Walking a Mile in their Shoes: Examining Social Class and Accessibility in Sport

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As we boarded the city bus, we were greeted immediately by an enthusiastic crowd of Seattle Sounders fans—all of whom were draped in blue and green and collectively led Sounders chants and songs as we traveled toward the stadium district. Before we reached our destination, we were singing along with people we had just met and asking where we should go to continue the celebration. This was an unexpected result of riding mass transit that day, as we had no idea there was a Major League Soccer (MLS) game scheduled and no prior intention to attend the pregame festivities.

The experience on the bus, followed by participating in the team-organized March to the Match (see Woosley, 2013), left a lasting impression. We were both struck by how traveling to the event connected people from economically diverse areas of the city and created a shared sense of community. For instance, the Microsoft executive and homeless man sitting in the seats in front of us were chanting the fight song and talking about the team. We disagreed, however, on what mechanism brought people together. The first author, who studies transportation engineering with a focus on human design, noted how mass transportation unites people. The second author, who researches diversity and inclusion in sport, emphasized how sport provides the opportunity for dissimilar people to interact (Cunningham, 2015; Eitzen & Sage, 2009).

Though we had differing opinions, we shared a desire to ensure all people have access to city events and activities (including sport events), and decided to pursue a collaborative project to explore how both our interests can promote interaction among people from various social classes. We focused on social class for two reasons. First, a considerable amount of transportation and urban planning literature points to how transportation is an essential backbone of modern society, allowing people to have equal access to work, services and recreation (Garrick, 2014). When mass transportation brings various people to city centers, it in turn creates greater cultural diversity within urban areas. Second, a scant amount of diversity literature in sport examines social class. This is unfortunate, as economic means and social power significantly impacts one’s participatory and spectator opportunities in sport.

The ever rising cost of attendance, for instance, causes major sports events to be too expensive for average fans (Brown, 2014), especially for those who fall within the working class or poverty class (Smith, 2010). This is regrettable given the tremendous social value sport events yield for attendees when organizers create opportunities for social interaction and feelings of celebration (Chalip, 2006). The match day activities prior to Seattle Sounders games are an excellent example of how event planners can facilitate and strengthen communitas (see Chalip, 2006). Interestingly, while much scholarly work focuses on strategies for social leverage of sport events, researchers devote little attention to understanding how social class may preclude some residents from attending an event. The purpose of the current research, therefore, was twofold. First, examine the accessibility of professional sport events for fans who are part of the working class (Smith, 2008; 2010). Specifically, we observed how access to mass transportation can facilitate or hinder one’s ability to attend a game. Second, by using a collaborative self-ethnography approach (see Hoeber & Kerwin, 2013; Kerwin & Hoeber, 2015), we hoped to gain a deeper understanding of the spectator sport experience for working class fans.

Drawing from the social class framework, we define social class as “the dimension of the self that is rooted in objective material resources and corresponding subjective perceptions of rank vis-à-vis others” (Cote, 2011, p. 47), and classism as the “oppression of the poor through a network of everyday practices, attitudes, assumptions, behaviors, and institutional rules” (Bullock, 1995, p. 119). This framework recognizes that power and status aid in our understanding of the socially constructed idea of class. According to Smith (2010), there are four social class groupings (poverty, working class, middle class, owning class). For the purposes of the current study, we focused on the working class.
Our decision to adopt a collaborative self-ethnography approach was based on several factors. First, the approach recognizes the existence of multiple realities (Kerwin & Hoeber, 2015). As previously mentioned, we bring very different views to the current study. Through collaborative reflection, we were able to raise issues, based on our unique perspectives, that the other person had never considered. Second, we were primarily interested in fully participating in the research context and describing the cultural setting. Thus, the collaborative self-ethnography approach was appropriate.

During a 3-month period, we attended four events together and six individually (a total of 10 sporting events: 2 MLB games, 2 National Pro Fastpitch games, 2 MLS games, 2 MiLB games, and 2 recreational sport events). To document working class experiences, data collection for the event commenced when we left the first author’s apartment (located in a lower income area of Dallas, TX) and started traveling to the game. We began each journey by riding mass transportation. However, some sport venues were not accessible via transit, which forced us to walk along highways or take Uber when there was not safe walkway. For each game we purchased a ticket in the lowest price category. We noted our experiences in journals and digital recordings and shared our reflections after each event.

We continually analyzed the the data during the research process. Once collection stopped, we transcribed our field notes and digital recordings verbatim. Then, we followed Kerwin and Hoeber (2015) recommendations for analyzing and linking our experiences to theory and past literature. Given the nature of a collaborative self-ethnography we were able to continually critique, debate, and assess our perspectives. Such in depth reflections enhanced the level of credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. Based on our reflections, field notes, and conversations, we identified five common themes: (a) diversity of fans, (b) attention to wealthy fans, (c) challenges of attending, (d) the need for greater collaboration among sport organizations and city planners, and (e) unstructured socialization opportunities build sense of community.

The diversity of transit riders and fans sitting in the upper deck of major sporting events was evident. The lack of surface-level diversity among premium ticket buyers was also obvious. In fact, there was rain delay during one MLB game we both attended. As the rain started to come down, one fan commented that the “White flight” had begun—meaning fans seated in first and second desks (predominantly White fans) were leaving the stadium while fans in the upper deck (a more diverse crowd) remained.

Sport teams’ attention to wealthy fans, and limited or no concern for working class fans, was apparent in game scheduling, location of sport venues, services offered, and refusal to approve mass transportation. For example, residents of Arlington, the home of the Dallas Cowboys and Texas Rangers, voted to suspend bus service on weekends. According to online comments, residents believed crime rates would increase if lower income families could enter their city via mass transportation. The length of time to get to venues located in wealthy suburbs, transportation schedule, and game times that conflicted with work schedules represented three challenges of attending among working class families. Sport organizations and city officials should work together to ensure they are meeting the needs of fans and residents. The arena for the Mavericks and Stars, for instance, is on the light rail route, which makes games accessible to fans from all over the city. As such, traveling to an NBA or NHL game in Dallas is similar to the Seattle Sounders experiences, in that enthusiastic fans have an opportunity for unstructured socialization, which enhances the game day experience.

The current research has the potential to inform the diversity literature on how class impacts fan experiences. In addition, the study’s findings can influence managerial practices as well. Specifically, sport managers should seek partnerships and collaborations with city departments to meet the needs of all fans. The final poster presentation will elaborate on theoretical contributions, potential practical implications, and future directions.