Forever Our City: Examination of an MLS Supporter Group

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In this study, I examine the cultural practices of a Major League Soccer (MLS) supporter group—an organized collective of highly identified fans with “long-term personal and emotional investment in the club” (Giulianotti, 2002, p. 33). Supporter groups are prominent in their active participation in the spectator experience; throughout a game, supporters stand, sing, and drum in designated sections of the stadium, waving flags, banners, scarves, and other displays. The cultural practice of supporter groups borrows from such audible and visual fan displays of global soccer, while creating a unique culture specific to a particular club. Thus, I seek to elaborate what it means to be a member of the Ruckus, an officially recognized supporter group of the Orlando City Soccer Club (OCSC) in MLS, and to understand the mechanisms through which that membership identity is constructed and performed.

The study of soccer fans globally has been a prominent focus among scholars (e.g., Armstrong, 1998; Clark, 2006; Dunning, Murphy, and Waddington, 1988; Giulianotti, 1995; Hallinan, Hughes, & Burke, 2007). Giulianotti (1999), for example, compared the spectator cultures among hooligan groups in the United Kingdom with the 'ultras' in southern Europe, 'barra bravas' in Argentina and throughout Latin America, the 'carnival' atmosphere in Brazil, and elsewhere globally. He concluded that while there were “significant geographical and cultural differences” (p. 63), there were also “increasing signs of international exchange” (p. 64), including the ways in which groups in southern Europe “creolized” (p. 64) the prominent British performances and infused their own local cultures.

Supporter groups have evolved from these origins into a distinct classification of fans. In his taxonomy of soccer spectators, Giulianotti (2002) noted four distinct identities: (a) supporters; (b) followers; (c) fans; and (d) flâneurs. For supporters, the club’s home ground becomes a core space laden with meaning; the relationships with the club and supporters share the intimacy of family and friends; and the club, itself, serves as an emblem of community. “Showing support for the club in its multifarious forms (including market ones) is considered to be obligatory…traditional supporters are culturally contracted to their clubs” (Giulianotti, 2002, p. 33).

Other scholars have focused on the specific ways in which supporter identity is performed. For example, Derbaix, Decroup, and Cabossart (2002) looked at the consumptive behavior of supporters, including willingness to spend, but also why the purchases were made and the meanings the supporters attached to the purchases. Similarly, Clark (2006) looked at the terrace chant—the songs and cheers shouted throughout the match by supporters—to examine the ways in which that identity was constructed through that performative act. Cumulatively, the connection between the individual supporter and the club is paramount in forming this identity; however, the supporter groups are independent from the club itself. As Giulianotti (2002) noted, “the various supporter rituals surrounding match day (not least the chanting of the club’s name and the oldest supporter songs) coalesce to become a ceremony, through which the supporters worship themselves” (p. 33).

The phenomenon of supporter groups in the U.S. has largely gone unexamined. Indeed, while the history of soccer in the U.S. has historically been encumbered with questions about its acceptance as a mainstream professional sport (e.g., Dure, 2010; Hopkins, 2010; Markovits & Hellerman, 2001; Wangerin, 2006; Wangerin, 2011), recent evidence suggests that soccer fandom is growing. The 2015 Harris Poll indicates that professional soccer popularity has seen significant fan-base growth—more popular than men’s college basketball. Similarly, there has been substantial economic investment in the growth of the U.S.’s professional league, Major League Soccer (MLS). Since 2005, MLS has added eleven new franchises and the cost of expansion franchises has increased from $7.5 million to $100 million (Ozanian, 2013).

Due to the role of fandom in the growth and the continued sustainability of professional soccer in the U.S., such fandom merits further examination. As Hopkins (2010) argued, “When delivered correctly and fully embraced by MLS teams, the soccer-fan experience is soccer’s overwhelming advantage and one that can lead it to prosperity” (p. 287). Hopkins (2010) further asserted that the economic success of MLS necessitated “[w]orking with existing teams
to increase fan ‘identity’ and ‘loyalty’” (p. 150-151). Indeed, MLS has explicitly stated that strength of fan support is one of four criteria for expansion, along with a franchise’s: ownership, soccer-appropriate stadium plan, and sponsorship market (Williams, 2015; Zeigler, 2010). In practice, MLS has incorporated a “new type of expansion” (Rollins, 2015), with five of the last seven franchises allocated to those markets where “minor league” clubs had established devout fan followings. Thus, unlike in global soccer, where promotion is dictated solely by a franchise’s on-field success, MLS expansion uniquely rewards soccer fans for their engagement with the enticement of promotion to “major league” status.

This study is an ethnographic investigation of the Ruckus, one of the two officially recognized supporter groups of the Orlando City Soccer Club (OCSC). Through this ethnography, I have participated as a member of the Ruckus throughout the club's inaugural 2015 MLS season. To gain access, I purchased season tickets for OCSC, and obtained a membership with the Ruckus. I attended home games in Orlando, as well as one road game organized by the supporter groups. Additionally, I participated in: supporter group tailgates, including volunteering for work roles within the group; charitable drives; and online communities. Throughout these experiences, observation and interviews of supporter group members were conducted, and artifacts and documents were collected (Hammersly & Atkinson, 2007; Markula & Silk, 2011; Silverman, 2011). As Hammersly and Atkinson (2007) suggest, I have collected “whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the emerging focus of inquiry” (p. 3).

Discussion will include theoretical and practical implications. This project will meet the call of Giulianotti (1999) to further examine supporter cultures and identities globally by addressing the supporter group culture in the U.S., as well as the call for further qualitative inquiry related to fan identity (Delia, 2014). Initial analysis suggests that supporters construct their identity relative to: other supporter groups of the same club, of (rival) MLS clubs, and of non-MLS clubs; non-supporter spectators; and non-residents, among others. As the supporter culture has seeped into lower levels of soccer, including intercollegiate clubs (e.g., University of Central Florida's Ruckus Knights) (Gramajo, 2015), soccer officials across the U.S. landscape may benefit from deeper understanding of the cultural practices of supporters.