“We are the ‘A’”: Atlanta United, Nationalism, And What It Means To Belong

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Abstract

This essay examines the phenomenon of Football (soccer) Club supporter culture in terms of nationalism and community. Specifically, this essay seeks to understand the intersections of identity, belonging, and "national" allegiance (both literal and metaphorical flag-waving) within association football (largely) and how the sport promotes nationalistic-feelings of belonging within very diverse supporter groups. Through an exploration of Atlanta United FC's culture, imagery, and ethos, I seek to evaluate the phenomenon of a very new club within a very old tradition. This essay starts with a review of literature discussing nationalism and identity, moves to a review of literature focusing on football as a particularly effective vehicle for the building of nationalism and identity, and ends with an analysis of Atlanta United FC's framework and branding. Finally, the essay concludes with an attempt to situate the phenomenon of Atlanta United FC with other larger discussions of rising nationalism within the US (politically and socially).

Keywords: nation, nationalism, belonging, football, soccer, Atlanta United

“We are the A”: Atlanta United, Nationalism, And What It Means To Belong

Around the 42’ and 80’ minute mark of each home match in Mercedes-Benz stadium in Atlanta, GA, 70,000 fans participate in one of the most awe-inspiring coordinated spectacles in sports. Fans young and old raise their arms above their heads, spread out, palms facing in, and wait. Aside from the shouts of players on the pitch, it is silent as all wait in anticipation. Then, drums, two eighth-note strikes sound across the stadium. The fans clap and yell “A!” before returning their arms back to their original position. They wait again until the drum beats again, “T!”. Once more, “L!” This is repeated, each utterance of “A-T-L” speeding up until the entire stadium is clapping furiously for their team: Atlanta United Football Club. The “A-T-L! Viking Clap” is one of the most moving and awesome traditions of this brand new club (if you haven’t experienced it, I’ll include this link to the very first time in Mercedes-Benz ATLUTD Viking Clap). The chant, pulled from Iceland’s National Football team, brings ceremony and ritual to a city once deemed a “bad sports town”. The 70,000 fans that can be found on any given match day would heartily disagree.

The team, announced in 2014 and started in 2017, demonstrates a new approach to sports in the U.S., one that promises to promote community, belonging, and pride in a town that has a love/hate relationship with sports. Arthur Blank, co-founder of the Home Depot, owner of the Falcons, and lovingly referred to as “Uncle Arthur” because of his dedication to the city of Atlanta, looked outside of the traditional markets in MLS in order to build a team with longevity. Blank, as quoted in a *New York Times* article in May of 2018, stated that he “understood clearly this was a global game and M.L.S. was trying to compete” and further noted that “American football is the top of the heap in America. But soccer is played in 209 countries. It’s much more

complicated than the N.F.L." (Belson, 2018). Soccer, for Blank and for the team, represented a much larger potential for base-building, as it is the world's sport and better reflects the international nature of the city of Atlanta. The success of the team, as I will argue, is rooted in the inherent belongingness that can be found in soccer fandoms across the world. Additionally, the intentional design and approach to the team, the commitment to the community of Atlanta, and the willingness to build a culture from the ground up, makes Atlanta United FC the "gold standard" of American soccer culture.

This paper seeks to examine the "nation" of Atlanta United supporters and situate it within an existing discussion of nations and nationalism. First, I will establish a theoretical background on nationalism, covering the notions of belonging and membership as they pertain to a person's identity and sense of nation. Then I will look at discussions of soccer as a community-building sport, one that provides a platform for those seeking to belong a place to partake in the culture of a nation. Finally, I will examine specific elements of Atlanta United's culture and embrace of the city of Atlanta including a close-reading of the logo of Atlanta United and a discussion of intentional symbolic messaging utilized by the owners and managers of the team.

Theoretical Background

Imagined nations, identity, and belonging

Before jumping into the nuances of Anderson's "imagined nations", I think it is important to distinguish between the concept of "nation" and the concept of "nationalism". The idea of a "nation" is as old as mankind--or at least as old as written history. A nation is a community or society that shares common culture, language, and history and is typically tied to a physical place

or territory. As Steven Grosby points out, “the nation is a territorial community of nativity. One is born into a nation” (2005). Grosby further points out that “the nation is a social relation of collective self-consciousness of actual and imagined duration” (2006) and is defined largely in opposition or recognition of difference in other nations (i.e., “I know that I am American because I am not _____”). Additionally, Grosby points out that a nation depends on a collective sense of community and is often marked by feelings of kinship with other members of the nation: “Important for understanding the nation is to recognize that relations that are perceived to enduringly bind one individual to another are possible not only within a family, but also within the territorially extensive,modern nation” (2006). So a nation is a collective (usually large) group of individuals, and while each individual may hold distinct (and many times contradictory) definitions of their nation, there is a common thread connecting each individual to one another, forming a collective.

