

Chapter 16

“The Leaver” and “The Left”: Sports Fans and Parasocial Divorce

Nathan John Rodriguez
Weber State University, Ogden, USA

ABSTRACT

The study of parasocial relationships has surged in recent years, as fans use new media to access even more information about various media personae. Most work involving sports fans has examined behavior at a particular time rather than over time. This article investigates how Kansas basketball fans reacted to the departure of former head coach Roy Williams over a period of nine years. Opinions were culled from reader responses to articles mentioning Williams on KU sports.com. Each comment was analyzed thematically and then coded by an expressed grief state using the Kubler-Ross (1969) model. The notion of parasocial divorce is introduced to describe the depth of parasocial relationships for highly motivated fans. The findings reveal an ebb and flow of affection and antipathy toward Williams over time. Results demonstrate how quickly fans may grow to loathe a former group member, but also how rapidly and under what conditions that parasocial relationship may be repaired.

INTRODUCTION

Much research involving sports fans stems from theories of parasocial interaction (PSI) and parasocial relationships (PSR). The premise is that individuals develop feelings toward media personae in a similar fashion as they might develop feelings toward others with whom they interact socially. Just as relationship expectations develop over time (Planalp & Rivers, 1996), fans tend to develop expectations and assumptions regarding behavior (Cohen, 2010). Highly motivated sports fans may identify strongly with a particular team, and such devotion may be “intense, blinding fans’ better judgment” regarding how to process particular events (Sanderson, 2013, p. 505). With relatively few exceptions, however, most studies have assumed a stable relationship between fans and the object of their affection (Hyatt, 2007). This is likely because most studies take a snapshot of fan behavior during a few weeks or months rather than years. As a result, the depth of fan involvement and the ways in which fan loyalty may be tested remain understudied.

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“The Leaver” and “The Left”

This study examines the complicated relationship many fans of the men’s college basketball team at the University of Kansas have with former head coach Roy Williams. In an attempt to better situate the inquiry, this section offers relevant background details regarding the case study and how it fills a need in the ongoing discussion of sports fans and parasocial relationships.

At his introductory press conference on July 8, 1988, Williams articulated his hope that a similar press conference would not be required “for about 30 years” due to his loyalty, as someone who was married to “the same wife for 15 years,” and owner of “the same set of golf clubs for 17, so I’m the sort of guy that if I get a place I like, and find something I like, I stick with it” (Lawrence-Journal World, 2009). Over a period of 15 years, Kansas fans had come to revere Williams for his success: In the 1990s, no school amassed more wins or a higher winning percentage (Mellinger, 2013). Although he had not won a national championship, he had reached the Final Four on multiple occasions in addition to winning a number of conference championships. Fans grew to enjoy his “Mayberry” personality: If he was upset, he might say “doggone” or “gosh darn” and he was open with his emotions following a post-season loss in a way that promoted empathy and suggested honesty (Gottesman, 1997). Williams was revered at Kansas, where fans “chanted his name before every game and he threw T-shirts into the stands. Nobody talked seriously about a statue yet, of course, but Williams could have had nearly anything” (Mellinger, 2013).

In July 2000, the University of North Carolina offered Williams, a former Assistant Coach under Dean Smith, the position of head coach. The following week was “one of the most anxious, agonizing seven-day periods in Kansas’ storied basketball history” due in part to reports from multiple media outlets that Williams had accepted the position (Hartsock, 2000). Thousands of fans assembled in the university’s football stadium to watch Williams’s announcement via satellite, as he opened with two words: “I’m staying.” Explaining his decision, Williams foreshadowed the relational metaphors that would come in the years ahead: “The North Carolina people have been fantastic with me. It’s hard to have the same feeling for someone if there’s been some type of rejection. I’m hoping this is not a divorce” (Hartsock, 2000).

Three years later, North Carolina renewed its request and this time, Williams accepted. A sizable segment of the Kansas fanbase felt betrayed, and a popular shirt around Lawrence referenced “Benedict Williams” (O’Neil, 2008). In 2005, Williams won the national championship at North Carolina, while Kansas was ousted in a major upset by Bucknell University in the first round of the tournament, which stagnated the grieving process for many fans. Finally, in 2008, Kansas was matched against North Carolina in the Final Four. Most analysts predicted North Carolina would advance, but after jumping out to a 40-12 lead--prompting announcer Billy Packer to comment, “this game is over” in the first half--Kansas would go on to win 84-66 (Hiestand, 2008). Two days later, during a *CBS* telecast of the national championship, Williams was shown standing and smiling in a section of Kansas fans, a Jayhawk sticker placed prominently on his black turtleneck. Kansas won the national championship, and within a matter of 48 hours, a significant contingent of Kansas fans spoke of finding closure (Armstrong, Bukaty & Gutierrez, 2013).

Kansas again faced North Carolina in the post-season in 2012 and 2013, winning both games. While some national pundits predicted a frosty reception for Williams in Kansas City, *ESPN* reported he received “rousing ovations” from Kansas fans in the two days preceding the game, and *The New York Times* noted that on game day, Kansas fans “slowly, politely...stood and cheered for Williams” (King, 2013; Borzi, 2013). In 2014, Williams would return to Lawrence to commemorate the 60th anniversary of its basketball venue, Allen Fieldhouse, alongside the other living former head coaches. He was greeted with a standing ovation and sustained applause.

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