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What It Means to Be a Fan  
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My talk today will address what it means to be a baseball fan. I want to primarily address the etymology of the term, and challenge the commonly cited theory that it is an abbreviated version of “fanatic.” But I hope, in the process of reviewing the strange and convoluted history of the word “fan,” to also be able to provide some insight into its cultural significance. My favorite definition of a fan is given by John Krich in his 1989 book *El Beisbol*: “Being a fan, of course means having every right to insist, with indignation, that others achieve regularly what we could never execute once.” As I’ll show, that definition incorporates a sense of bluster and inverted logic that is very appropriate to the origins of the term.

The case for “fan” being a shortened version of “fanatic” is laid out in an October 1996 article by Gerald Cohen and Barry Popik in a publication called *Comments on Etymology*. (The 1999 *New Dickson’s Baseball Dictionary* gives a detailed summary of their argument.) They contend that the term was coined in 1883 by Ted Sullivan and was a shortening of “fanatic.” While I agree that the term was most likely coined by Ted Sullivan in 1883, there are serious problems with the claim that it is an abbreviation of “fanatic.”

Cohen and Popik cite two accounts given by Ted Sullivan himself, one in 1896 and one in 1898, as the primary basis for concluding that “fan” is a shortened version of “fanatic.” They also offer some second-hand accounts, but if, as I intend to show, Ted Sullivan’s own accounts cannot be believed, then little credence can be put in second-hand accounts by people who may have heard or read Sullivan’s version.

I want to stress that Ted Sullivan is one of my favorite baseball figures. He was the discoverer of Charles Comiskey, a legendary promoter of baseball, and deserves to be remembered as the first important baseball scout. In 1907, the *Sporting News* referred to him as “probably the best known man in base balldom” (SN 2/2/1907) and it is a shame that he is so little remembered today.

Ted Sullivan was perhaps best known as a story-teller. Unfortunately, his stories cannot always be relied upon. His best known book was entitled “*Humorous Stories of the Ball Field*” and they are just that: humorous stories. The facts in his stories often don’t check out. I want to stress that I am not attacking Sullivan: no doubt he would be astonished and amused to find that his stories were being analyzed in this kind of detail a century later. But I do want to stress that it is necessary to take his stories with at least a grain of salt, especially when their intent is clearly humorous.

As I mentioned, the theory that “fanatic” is the origin of “fan” relies upon two of Ted Sullivan’s accounts, one in 1896 and one in 1898. Ted was manager of the St. Louis Browns in 1883 and the owner of the club was Chris von der Ahe. In the 1896 version, Ted tells von der Ahe that he doesn’t “propose to be advised by a lot of fanatics.” Von der Ahe responds: “Vat dat you call it? Fans, eh?” Ted says: “Yes fans for short” and the new word catches on. (SL 1/18/96)

This no doubt corresponds to tales about von der Ahe that most baseball historians are familiar with – von der Ahe speaking with a thick German accent, not understanding English, and insisting on his own peculiar ways of doing things. There’s a good reason for that: Ted Sullivan started many of those stories! The two men had a contentious relationship while Sullivan was managing the Browns and von der Ahe eventually fired him. Sullivan’s revenge was to relate a series of stories about von der Ahe that were hilarious, but hardly credible. He was largely responsible for turning von der Ahe into the 19th-century equivalent of Yogi Berra.

That is not, of course, to say that there was not some truth in Ted Sullivan’s depiction of Chris von der Ahe. But just as we hope that twenty-second-century scholars will recognize that Yogi Berra “didn’t say half the things he said,” so must we regard with skepticism stories about von der Ahe, especially ones that spoof his command of the English language. In particular, the lynchpin of this story is that von der Ahe, as a native German speaker, does not understand the word “fanatic.” The problem with this is that the German word for fanatic is “fanaticker,” for fanaticism is “fanatismus,” and for fanatical is “fanatisch.”

