Radio Sports Talk and the Fantasies of Sport

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Rhetorical analysis of radio talk shows in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, home of the Louisiana State University “Fighting Tigers” college football team, revealed that the talk shows gave Tiger fans opportunities to share creative interpretations of events. This helped them cope with moments of perceived crisis when the team lost, and solidified their identity as tied to regional pride and the values of work, race, and masculinity. The talk shows also promoted fantasies about college athletics, essentially designating the university’s athletic tradition as the most important activity on campus. In this sense, radio sports talk helps blur the line between amateur and professional sports and oversimplifies the complex mission of higher education.

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In recent years, interactive radio sports talk shows, like their political talk show counterparts, have grown in popularity (Goldberg, 1998; Haag, 1996). Part of this rising popularity is due to the shows' dramatic content. While radio sports talk shows and political talk shows on radio are different in some important respects, they both address issues of deep emotional significance to the participants. Sports talk shows, in particular, open a public space where the ideas and attitudes of ordinary people seem to matter, enabling the fans and broadcasters to share dramatic interpretations about...
the relationship between sport and society, whether or not these interpretations
 correspond to reality.

In an effort to understand more clearly how this process works, we investigate radio sports talk in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, home of Louisiana State University (LSU) and its football team, the “Fighting Tigers.” Our analysis demonstrates how talk radio gives Tiger fans opportunities to share creative interpretations of events. This helps them cope with moments of perceived crisis when the team loses, solidifies their community identity, and shapes fans’ understandings of the production of institutionalized athletics. Examination of these programs reveals that callers perceive LSU losses on the gridiron as threats to community identity, where identity is tied directly to issues of regional pride, work ethic, race, and masculinity. Losses create a perceived crisis of confidence among the fans, with potentially major implications not only for them and the team but also for university officials who administer athletic operations. On the other hand, victories provide opportunities on the talk shows for callers to re-knit the sundered community and the social reality upon which it is based.

Radio sports talk shows are therefore important for communication scholars to study. They function to reaffirm identity through mediated interactions in which heroes, martyrs, villains, and the role of the fans are recalled and renewed in common appreciation. Simultaneously, because college athletics becomes a critical lens through which callers also identify with a particular university, the talk shows, and the larger social reality they reflect or help to create, may also blur perceptions of the lines between amateur and professional sports and oversimplify the complex mission of academic institutions. As Sperber (1998, 2000), Byers and Hammer (1995), Telander (1995), and Zimbalist (1999) have shown, big-time college athletics and the accompanying media coverage have increasingly eroded the once-noble ideal of the “scholar-athlete.”

We combine a critical, reflective approach with Ernest Bormann’s (1972, 1982, 1983, 1985) fantasy theme analysis (FTA). FTA is useful for investigating how participants on the talk shows exchange ideas and how these ideas come to provide an interpretive framework through which the callers interact with others to make sense of their social world. As Bormann (1983) points out:

If several or many people develop portions of their private symbolic world that overlap as a result of symbolic convergence, they share a common consciousness and have a basis for communicating with one another to create community, to discuss their common experiences, and to achieve mutual understanding. (p. 102)

Other scholars have borrowed from Bormann to explore the fantasies of sport. Nimmo and Combs (1983), for example, argue that if one is to understand a group of people, “one must study its sports-mediated reality, given dramatic construction by its mediators. The fantasies that sports conjure are socially significant for the mass public that accepts them” because these fantasies reflect underlying attitudes, values, and beliefs (pp. 125–127). They add:

Sportswriters and broadcasters chain out mass fantasies about heroism [and villainy] and, in most cases, believe in sports heroics themselves. Whatever their
private beliefs, their public rhetoric—in the [news]paper or on the air—is largely supportive of the heroic fantasy if for no other reason than that they sense that their audience expects it. (pp. 127–128)

Of course, one could view the world of broadcast sports talk as a self-contained text. A critical analysis of such a text, we submit, would support the existence of the primary themes explicated here. However, the particularly salient aspect of FTA for this study is the concept of fantasy themes coming together to reflect or create a shared perspective of reality. The social world according to radio sports talk does not remain contained like a film in the world of make-believe. Instead, the socially constructed reality illustrates the audience's perception of what life is like in the “real world.” This reality seems to resonate even with certain influential university administrators. Such a sports-dominated perception of the role of universities like LSU raises the specter of a fundamental disconnect between the academic reality of America’s institutions of higher learning and the various mediated publics they seek to serve. At the very least, it invites the production of alternative mediated understandings of the relationship between sports and a particular university’s public mission.

We focus our inquiry on radio programs from the last week of September 2000. On September 24, during the university’s annual homecoming celebration, the Tiger football team lost to the University of Alabama-Birmingham (UAB). The team’s performance earlier in the season had already failed to satisfy the fans’ expectations: LSU had won two games against weak opponents but lost to a major rival, Auburn University. After nearly 10 years of losing and mediocrity, the university had only recently hired a new coach for the 2000 season, making him the third-highest paid college football coach in the nation, with the hope that he could turn the fortunes of the Tigers around. Despite the unremarkable start to the season, very few fans anticipated the team would lose to UAB, a non-conference and lowly regarded foe. Consequently, they spent all week trying to make sense of the defeat on the local radio talk shows. The next weekend, however, LSU beat the highly ranked University of Tennessee in Tiger Stadium. This produced expressions of relief and rejoicing on the talk shows.

After a brief overview of FTA, we examine the radio sports talk shows for evidence of fantasy themes that culminated in a larger rhetorical vision. We conclude our essay by considering the implications of radio sports talk for communities of fans, for their sense of region, work, race, and masculinity, and for their conceptions of higher education.

