, the one game a week format of football heightens the importance of each game and the fans' desires to make the most of each opportunity by tailgating.

Each National Football League (NFL) franchise has 8 scheduled home games that are spread over a four month period. This adds to the critical nature of the home team defending its turf. The two-home-game per month average is not lost on the fans either. They see every home game as a social event, and certainly not *just* a game. The mentality of college football fans is very similar to that of NFL fans. Most colleges have anywhere from 5 to 8 home games a year spread over an approximate three-month period. And because college football has existed longer than professional football, tailgate parties on college campuses precedes, but not necessarily exceeds, that of the NFL.

Tailgating is such an integral aspect of professional football that the NFL claims

that more than 35 percent of visitors to the Super Bowl each year don't even have tickets (Dyson, 2008). They come anyway to be a part of the festivities and to tailgate outside the stadium, catching the game on TV or on the radio.

Who are the Tailgaters?

Although some tailgaters resemble the Homer Simpson character—rude and rowdy due to excessive alcohol consumption—the vast majority of tailgaters are decent, everyday folks. Based on statistics compiled by “Tailgating America,” Homer is representative of the dominant age group of tailgaters, 25 – 44 (60 percent) and like 90 percent of tailgaters, he sets up at least three hours before a game (Janoff, 2005). Homer Simpson is unlike most other tailgaters in numerous other ways, however. For example, nearly 60 percent of all tailgaters have a college diploma; 40 percent spend more than \$500 a season on tailgating supplies; 46 percent of the supplies are bought together by husbands and wives; 47 percent tailgate six to 10 times per season; 28 percent of tailgaters prolong the tailgate between five and six hours before the game; and 92 percent of tailgaters surveyed say they prepare at least some of their food on the grill (Dyson, 2008).

Features of Tailgating:

“Tailgates Don’t Just Happen, They Have to be Planned!”

As presented in this paper, tailgating in football, and to a lesser extent in auto racing, represents communal bonding opportunities, and serves as a means to fire up fans before the game. Most likely, the first tailgating took place on an Ivy League campus a century ago as college football not only predates the NFL, it predates auto racing. In his article “The Art of Tailgating,” David Von Drehle (2007) argues (tongue-in-cheek) that the first tailgate occurred in the crisp New England autumn of 1621, when the Plymouth Pilgrims cooked outdoors and invited their neighbors to join in the feast. As with tailgaters today, these early partiers gave thanks by drinking ale and eating meat with lots of side dishes. These Pilgrims did a good job of partying that first Thanksgiving, but there was no football game to be watched and certainly none of the

guests arrived by car or motor home, nor did they park on concrete or asphalt lots.

Although all tailgaters have their own idea as to what makes a good tailgate, there is certainly such a thing as a “bad” tailgate party and a “good” one. Tailgaters should heed this warning: “Tailgates don’t just happen, they have to be planned!”

“Bad” Tailgating

A bad tailgate party “involves last-minute Kwik Mart beef jerky, not enough beer, and a parking spot nowhere near cute girls or a Porta Potty” (Lufrano, 2005: 12). In an attempt to avoid self-shaming, fans that attend a football game and have not planned their tailgate properly may try to convince others of their worthiness in the community. Those who did not bring enough alcohol may try to justify their lack of consumption by claiming that they are “hung over” from too much partying the night before. The lack of proper food supplies may be explained away by deferring the blame onto one member of the group as in, “Wayne forgot to bring the cooler.” Some people are so desperate to appear as though they fit into the greater community they may actually deceive others. I once overheard a person parked next to me during a tailgate talking on a cell phone to his friends wherein he exclaimed, “We’re partying our asses off!” I examined their tailgate situation and the two of them had 4 pieces of shrimp on a grill, a bag of chips, and two sodas. That’s all they had! This represents a classic example of a bad tailgate. It also represents a desperate attempt on the part of this person to convince others that he was “cool.”

“Good” Tailgating

Some people are so good at tailgating they consider themselves professional tailgaters (Cahn, 2005). Technically, there is no such thing as a professional tailgater, but what a great job that would make! Although tailgating is not a profession, there are many simple ingredients (features) involved with assuring a good tailgate.

