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More Than a Game: A Comparison of American and English Sports Culture

I still remember the night Ohio State won its first football national championship in my lifetime. I was four years old and chasing the cats around the couch in my family room, while my dad and brother watched the game tensely, reacting to every play. My dad had grown up in Columbus Ohio, and was taught from a young age to root for Ohio State, and although I was born in Michigan and was growing up in New York, I was excited that he was raising my brother and I the same way. Although I was too young to understand the complex rules of the game, I enjoyed being around them, feeding off their excitement and nervousness. I loved having my dad explain what happened in each play, who each player was, and whether they were good or bad, but most of all, I enjoyed the way he would say, "us," and "our team." I felt included in the experience, as if my cheering was having a direct impact on the game. When Ohio State finally won, my family celebrated as if we had been on the field, playing the entire game. Although it felt strange to revel in a victory that I hadn't achieved myself, I felt like I somehow was part of a community, one that included my family, the team itself, and every other person at home watching the game dressed in scarlet and grey. While I was already very close with my family, this was the first time I can recall bonding with them over sports, a tradition that remains strong in our home.

This is the power of sports. When utilized correctly, they minimize the differences between people, and instead foster a healthy, safe environment for strengthening friendships, creating bonds between strangers, and building

comradery. This has always been the case for me, whether it be or whether it be through watching sports, both live at the stadium and on TV, or actually playing sports in little league, on my high school team, or intramurally. Sports and its surrounding culture in America have played a massive role in shaping me into the person I am today, yet now in a different country, the landscape of sports is entirely new. The predominant sports are different, the terminology changes, even teams' jersey styles and the designs of their logos feel extremely foreign. But most of all, there is an entirely different and new culture surrounding sports in England, one that I've been fascinated with ever since I decided to study abroad here. As soon as I stepped off the plane, I've kept my eye on the world of English sports, almost always comparing it to the world of sports I came from, intrigued by the vast differences, but also the uncanny similarities. To me, sports can tell stories; they say a lot about who you are, where you come from, and how you like to spend your time. I came to London with my story already started, however it is not one I paused until my return; rather it is one that I have filled with a fascinating, entirely new chapter, one that has certainly changed my outlook on the culture of sports entirely.

Part I: The Stadium

I couldn't tell you the first game I ever saw live. It could have been a Mets game at Shea Stadium, or maybe it was a Knicks game at Madison Square Garden. However, I know for certain that I was very young, and that I was there with my dad and brother. Going to games was always a bright spot in my childhood, and one that happened fairly frequently too, averaging at least a couple of basketball games every

winter and just as many baseball games each summer. I fondly remember one summer evening, when my dad told my brother and I that we had to go shopping with him, and as we begrudgingly walked to the train station, he pulled out our baseball gloves and hats from his bag, and told us we were going to go see the Mets play the Reds—my favorite team against my brother’s. Everything paled in comparison to seeing a game live; there was something about the atmosphere of the stadium, beyond the lure of greasy ballpark food.



Me at a New York Knicks basketball game, about 7 years old

I remember feeling strangely nervous every time the stadium came into view, it was such a massive structure, and for some reason, the thought of seeing a game live was somehow slightly intimidating. Yet once inside, I felt right at home amongst the crowd, adding my voice to the cheers and boos. Although my calmed nerves were certainly due, at least to some extent, to settling into the atmosphere, I see now that there was another reason for this. The American ballpark or stadium is meant

to be somewhere anyone can go, regardless of whether they were season ticket holders, or if they had never seen a game in their life. It is a fairly relaxed, inclusive atmosphere, one that allows parents to bring their toddlers, for friends to grab a drink and spend an afternoon together on a weekend, and for diehard fans to dress up and paint their faces in support of their team. Additionally, the full basketball season is 82 games long, and the baseball season is almost twice that, at 162 games long. The fact that the season is so long means that individual games matter less, making the atmosphere more relaxed, and because of that, on any given night, the stadium is less likely to be packed with hardcore fans. This, combined with the fact that most of the teams I grew up around were never very good meant that most of the time, there were a lot of empty seats, and the atmosphere was far more relaxed. Despite this, I always had a great time at the games, and enjoyed how it strengthened the bond I had with my family.