Two years later, in 1898, Sullivan came up with a new version. Again he was manager of the Browns in 1883 when the word was coined but virtually every other detail had changed. Now Sullivan was seated in his office with several players when a man entered and wasted their time by giving “his opinion on all matters pertaining to ball.” After he left, Sullivan asked what name would best describe the man. Charley Comiskey said “He is a fanatic,” and Sullivan responded “I will abbreviate that word and call him a fan.” (SN 11/19/1898; reprinted word for word in 1903’s *Humorous Stories of the Ball Field*)

So Ted Sullivan told two versions of the coining of the word “fan” a mere two years apart that are wildly contradictory. But you may be asking at this point, since you acknowledge that Ted Sullivan most likely coined “fan” in 1883, and both of these stories state that “fan” is an abbreviation of “fanatic,” isn’t it reasonable to accept that part of the story?

Well, here’s where I drop my bombshell. Five years before either of these versions appeared, Ted Sullivan gave another account that appeared in *Sporting News* on September 12, 1891. This account resembles the 1898 version but has many important differences. This time, Sullivan and Comiskey are talking when they are joined by two or three men who “commenced to talk base ball. After they had bored Ted considerably they left. Addressing Comiskey, Ted asked what name in the dictionary would fit the

men that had addressed them. Comiskey said the dictionary was unequal to this occasion. ‘Then, said Ted, ‘I will coin a name of my own; I pronounce them “fans.”’”

So in this earliest version, the word “fan” has no relationship to fanatic; instead Ted is “coin[ing] a name of [his] own.” Now by coining, he obviously did not mean that he was making up a word. If he had, he would have called the men something like “friggles” and there would be no doubt. Clearly this is instead a metaphorical coining. While this is conjecture on my part, as I will try to show, the most likely scenario is that Sullivan thought to himself that the men were “windbags,” asked himself what else just blows wind around, and settled upon a fan.

That’s the end of what I regard as primary evidence. It’s obviously contradictory and at this point, you may be saying to yourself: since Ted Sullivan told three different versions of the coining of “fan,” how can we be sure that one is right and the others wrong? And I agree that we can’t. The last man who really knew exactly what happened in 1883 was Ted Sullivan and when he died in 1929, we lost any hope of knowing for certain. Moreover, I suspect by that point that he’d told enough different versions that he himself may not have been entirely sure which one was right!

But given Sullivan’s habit of taking a good story and embellishing it, I submit that the most likely version is the earliest one – the 1891 version in which “fan” is a new coinage and not an abbreviation of “fanatic.” Moreover I believe that careful study of the early usage of the word “fan” supports that contention. And I want to use the remainder of my time today to illustrate that.

Now I emphasize the *early* usage of the term “fan.” Fan was coined in 1883, first appeared in print in 1887, and, as I will show, it originally had strong associations with the idea of wind. But the meaning of fan almost immediately began to broaden and to describe any enthusiastic spectator. By 1893, the term had become so popular that it had started to outstrip “crank” and be used generically to refer to spectators.

So I want to look first at crank and then at fan to establish the distinct meanings that these two words initially had. In a nutshell, “crank” referred to a wide variety of obsessive behaviors and is very close in meaning to a fanatic. In contrast, a “fan” referred much more narrowly to a verbose person who is full of wind.

The term “crank” came first and it was popularized by the 1881 trial of Charles Guiteau, the madman who assassinated President Garfield. But it quickly spread to baseball and let’s look at some examples:

Boston Globe, May 17, 1886, refers to “The base ball cranks of Boston, such as General Dixwell, who keeps four different base ball scrapbooks, one for each Boston morning paper, and spends all the time he has when not witnessing ball games, in figuring out averages ...”

Sporting Life 1/23/84, "There is living in Camden, N.J., a crank named Farnham, who ... imagines that he invented the national game and should receive a royalty on every game played. He seems rational on all other points."

