

Aberdeen football fans: The 'glory hunter', the 'true fan' and the motivational role of the '12th man'

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Method

The anthropological methods used to carry out this project were: formal one-on-one interviews with Aberdeen football club fans; informal discussion with groups of supporters in my local pub and participant observation in the form of attending a Scottish Cup semi final match day in Glasgow; interacting with Aberdeen fans before, after and during the match. The names of those interviewed or quoted were changed for privacy purposes.

April 14th was a day that Aberdeen fans had eagerly anticipated for months. Fifteen thousand fans regimentally descended upon the National Stadium to roar on their beloved team, Aberdeen. As an Aberdeen fan myself, it was this very sort of occasion that interested me and inspired me to undertake this project. I wanted to understand what made these fans so passionately devoted to this football club, what connection was binding them to this team. I set out on this project thinking that it would not be possible to come to a conclusive, holistic answer to this question in relation to football clubs in general. There are several factors that lend individuality to Aberdeen fans, and for that matter any club, which makes them unique in their fan base and the sort of people who support them. However, I shall argue that the impact on those other clubs and their own unique characteristics is one that also has a great impact on Aberdeen fans and their connection to the club.

On the day of the game, as my taxi pulled up at the pub where I had heard that many Aberdeen fans would be congregating, I was greeted by hundreds of fans waiting by the door, singing and shouting, bathed in red and white (the colours of Aberdeen). As the doors opened, the masses stampeded up the stairway leading into the front door and the consumption of copious amounts of beer commenced. I spoke to one man in the pub, asking why it was necessary to go to such effort to acquire alcohol before the game, he responded: “ need to be in a fit state to sing my bollocks off at the game!” Many football fans (not only Aberdonian ones) see drinking as a way of lessening their inhibitions and making them comfortable to vocally make ‘themselves heard’ (as this man put it) once they reach the stadium. The emphasis placed on singing is huge. In the numerous discussions I had with fans the success of trips to other grounds and matches lay, not on the pitch, but in which sides fans could sing both the loudest and most pertinent songs. It is through this vocal support that the fans feel they can do their part in helping the team to victory. If the proper atmosphere is created, then the fans feel they have done their job, their part of the bargain. Steven, whom I travelled to the game with, told me whilst being interviewed that ‘it is as much the fan’s Job to help win the game as the players. If we can make enough noise and give them enough backing, we can give them the lift to do their job, we are the twelfth man!’ Slowly fans began to sift through the front door of the pub and embark on the walk to the stadium, to attempt to fulfil their duty and their backing of the team.

In front of me lay a procession of red charging down the hill towards the stadium. As I entered Hampden, there was a cacophony of chants being battered back and forth between the Aberdeen and Hibernian fans. As the players entered the arena the fans roared them into the

stadium, they also both raised colourful card displays in both teams colours, filling the stadium in a solid block of green (the team colours of Hibernian), red and white. These displays (set up by the fans) are another indication of the fans trying to play their part in the victory. The Aberdeen display depicted two stars, each signifying a European trophy won by the Dons (see Figure 1). These are moments that seem to have a huge significance for all Aberdeen fans, old and young. The two stars appear everywhere you look in relation to Aberdeen; there are even two stars above the club badge on the team strip. When speaking to one of my informants, Ian, on the topic of the European games, he remarked 'I just wish I was old enough to have been in Gothenburg [where the first European final was staged]. I would give anything to have been there that day, just thinking about it makes me proud to be a dandy [one of Aberdeen's nicknames]. If we can come through on Saturday it would give me the nearest chance I can get of having one of those moments myself'.



Figure 1: Aberdeen fans' pre-match display (picture taken from Facebook) .

The game itself passed very quickly. As promised there were vast amounts of singing and huge fluctuations in the emotional responses of the fans to the game being performed in front of them. Aberdeen went 1-0 down early on and the supporters were silenced. The fans broke out in deafening raptures when they levelled at 1-1, then despair at the finish as Hibernian scored a last minute winner. The most striking illustration of how much this game meant to Aberdeen fans was the train journey back up to Central Station (from which the fans could begin their journeys home). Special trains were put on for the football fans to reach the city centre and each team had a designated station so that the fans would not mix. As I approached the station to get on the train I was greeted by a long curving queue that stretched for around 800 yards. The animation and energy that I saw in the fans prior to the game, was dissipated. I was stunned by the contrast. Over the thirty minutes it took to work my way up the queue and transfer across to central station I have never witnessed such a large crowd making so little noise. The train was rammed full of people with barely any room to move and the only noise I heard was the occasional grumble about what went wrong out on the pitch. I then went my separate way from the fans I had spent the day with.