Now nearly two decades removed from that young kid and an ocean removed from the stadiums he frequented, I find myself once again feeling the same nervousness I did at my earliest live games. I'm clutching my print-at-home ticket, which I've folded wrong, which will get me stuck at the turnstile for what was probably only a minute, but felt like an eternity. As I exit the train and walk alongside the massive throng of people dressed in red and blue, I can hardly contain my excitement. I'm about to see my first Crystal Palace game, a small soccer team in the Premier League that I've become obsessed with over the past two years. I turn a corner, and I see the grandstand of Selhurst Park, the home of Crystal Palace, looming massive overhead. As I step into the stadium and walk to my seats, I'm

amazed by how close the seats are to the field. Not only this, but by kickoff, every seat in the stadium is filled. The atmosphere is electric. Even though it is a small stadium, only seating 25,000, the noise is remarkable. Everyone is shouting and chanting, and every time Crystal Palace makes a good play, the applause is monstrous. The most amazing part, however, is the singing. There's a song for nearly everything; there's one for when



Crystal Palace scores a goal, for when the away team scores a goal, for when someone makes a particularly good play, there's even a chant for when the referee makes a bad call.

Crystal Palace goal and the chant the fans sing for it



(Double click to play)

The atmosphere at the stadium was so much more lively and intense than almost any sports game I had ever been to, and after some reflection, I realized the reasons for this: first, in order to be able to buy tickets for a soccer match, one must first buy a membership with the team. These memberships, though reasonably priced, only allow one to buy tickets for that specific team, so as a result, the people who attend matches are more devoted fans, willing to pay for the memberships as they do not care to see any other team, making it far less likely that someone would go to a game to casually observe, as one might in America. In London, the spectators are devoted fans who are there to see every second of their team play. This might

make the culture there seem exclusive and inaccessible to many, however this is not the case. The atmosphere at the stadium instead felt like an extremely tightly knit community brought together by the team, which everyone there, save for the visiting team's fans, cared about immensely. When I explained to the people I was sitting near how I was an American student but a big Crystal Palace fan, they were extremely warm and welcoming, and we bonded over talking about the team and watching the match together.

The second reason for the atmosphere being so lively was the result of a group of fans known as "ultras." Typically a younger crowd, ultras are the fans who sing the loudest, celebrate the most enthusiastically, wave massive flags during the game, lead the chanting, and have an entire section of the stadium devoted to them. Some even bring instruments (typically drums) to games to play during the chanting. While most teams in England have a group of ultras, it was something I had never seen before in America, and it made the environment at the stadium brilliant.

There is also an important distinction that must be made between American and English sports. In America, a professional team retains its professional status through every season, regardless of how they perform. This means that even if a team finishes last in the entire league, it will still get to come back next season with a clean slate and a chance to do better. This is not the case in the sports leagues of England (and many other countries around the world), which operate on a system of promotion and relegation, where the teams who finish in the bottom couple places are sent down to the league below them, which is a huge setback. On the

other hand, those who finish in the top couple spots are promoted to the league above them, which is a massive accomplishment for a team. Since the Premier League, which Crystal Palace plays in, is the highest league of English football, there is no promotion as there is nowhere higher for teams to go, however there is relegation. As a result, there is significantly more at stake for small clubs like Crystal Palace, whose first concern each season is always to avoid being relegated. That means that even though Crystal Palace only win about a third of their games, every game is still crucial, as they always have something to play for. This in turn fills the stadium with passionate fans who are deeply invested in the game, making for an electric atmosphere. Teams like this in America have nothing to play for, as they have nothing at stake but at the same time cannot win anything, and as a result, fewer fans show up until the next season starts.

This incredible culture of live sports spectating was almost unparalleled by any experience I had going to games in America. No professional American sports team had the same community of dedicated fans, completely made up of diehard supporters. The atmosphere at Selhurst Park did, however, remind me of one specific brand of sports in America: college athletics. As I mentioned before, I grew up rooting for Ohio State, however, “rooting” is not strong enough of a word. There was no team that meant half as much to me as the Ohio State Buckeyes. I hung up an Ohio State flag in my room, I wore the jerseys of my favorite players whenever there was a game—I even put on a necklace with buckeye nuts on it (which I eventually discovered I was allergic to). This dedication and intensity was matched by the atmosphere at every Ohio State game I’ve ever been to.

Every other Thanksgiving, my cousins in Michigan host my family, for what is always, without fail, my favorite weekend of the year. The endless amounts of delicious food and wine, combined with spending time with family that double as some of my closest friends would already be enough on its own, however the highlight of the trip every year, without fail is the Ohio State vs. Michigan college football game.