Fantasy Themes and Rhetorical Visions

According to Bormann (1983), a rhetorical vision is “a unified putting together of the various shared fantasies” that construct a credible interpretation of reality (p. 114). Rhetorical visions consist of fantasy themes that “chain out” among audiences in many different contexts, including “listeners to radio programs” (Bormann, 1972, p. 398). As used by Bormann (1983), and Nimmo and Combs (1983), chaining out
refers to the process of fantasy themes being picked up by different members of the rhetorical community who then improvise upon or respond emotionally to them. These chained out fantasies develop in more complete ways until they reflect the users’ common preoccupations and function to make those common concerns public.

Fantasy themes relating to setting, characters, and plotlines together create a compelling and dramatic version of reality. By describing characteristics of a scene, setting themes reveal where the drama takes place or where the characters act. Character themes disclose the qualities, motives, and characteristics of the actors in the drama, often portraying them as heroes and villains. Action themes reveal the action of the drama. Fantasy theme is the means through which the shared creative and emotional interpretation of events is accomplished. It usually appears in a word, a phrase, or statement—what Foss (1989) calls a “cryptic symbolic cure” (p. 127)—that interprets events in the past, pictures events in the future, or describes current events that are removed in time and/or space from the real activities of the group.

In the case of the talk shows studied here, whether interpreting events on the field that had already occurred or that might occur the next weekend, callers drew upon fantasies embedded in the popular culture of LSU sports to make sense of these events. The fantasy themes told stories that dramatized in an organized and artistic manner the community’s experience related to sports, in effect becoming a reality for them. Often, the fantasy themes chained out, as they were raised and discussed on one program and taken up and elaborated upon on another. Occasionally disagreements emerged over the meaning of specific events but, by the end of the game against the University of Tennessee, the talk shows appeared to restore callers’ shared understanding of LSU football.

The individuals who participated in the rhetorical vision surrounding LSU football constituted a rhetorical community. They shared a common symbolic ground and responded to messages in ways that were consistent with their rhetorical vision. As Bormann (1983) puts it:

They will cheer references to the heroic persona in their rhetorical vision. They will respond with antipathy to allusions to the villains. They will have agreed-upon procedures for problem-solving communication. They will share the same vision of what counts as evidence, how to build a case, and how to refuse an argument. (p. 115)

During the 2000 football season, Baton Rouge radio stations aired many sports talk shows. While we tried to attend to most of them, we focused on two programs, one on AM-WIBR (billed as “the Sports Animal”), hosted by Charles Hanagriff, a Baton Rouge sports commentator and columnist. The show, aired Monday to Friday, from noon to 3 pm. The other program, a post-game radio talk show, aired on FM-Eagle 98 (the “Eagle Sports Network”), and was hosted by Kevin Ford, a graduate of LSU who also served as a color analyst for the LSU men’s basketball broadcasts. The length of this show varied, depending on the length of the game and time allotted afterward by the station. Like other sports talk show hosts in Baton Rouge, Hanagriff and Ford had
reported on LSU athletics for many years and maintained ties with former LSU
athletes and university athletic administrators. For these reasons, the callers and other
journalists sought out their opinions about LSU sports. Depending on time
constraints, Hanagriff fielded approximately 15–20 callers per show, while roughly
5–10 fans phoned into each of Ford’s post-game programs. Most callers were white,
middle-class males between the ages of 18 and 64 and from South Louisiana, although
Tiger fans from all over the state (and sometimes out of state) phoned in.3 While many
callers identified themselves as former LSU students, several others said they were not.
The primary topic of conversation was Tiger football. The hosts spoke to frequent
callers on a first-name basis (we do not use their names here). Fans claimed to be
calling from many places, including their homes, their work, and their cars.
Some callers indicated they were interrupting their work schedules or car rides (several
used cell phones) to contact a particular show, which suggested an interest in the
content of the programs and their desire to participate.

Rhetorical Analysis

The loss to UAB caused fans to reflect upon and even revise the ways in which they
fantasized about LSU football. As our analysis will demonstrate, rather than
dismissing the game against UAB as an anomaly, the callers centered their criticisms
mainly on how the loss had hurt the pride of the fans or profaned what they referred to
as “the proud tradition.” These criticisms seemed to resonate with listeners, because
they called forth what we identify as a setting fantasy regarding Tiger Stadium and the
larger tradition of LSU football. Tiger Stadium is a 90,000-plus seat arena on the LSU
campus where the team plays home games. Generally, the fans take great pride in the
team’s winning record there. They assume that the team’s achievements in Tiger
Stadium, particularly against championship-caliber opponents, reflect well on the
image of the state in which they live. In the talk shows considered here, cryptic phrases
such as “bleeding purple and gold,” “the proud tradition,” “the glory days,” and “the
feared Death Valley” keyed listeners into the fantasy. These phrases are repeated so
often on talk shows and elsewhere that they have become something of a mantra for
Tiger fans. They evoke, in metaphoric terms, what callers understand to be the near
invincibility of the LSU football team in Tiger Stadium and the fans’ historical,
passionate commitment, which some fans refer to as “a way of life” and “a matter of
life and death” (Henderson, 2004). As Chris Warner (2000), a Baton Rouge sports
journalist, explains,

[T]he many legions of LSU fans will continue to religiously follow their beloved
Bayou Bengals as they fight for the pride of LSU on the leaf-blown fields of the SEC
[Southeastern Conference], carefully passing on the storied tradition from one
generation to the next. (p. 14)