An article in St. Louis Post-Dispatch 4/18/84 (also reprinted in SL 5/7/84), quoted an ex-Governor of Maryland, "There is a man in the Government Hospital for the Insane who is perfectly sane on every subject except base ball. He knows more about base ball than any other man in America. The authorities have humored him so that he has been able to cover the walls of his large room with intricate schedules of games played since base ball began its career. He has the record of every important club and the individual record of every important player. He takes an astrological view of the game. He explains every defeat and every success on astrological principles. It is because a man was born in this month or under this star or that. He has figured it all out. His sense has gone with it. He is the typical base ball crank."

This shows that "crank" designated a wide variety of fanatical or deranged behavior. One of the manifestations of this behavior was a propensity to verbose utterances about baseball, as these examples show:

SL 2/18/85 "As horse racing is called the 'sport of kings,' why should not base ball be designated as the 'sport of cranks?'"

"The National game contains amongst its votaries as large and varied an assortment of this species as any pastime in existence, not even excepting roller skating.

"Amongst the least agreeable is the oracle who inflicts his knowledge (?) of the game on the poor unfortunate who has the ill luck to be seated near"

San Francisco Examiner, July 26, 1890, describing an Oakland "crank": "He was a walking baseball encyclopedia, one of the kind who know everything about the game, the kind who memorize weekly editions of the Eastern baseball press and then fire their knowledge off at fellow travelers on street cars and boats. He bears the same relation to the lover of baseball as the man who accompanies you to see a play he has at some period of his life seen once before, and who tells you and everyone else within hearing the plot in advance, does to the theatre-goer."

So clearly verbal bombast was one of the characteristics of a "crank," but this was only one of a wide variety of fanatical behaviors to which the term could refer. In contrast, the term "fan" was much narrower:

St. Louis Post-Dispatch, April 23, 1893, "Webster's defines 'fan' as a wind-producing instrument, a quality which makes it figuratively descriptive of a base ball crank." The article goes on to say of fans, "When the umpire agitates them they raise a storm." (Note the metaphorical allusion to wind.)

Sporting News, November 2, 1889, "Every base ball town is afflicted with 'fans.' The 'fan' is a peculiar creature. He is not made in China, but is a home product. It is too bad that he is not manufactured abroad; if he were, the tariff could be placed at so high a

figure as to exclude him. The ‘fan’ has a mouth and a tongue. In fact that is about all there is to him. The other members are so small that they are lost in the shuffle. The ‘fan’ uses his mouth and tongue whenever there is no occasion to use them. People would rather not listen to him but he is irrepressible and will talk whether one likes it or not. The ‘fan’s’ pet subject for discourse is the intemperance of ball players. Whenever a pitcher’s arm is out of shape or a catcher is not able to play on his regular day the ‘fan’ always says ‘drunk again.’ He does not know that the players are drunk, but he says so just the same. The ‘fan’ always jumps at conclusions; he never stops to investigate. If he was to do a little investigation he would not be a ‘fan.’ But the ‘fan’ is uncovering himself now and people will soon learn to recognize him by the length of his ears.”

Sporting Life, April 23, 1892, “A queer fan is hovering about [Cleveland who] has to be heard to be appreciated. He doesn’t think that such players as Tebeau, McKean, McAleer and Zimmer [these were all star players] are of any earthly use, and talks of bringing up a gang of Canton players [this was a minor league team] to annihilate our club.”

These all paint a picture of the “fan” that revolves around verbal utterances – specifically, verbal utterances of great stupidity.

By 1893, the word crank was beginning to fade and the meaning of fan to expand. But many citations of fan still reflected the original meaning:

SL 7/5/1902 notes that Pittsburg secretary Harry Pulliam had the groundskeeper erect a fence around the entrance to the club’s office to “add to the protection of [Pulliam] from the men who merely want to fan with him during busy days.”