Nationalism, on the other hand, refers to the *thoughts or ideas about* the nation--i.e., the ideology surrounding that nation (usually marked by patriotism or loyalty to the sovereignty of that nation). Unlike patriotism, which, simplified, could be defined as a genuine love of one’s nation without a prejudice against or hatred of other nations. A patriot may recognize the sovereignty of other nations and does not seek to maneuver his own nation above another. Proponents of nationalism, however, “[divide] the world into two irreconcilable and war-ring camps – one’s own nation in opposition to all other nations – where the latter are viewed as one’s implacable enemies” (Grosby, 2006). The ideology of nationalism dictates that one nation is superior, and thus the definition of what it means to be a member of that nation is specific and

usually exclusionary, utilizing strict rules members must follow (i.e., "America First" or a dictate that assumes rejection of another nation as key to true membership).

Most theorists argue that nationalism as a movement/concept is relatively new and modern. Benedict Anderson, for instance, that 1) nationalism is "new" or modern, 2) nationalism is universal, and everyone belongs to a nation, and those nations are all distinct from one another, 3) nationalism is really hard to define, but it is nonetheless, powerful enough that people will die for it (2006). In terms of its modernity, Anderson links the rise of nationalism with the rise of capitalism and the printing press, arguing that the increased accessibility to others, coupled with a decline in monarchy and belief in the divine right of kings, afforded the average citizen access to other communities--i.e., they could "see" others and "hear" them in a new way (2006). Perhaps most notably, he defines a nation as an "imagined political community--and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (Anderson, 2006). Anderson argues that nations are "imagined because members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (2006). In other words, the bulk of a person's sense of "nation" is ideological and constructed; however, Anderson's assertion that people are willing to die for their nation points to a genuine feeling or affection (2006). Although ultimately a construct, the emotional ties to one's nation form identity and a sense of belonging.

The concept of belonging is particularly integral in understanding the intersection between nationalism, identity, and community. Moving beyond a spatially-centered definition of identity, belonging concerns the emotional aspects of identity and of a person's psychological health and well-being. And while psychologists have long studied belongingness (particularly as

part of Maslow's Hierarchy of needs), a discussion of belonging is also useful in any discussion of nationalism and "nation-ness". Elizabeth Knott argues that "conceiving of belonging needs to go beyond identity vs. membership, in terms of the relationship between belonging and nationalism, to consider the role of politics, distance, contingency and contestation" (2017). For Vanessa May, belonging is "actively lived" (2011) because it involves action by the individual (whereas identity passively be connected to the spatiality of the nation). Belonging usually involves ritual and demonstration--i.e., like-minded people gathering together and performing some representation of identity. Sven Ismer notes that "the social practice of collective rituals enables people to transcend their individual and profane world and to construct a common world with shared meanings and symbols" (2011). It is the emotional connection to like-minded people that, according to Ismer, maintains a sense of nationality beyond the technical aspects of citizenship and spatial-identity. Whereas identity in terms of where-you-were-born is essentially the lottery of birth, "emotions help the individual to choose and set priorities [...] emotions are thus important for a nation's people to believe in the significance of the 'realness' of being a part of the nation" (Ismer, 2011). An individual must *feel* included in the group in order to fully buy-into the construct of the nation. Without the emotion, the individual is incomplete.

Football nation: membership, ceremony, and belonging

Ismer's perspective is particularly useful in examining the role of sport in in-nation forming as he examines how football embodies the otherwise imagined nation and provides the emotional outlet with which a nation can move from the merely imagined to the fully realized. Football, according to Ismer, "is believed by many to be able to manage the enormous task of

constructing or updating national identity" (2011). It is through the emotion of the sport that the game achieves this:

> [...] it is important to keep in mind that a large part of emotions [...] are mental scripts formed by historical, social and cultural context and their values and norms. Emotions can be seen as software that is used on a powerful piece of hardware--the human physiology--both interacting with and shaping each other. [...] It is emotion that certifies one imagined community to be a more pristine and natural source of identity and claimant of loyalty than the other. In order to be socially effective, the imagined community of the nation needs to be accepted as a natural part of identity, which can only be done by the emotional experience of membership. (2011, p. 550)