Because winning in Tiger Stadium meant so much to the fans, many callers
throughout the week referred to the UAB game as an “embarrassment” or the
“most embarrassing loss in the history of LSU.” One angry caller on Hanagriff’s
September 25 program described the contest as the most “embarrassing loss going back to 1900,” and chained out his critical observation to articulate what sounded like a threat to the university administration. “People are not going to put up with it anymore,” he claimed. The loss was “embarrassing … a debacle.” Seemingly recognizing the overall dissatisfaction of callers, Hanagriff responded by shifting to one of Louisiana’s premier football teams: “Well, at least West Monroe got the state some pride this past weekend.” He was referring to a nationally-ranked high school team that had won a contest a few days before in which the listeners could take pride. Other fans on this program and throughout the week also shifted focus from the humbling defeat by anticipating the upcoming spring baseball season, during which it was expected the perennially successful LSU baseball team would compete for its fifth national championship. Apparently, in the midst of the present “debacle,” the fans needed to acknowledge, in a highly public manner, the praiseworthy accomplishments of other LSU athletes and other Louisiana football teams, whose efforts were noticed as a way of restoring the callers’ self-esteem and also of holding the LSU football team and university officials to the highest standards of the proud tradition.

On September 26, after fielding several phone calls about the decision-making ability of the coach and the long-term prospects of the team, Hanagriff returned to the issue of damaged pride: “LSU elicits no fear anymore,” he asserted. The host then articulated a different slant on the issue: He claimed the fans were “part of the problem,” suggesting that they possessed inflated expectations, given the team’s level of talent. Indeed, the host called for realignment in the way fans compared the present squad to Tiger football teams of the “glorious” past: “We need to stop talking about the ‘glory days’ of the past and change.” He did not so much reject the fantasy of Tiger Stadium and the football tradition as he chained it out or modified it to fit the present predicament. In his interpretation, the “glory days” part of the fantasy remained more or less intact, so the disgruntled fans could still be proud of what they thought the Tigers had accomplished years before.

The next caller validated the host’s explanation but focused more specifically on LSU students, who, he charged, had unrealistic expectations: “Students have bad attitudes and put too much pressure on the team” to win every home game. Hanagriff agreed but noted that people from around the entire state wanted the Tigers to succeed: “Losing is old . . . People of the state appreciate good effort” (our italics). The following caller also emphasized the importance of pride: “Players have shown no pride in the team, the school, the city, the state. It’s sad.” Like callers before him, this fan called for dramatic change: “I say get rid of the whole group. Do what they’re told or get the hell out.” Then, exploiting another dimension of the setting fantasy, he identified the national ramifications of the defeat: “We’re the laughing stock of the nation and the SEC” (our italics), he charged. This fan and other callers seemed to endorse the fantasy that the winning LSU football tradition was so important that even college football devotees from around the nation paid serious attention to LSU sports or inferred from the football team’s performance significant information about the state and its citizens.
Callers on this show, and again later in the week, reiterated claims that the game had caused great damage and required serious redress. On September 28, a disgruntled fan observed:

If this is where our program has dropped to, let's get the “death penalty,” let's do away with football at LSU if that's how low our program has dropped... That's a shame. We talk about this tradition and Death Valley this and all the tradition. [but] if that's where the tradition is, that's where the feared Death Valley has dropped, then we need to do away with the whole thing, tear it all down and start over.

Hanagriff agreed, although neither he nor the caller was literally recommending that the LSU administration disband the current football program (the “death penalty”) and then build it anew. Rather, they were urging university administrators, including the new coach, to do something to make the team achieve fan expectations as these were articulated in the setting fantasy. Like other fans, Hanagriff and the caller seemed to think their deep loyalty entitled them to demand changes from the university and from anyone else who was listening. As Bormann (1985) says, fantasy themes empower those who use them by providing a common set of assumptions about what constitutes good reasons for belief and action.

Additional topics raised during the week focused on the performance of the players, the new coach, and the fans themselves. Here, the callers invoked the setting fantasy but also a character/action fantasy that revealed fan expectations about the heroic/villainous traits and behaviors of LSU football teams. Callers directed much of their ire at the starting quarterback, a once-highly regarded prep school star from North Louisiana who opted to play professional baseball for several years before he returned to LSU. He threw a critical interception in the closing minute of the game that may have prevented a Tiger victory. Reports in the print press after the game claimed he had ignored a signal from the sideline and called his own play, a pass to his own brother. Sports journalists from various media predicted the quarterback would be replaced with the second string backup, a highly touted African American.

The subject of the quarterback’s performance arose on September 25 and 26, when numerous callers speculated about whether the coach would demote him. In an effort to account for the quarterback’s failure, one fan on September 26 raised the possibility of (reverse) racism when he inquired about why the rest of the players, the majority of whom were African Americans, “don’t do good” when the white quarterback is playing: “Are they going to excel when [the backup African American quarterback] is in there? That would be pretty sad if they did.” Hanagriff countered that such talk is “baseless.” They probably did not like the starter, he suggested, but the players did not conspire to perform poorly when the white quarterback was in the game. In other words, he assured listeners that, as many problems as there were, the players were not bigots. The race issue emerged a couple of times on other talk shows early in the week, eliciting similar responses from the hosts. The above interaction reflected fantasized notions regarding teamwork and tradition, where overt racist attitudes appeared to have no place in organized college sports and hindered the success of the team.
Subsequently, the same caller began discussing mental and physical preparation, an important concern for football fans generally and for Tiger fans in particular. While fans would expect LSU players to be mentally and physically ready, the caller questioned the mental state of the players. He teased that “physically, they’re probably good, but mentally, they look like a bunch of head cases … and [the coach] perhaps needs to administer Prozac or something.” Acknowledging the character/action fantasy’s emphasis on athletic prowess, Hanagriff objected that the players were not “that good physically, either.” The caller asked how the same players could be highly touted as high school recruits, and yet perform unsuccessfully at the college level. The host explained that in college football, many former high school stars simply are “physically … behind the other players. If they don’t play smart, with heart and emotion, it won’t matter anyway.” The caller agreed but still maintained the players were “a bunch of head cases.” Finally, suggesting that he had come around to an emerging view of the quarterback as insubordinate, the caller described the starter as a “cancer that has infected all the players.”

