1 Introduction

The Tampa Bay Buccaneers began their franchise with fourteen consecutive losing seasons. The Detroit Lions have not had a winning season since 2000. The St. Louis Rams have won six games in the last three seasons. Perhaps most famously, baseball’s Chicago Cubs have not won a World Series since 1908. Yet all of these teams maintain fiercely loyal fans. And we admire those fans. Perhaps we even are those fans.
We admire sports fans who stick by their team in lean times. We look down on “fairweather fans” who “jump on the bandwagon” when a team is doing well only to abandon it when it does poorly. But why should we do this? When a team is playing well, isn’t there more to value? Greater athletic prowess? More memorable wins? Increased enjoyment? What we value in watching athletic competitions, whether aesthetic pleasures or the elation of winning, are increased when a team does well. So why shouldn’t we invest in those teams most likely to demonstrate the athleticism we admire, the physical and mental prowess that awe us, or the highest chances of filling us with the joy of (vicarious) victory?

But we don’t admire those who simply follow the winningest team of the moment. Perhaps that is appropriate for sports journalists at national publications, but it’s not appropriate for the true fan. This points to something odd about loyalty. Isn’t loyalty to a friend only loyalty if I stick with her even when she fails to be the person whom I first admired? Isn’t loyalty to my favorite TV show only loyalty if I continue to stick with that show long after it has passed its prime? Isn’t loyalty to my country only loyalty if I maintain it even when someone I despise is elected, or it goes to war when I want peace, or its economy tanks? Loyalty, it seems, requires that I maintain my support for the object of loyalty even when the attributes that I admire in that object are diminished.1 In football terms, someone might have fallen in love with St. Louis Rams of the “Greatest Show on Turf” era but continue to support them through their current nadir. Or someone may have been so impressed by the play

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1Ewin: “The thing about loyalty is that it appears to involve as part of itself a setting aside of good judgement, at least to some extent. If I stick with the firm, or the football club, or whatever, only when reason makes it clear that that is the thing to do, then I am a fairly calculating person and not particularly loyal. The loyal person sticks in there in the bad times as well.” (411)
of Walter Payton or the cheekiness of “The Superbowl Shuffle” that they became a
Chicago Bears fan in the mid-1980s and have followed their ups and downs since.
The person who jumps from team to team depending on which one is performing
well is not a loyal fan of any team.

I will begin with a general account of loyalty, and suggest a few guidelines for
explaining in which contexts loyalty is virtuous. When we turn to the case of loyalty
to a sports team and apply these criteria, we see that there are a host of interesting
issues raised that complicate and enrich our understanding of loyalty. In all of this, I
will consider only the loyalty of the sports fan to a team, not the loyalty of players to
each other or of owners to a community. And while I will focus on loyalty to a sports
team, it is not hard to imagine loyalty to a particular athlete or, as some advocate
in the sport of basketball, loyalty to a style of play.

Also, I will assume that loyalty is virtuous in those cases where it is permissible. I
have no argument that loyalty is a virtue, other than to point back to our intuitions
about sports fans and other loyal people that we admire. Frankly, I’m not fully
convinced that loyalty is a virtue, but I’ll set aside this worry. For this talk, I
will assume that when loyalty falls within the limits of permissibility (which I will
elucidate), then it is virtuous.

For clarity, I will also focus only on professional sports teams, not collegiate or
national teams, which add further complications.
2 Loyalty

There is disagreement among ethicists about how best to understand what loyalty (or any other virtue) is. For instance, it might be that loyalty is a sentiment, a character trait, a practical disposition, or a pattern of concern. This does not matter a great deal for our purposes. What matters for us is that loyalty always has an object, a thing to which the subject is loyal. There is a relationship between the subject and the object that involves advancing the interests of the object, caring about the object, or identifying with the object. (This is all very general and untidy, but it is the minimum we need to proceed.)

Another point to take notice is that we generally think there are limits within which loyalty is appropriate. Loyalty can conflict with our other duties, responsibilities, or moral imperatives. This can happen in choosing the object of our loyalty or in how we express that loyalty (including how we prioritize our interests, how we advance the object’s interests, and what we believe about the object). Sometimes, it is appropriate to put constraints on my loyalty so that I don’t fall into the more disastrous consequences of being loyal. For example, loyalty to my team does not justify my physically harming an opponent’s star player. In another venue, a judge may recuse herself from a case involving a friend, so as not to let loyalty sway her decision.