My brother, my cousins, and I at the Ohio State vs. Michigan game, age 17

As I mentioned before, I was raised to love Ohio State. Ask any of my friends, they'll all tell you college football consumes my life from September till January. My cousins are the same way, except they were raised to be diehard to Michigan fans, Ohio State's biggest rival. So of course, all the conversation the week leading up to it is centered on the game, flavored with good-spirited competitiveness. All throughout Thanksgiving dinner and all day Friday, all we can talk about or think about is the game, the anticipation as well as taunts and jabs fueling the rivalry.

When the day of the game comes, I'm up early, extremely early, putting on my jersey, sometimes painting my face, and getting ready to go out. My brother, cousins, and I go around the neighborhood, hanging out in my cousins' friends' front yards, throwing footballs, eating hot dogs and hamburgers, and talking about the game. Dressed in rival jerseys, my brother and I stand out, however we're allowed to tailgate with the group, putting up with the occasional tease or snide comment from the Michigan fans. Eventually, we start heading towards the stadium walking amongst a massive throng of people. Walking into the stadium still takes my breath away. The University of Michigan's football stadium is the largest stadium in the country, and the atmosphere is indescribable. It's freezing out, yet every seat is filled, and the noise is remarkable. Every fan in the stadium is standing for the entirety of the game, singing along to their team's chants and songs, led by the student marching band.

The Ohio State vs. Michigan game is a famous meeting of powerful football schools, and the atmosphere is completely unrivaled to anything I've ever seen at any sports game in America. However, the atmosphere felt very similar to the one at Selhurst Park. Despite being on opposite sides of the Atlantic, playing different sports at different levels of competition in front of different fans, there was a significant amount of overlap. The energy at both stadiums was phenomenal, far more intense and engaged than the leisurely baseball and basketball games of my childhood. Every fan at both stadiums was a serious supporter of their team—these games were not intended as something to pass the time. You were there to engage, to give every drop of enthusiasm, intensity, and energy that you could afford to the

team you root for. I was even reminded of the ultras by the student section at the University of Michigan, as well as both university's marching bands, who, like the ultras, were younger, and the most intense and hardcore fans, and were leading the chants and celebrations.

At first, I found this to be a bizarre connection, however in truth, it makes a great deal of sense. Just as soccer teams form a community of sorts for the fans, so do college sports. I often find myself talking to the other Ohio State fans around me, celebrating with them, discussing players we like, sharing our frustrations with their mistakes. Our shared interest in a college sports team allows for a total stranger and me to form a bond, just like how I bonded with the Crystal Palace fans. And this is not just the case with the fans of my team. Regardless of the outcome of the game, I always feel exponentially closer to my cousins by the end of the weekend. The relationship I have with my cousins built around our rivalry gives us a healthy outlet for our competitiveness, however it's more than just that. It's a safe community in which we can bond over the things we care about, a place where we can disagree, voice how we feel, and ultimately finish the day understanding one another better than we did when we started it.

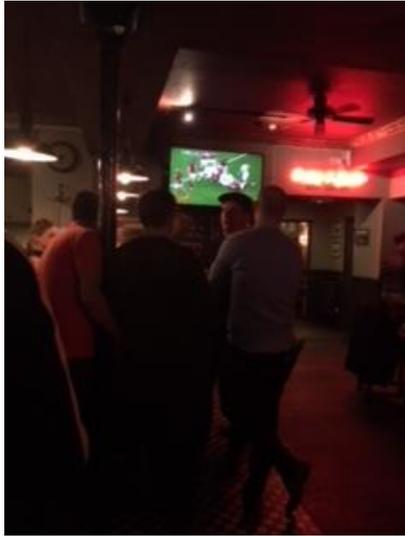
Part II: The Pub

Our family friend Scotty passes my dad a shot glass, nodding his head towards me. My dad gets the message, and subtly slides the glass over to me. I'm only 18 at the time, and this is one of the few occasions I've ever been to a bar, however it's for good reason: Ohio State is playing in the college football playoffs,

and the game is on every screen in the bar. It's New Year's Eve and my family is spending the holidays skiing in California, however the drink is not one of celebration, rather one of consolation. I have just spent the last three hours watching Ohio State get blown out by Clemson, 31-0. Despite being sad about Ohio State's season ending in such a dismal manner, I've very much enjoyed my time at the bar. Not only have I enjoyed the novelty of the new atmosphere, it's proved to be a very exciting and engaging one as well. Even with the game being heavily one-sided, the crowd at the bar remained engaged with the game, reacting to it passionately each time an important play happened. This gave me some solace, as watching my team lose in the company of strangers as well as some family and friends was less painful than watching them lose alone at home. Even though my first experience of watching a game at a bar was heartbreaking on one hand, it gave me something to look forward to for when the world of bars would finally become accessible to me. The atmosphere in the bar that night promised exciting nights to come, where I could watch games in a space designed for sports viewership, forming connections with the people there over a shared passion for sports.