On September 28, a caller offered a somewhat new interpretation of the quarterback’s actions by insisting this was not the first time the player had disobeyed the coach’s orders. In the past, the quarterback had “tried to be a hero and failed. So the kid’s 0 for 2 in his hero choices. That aside, however, he was insubordinate and disrespectful to his coach.” Hanagriff agreed with this and with the caller’s claim that even the quarterback from the preceding season, who was not widely embraced by the fans, followed the coach’s orders as he was supposed to. The next caller offered an explicitly military slant on the quarterback situation, saying:

I have no respect for anyone who disrespects his coach. It’s like being in the military. I have no respect for anybody who disrespects their commander-in-chief. . . . If you don’t have discipline with [the] coach and players on your team, you don’t have unity, and when you don’t have unity the players don’t care. . . . If I were [the coach] I would build from younger players, not from what was left behind [from the previous coach’s regime].

Military metaphors, often used to describe team sports (Nimmo & Combs, 1983), were deployed here to highlight the importance not only of authority but also of discipline. Such discipline, the caller said, was severely lacking from the quarterback and his teammates. He appeared to think the younger players were more amenable to the coach’s disciplinary tactics, just as impressionable military recruits are expected to follow the orders of their commanders. The host agreed, but the caller worried that even if the Tigers put forth a good effort in the upcoming game, if the starting quarterback takes the field, “the entire stadium will boo on national television.”

The topic of booing immediately provoked a new set of inquiries into the nature of proper fan behavior in Tiger Stadium, all of which tapped into the setting and character/action fantasies. Confirming the above caller’s suspicions, Hanagriff warned that jeering the players could motivate the African American replacement to take the field, even though he was injured. For the host, this could have potentially disastrous consequences on the outcome of the next game. In other words, Hanagriff praised
the selflessness of the backup quarterback, but worried that booing violated both the value of teamwork and the proud tradition of LSU football. After all, the fans had always thought of themselves as acting in a manner that helped and did not hamper the home team. The host continued to examine the performance of the coach and the quarterback, framing his comments in terms of the character/action fantasy. Referring to the virtues of discipline and teamwork, Hanagriff urged the coach, not the players, to promote “team unity” and not let the “inmates [the players] run the asylum.” He also reiterated concerns about the quarterback’s insubordination, and claimed there were “ten other reasons” to replace him.

The next caller offered a new and critical evaluation of booing. He declared that previous callers had him “hacked off” because they claimed not to support the team any longer. Such an attitude, said the caller, was “a bunch of trash.” Death Valley had become “a myth because of the fans’ negativity.” The caller accentuated this rather negative portrait of LSU fans by comparing them to boosters at the University of South Carolina, another Southeastern Conference institution. In his estimation, these boosters “packed their stadium” despite the team’s unimpressive record at the time, because they “love South Carolina, because they love the [University of South Carolina] Gamecocks.” The implication was that many LSU fans did not love LSU, as was expected of the Tiger faithful. He suggested that if people were going to boo at Tiger Stadium, they were not “real Tiger fans” and need to go to the University of Alabama where, ostensibly, less loyal fans likewise presided. Rather than blaming the setting or the tradition for the recent lack of success in “Death Valley,” this caller derided the fans for their lack of “purple and gold” loyalty. As in most character/action fantasies, he derived a hierarchy of superior and inferior characters—loyal fans and those who booed.

The host mostly agreed, although in what was probably another effort to bolster the pride of the listeners and to restore the setting fantasy, he was not willing to concede that “Death Valley” had wholly lost its aura. He pointed out that still-devoted fans returned to Tiger Stadium game after game, no matter what the final outcome. “Think about the problems LSU could have. Think about what would have happened,” he argued, had there been similar losing seasons at other major state universities. His examples included Texas A&M University, the University of Texas, the University of Georgia, Mississippi State University, and the University of Florida. Would they attract 85,000-plus fans into the stadium every week? The team, Hanagriff explained, was setting attendance records this year for “garbage games”—games against second-tier opponents. He noted, too, that LSU officials had instituted several controversial policies, such as restricting fans’ access to tailgating, raising ticket prices, stopping fans from bringing water into the stadium, and so on. Yet the fans still set attendance records. “Don’t tell me,” Hanagriff insisted, “that the fans here don’t support that damn university. . . . That’s tired, it’s old, it’s false.”

The next caller dismissed the fans who disapproved of booing as too “politically correct.” He meant the fans should not fear hurting the feelings of the players. For this caller, the negative reference to political correctness probably keyed listeners into the character/action fantasy, which emphasized traditional conceptions of
masculinity—where male athletes were tough enough to withstand public criticism. As the caller explained, “If the kid can’t take booing, he shouldn’t be out on the football field.” The host disagreed, explaining that booing hurt the team because it dissuaded highly touted high school “recruits” from attending LSU, something the fans feared. The caller and host agreed on what constituted true LSU fans and that LSU would “always have fans.” The caller stated he would support the team “no matter what” by buying tickets because “I’m a big-time supporter of LSU.” The next caller obviously took some solace from the host, whom he praised. The host’s “emotional” investment in the team proved he was, the caller said, “kind of like us—you get frustrated with all the losing and it just mounts on you after awhile.” Both the caller and the host were identified as loyal fans because of their emotional attachment to the team, as loyalty and spectatorship were defined in the setting fantasy.