What we need is a set of conditions to determine when it is appropriate to be loyal. We value loyalty, but don’t want to be loyal to the wrong things or let it blind us to our other obligations. I’ll give some suggestions about what these conditions might be. These conditions should be attuned, I think, to the kind of thing that the
object of loyalty is: a person, a cause, or a group.

**Loyalty to a Person**  We can be loyal to individual people. Often, loyalty arises in friendships, spousal relationships, or familial bonds. We can also, of course, be loyal to people we have never met (e.g., a presidential candidate), but that case has more in common with loyalty to a cause or group, so we can bracket that. When is loyalty appropriate in these personal cases? We don’t want to advocate loyalty to a victim of domestic violence who “sticks by her man” when it would be better to leave. So (1) loyalty to a person should be part of an otherwise healthy relationship. Part of what makes that relationship healthy is that (2) the loyalty is reciprocated. Friends are loyal to each other. It is appropriate in these circumstances (3) to respond with gratitude when loyalty is shown; this, too is a mark of a healthy relationship in which that relationship is being valued. Finally, while not all relationships will take this on in a formal manner, there is often (4) a spoken commitment of the bond between the people. In marriages, this is a central part of the wedding ceremony. But it can take less formal forms, as well, such as declarations of love (romantic or filial).

**Loyalty to a Cause**  Loyalty can also take a cause as its object. For instance, I may want to see the eradication of poverty from the earth, or an end to deforestation, or a return to traditional values. In each case, I am not advancing the interests of a particular person or group, but of the cause generally. But, of course, in advancing this cause, I may align myself with an individual or group to advance this interest. But my loyalty is not to one of these because if they no longer advance the cause, my allegiance remains with the cause, not with the group. (For instance, one could be a
single-issue voter who votes primarily for members of one political party, but changes the vote to whomever advances that one interest, regardless of party.) I think there are three reasonable restraints on loyalty to a cause. (1) The cause must be morally permissible. So there can be no loyal Nazi, because nazism is morally impermissible. There is no value to being loyal to such a cause. (2) The cause must be non-trivial. It is impermissible, I think, to devote oneself loyally to something that in one’s own judgment is trivial. (3) The cause must be supported after a reasonable amount of deliberation or be capable of being supported with reasons, when prompted to do so. Causes that are not defensible with reasons or that were not reached through deliberation cannot be assessed to be non-trivial or morally permissible.

Loyalty to a Group  Finally, one can be committed to a group, organization, institution, or nation. (I’ll call all of these “groups,” but the institutional structure behind them should not be forgotten.) In many cases, a group is connected to a cause, a person, or a value. One’s commitment to environmental causes might lead one to be a member of the Sierra Club. One’s commitment to the Democratic party might lead one to a commitment to Barack Obama. These different loyalties can intertwine and interact. The one criterion that I’ll apply to loyalty to a group has three parts. Loyalty to a group is permissible only when (1) it advances a cause we independently support, (2) is historically connected to a cause we support, or (3) is inextricably linked to a person, cause, or group we care about independently such that one feels this loyalty is required by the commitment to the thing we care about. The first part is for those situations in which an organization supports a cause we believe in (e.g, MADD and a desire to eradicate drunk driving). The
second part explains why we can continue to be loyal to a group that once but no longer espouses causes we believe in; for instance, there may be value in advocating that a political party returns to the causes that it once held but has moved away from. The third part is to deal with an unusual type of case: we may take on the interests of someone we love or admire or an organization they once cared about even if that would not otherwise be a high priority for us. For instance, you may feel the need to continue supporting your father’s Elk’s Club organization after your father’s death not because you are attached to that club but because it is an expression of loyalty to your father. Relatedly, you might continue to pass on religious or cultural traditions to your children even if you no longer believe that religion’s tenets or embrace that culture in your day-to-day life because you feel there is some value in maintaining a connection to that religion or culture.