For anyone who has watched, attended, or played football, there is no question of the emotional connectivity generated between the players and spectators. There is a reason it is called "the beautiful game" and that reason is entirely related to the artistry--and thus emotion--inherent in the game. Russian composer and pianist, Dmitri Shostakovich, is credited with the quote, "football is the ballet of the masses". And unlike other sports common in the U.S. that pause often (with American football building specific breaks for commercials into the time), the game is non-stop, thus heightening the emotional atmosphere. Additionally, the game "performs" nationhood on a global scale in a way that no other sport (and even the Olympics) does. Ismer's focus on "social effectiveness" points back to the distinction between passive and actively lived identity. In order to be viable, there must be a "collective effervescence" in which many members of the same "nation" experience "high emotional arousal" (Ismer, 2011). This allows

the members to transcend the trappings of the construction of the nation and instead experience the "true" sense of membership and belonging.

How, though, does the spectacle of sport (specifically football) move from proface to sacred? According to Ismer, "All across Europe, rituals encompassing large numbers of a nation's members increasingly move from the sacred to the profane context, with an inherent tendency to sacralize the profane" (2011). In other words, it is through the *collective* participation and communion with the "profane" that the individual can achieve the sacred. Ismer, through Speth, Anderson, and others, recognizes that "nations as imagined communities need different kinds of rituals, e.g., commemorations, parades, celebrations, other forms of staging in order to be *emotionally experienced*" (as referenced in Ismer, 2011, p. 551). Football, with its many traditions and unique-to-the-club culture, provides a profane space to practice the sacred, a space that is cleansed of its sacredness after every match. The World Cup, specifically, is a stage on which players can perform nation-ness and through-which spectators can amass the emotional experience necessary to move from the idealized nation to the "real". Particularly through mass media, "sports seem to be the antipode to globalization by providing the most important area of ritualized action and collective emotion/effervescence in a predominant national frame" (Ismer, 2011). As demonstrated in Ismer's examination of two German national teams in the 1974 and 2006 World Cups (both held in Germany), there is a clear link between leisure sport in scale that begets a codified and measurable shift in national thinking and identity.

Ismer's study largely assumes that the measured feelings of the nation are unified and inclusive. He mentions mildly that "social inequalities are increasing. This process implies the danger of social conflicts within the country and leads to the growing need for unifying

moments" (2011); however, he largely fails to acknowledge the "other" within the nation and focuses rather on the "other" outside of the nation that enables a stronger national identity within it. While I certainly agree that there is a measurable uptick in patriotism and support for the national team during a World Cup, Ismer's article does not really account for those who have German identity by birth but do not necessarily experience the feeling of being German. This is in large part to the hope felt in 1974 "to demonstrate to the world that Germany was a democratic society that had overcome its Nazi history" (2011), and because of this hope, a general fear of performative nationalism that could harken back to that history. Here, the work of Donna Woodhouse and Dom Conricode help to determine the power of football to "create a sense of belonging" for those who seek to gain membership in a nation that they do not necessarily identify with--specifically those seeking asylum in the UK.

Woodhouse and Conricode provide a more balanced perspective regarding the complexities within the relationship between identity, membership, and belonging. They remark that "identity is not a social monolith" and point out the "potential of sport to deconstruct, formulate and reformulate an individual's subscription to markers of identity" (2016). In other words, sports such as football, through ceremony, can manifest belonging; however, it can just as easily promote "otherness" (Woodhouse and Concricode, 2016). Specifically, the collective emotional fervor spikes in patriotism during and following a tournament can be extremely short-lived (2016), perhaps because the scale cannot be maintained except for every four years. Local club football, however, "may have greater resonance for those seeking asylum in terms of identity than associations with English/Britishness" (2016). Thus, as Mutz points out, "national identity flowing from soccer is perhaps overplayed [...]however, [may] be that for those seeking

asylum, a stronger affiliation with the national team is a useful resource and explains the lack of sustained interest on the part of the 'native born' who already feel that they belong" (as quoted in Woodhouse et. al, 2016, p. 944).

For Woodhouse and Conricode, the importance of football in determining and experiencing membership and belonging had less to do with the feelings generated at the matches and more to do with how those seeking membership from the outside *utilized* the sport to gain access to regional communities. The participants "spoke passionately about the major part soccer played in their lives" and "each reported a desire to be seen primarily as a fan" instead of as an "other" (Woodhouse et. al, 2016). The participants specifically seemed connected to club soccer instead of the national team which seems to be *more British* and reflective of attitudes of existing in-groups than the *Englishness* required to support the national team of England (2016). And, important to my exploration of Atlanta United, the participants spoke candidly of the importance of inclusion in football (2016), suggesting the potential for "soccer as a leveller" in that is "something which offers them common ground with citizens, locally and further afield" (2016). This is key because this goes back to the importance of lived experience in regards to successful integration and belongingness (2016). For those on the outside looking in, the opportunity to interact with the in-group alone provides an opportunity for membership and belonging. This is particularly encouraging within the Euro-centric tradition of football as its rules and fans are much more rigid in structure and concept.