These nights arrived when I touched down in England, and suddenly the world of pubs was made available to me due to the lowered drinking age. It was well worth the wait. The atmosphere inside the pubs was just like the bars I had seen games in back in America; they were crowded, yet still inviting, with multiple screens making it easy to watch the games. And the games were not simply background noise—most of the people at the pubs while the games were on were there to watch while they grabbed a drink with friends and family. This showed, as

the energy in these pubs was high. Just like at the bar in California, people at the pub would shout in glee, or groan and grumble in response to the game, their reactions getting louder and more intense as the night progressed and as people drank more.



At the Rose Pub, watching a rugby match

The big difference I noticed between the bar and the pub, however, was that the pubs were significantly more family friendly than any bar in America. On a Saturday evening, the Rose Pub was filled with just as many tipsy young adults watching the game as it was with strollers, young children, and tables littered with crayons. I found this quite interesting, as a child at a bar in America would seem incredibly out of place, regardless of whether or not they were accompanied. In Britain, however, especially before late at night, the pubs are a communal space, where families with young children as well as young adults grabbing a drink with friends alike can relax and enjoy a game. Although at first it seemed rather funny to me, I realized I was jealous that I didn't have access to a more communal space to watch games when I was younger, as it was far more engaging and exciting than simply watching it on the couch at home.

My experiences at the pub made me realize something important about English sports culture as a whole. While in America, people are only invested in the local teams, or the teams of their college, in England, there is overwhelming support for international play, where all of England is represented in competition against other nations by a single team made up of English athletes, such as the World Cup for soccer, and the Guinness Six Nations tournament for rugby. Although there is some support for American teams competing internationally, like for the World Cup or the Olympics, it does not unify the country like it does for England. Not only is soccer not especially popular in America, the American soccer team is not particularly strong, so when they do qualify for the World Cup, they never go far in the competition. Similarly, with the Olympics, the American audience is often limited, and most people won't go to a bar to watch the competitions.

This is not the case in England. I watched a handful of English rugby matches in the Guinness Six Nations in various pubs, and they were all completely packed, with passionate English rugby fans all cheering on their team from their barstools. This atmosphere for an international competition was completely new to me. I had been used to watching international games in various sports very casually, never feeling particularly invested, as this was the nature of American sports culture, however the excitement and passion that was so clearly visible on the faces of everyone in the pub showed me just how important the England national team is to them. At the pubs during those games, it doesn't matter if the person sitting next to you is a fan of your professional club's biggest rival—every English person there was brought together by their national team, which unifies the country in a way that

isn't seen in America. I really enjoyed witnessing this, as it showed me once again the bonds that can be formed over sports, which allow us to set aside our differences, and celebrate our passions.

Part III: Playing the Game

I stand at third base, smacking my glove, leaning forward expectantly. I know the kid at the plate can hit; his last at-bat landed well in the outfield, which for an eight year-old, was pretty impressive. For some reason, I know as the pitcher winds up, that the ball will come to me. I put myself on the balls of my feet, so I'm ready to jump either way at any moment. The ball sails from the pitcher's hand, towards the plate. The next few moments happened so fast, I only remember it through how I replayed it in my head that night. First, there was the clang of the metal bat colliding with the ball. The ball is launched right at me, a hard hit ground ball right up the third base line. I field it on the hop, and without having the time to think, I wind up and throw the ball all the way from third to first. The ball seems to hang in the air for eternity, and as I watch it, I begin to worry that maybe I threw it too high, or maybe it wasn't strong enough throw to even make it to first, but then all of a sudden, the first basemen catches it; the throw had beaten the runner by at least three or four strides. Only eight years old, I had just thrown an accurate ball 127 feet across the entire width of the baseball diamond. And I had gotten their best player out. My teammates surrounded me, giving me high-fives and accolades and the parents started clapping. My dad later told me that it was one of the greatest plays he had ever seen in a little league game.



Me batting and pitching in a little league baseball game, around 10 years old.