By looking at three types of objects to which we can be loyal, we can see under which conditions loyalty is appropriate for each type of object. This is in addition to certain broad limits to our loyalty. For instance, we should not let loyalty conflict with our other moral duties, responsibilities, or moral imperatives. These might be very large-scale concerns (e.g., don’t be a loyal Nazi). Or they might be relatively small-scale (e.g., don’t neglect raising your children while you register voters). Since loyalty can also lead to self-deception due to our attachment to the object, we must also be wary to not let it exert undue influence over our beliefs and decisions.\(^2\) This is a possible negative consequence of the partiality that is inherent in loyalty. One of the defining features of loyalty is that we are partial to some things over others.

\(^2\)See Keller, Chapter 2.
Every human being may be equally valuable, but most of us agree that I am allowed to be partial toward my wife. You do not have a legitimate claim against me if I do not buy you a birthday gift. My wife does. Your mother should not be upset when I do not call her; mine should. This does not mean that I believe that my mother is more valuable or in some way superior to yours. It simply means that in virtue of her being my mother, I am allowed to be partial toward her. There are limits to this partiality, however. If I become President, I am not allowed to appeal to family loyalty as the reason why I appoint my mother Secretary of State. In many of our beliefs, choices, and actions, we must appeal to impartial reasons. Since loyalty entails partiality, loyalty must give way in some circumstances to impartial considerations.

Now we can turn to the issue of loyalty to a sports team. There are two questions worth exploring. First, are sports teams the sorts of things that are worthy of our loyalty? Second, what can loyalty to a team teach us about loyalty in general?

## 3 Team Loyalty

Turning first to whether sports teams are appropriate objects of loyalty, what would it take to show that team loyalty is virtuous? The appropriate category for sports teams is that of the group. Interestingly, sports teams are not primarily advocates of a cause (other than their own winning, of course). They may contribute to causes (intentionally or inadvertently), but they do not exist to support a cause. For that reason, it makes it difficult to assess them according to the metric I’ve provided. But,
in a way, this seems appropriate, given the common charge that sports is frivolous. So let us think about whether sports teams can demonstrate the qualities that make loyalty to a group virtuous. There are three steps to this.

1. Show that team loyalty does not conflict with our other duties, responsibilities, or moral imperatives.

2. Show that team loyalty is an acceptable partiality.

3. Show that sports teams are tied to a non-trivial, morally permissible cause, or that team loyalty is a morally permissible outgrowth of another loyalty, or that they cultivate a non-trivial interest.

I think there are potentially two great harms that come from the loyalty of fans. The first is that, on the assumption that team loyalty sustains or increases interest in a sport, it leads us to spend time and money on things that are less valuable than others. Think of all the good that could have been done with the 1.3 billion dollars that Jerry Jones and the city of Arlington, Texas, spent on the new Cowboys Stadium. Or, on a smaller scale multiplied many times over, the money spent on tickets, apparel, and memorabilia for one’s favorite team. This money could have provided life-saving water, food or health care to millions at home and abroad. And the time and energy spent watching sporting events, reading box scores, and arguing over strategy could surely be put to more noble pursuits.

The second potential harm is the violence it might catalyze. Think of soccer hooliganism, or fans rioting after their team wins (wins!) a championship, and it becomes hard to dismiss the possibility that team loyalty can lead to violence.
Are these two harms great enough to render loyalty to a sports team impermissible? I think not. At most, spending large sums of money on sports or fan hooliganism demonstrate impermissible demonstrations of loyalty. One is not allowed, morally, to commit violent acts against other fans or in celebration of a victory. But that doesn’t mean that there aren’t permissible expressions of loyalty. To show that team loyalty is impermissible on these grounds, it would take showing that all cases of team loyalty lead to violence. Until then, let’s assume that team loyalty need not lead to violence (since we can think of many non-violent sports fans), and turn to the second issue.

2 Loyalty involves partiality. Is the partiality of team loyalty an acceptable partiality?

One way to show that a partiality is acceptable is to show that the preponderance of reasons weigh in favor of people being partial in that realm. For instance, we might try to show that it is acceptable to treat your family with more concern than those outside your family by showing that, on the whole, it produces the best consequences by having everyone act in such a way. Can this strategy work with team loyalty?