Soccer in America: The MLS and American Fandom

Of course, in the U.S., professional soccer is still in its infancy. Major League soccer was only founded in the 1990's as a concession for FIFA (which was founded nearly a century earlier

in 1904) awarding a World Cup tournament to be held in the U.S. ("FIFA", n.d.). Starting with only 10 clubs, MLS struggled to gain a foothold in the U.S. in large part to competition with MLB and NFL. In the last few years, likely due to globalization and access to premier leagues outside of Europe, MLS has grown to 24 clubs with the intent to expand to 30 in the next few years. Still, outside of the U.S., particularly in Europe, American soccer culture is either 1) not considered a thing or 2) considered a poor replica of European Ultra culture. It is important to note the difference between a casual fan of a team and a "true" supporter. "Ultra" refers to a set of particularly extreme or passionate fans within the larger fandom of a team. They are raucous and diehard supporters of the club. One unique thing about American fan-culture, however, is its unique relationship to and with the teams it supports.

Unlike most premier and national league teams, MLS supporters are uniquely positioned to influence the game as they experience the genesis of the sport in real-time. Markus Gerke argues that American supporter groups "challenge traditional local modes of fandom and the relationship between fans and professional sports teams as they presently exist (not only) in North American professional sports" (2017). Specifically, American soccer supporters "see themselves as stakeholders in the clubs they support and demand accountability from them" (Gerke, 2017). Essentially, the unique consumer/producer relationship in America promotes an atmosphere and stage within which "ultra fandoms" can "engage in collective action" in their own interests as fans (Gerke, 2017). As Gerke mentions, the game in the U.S. has largely been a "sports entertainment product" (2017). Europe, on the other hand, has teams that have been in local communities for a generation or more and represent a more tested, ground-up model of the game (Gerke, 2017). In other words, most sports games here have *always* been about business as

spectators as passive receptors of entertainment and product. But that just doesn't work with soccer.

Passivity does not exist in the world of soccer ultras. They are present and loud for the entire 90 minutes of game play, regardless of the team's effort on the field. If you have seen an NFL game, the opposite can be said of fan interaction and support. The fans are more reactive than proactive in their support of the team--they cheer or jeer based on the action of the team and largely remain quiet or unengaged unless something 'exciting' happens on the field. Perhaps they purchase merchandise or a beverage, but for the most part, they are observers first, reactors when stimulated. There are restrictions on fans in these stadiums as well:

> Fans are typically banned from bringing in flags and flag poles, banners, musical instruments and other items. In 2013, the National Football League (NFL) even introduced a policy of banning all bags and back packs from the stadium; instead, fans are only allowed to bring in clear plastic bags. These measures ultimately serve to discipline fans in a specific practice of fandom: They are supposed to be customers whose only activities inside the stadium are restricted to consuming the amenities, providing a colourful backdrop for the TV broadcast and promoting the sports entertainment product on social media platforms via their smartphones. (Gerke, 2017, p.936)

As Gerke reveals, America sports outside of soccer have become places of aesthetic civility. There is an appearance of 'the public', but that appearance is rigidly controlled and edited for television. However, fans of American soccer are "regulated space" in the stadiums with entire sections marked off for official supporter groups of the teams (Gerke, 2017). These sections can

bring flags, banners, and instruments and are expected and encouraged to provide non-stop support for the club. In some ways, the supporter section is as much part of the entertainment of the match as is the action on the field. In fact, the general structure of these supporter groups--because they are far from spontaneous gatherings of fans--provides an opportunity and platform for the groups to engage directly with the front-offices of these teams. They enjoy certain privileges like early access to venues and even infrastructure like the stage for capos--prominent members of the groups that direct the chants and movements--or even the pulley systems for tifos--elaborate and large banners created by the supporter groups to display at the opening of matches--all demonstrating the unique position of agency held by collective individuals (Gerke, 2017). The American soccer supporter is not a passive receptor for MLS swag. Instead, these supporters have active subcultures that drive the direction of the teams they support.