What this day (along with several other experiences with the Aberdeen fans) told me was that these trips across the country to follow the team are more than a simple day out to watch the football. Supporters place huge meaning in playing their role of supporting the team, coupled with their emotions that they experience as a direct consequence of the teams results. My mission in this project was to discover the nature of the connection felt by this club and their fans. What I drew from my visit to Hampden for the semi final was that the fans seem to feel that their job was to roar the team on and perform their role as the '12th man'. One of the

few muttered comments I overheard on the deathly silent train back to Central Station was someone stating that 'we did our bit, the team let us down!' Clearly what can be drawn from the importance placed on winning is that, although the fans job is a motivational one and they do not have any *direct* effect on the result, they crave victories to reminisce in and be part of (exemplified by the two stars on show in the pre match display). The appropriation of roles (between supporters and players) suggests there must be some further connection for the fans, to give up their time towards playing their part. At the end of the day, the players are paid to play their role but the fans have to pay their own money to play theirs. I attempted to find out the reason why they give up both their time and money to support this team, in several interviews with my informants.

When I approached interviews with my informants I entered them with the aim of eliciting exactly where the connection between fan and club, in the case of Aberdeen, lies. As stated before, I did not expect an all encompassing answer which shows why all football fans support their teams, as conditions vary drastically between contexts and clubs. However I did find that, in the case of Aberdeen, the other clubs impacted greatly on their reasons for supporting their team. To investigate this I conducted several formal and informal interviews. These interviews ranged from casual discussion in the pub to sit down interviews. One concept that came up frequently, whilst discussing Aberdeen and their fans in the pub, was the concept of 'glory hunters'. In my hometown, Banchory, a small town near Aberdeen, not all fans support Aberdeen. Many people support English teams and more still support the two Glaswegian teams, Rangers and Celtic. Aberdeen fans are deeply resentful that they support clubs other than Aberdeen. This can be exemplified with an encounter in the pub with a few of my

informants who support Aberdeen. On this occasion we were joined by Dave, a Rangers supporter. Ian, one of my informants, went up to the bar to order a round of drinks for the table. He asked each person in turn, however he missed out Dave. Dave questioned, 'Why do I not get a drink?' The response from Ian was, abruptly, 'Because you're a dirty, glory hunting, Rangers bastard!' This was in fact a piece of casual joking, but these sorts of incidents occur frequently in my local pub. In a later interview with Ian I questioned him on the concept of glory hunting. I asked him what makes a fan a 'glory hunter' and what makes a fan a 'true fan' (a phrase which comes up many times in conversation with Aberdeen fans)? He responded that 'a true fan supports their local team, no matter how good or how bad their team are. I automatically look down on people who support other teams from where they are from just because they win. I take pride in the fact that I support my local team and I do it through thick and thin.' The term 'glory hunter' was one I heard frequently throughout my fieldwork. For Aberdeen fans it seems that a big part of the pride that comes with supporting their team is that it makes them feel like genuine supporters. One stranger I spoke to, prior to the semi-final, stated that 'When we win it feels like I'm on top of the world, for these glory hunters they have it all the time!' This concept of supporting your local team, for the sake of supporting your local team, is an ideal held commonly around most of the fans I talked to. The pride that comes with supporting your local team (for Aberdeen fans) far outweighs the pride of winning itself. Supporters highlight and use winning moments as ammunition for arguments in pubs with other fans, but eventually if any other fan (from Aberdeen) that does supports a different more successful team enters an argument, they are normally labelled as a 'glory hunter'.

It seems that, for some Aberdeen fans, it is not about the pride of where they are from but the concept of adhering to the code of supporting the team where you come from. This concept is one that is born through resentment towards fans from other teams who do not support locally and as a result the term 'glory hunter' was created. This code, that you should support your local team, is one holding a large significance for Aberdonian fans. To know whether it is one that is universal for fans who support their local clubs would require further research. Regardless, for Aberdeen fans the definition of a 'true fan' is someone who attends week in week out and supports their side whether the team wins, loses or draws. This is not to say that there is not deep significance placed on when the team succeeds. This can be illustrated by the two star display at Hampden (see Figure 1), the emphasis on past victories like Gothenburg and the deep despair displayed on the train back to Central Station after the semi-final defeat. Fans will add the victorious moments to their social identity of association with the club (like the European trophies associated with the stars). This however does not influence their qualities as a football fan itself. These fans take their main pride in fulfilling their role as the '12th man' and as loyal supporters. With this they see their job as complete, although there is a deep emotional connection to what happens out on the pitch and the moments when the team succeeds. They bask in these victories and store them in their minds.