SN 2/4/1905 Ted Sullivan: “any base ball player or manager that ever knew me knows that I have no use for the records of ball players. I leave that for the fan managers.”

And, especially, Ring Lardner in 1911: “The man who ... knows [that ballplayers] are just real people, isn’t the real ‘fan’ ... the real article is the man who ... struggles hard to keep an accurate score and makes a mistake on every other play, or doesn’t attempt to score at all, disputes every statement made by his neighbors in the bleachers whether he knows anything about said statement or not, heaps imprecations on the umpire and the manager, thinks something is a bonehead play when it really is good, clever baseball, ... and says ‘Bransfield is going to bat for Moore’ when Walsh is sent in to hit for Chalmers.” (Boston American 7/23/11)

This brings us to the question of why the term “fan,” although apparently coined in 1883, did not make it to print until 1887. And a related question is why the term’s origins have been shrouded in mystification and obfuscation. The answer seems to me to be that “fan” was originally a term of derision intended to designate, not all spectators, but only the most loud-mouthed and ignorant ones. Baseball men used it amongst themselves, but understandably wished to keep it from the game’s supporters, something they did successfully for several years. Its unexpected appropriation by fans made it desirable to suppress its origins and that may even have been why Sullivan changed his story.

But it turned out that such worries were in vain. The portrait of the “fan” is so extreme that few spectators really correspond to it. And the nature of egotism means that nobody is likely to recognize themselves in this sort of portrait, even if it does apply. But everyone can all think of someone they’ve sat near at a ball game who incorporates at least some of these characteristics. Thus, the term could safely be reclaimed and, ultimately, transformed into a term of endearment.

I want to close by pointing out that a proper understanding of the early origins of “fan” helps to answer an intriguing philosophical question has been raised by a number of observers. In 1887, a man named W. G. Betty noted that baseball enthusiasts were described in terms like “crank, fanatic and fiend” while those who attended other outdoor sports were described as “devotees and patrons.” He therefore asked: “Why should this difference be made? Just because my taste for out-door sport has an inclination to base ball should I have such names applied to me?” (SL 12/7/87) In a famous essay, the philosopher Morris Cohen asked why “a properly, cultured, serious person always feels like apologizing for attending a baseball game instead of a Strauss concert or a lecture on the customs of the Fiji Islanders.” (Dial 1919, from Len Levin’s SABR collection) In 1952, Marshall McLuhan asked why attending a baseball game should not be regarded as an element of “culture,” in the same way that attending a ballet is. (reprinted in All I Thought About ...)

I think we all know the answer to that. Our appreciation of a baseball game is just as high-minded as that of the person who attends a Strauss concert. But the problem is the other guy who sits behind us! And indeed the stands are full of people who appreciate baseball, but have an idiot sitting behind them! To paraphrase W. H. Auden, “I know that we are here on earth to help others, but what are the others here for?”

This phenomenon has made the baseball fan singularly thick-skinned with respect to criticism. The ability to redirect the most virulent comments to that idiot behind us has enabled the baseball fan to accept and adopt terms of derision, including “fan” itself.

This is far from unique. To give an example: In 1953, reporter Joe Williams asked Dodgers President Walter O’Malley if the term “bum” was offensive. He received this response: “The Dodgers are the symbol of the underdog, and well – so is the Bum. The exhortation, ‘Come on, you Bums,’ is not an opprobrium. Rather it is an endearment ... I cannot lend myself to any squeamish campaign which has as its objective the demise of The Bum. So far as we in Brooklyn are concerned the fellow is here to stay.” (syndicated Scripps-Howard column of November 13, 1953, reprinted in The Joe Williams Baseball Reader)

I submit accordingly that, just like “bum,” the term “fan” originated as a term of derision for a spectator who has “a mouth and a tongue” and that is about all there is to him. But, in a delightful linguistic irony, the term has been transformed into one of endearment and one that all of us now embrace.