As with staging any gala, there is a relative amount of planning involved for the host of a tailgate party. “For the experienced tailgater, preparation is key” (Feschuk, 2007: 177). At the top of the list: bring the grill and food for the grill! Guests of the

tailgate host simply have to show up with a dish or beverages to share with the rest of party. Often, any near-by fan is welcomed to join in the feasting as an abundance of food is a mandate at tailgate parties.

Let's take a look at some of the many features of a tailgate party. As stated above, a tailgate party begins with the host packing a grill and food into his or her vehicle. Generally, a number of folding chairs—in a variety of forms—are also packed. Upon arrival at the stadium, many tailgaters have a “usual” spot where they like to park. At many stadiums, tailgaters who arrive in recreational vehicles (RV's) often have their own parking lots. A number of other factors are involved with the choice of parking as well, including, an area with easy in and out access, an area where all the party-goers know how to find, an area with plenty of space to set up tables full of food, and/or a spot close to the portable bathrooms. The Kansas City Chiefs parking lots are known to have the most Portalets (Dyson, 2008).

The most important facet of any tailgate party is food and beverage. A wide assortment of beverages is recommended, but of course, alcohol is the primary liquid refreshment. It is a good idea to also pack soda, juices and water. As for food, some sort of meat (e.g., steak, pork chops, chicken, sausages, hot dogs, or bratwurst) is mandatory. Sorry vegetarians, but this is a football tailgate party and there must be meat on a grill. Like Pavlov's dogs, nothing causes such a primal reaction for humans as seeing meat atop fire. However, a good tailgate host wants to appease all guests so keep some sort of veggie option available. To no one's surprise, California tailgaters are the most likely to grill veggie and tofu burgers (Dyson, 2008). But don't try placing veggie or tofu burgers on most people's grills as that is typically considered “bad” tailgating.

Beyond the necessity of grilling meat, many other types of food are acceptable. Nachos and chips and dip and other snacks to munch on as the grill fires up. Submarine sandwiches are always a hit with partygoers. Salads, baked beans, and other appetizers, such as chicken wings, served as side dishes. And of course, desserts.

Obviously, before the food is served the tables need to be set up. Some people like to place a tablecloth atop the table. If you do this, make sure the tablecloth is in

the team's colors and not something fancy or frilly. In fact, the team colors should be highly visible everywhere. You can never place too many team-related items in the tailgate area. Let everyone know what team you are cheering for; but beware, if you are on the road, the home team fans will not take too kindly to your open display of support for the "enemy." Tailgaters should all be wearing their colors. Face painters and fans who dress with a gimmick are especially revered. For example fans of the Cleveland Browns have long taken on the persona of the unofficial "Dawgs" nickname. In this manner, Browns fans can dress and act like dogs and incorporate such items as dog-bone helmets.

Tailgating at football games will last hours. Most people arrive 4 or 5 hours before kickoff (depending on when parking lots open). As with the Super Bowl, a number of tailgaters of football games have no intention of entering the stadium (*Economist*, 2004). With all this time on their hands, tailgaters need something to do beyond eating and drinking. Music or radio pregame shows blare across stadium parking lots. A number of fans bring televisions with them, usually to watch pregame shows or highlights from games played earlier in the day. Many fans bring a football with them and friends toss the ball back and forth. Other people bring tailgating games with them like ladder ball, corn toss (or bean bag toss), washer pitching, and, of course, a drinking game favorite, beer pong.

And then there are the accessories, like plates and silverware; napkins; condiments; plenty of ice; and of course, trash bags. The more items that are disposable, the easier it is to pack up when the time comes to leave. Oh yeah, one other thing you might not want to forget if you are planning on attending the game—the game tickets!

Final Thoughts

Sociology analyzes the behavior of individuals in social groups, communities, organizations and societies. The tailgate party provides sociologists with an excellent social setting in which to study the ritualistic behaviors of group members bound together by shared sentiments, values, norms, and expectations of behavior.

Unfortunately, sociologists have, for the most part, ignore this environment. The behaviors of tailgaters is so significant that it could be argued they have formed their own subculture. Subcultures are, after all, formed when reference group members share a number of common goals and traits. Within the framework of the reference group, members feel a great sense of loyalty to each other, they aspire to gain or maintain acceptance, and consequently, group norms take on great meaning. Everything about the behaviors of tailgaters would seem to legitimize their significance to sociology and sociological discourse.

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