PERSONAL ESSAY

Seize the means of touchdown production

// BY VINCENT HUANG

"I am loyal to Amazon.com Incorporated. I will never waver in my support of Amazon.com Incorporated no matter what!" What would your reaction be if a close friend made such a declaration to you? Would you, perhaps, remind him that Amazon.com Incorporated is a capitalist corporation and cares nothing for him outside of his ability to contribute to its revenue and valuation? What if you replaced "Amazon.com Incorporated" with, say, Liverpool F.C.? Instantly less off-putting, infinitely more socially acceptable. After all, she who pronounces her unshakeable devotion to Liverpool's Reds is merely demonstrating her loyalty as a sports fan, and love for team or club is not quite the same as love for Amazon, right? But what is Liverpool, other than another capitalist corporation, owned in part by the same Jeffrey Preston Bezos, for the same reasons of revenue and valuation generation?

Professional sports teams are many things, but at their core they are assets — assets increasingly owned and controlled by the reaching tentacles of billionaires, asset management firms and even nation-states. The Buffalo Bills are an asset of fracking billionaire Terry Pegula, the New York Mets, an asset of hedge funder Steve Cohen, and Paris Saint-Germain F.C., an asset of the nation-state of Qatar. So then, I ask, what does it truly mean to be "loyal" to such a sports team?

As humans, we naturally venerate the virtue of loyalty. This is especially apparent in our distaste for the so-called "bandwagoner"— that is, a fan whose support is given to whichever team is winning at a given moment. To be a bandwagoner is to be the sports fan's Judas Iscariot, whose thirty pieces of silver is a Super Bowl Champions T-shirt. We have a natural disdain for traitors, drawn from our very evolutionary biology. We see loyalty and self-sacrifice as a natural good, whether it is the soldier throwing himself on the grenade so that his compatriots in the foxhole may live, or the Pelicans fan willing to watch a full 20-62 season of basketball without so much as a first-round draft pick to look forward to.

But, I ask, is the virtue of loyalty dependent, in part, on the object to which such faithfulness is given? When a husband swears at the altar that he will love his wife in sickness and in health, we applaud his eternal devotion to his life partner. Is it as virtuous to be loyal to the Walmart founding family-owned Denver Broncos? Or is it a complete betrayal of the self, a perversion of fandom that takes advantage of our natural instincts? We allow our natural inclination towards loyalty to shackle us to privately-owned corporate entities, so that they may deliver greater profits and valuations to their owners.

The dedicated fan will argue he is dedicated to, say, the Orlando Magic because he is from Orlando, or he is from Florida, or his distant family is tangentially linked to the Sunshine State, and as such his love for his team is merely an extension of his affection for his hometown. But are these professional sports teams loyal in return? Do they even care?

Let's say that I snap my fingers and a new city appears in America. Let's call her New Vincent. New Vincent is twice the size of New York, with twice the media market, twice the population, twice the spending capacity, and is in dire need of some professional sports franchises. Now, let's say that Roger Goodell, or Adam Silver, or Rob Manfred, or any other sports commissioner offers your favorite team (yes, your) the opportunity to move to New Vincent, and become the New Vincent Patriots, or the New Vincent Knicks, or the New Vincent Dodgers. How many teams, confronted with the promise of increased revenue and valuation, wouldn't instantly say yes? Probably just one — the Green Bay Packers, who are owned by the fans, in what is technically a violation of private ownership regulations.

I'm sure that many St. Louisans felt a great loyalty to her St. Louis Rams; a loyalty that the Rams themselves didn't seem to share, as they were willing to pack their bags to become the Los Angeles Rams the minute Goodell permitted it — a switch that doubled the team's valuation and instantly placed millions in their owners' pockets. The New Jersey Nets similarly betrayed the loyalties of their fans when they became Brooklyn's Nets, but as their valuation has increased over fifteenfold since, I doubt that their ownership has lost any sleep.

What we are morally called to do as lovers of sports is to seize the means of touchdown, or 3-pointer, or goal-scoring production. The German soccer league Bundesliga has a strictly enforced 50+1 rule, stating that all participating clubs must be at least 51 percent owned by fans. This rule has allowed tiny backwaters of Germany such as Hoffenheim and Elversburg to keep their top-flight teams (equivalent to a situation in which El Paso were to have an NFL franchise in America) while also giving fans a real stake in their teams that protects them from relocation and other ownership betrayals.

The winningest soccer club in all the world, the fifteen-time European champion Real Madrid, is owned by its fans, or "socios." Such ownership structures hardly make these entities morally perfect, but they are undoubtedly superior to sole ownership by a billionaire, private equity vulture or propagandizing nation-state.

Ultimately, without the ability for a fan to participate in team ownership, I believe it is morally obligatory for said fan to be a bandwagoner. The bandwagon fan makes these oligarchic owners fight for fans' time, attention and money.

When the Glazer family undertook a leveraged buyout of Manchester United as a means to load the club with their own massive debts and extract dividend payments, they did so knowing that the famously devoted Red Devil fanbase would be there to catch their falling knife. When Tom Dundon (who made his fortune through providing predatory high-interest loans to high-risk car buyers) purchased the Portland Trail Blazers with the stated intention of cutting of every imaginable cost, he knew that the revenue he would pull in from the Blazers' enormously dedicated Pacific Northwest fanbase would not change in the slightest.

If we were all bandwagons, owners such as the Glazers, such as Dundon, might be forced to care more for the cultural and historic jewels that they should be stewarding. In a world where sport has become just another asset, the only righteous method of rebellion is to be a bandwagon.

Contact **VINCENT HUANG** *at v.huang@yale.edu.*



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WEEKEND RECOMMENDS:

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