Let’s say that we want to be the purest fans of football (or baseball or team handball or any other sport) that we can be. Would we be fans of a particular team or not? I think that we would. Entry into a sport can be difficult for a beginner, and forming an attachment to a team can aid that process. Even in a sport with which one is familiar, it can be useful to follow a particular team as an entry into that league. For instance, I enjoy watching the other football, known to Americans as “soccer,” and I am pretty sure that I would enjoy watching the English Premier
League. So far, I haven’t done this, because I’m not sure which team to follow. I’m too ignorant to choose a team, and without a team to follow, I remain too ignorant of the league to find a team to follow. So I continue to know almost nothing about the Premier League other than what I know of the sport of soccer generally. And I’ll never increase my knowledge of soccer or the Premier League as long as I fail to attach myself to a particular team. For a sport I know even less about, such as cricket, I find it nigh impossible to consider learning the game without it being explained to me by some fan who is loyal to a particular club or national team. Team attachment seems to increase interest and knowledge of a sport, at least for beginners.

But not just for beginners. With the limited amount of time and attention most of us can give to a particular sport, identifying with a team provides a short-cut to the history of a league and its players. Following a team is what has led the NFL Draft into a huge event, by leading eager fans to explore every nuance of draft order, strategy, and scouting in an attempt to determine what would be in the best interest of their team. So following a team is a short-cut to the future of a league, as well. By forming an attachment to a team, even moderately knowledgeable and interested fans deepen their interest in a sport. And this knowledge increases one’s enjoyment of an athletic competition, as they watch draft prospects rise up to full-time starters or fall off the practice squad, or see that a little-known special teams player is making an increased contribution.

What I am suggesting is that if there is value to watching athletic competitions in which one is not performing, then team loyalty increases this value. I’m not in a
position now to defend this value, other than to say that I find sports viewing to be, in the best of cases, both intellectually stimulating and emotionally fulfilling, and that this suggests that there are likely some important values lurking in the weeds nearby.

Being loyal to a team is a kind of partiality, one that grows out of attachment. It is good to form attachments. Forming attachments to other people, to institutions, to communities, to animals, to many other things pulled from different categories - the ability to form these attachments is good. It shows a healthy mind and an ability to develop a morally praiseworthy character. It allows for society. It allows for cooperation and community and communication.

These attachments can become distorted, of course, but we do not have to assume at the outset that they must distort how we see the world. In fact, our attachments to particular persons and things can be expressions of universal motivations. I express my love for all people by loving my family. (It’s awfully hard to love everybody all at once.) I express my desire to improve the environment and leave future generations a habitable planet in a variety of ways, but one of them can simply be cleaning up a park I am particularly fond of. It’s not that my fondness for this park reduces my fondness for other parks; rather, it is through taking care of this one park that i express my commitment to taking care of all parks. There is room, I believe, for a kind of team loyalty that allows one to express a commitment to whatever value there is in sport by being attached to a particular team. So we have the next-best thing: attachment to a sports team.

However, even if we can defend team loyalty as an acceptable partiality in general,
it would not follow that any team is worthy of our loyalty. A team that wins by cheating or that makes consistently poor scouting decisions or refuses to be a good member of its community might not be worthy of our allegiance. Thus, it seems plausible that we should carefully consider which team deserves our loyalty, weighing whichever factors seem most important.

But that is not how team loyalty usually works. It is largely an arbitrary matter, determined a great deal by features like where we live (or at least, where we lived in our formative childhood years), which team gets the most media coverage, and which team our older family members or friends support. But these features do not seem like very reasonable criteria to decide an allegiance.

Since most allegiances to sports teams appear to be due to purely arbitrary factors of geography and family interest, even if we could pick out some and only some sports teams as worthy of loyalty, most of us wouldn’t be supporting those teams; we’d be supporting the local team. And even in those cases where we did happen to be loyal to the proper teams, it seems unlikely that we would be loyal for the right reasons, since we wouldn’t have weighed evidence to reach a well-considered conclusion.