Atlanta United FC

Atlanta United FC (ATLUTD) joined the MLS in 2017 and immediately established a brand-new kind of team, vision, and supporter ("About the Club", 2020). The team won the MLS cup in only its second season and set many MLS records in the process ("About the Club", 2020). In this close-reading section, I will analyze the culture, the supporters, and the framework of the club and argue that, through its intentional deference to and respect of the community it owes its name too, it represents a new kind of business and offers a new kind of team/fan relationship. Specifically, the extent to which the team sought the approval of the community--from fan-lead Q/As to President Darren Eales mingling with fans in pubs and in the

Gulch before each match--proves that ground-up marketing and showing genuine care in community-building change the relationship between consumer and producer irrevocably.

Visibility and prevalence

Figure 1

Atlanta United FC Official Logo

Beginning with the logo, ATLUTD established its commitment to the unique quality of Atlanta as a diverse and international community. The circle references several layers of Atlanta history. First, the circle is a nod to the city seal of Atlanta (**Fig. 2**) which also features the latin "resurgens" and an image of a phoenix--iconography adopted by one of the officially recognized supporter clubs, Resurgence. The circle also acknowledges the city's Olympic past, referencing the 1996 Summer Olympics. Additionally, the circle relates to the"perimeter" or city limits of Atlanta as the expressway I-285 literally circles the city limits. But also, the notion of belonging to the city is often distinguished as ITP or OTP (inside or outside the perimeter). The A prominently featured represents the Atlanta-ness of the team and the literal physical location of

Mercedes-Benz stadium as “ITP”--”The A” is a nickname for the city (and no, “hot-lanta” is not a nickname those ITP acknowledge). The city of Atlanta is at the center of this club--the logo represents its centrality and the community’s importance to the identity and success of the club.

Figure 2

Seal of the City of Atlanta

The colors are bold and, according to the ATLUTD website, intentionally chose to reflect the nature and essence of Atlanta: “Black is a symbol of strength and power” (“About the Club”, 2020). This also acknowledges the diversity of Atlanta, specifically the black population (2nd in size only to New York City). Where the color has been read as “evil” compared to the “goodness” of white, the team instead chooses to highlight the power in blackness, something that can also be seen in their commitment to community building in the city with Soccer in the Streets and the academy. Additionally, the city’s ties to Hip Hop culture, with prominent rappers

and artists coming out to games, help to cement a place for city residents who often feel left out or excluded from the typical demographics found in the Falcons or Braves games. The gold not only represents wealth and luxury. Gold represents high quality and demonstrates the expectations of the owners and supporters for the team. Each season is themed, and the second season was themed "The Gold Standard", suggesting that the fans and team expect this club to represent the future of MLS and American soccer culture. The red represents passion, courage, and pride.

Vamos! Vamos! Vamos, ATL!: Supporter Culture and inclusion

The four officially recognized supporter clubs for ATLUTD represent the potential for soccer in the U.S. as a platform for membership-building and belonging. Terminus Legion, Resurgence, Footie Mob, and The Faction all seek to promote different angles of ATLUTD culture and do so every match. In multiple interviews, members of the groups speak candidly about their desire to build a lasting community in support of a city they all love. Specifically, they create chants and choreography that establish a ritualistic atmosphere for the stadium. The chants are simple and catchy, ensuring that anyone can participate. They pull from European influences with their version of the Viking Clap. They incorporate South American culture and language as well, officially embracing the language of many of the players and of the first coach (with "Vamos ATL" and "Este Noche"). They pull from Atlanta's trap music industry, singing Archie Eversole's "We Ready" at the beginning of every match as they march toward the stadium (Eversole recently recorded a song for the supporters called "United we Conquer"). The golden spike is brought into the stadium to the tune of "Stir fry" by Migos. Every element of the fan culture is designed to reflect the city and the diversity present there.

Conclusions

Bill Shankly, legendary coach of Liverpool, once said ““Some people think football is a matter of life and death. I don’t like that attitude. I can assure them it is much more serious than that”. While he was known for his border-line obsession with the game, he was also credited with instilling a sense of pride and ethos into his club. Although far younger than Liverpool, Atlanta United FC reflects a changing demographic and attitude surrounding soccer. The love of the game is serious in that it is more than the technicalities of life (we are all born and we all die). For many, soccer offers a chance to engage with and belong to a community beyond national borders and tricky definitions of identity. For 90 minutes, anyone can sit with 70,000 of their closest friends and belong. The ritual and ceremony of an Atlanta United game reflects the new demographic of the city--young, progressive, and seeking something to feel pride in.

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