

Crowds, Mobs, Fans, and the Fancy

In September 2007 the Chicago Cubs celebrated a real first. Paul and Teri Fields had named their newborn son Wrigley Alexander Fields, in homage to the Cubs home venue. Parents have named their children after famous athletes, but ballparks and stadiums? Obviously, the Fields were serious fans, the kind who have been analyzed for centuries. The Romans, for instance, had the crowd or the mob or the factions who filled the circuses to cheer chariots and horses that were organized into stables of reds, whites, blues, and greens. By the empire's second century, Pliny the Younger complained of the "childish passion" that he saw among the racing crowds. It was not the driver's skill or the horse's speed they cheered, Pliny lamented. That might be understandable. "But in fact," he claimed, "it is the racing colors they support." If the drivers changed colors in midrace, the crowd would change allegiance—"such is the popularity and importance of a worthless shirt." Such avid consumers are now called fans. Where did the name come from? Many assume it is simply a shortened version of the word *fanatic*, and that notion has some logic to it. But there is another possibility.

In a 1929 *American Mercury* essay, William Henry Nugent gave his readers a detailed history of sports writing from its British beginning in 1824 with Pierce Egan's weekly *Life Sporting Guide*. Irish by birth (1772), Egan found his calling on his days off from work as a compositor for *London's Weekly Dispatch*. Walking the streets and alleys later made famous by Dickens, Egan was enamored of the cockfights, prizefights, hangings, and other blood sports popular with the city's underside. He wrote about what he saw and in 1813 published *Boxiana: Or Sketches of Ancient and Modern Pugilism*. Four more volumes would follow. A century and half later, A.J. Liebling would dedicate his own volume on boxing, *The Sweet Science*, to Egan's memory, calling him "the greatest writer about the ring who ever lived."

One of Egan's projects was an 1823 revision of Francis Grose's *Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue*, a book that took readers into the auditory world of the "sporting character" who was "attached to pigeons, dog-fighting, boxing, etc." Egan called such characters collectively "The Fancy." A century later, Nugent wrote, "*The fancy* was long a class name in England and America for followers of boxing. Baseball borrowed it and shortened it to the *fance*, *fans*, and *fan*." Nugent did not agree with those who claimed that *fan* was an abbreviation of *fanatic*.

Much evidence supports Nugent (and Pierce Egan). The *Oxford English Dictionary*, first compiled beginning in 1857, includes a short meaning of *fan* as "a jocular abbreviation of fanatic." Unfortunately, *OED* definitions of *fanatic* include no sporting references. On the other hand, the word *fancy* is clearly identified with boxing and the prize ring (as well as with bird and book lovers).

We are hard pressed to find early accounts of baseball that use the term *fan* or *fancy*. When New York area rivals began to face off in the late 1850s, spectator groups might be called club followers or spectators in general. If misbehaving (which happened early and often), they were called roughs, the blackleg fraternity, or factions, all terms unrelated to sport. A few decades later, baseball writers developed other names for rabid followers, including the term *cranks*. Ice hockey fans in the 1920s were sometimes called bugs, and they were prone to litter the ice with lemons or eggs.

Selecting the origin of a word like *fan* is always dicey. But the available evidence tilts toward Nugent's theory. Fans are often fanatical, but the term more likely emanates from the thriving commercial and entrepreneurial underworld of Regency London captured in the work of Pierce Egan—a world populated by The Fancy.⁶