These illustrations show football as a means of social interaction. Football is a game that millions of people regularly follow and actively support. As stated earlier, there are many different levels upon which one can participate in watching the game, but I am particularly concerned here with those who actively follow specific teams. The game of football allows its followers a means to create a specific social identity, within the realm of the sport, and

promotes behaviour that brings groups of people together and also creates fierce rivalries. These rivalries allow for a classificatory sort of meaning, which supporters of different clubs can adhere to and promote whilst interacting in a social environment. Whilst observing Aberdeen fans, I have noticed a dividing line between them and those who follow other specific Scottish teams. In the pub at weekends, frequent debates occur about who has the best team and the best fans, and in partaking in these debates, fans seem to evoke a certain pride and identity, which goes along with identifying with these specific teams. From the perspective of the fan, each team inherits its own collective personality and trait: it is not relevant whether these stereotypes are positive or negative, as Stoeken states in his piece on International football: 'Even a nation's repeated defeat can be attributed to an asset of their national identity' (Stoeken, 2002: 11). This collective stereotype is one that fans bear with pride when interacting with others. Aberdeen fans are known as 'sheep shaggers' by fans of southern teams. The Aberdonian fans rather surprisingly adopt this negative connotation with pride and as a result call themselves 'sheep shaggers'. At one point in the semi-final a chorus of 'We are only sheep shagging bastards' broke out amongst the Aberdeen fans. This collective embracing notion which Aberdeen fans and football fans in general carry, is similar to the collective consciousness prescribed in totemic beliefs posited by Durkheim. Although fans at times may have disagreements or disgruntlements, the general mass (in terms of the groups I followed) will collect as one, adopting the same rituals like the pre-match drinking and the singing, ideals, beliefs and collective stereotypes. Durkheim states of a totemic group, 'Thus the men of the clan and the things which are classified in it form by their union a solid system, all of whose parts are united and vibrate sympathetically' (Durkheim, 1915: 150).

This overarching collective consciousness is, however, far more complex than an overarching system. This sort of collective whole or consciousness is subject to many variations between different sets of fans and individual clubs themselves. This is apparent in the sense that, within world football, there are many different sorts of clubs. Football is increasingly becoming more business oriented with super powers like Manchester United gaining billions in merchandising from multiple countries. Giulianotti illustrates this in his conception of the traditional fan (who seems to reside in smaller clubs) to the flaneur (a less intense supporter who isn't necessarily interested in their local team). 'Traditional spectators will have a longer, more local and popular cultural identification with the club, whereas consumer fans will have a more market-centered relationship to the club as reflected in the centrality of consuming club products' (Giulianotti, 2002: 31). It is apparent that the majority of Aberdeen fans I encountered lie firmly in the former, traditional category. With the existence of these differing sorts of spectators, it becomes important to take into account the context of the spectators you are engaging with and the different anthropological layers they pertain to.

In the realm of football supporters these different anthropological layers can be explained through Clifford Geertz's conception of 'thin and thick description'. This idea is a conceptual tool that Geertz borrowed from the philosopher Gilbert Ryle. Here, the act of the ethnography (thin descriptions) is contrasted to the meanings placed upon them (thick description) (Geertz, 1973: 7). The culture of supporting football in Scotland is full of contextually dependent thin and thick descriptions. Thousands of supporters throughout the country engage in the overarching concept of football support, attending games throughout the country each week. However, the meanings placed upon this act differ greatly depending on

what meanings the individual places on the support, and which club the individual supports. The ways in which different sets of fans conduct both their role of the '12th' man and the ways in which they place meaning and find connections to their clubs differ, depending on context and situation, and can also vary in accordance with Giulianotti's classification of sorts of spectators.

As a result of my findings I have proposed a twofold inference that can be drawn from the group of Aberdonian football fans I encountered. The first is that as the 'supporter', in the eyes of the Aberdeen fans, one has a duty to fulfill a motivational role for the players. Many supporters conceptualized this role under the guise of the '12th' man'. Although there is a deep connection and affinity to the club there is also a disconnect with the players, in the sense that the fans feel there are two different jobs to be achieved on a match day: they must fulfill their motivational role and the players themselves must go out and win. If victory is not achieved then dejection occurs within the fans, as exemplified by the train journey back to Central Station. What I aimed to pursue were the origins of this emotional connection and why the fans chose Aberdeen as the club to support. I elicited that, for many Aberdeen supporters, support comes through the ideal of supporting one's local team. In the local area many football fans support the country's biggest two clubs, Rangers and Celtic. For the Aberdeen fans this is not what the 'true' supporter does. The true supporter will support one's local team no matter how good or bad that team is. The fans themselves take great pride in this act and conceptualizing themselves, in relation to other supporters, as true fans, laying the claim that their victories on the pitch are more legitimate. Essentially, these conceptions of footballing fanship are contextually relative and dependent upon which set of fans are interviewed and observed.

There are many different 'thick descriptions' that can explain a fan's correspondence to a team and one must be careful not to generalize in this field, as it is subject to many varying factors. This being said, it is safe to say that the influence of other clubs and the complex culture of football rivalry both greatly influence Aberdeen fans and the connection to their club.

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