In order to defend the team loyalty of most fans, what we need is a way to show that team loyalty is an acceptable partiality that allows one to be loyal to a local team even if that team isn’t, on balance, the most worthy of our loyalty. I think we can do this by turning to our third criteria.

3 I see no good candidate for a non-trivial, morally permissible cause that sports teams are organized to support, so loyalty to sports teams cannot be grounded in that. I have suggested that there is perhaps some value in spectatorship, and that
team loyalty can contribute to this value, so that is a place to go to ground the value of team loyalty. But let me suggest a more defensible candidate. The value of loyalty to a sports team can be derived from the value of an associated loyalty.

Being attached to Wisconsin can lead to being loyal to the Packers, Bucks, or Brewers. This is especially true during an exciting pennant run, when civic pride often peaks. But a form of loyalty can also develop when we wish well toward a city that could really use some good news. For instance, for those with no previous attachment to the Colts or Saints heading into the last Superbowl, I think a morally mature person would properly want a Saints win for the sake of New Orleans. And despite my supporting an NFC north foe, I want to see the Lions turn their franchise around for the sake of Detroit, which has suffered greater than normal hardships for an American city these last twenty years.

Loyalty to a sports team can also be derivative of my loyalty to my family, my friends, or other people that I care about. I follow the Indianapolis Colts with above-average interest because I know my brother-in-law’s family are big Colts fans. My loyalty to his family leads to loyalty to his sports team. Loyalties, especially to sports team, can be derivative.

The prospects for defending team loyalty rest on showing that it does not have impermissible consequences. I’ve suggested that it is at least not obvious that it has such consequences necessarily, even though sports fans may act impermissibly. I’ve also pointed to two possible sources for the value of team loyalty: the value of spectatorship and the value of a loyalty that leads to team loyalty.
4 Interesting Complications

In this third section, I will identify five surprising things that we can learn about loyalty by reflecting on the phenomenon of team loyalty. By focusing on the loyalty of a fan to a sports team, we can identify features of loyalty that might be lost by focusing on loyalties that are more commonly discussed, such as patriotism and friendship.

1. Loyalties can be derivative. As I just argued, loyalty to a sports team can arise from a different loyalty, for instance, the loyalty that naturally grows out of our attachment to the place where we live or the people we love. Loyalties, especially to sports teams, can be derivative.\(^3\)

2. In becoming loyal, beware derivative loyalties. Being a fan of an out-of-market sports team means heading out to sports bars or following on-line discussions of your favorite team. And what happens in these situations, particularly at a sports bar that attracts fans of different teams, is the awareness that your loyalty to a team necessitates being associated with other fans of the team. And not all fans are created equal. If the fans of a particular club are noted for their hooliganism, that can be a reason against being loyal to that team. Not for fear of being tainted because others might think (wrongly) that you are a hooligan, but because these are the fans with whom you will have to share an important aspect of your life (and your family’s life). And, if you are still choosing which team deserves your loyalty, this

\(^3\)Somewhat strangely, Keller discusses loyalty to a sports team as an underived commitment (59). I don’t doubt that this is possible, but it seems to me to be the exception.
can be a factor in making that decision.

3. **Loyalties can exclude other loyalties in complex ways.** It’s debatable whether being loyal to your country entails negative feelings or actions toward other countries. But most of us would agree that being loyal to a sports team means taking a negative stance toward your team’s bitter rival. It also excludes, I think, being loyal to other teams in your team’s division. So being a Seahawks fan might preclude being a Cardinals fan, but not preclude being a fan of an AFC team, because an NFC West team will rarely face an AFC team, so there is greater room for attachment to a team from that conference. (This is not always the case with multiple local teams; e.g., being a Mets fan excludes being a Yankees fan.)

   However, being loyal to an NFC West team like the Seahawks might lead one to feel positively toward that division in such a way that, unless a really bitter rival is advancing in the playoffs, you might want your division advanced in the playoffs and thus support a team you would normally root against. The same extends to one’s conference in a championship game or all-star game.

   Team loyalty is weirdly complex in another way. In friendships, I can (perhaps) be a loyal friend to two people who hate each other. My loyalty might involve me trying to reconcile these two friends. But my loyalty to a sports team does not mean that I should help rivals reconcile. This is strange. Why should we seek reconciliation among friends who have a falling out but not sports team rivals?