More concerns about the new coach emerged as the big game against the University of Tennessee drew nearer. While some callers reasoned that the third-highest paid coach in the nation should never lose to a team like UAB, most evaluated the coach positively and claimed he would prove to be worth his wages, if given time. As one caller explained on September 28, the coach’s high salary was just “the going rate for someone of his caliber … he’s proven that over the long haul he’s done a lot of good things.” A particularly serious charge on September 29 came from a fan who asserted that the coach was not earning his high salary and was “a bust.” He said that a coach’s job is to motivate players, that all the team’s coaches were failing to motivate, and that the new coach “is laughing all the way to the bank at us [the fans].” The fan predicted the coach would exercise bad judgment by starting the same quarterback; the ensuing booing from fans would motivate Tennessee, which would, in turn, he predicted, “cruise over LSU.” Hanagriff replied with what sounded like sarcasm—referring to the “positive, cheery note.” Although he did not disagree with the angry fan, the host’s sarcasm may have signaled an attempt to interpret the overall situation in a more sanguine way. The very next caller, who laughed and expressed hope “that last caller is not right,” did cast the coach’s performance positively, explaining that so far he saw no reason to doubt the coach’s character, his salary, or, for that matter, the judgment of university officials. He may have eased the minds of other listeners who supported the coach but nevertheless worried that, despite his credentials, he might actually fail to earn his salary, as the disgruntled caller above predicted. For LSU fans, this would amount to a violation of the character/action fantasy.

After other callers on the same program voiced concern about the impact of the team’s poor performance on recruiting, the alleged insubordination of the quarterback was raised once more. One caller doubted the team would play for the quarterback. After Hanagriff agreed, the caller chided the coach for “hanging [the quarterback] out to dry at a press conference,” a reference to negative comments the coach had made publicly about the quarterback that also seemed to violate the fan’s sense of teamwork and unity. However, the caller added, replacing the quarterback was justified, since the player “undermined the coaching staff.” The caller reported he did not care if LSU lost against the University of Tennessee, but he predicted, “one day LSU will be good … [the new coach] will turn the program around.” His optimism seemed to draw upon
fantasized notions about the character of Tiger football teams, which, although they may have started slow, fought hard and eventually triumphed. Still, the caller reminded listeners that if Tiger Stadium were to reclaim its former glory, the new coach needed the fans’ support: “Death Valley has a name for a reason; at one time, maybe 10 years ago, it was the most feared place in the nation to play.” The host agreed.

The next caller chained out the issue of the quarterback’s indiscretion in a way that underscored the fans’ apparent economic interests. Speaking with what sounded like sarcasm and humor, he proposed that fans take up a fund for the quarterback, return his tuition, and have the quarterback’s brother write the fans a check for his scholarship, before sending them both back to their hometown “on a one-way mule.” The host laughed in reply, as if by doing so he could alleviate some of the anger and frustration voiced by callers like this one. However, the host did not disagree with the caller, suggesting that sarcasm and humor did not diminish the perceived seriousness of the quarterback’s indiscretion. On talk radio, jokes appeared to implicate the tribal history of the community and evoke the community’s inner world.

As it turned out, the LSU football team prevailed the next weekend at home against the University of Tennessee, winning a close contest in overtime, on national television. Many reactions heard on Kevin Ford’s post-game radio talk show, on September 30, seemed designed to reassure listeners that everything they had come to imagine about Tiger Stadium and the LSU team remained true—an assertion around which the recently-divided fan community could rally. For example, one relieved caller who said he had been “around football all my life” admitted he “never would have thought LSU would have hung in this game.” He described “tears of joy after this one.” The idea that perseverance—“hanging around”—contributed to successful performance also occurred to the next caller, as did preparation, mental focus, and motivation:

After last Saturday night, it wasn’t looking very good. Give [the head coach] and the [assistant] coaches lots of credit. They had the team ready to play. . . . There was no question the team was focused; they were motivated, “fired up.”

He also hailed the African American quarterback, who actually started the game and, despite being hobbled, led the way to victory. About the new quarterback this caller remarked:

He just was not coming out of the ballgame, no matter what. . . . No question after his performance tonight that . . . he’s the man to take the snaps. . . . The rest of the season looks pretty good with him at quarterback. . . . Defense did a good job, too.

The caller continued to muse over the quarterback’s heroics and even expressed gratitude to his fellow fans for their efforts in supporting the team. “It’s a happy night in Tiger Stadium,” he rejoiced. “Great job, fans.”

The next caller extended the praise for the new quarterback, reminding listeners about how great Tiger athletes exhibited courage under fire, even martyring themselves for the team. He claimed the quarterback had “played the single greatest game I’ve ever observed an LSU quarterback play. . . . given the quality of the opposition” and playing
“with a swollen ankle.” He raised the game to near-mythical proportions, aligning it with fantasized recollections of a heroic past: “I thought the game was of legendary proportions. I thought of Nelson Stokely [an LSU star quarterback from the 1960s] when I watched the kid playing.” He added that heroes in the proud football tradition—those with exceptional courage—could simply “will” a Tiger team to victory: The quarterback

played with the courage of a lion. This kid is a leader. . . . The kid plays with poise. That kid willed LSU to victory tonight, and I want everybody within the sound of my voice to understand what I am saying: he willed it.