I remember this moment fondly, not because it was such an extraordinary play by any standard; by the time players get to high school, they're expected to make that play every time. It means a lot to me because I didn't have many plays like that as a kid. I wasn't the most athletic kid, I wasn't fast, and I wasn't particularly strong, but I loved to play sports, maybe more than anything. My love for playing sports extends as far back as I can remember. Although my elementary school was not even 100 yards away from my house, I would have my dad bring a football on the walk over every day, so that we could play catch for maybe two minutes. And after school let out each day, I would go to the playgrounds and fields of Central

Park, which felt like a second home, where I would never be found without my favorite football, or baseball glove. I have countless fond memories of playing sports as a young kid, however, in that moment on the baseball field, I felt like I belonged, that I was contributing to the team in a meaningful way. I proved to myself that I could participate in the activities I loved and succeed at them, even if I wasn't the best.

This love of playing still exists in me today. I played sports all through middle and high school, whether on a team or just for fun with friends. I even tried out for the JV basketball team on a whim, having had very little experience playing the sport before, doing it simply for the love of playing. Of course, I was terrible, and was rarely used in games, however I was happy just to practice with the team, and savored every moment I got on the floor in games.

Not only do I enjoy the experience of playing, I love the comradery I build with the people I play with. Playing sports creates a space for people to form strong bonds and strengthen pre-existing ones; some of my closest friendships have been forged through playing intramural sports at Vassar. This is because my teammates and I all have the mindset of playing for the pure joy of it. Even though we try to play our best, we are often playing sports none of us have any background or training in, and as a result, we seldom win. Nonetheless, every walk to the field is filled with excitement and glee, as we're all simply happy to have the opportunity to play a game we all enjoy with friends we cherish.



My friends and I after an intramural game of soccer at Vassar

This feeling of pure love of playing the game is clearly visible in London as well. Although I haven't sought out playing sports in London to the same extent as I have back home due to a bad knee, I see sports being played all over the city, every day, whether it be hearing the children in the playground outside my window shrieking in delight all morning as they play basketball and soccer, or watching pick-up games form in courtyards and parks. When it's a nice day, my friends and I often go to the green on campus and join in the large groups of people passing around soccer balls and frisbees, just as I do with my friends back home. Just like in America, playing sports builds a community, one that when in the hands of the right people, is an inclusive group that plays out of passion and joy, not just pure competitiveness.

While in London, I also noticed a significantly larger amount of soccer and basketball courts than in America, which implies a high demand for designated areas to play. Perhaps the most impressive example of this is "Powerleague Shoreditch." Built in an immense space directly under the Overground,

“Powerleague Shoreditch” has nearly a dozen soccer fields that host various recreational leagues, and can be used for leisure as well.



A panorama of “Powerleague Shoreditch” and a view of one of the fields

This immense space and others like it show the London community’s clear love for playing sports, regardless of the level, and these parks and fields function as spaces in which people can connect with one another, fulfill their passion for playing sports and feel as included and as central to their team as I did all those years ago back in Little League, standing at third base.

From a young age, I knew sports would always be a part of my life. I knew I would always look forward to going to see games live, that I would always make time to catch a game on TV, and that I would do my best to play as much as I could, for as long as I could. I built a home of sorts inside the world of sports, one that

allowed me to connect with other sports fans and strengthen friendships. Although this was the perfect “happy place,” if you will, I didn’t realize that the world of sports I was living in was just one of many, and that there was a vast array of different cultures of sports, whether it be watching a game in person, on TV, or playing the game at any level. Exploring English sports culture was an eye-opening experience. The games I witnessed at Selhurst Park will stay with me for the rest of my life, both because of the exciting nature of the game itself, but particularly because of the phenomenal atmosphere at the stadium, which was unparalleled by any experience I had at any game, except perhaps college football games. Watching games at pubs showed me that there could even be an exciting atmosphere around the culture of sports away from the stadium. However, more importantly, it showed the unifying power sports can have for people. Now finally 21, I look forward to returning home and going to bars, not so much to drink, but more so that I can once again experience the exciting atmosphere of watching sports in the company of friends and strangers alike. Finally, playing sports was always an outlet for me back in America, and although a bad knee made it hard for me to participate so much in sports here, I saw sports take on the same role for Londoners as it does for me, allowing people to connect with one another, and giving people the space to explore their hobbies. I even still managed to bond with people over playing casually, taking advantage of beautiful days and open greens, blowing off steam by passing a ball around. American and English sports cultures are different in many senses, whether it be the sports themselves, the way the leagues are set up, the terminology, or the atmosphere. However, what they share, and what I believe all sports cultures share,

is that sports allow us to put aside differences, and work together to achieve a common goal. It instills in us a sense of solidarity, community, and friendship, and that is how the game is won.