4. **Spectatorship is a non-trivial interest.** In order for loyalty to a sports team to be morally permissible, it might be that we have to identify some good
that is promoted by that loyalty. For instance, loyalty to other people gives rise to friendship, loyalty to a cause gives rise to discernible change in the world, and so on. What does loyalty to a sports team generate?

The only potential good that I can see in the neighborhood is spectatorship. If we want to say that loyalty of a fan to a sports team is a good, it may be that it is because spectatorship is valuable. I’m not sure that this is plausible. Why is it a good thing to watch others play sports? There is no athletic benefit to me by sitting on the couch, as there is to those who play. I don’t execute complex strategies the way a coach does. What good is it?

I suspect that we can come to see spectatorship as a good by understanding it as a form of appreciation, akin to the appreciation of art. In addition to the value of creating works of art, there is value in appreciating the works created by others. Recognizing genius, understanding the formal qualities of an art work, being able to place a work of art in its proper historical context, being moved by a particularly beautiful piece - all of these are values that contribute to art appreciation as an important part of the good life. They should be things we strive for in our lives, even if we are not ourselves producers of art. Perhaps there are similar goods embedded in sports viewership. Athletic prowess, scouting ability, talent development, the development and execution winning strategems - appreciating all of these and more might have value parallel to the value of art appreciation. In fact, defending team loyalty as a virtue might depend on finding such a value in sports spectatorship in order to keep the attachment from being non-trivial. (Alternatively, we might try to derive the value of team loyalty from the value of loyalty to a community; but then
we need to find the value in that and show that it carries through.)

5. **Loyalty unveils ontological complexities.** Philosophers often generate pretty absurd examples that try to isolate intuitions in difficult cases. But sports teams offer real-world examples as absurd as any we could imagine.

For instance, there are no current New York Yankees who were members of the 1927 Murderer’s Row team. There has been complete turn-over. So why should someone who became loyal to that 1927 team have any attachment whatsoever to the current team? There is some continuity, slight changes each year, but eventually everything (or almost everything) changes. We see this question amplified in free agency. It’s impossible to be loyal to a team without being loyal to at least some players of that team. What if one’s favorite player leaves through free agency? Should one maintain loyalty to the player or the team? Does how they left matter? This raises the difficult question of what exactly a sports team is. Is it the current collection of players? Is it the institution (the organization, name, the stadium, the uniforms)? Is it some abstract concept that is attached to an ever-changing collection of people, an ethos, a community?

Best of all, we have the strange case of football in Baltimore. When Robert Irsay, the owner of the Baltimore Colts, moved them to Indianapolis, the fan’s team (for the most part) remained loyal to Baltimore football, even though no football team existed there any more. They even maintained, famously, a Baltimore Colts marching band. So despite almost everything about the Colts remaining the same in the move to Indianapolis (the players, the front office, the uniforms, the club history), the loyalty of fans did not (for the most part) remain with them. It remained with
Baltimore until an NFL franchise returned in the form of the Baltimore Ravens.

The Ravens came from Cleveland and brought with them the Browns’ players, front office, etc., but not the uniforms, nickname, or history of the Browns franchise. Amazingly, the nickname and the history (include win-loss records, and so on) remained in Cleveland until a new franchise began there. The new Cleveland franchise had the old name and its history, but none of the players or management. Besides reaffirming my earlier claim that loyalty to a sports team is often derivative of a prior loyalty to a community, this is a fascinating example of the ways in which objects change over time and how difficult it can be to see to what exactly our loyalty attaches. It’s as if the United States and Mexico switched histories and governments but maintained geographical boundaries. How would we ever know to whom we should be loyal? Well, we actually have such a case in sports.

5 Conclusion

In this talk, I have tried to identify the circumstances in which loyalty is valuable, apply this to the loyalty of a sports fan to their team, and show that this raises some fascinating questions about the nature of loyalty. My suggestion is that the project of showing that team loyalty is actually valuable rests on showing the value of spectatorship or showing that it derives its value from the value of loyalty to a community.