The caller complimented the team in a way that confirmed the very expectations about LSU football that had been called into question the week before: “Hats off to [the coach; and the new quarterback] made himself into a Tiger legend tonight. [His] play is what legends are made of. . . . That’s what makes LSU football Tiger football.” After two other callers praised the coach for “his guts” and “his knowledge of his players,” a fan from “The Bengal Belles,” an organization of self-described “fanatical” female boosters who support LSU athletics, reiterated the importance of discipline. She commended the football team “for doing an excellent job and doing everything they were supposed to do according to the coaches.” She claimed to speak on behalf of deeply loyal female fans when she concluded: “No matter what any of the other LSU fans may think, the 'Bengal Belles’ are always in total support of the LSU team, no matter what happens. We have an undying support of them.”

On Ford’s talk show, the callers not only praised or blamed the team for its heroic/villainous virtues and feats, but they also recalled, renewed, and celebrated the role of the fans in Tiger Stadium, as if participation on the radio program itself represented yet another way of “bleeding purple and gold.” But the intense revelry and tribute expressed on this broadcast also indicates that callers considered the heroic acts as vicarious reflections of their own desires, which the talk show enabled them to articulate and have confirmed. As Nimmo and Combs (1983) explain, sports fans “fantasize about performing great deeds and winning admiration and thereby enjoy the mass-mediated fantasy of sports heroism presented to them” (p. 127).

The Rhetorical Vision and its Implications

The fantasies combined to form a larger rhetorical vision about what it meant to be a member of the LSU football community, a community that was understood by many callers to extend to the university and the entire state of Louisiana. The heart of this community is Tiger Stadium, where heroic acts take place. It is a sacred setting (Prebish, 1992) in which allegiance to the state, the manhood of the combatants, and the capitalist virtues of the system are tested. Fans and players alike fight for the pride of their community, and heroic achievements on the field exemplify the heroic virtues of the fan community. However, losses threaten to transform Tiger Stadium into a profane setting, since unfortunate and even villainous acts (the quarterback's disobedience, the fans’ booing) occasionally occur there, violating valued traditions.
In other words, defeats in Tiger Stadium, like the one against UAB, represent more than the mere loss of a football game: They diminish the state and its people, and demand redress—that is, disciplining and replacing players, reprimanding coaches—the symbolic equivalent of imprisoning or executing the culprits or purging the corrupt system. If the military metaphor is taken to its logical extreme, one might claim that Tiger Stadium is perceived as a symbolic battleground, with its sacred home territory overrun and its people traumatized when the Tigers lose.

The talk show format was important for upholding this rhetorical vision in the face of perceived crisis because it enabled callers to share fantasies in a manner that also elicited immediate validation and restored pride (Duncan, 1983; Hoberman, 1984; MacClancy, 1996; Real, 1989). The talk show hosts played an important role here as well. As Avery, Ellis, and Glover (1978) might observe, they adjusted and legitimized heroic fantasies about LSU football for fans who feared they had become “the laughing stock of the nation and the SEC.” As Bormann (1972) explains,

Against the panorama of large events . . . the individual feels lost and hopeless. One coping mechanism is to dream an individual fantasy which provides a sense of meaning and significance and helps protect him from the pressures of . . . social disaster [and which supplies] supportive warmth of like-minded companions. (p. 400)

The hosts articulated and re-articulated these dreams.

Talk radio also distills sports fantasies into potent springboards for behavior when they chain out into the real world. This explains how the home win over the University of Tennessee and a victory in Tiger Stadium against the University of Alabama (a team LSU had not beaten at home for over 20 years) motivated hundreds and perhaps thousands of fans to storm the field. Certainly, reactions like this were cathartic (Gilbert & Twyman, 1983; Guttman, 1986) for a fan base that had witnessed and heard much negative talk show criticism about the recent spate of frustrating home defeats. At the same time, such post-game demonstrations of ecstasy and raucousness, which are growing at alarming rates at other universities as well (Lopresti, 2002), seem to represent displays of fantasized identity and pride. For Tiger faithful, whose disappointment or jubilation the talk show interactions did much to incite, the mass celebrations served as poignant reminders that the football tradition—and by implication Louisiana itself—still mattered.6

The talk shows also invited participants to evaluate the work of the LSU student-athletes by publicly labeling them physically unfit and insubordinate, as “inmates” in an asylum and “a bunch of head cases,” and as a “cancer that has infected all the players.” Moreover, because the mediated interactions regarding the team’s play picked up momentum as the shared character/action fantasy chained out (in the case of the quarterback, the criticisms seemed to grow in intensity), callers were discouraged from offering alternative explanations of the Tigers’ performance. Thus, the hero/villain imagery led participants to see the injuries or other player traits not as threats to the players’ health, education, or careers, but as potential failures of courage, violations of teamwork, or refusals to “sacrifice” nobly for the cause. In fact, according to the fans’
interpretations, the selfless African American quarterback led the Tigers to a climatic victory and made them proud by putting aside his ill-health.

The problem with these characterizations is that they may encourage callers to consider the players, just as fans of professional teams often regard their respective athletes, more as laborers on behalf of fans’ desires than as student-athletes. Indeed, one caller demanded that the starting quarterback’s brother return his scholarship money to fans, as if the fans were paying him a salary to perform for them. Yet college players at LSU and other major public universities themselves receive no salaries, despite the fact that they perform real physical work and as a result often suffer through career-ending injuries, fan ridicule, and missed class time (Funk, 1991; Telander, 1995; Zimbalist, 1999). In addition, since the players are portrayed as professionals whose status as students remains ambiguous, callers generate few reasons to demand that players, coaches, and administrators reform college athletics, for example along lines recommended by the Knight Commission, which has advocated banning from bowl games college teams that do not graduate acceptable numbers of athletes. Callers might interpret these proposals as too naïve or as measures that merely distract them from public expressions of pleasure and nostalgia they value in talking about their team.

As far as the coach was concerned, the hosts and the callers placated one another by appealing to his alleged market value (the “going rate”) and to the authority of the LSU officials who hired him. While some fans criticized the coach, they directed little attention toward what critics of college athletics see as the increasingly exorbitant salaries that athletic boosters and university administrations pay to coaches, whose earnings far exceed those of most other university personnel (Byers and Hammer, 1995; Sperber, 1998, 2000; Zimbalist, 1999).7 The message on the talk shows seemed to be that if the coach were not already highly valued in the larger marketplace of college football, the university would not have agreed to invest in him. As long as he could eventually lead the Tigers back to greatness in a manner that actualized the fantasies of sport, then no amount of money was too much to pay.

We should note too that, on the talk shows, race appeared subordinate to physical ability and moral character. Nonetheless, large numbers of African American college football players never graduate or make their way into professional football. Furthermore, hidden structural components directly or indirectly facilitate subtle forms of racism on university campuses. Perlmutter (2003), for instance, has noticed that some professors overly scrutinize African American student-athletes in their classes, searching exclusively for the failures; other professors unfairly assume these athletes have nothing to contribute to classroom discussions. On the one hand, the rhetorical vision may have reassured the predominantly white middle-class male listeners that no one was discriminated against at a major southern university such as LSU, and that whites like themselves had made significant progress on racial issues. Perhaps race became part of the white listeners’ efforts to define themselves on talk radio and to assert their progressive place in society through their sports fantasies. For African Americans listeners, the message may have been equally if not more satisfying. African American athletes were now being hailed and turned into celebrities by
a community of (traditionally white) fans, when in fact whites had up until the mid-1960s mostly excluded African Americans from LSU. On the other hand, these interactions alert us to the possibility that fantasies about the players’ lack of physical skill or their mental disabilities (the “head cases” or players with individual initiative who “infected” the team) can actually redirect racist attitudes in mediated spaces such as talk radio. As hooks (1995) points out, overtly racist attitudes are often justified when they are re-articulated in what a particular audience considers more acceptable terms. Since accusing a player of racism was apparently off-limits on the sports talk shows, the racist attitudes of certain callers may have been transferred onto alternative or more legitimate critical categories acceptable to the listeners, such as physical or mental ineptness. Read as a code, these descriptions indicated racial bias, as if white players were no longer physically skilled while African American players lacked intelligence or motivation.

As suggested earlier, because the majority of talk show listeners were male, the emergent rhetorical vision, with its focus on physical prowess, sturdiness, and competition, also revealed what Connell (1990; see also Trujillo, 1991) calls “hegemonic masculinity.” Connell defines hegemonic masculinity as “the culturally idealized form of masculine character” (p. 83), emphasizing “the connecting of masculinity to toughness and competitiveness,” as well as “the subordination of women” and “the marginalization of gay men” (p. 94). More than simply reflecting fan conceptions of masculine character, however, the talk shows also enabled participants to perform gender stereotypes consistent with the rhetorical vision. For example, precisely because they saw themselves as loyal LSU followers, male callers were prone to criticize the players aggressively. Women callers, on the other hand, seemed to offer nurturing support, as was true of one fan not mentioned above, who expressed great concern on Ford’s post-game broadcast about the health of an injured LSU player. Meanwhile, the “Bengal Belle” said the team would always have her “undying support,” no matter what. In other words, the rhetorical vision revealed acceptable gender identities for LSU fans, and talk radio provided a forum for callers to project these fantasized identities into public consciousness (Lefkowitz, 1996).

Finally, sport fantasies seem to inform the public arguments of university officials, who must recognize that college athletics is an important service provided to fans purchasing tickets and attending university athletic events. However, these fantasies risk reducing the complicated issues facing higher education to simpler, more manageable narratives that exclude important details of the larger whole. As Brummett (1994) observes, “Instead of developing complex arguments and amassing proof . . . many texts of popular culture tell stories or are storylike, using both words and images” (p. 64). For instance, the retiring LSU athletic director implored the LSU Board of Supervisors in his farewell address to find someone who, like the fans, was passionate about LSU sports: “When I sit in Tiger Stadium on a Saturday night, I felt something. It’s in my heart. It’s meaningful to me. It’s special” (Dean, 2000, p. 3D). Meanwhile, in an article for a local newspaper the LSU chancellor tied fantasies of LSU sports to academic achievement. “Sports success,” the chancellor was quoted as saying,
gets people energized and focused on the university. It then helps rally people behind the academics and economic development. Athletics is essentially our front porch. [What] we have to aspire to is not just to be the best university in Louisiana but the country. (Quoted in Androbus, 2001, pp. 15, 17).\footnote{9}

Fans who hear these arguments might conclude, incorrectly, that passionate enthusiasm and nostalgia are the most critical character traits necessary in an athletic director. Or that when events in a stadium align with a particular sports fantasy, the university (or an otherwise economically impoverished state like Louisiana) must be doing well, too, since sport—the university’s “front porch”—is essentially a reflection of the entire academic institution. Yet such fantasies seem undermined by the fact that university athletic directors require much more than passion and nostalgia in order to supervise multi-million dollar athletic programs. Furthermore, financial support provided by athletic departments to non-athletic university activities varies greatly across schools, and some top colleges have reported deficits in sports funding, despite huge sellouts and television profits from nationally televised football games (Sperber, 2000; Zimbalist, 1999). Moreover, upgrading athletic programs does not improve the academic quality of universities, since athletic reputations do not necessarily lure better students or professors (Robertson, 2003).

Fantasies that allow fans to identify with particular institutions seem to offer therapeutic value but also reinforce existing ideological beliefs. In the case of college athletics, the talk shows in which the fantasies emerge could nonetheless provide bases for rhetorical invention enabling administrators or other spokespersons to address a wider array of issues. Framed in terms of the dramatic fantasies that seem so vital to talk show interaction, these discussions could potentially shift identification from that of athletic teams to issues central to the academic mission of the university, without necessarily alienating or excluding the fans. The rhetorical challenge is to find ways of taking the passion of both sports media critics and fans for college athletics and using it to protect the academic integrity of higher education.

Notes

[1] Sperber (2000) even argues that spectator sports, and the variety of social affairs surrounding them, now occupy the “academic” careers of vast numbers of undergraduates. For many of these students, he concludes, athletics will soon become the primary purpose for going to college.

[2] We fully transcribed tape recordings of these two shows, which we utilize as case studies, and of two other radio talk shows. We then applied FTA to those texts by assembling the various subjects discussed on the talk shows and categorizing them in terms of their setting, character, and action components. From these components we derived two major sports fantasies and a larger rhetorical vision. Our analysis showed that even when different games were under consideration, other radio sports talk show participants used the same fantasy themes to interpret them.

[3] Demographic information on the talk show audience was collected by station managers and faxed to us. According to their data, over 90% of the listeners were male; roughly 38% worked in white collar jobs; 50.8% earned incomes over $75,000 per year; approximately 70% were aged 25–54; and slightly over 60% earned college degrees.
Segal (1990) argues that sport "provides the commonest contemporary source of male imagery" insofar as "the acceptable male image suggests—in its body’s pose, its clothes and general paraphernalia—muscles, hardness, action" (p. 89). Callers to other Baton Rouge sports talk shows also raised questions about the players’ "manhood" and described defensive linemen from the University of Tennessee as "real studs, real men." The comments suggested that the opponents would not only overpower LSU but that they were more sexually potent as well. Probably, the callers thought the lack of sexual prowess on the part of the LSU players was an even greater insult than the lack of physical strength. Such claims invoked powerful and commonly-held masculine stereotypes of what makes a man a "real" man or a "stud”—a virile nature and an ability to out-compete other men in contests of extreme physical or sexual activity. By comparing "studs" against the lesser Tiger athletes, the callers readily invoked predominant cultural/communal images embedded in the sports fantasies to question and correct the social and bodily masculinity of their own players.

Several "Bengal Belles," who describe themselves as "fanatical Southern women with tremendous passion for life that includes LSU football," phoned the talk shows once or twice a week. The organization’s mission statement can be retrieved from http://www.bengalbelles.org/mission.htm.

We are not suggesting the talk shows were the sole cause of these events—only a contributing factor. As anyone who has listened closely to such programs can attest, and as our own analysis illustrates, callers display—and are encouraged to display—strong emotions about their teams. Such emotions can very well lead to over-exuberant demonstrations of loyalty. And fantasy themes themselves encourage a sense of emotional belonging (Hensley, 1975). As Eco (1983) says about sports talk in general, sports fans yell and gesticulate and thereby perform "physical and psychic exercise" that allows them to "discipline" their competitive natures (p. 162). Yet this form of spectatorship does not really translate to an acquired control and self-mastery. On the contrary, while the athletes are competing in play, "the voyeurs compete seriously (and, in fact, they beat up one another or die of heart failure in the grandstands)" (p. 162).

Few complained on the radio sports talk shows when, in August 2002, the LSU Board of Supervisors increased the chancellor’s pay by $205,000 to $490,000 a year. This was only seven months after the coach hired by that chancellor led LSU to a Sugar Bowl victory and its first Southeastern Conference football championship in years (Redman, 2002). After winning the "2003 Bowl Championship Series" national championship in college football, the coach was made the highest-paid college football coach in the nation, as the fans had strongly encouraged on the talk shows.

Hanagriff emphasized playing "smart, with heart and emotion," words that might even seem associated with femininity. In all likelihood, however, he was appropriating the meaning of these terms to football, a characteristically masculine endeavor. Hence, "smart" referred to playing with discipline, while "heart" and "emotion" referred to playing with aggression, bravado, and even with physical pain. Ideally, LSU football players combined all of these traits with raw physical strength, something also associated with masculinity. In contrast, players who were ineffective but "sensitive" to the needs of their teammates would be suspect and perhaps labeled unfit on the talk shows. Furthermore, it is unlikely a gay male athlete would publicly announce his sexual orientation at institutions like LSU, for such a disclosure would be met with derision on talk shows or it would be suppressed completely. (As far as we know, not a single LSU athlete has ever publicly made this announcement.) Also, hegemonic masculinity may discourage serious discussion of women’s sports on talk radio. A promotion for one WIBR talk show, “Condon’s Corner,” hosted by a local sports commentator nicknamed “The Hammer” for his aggressive, irascible style and love of LSU football, sarcastically rejected the notion that women’s tennis or soccer would be covered on Condon’s show.

The chancellor linked athletics with the university’s “economic development” because LSU was, according to its provost at the time, “the worst-funded university of our size in
the nation. . . . We are absolutely dead last in the nation in public funding for higher education” (quoted in Androbus, 2001, p. 17). Of course, the situation faced by the LSU chancellor may not be very different from the situation other Southeastern Conference administrators face. As Barnhart (2002) points out, chancellors at these institutions must walk a tightrope between athletics and academics, learning to deal with overzealous fans and boosters who demand, on talk shows and elsewhere, nothing short of a winning season every year, whatever the cost to higher education. Chancellors are part of a culture “where booster and fan involvement is hands-on—sometimes to its detriment” (p. 16D).

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