

Team Dinners: Considering Trends, Traditions, and Impacts Beyond Sport

Alana N. Seaman & Michael E. Seaman

ABSTRACT: Team dinners persist as an enduring tradition merging sport and food. Encompassing sportsmanship, superstition, and sometimes even classically trained chefs, team dinners are enjoyed by youth and professional athletes alike worldwide. However, the role and impacts of such rituals remain poorly understood. This paper contends that team dinners represent a unique gastronomic phenomenon that has lasting effects beyond sport. Given that sport and food are often both culturally entrenched and emotionally bound, team dinners are likely influential in molding adolescence athletes' notions of nutrition, food choice, and acceptable dining behaviors. In the U.S., pre- and post-game dinners are used as a means of recruiting student-athletes to elite collegiate teams and some programs have even constructed facilities dedicated to the procurement, production, and distribution of meals to athletes in turn shaping supply-lines and campus skylines and introducing students to elevated food experiences likely not had before. At the professional level, some of the most decorated athletes adhere to pre-game meal superstitions, while others use the meals to tout their status. In short, team dinners are seemingly significant to both sport and food in a myriad of ways. Thus, they deserve further academic consideration and offers avenues for future scholarly exploration.

In sport, team dinners are a time-honored and enduring tradition; one that spans genre, location, and levels of play. These pre- and/or post- competition meals encompass sportsmanship and superstition, calorie-counting and closely guarded secrets, and sometimes even classically trained chefs. Team dining rituals and the foods included in them also both represent and offer a platform for movement in various symbolic and physical iterations related to sport. Team meals highlight the evolution of some individuals from players to celebrity athletes – their climb up the social and economic ladder illustrated in the classing of the foods they consume and settings they dine in. Group dinners before competition garner such attention at the collegiate and professional levels in the United States that whole facilities, supply lines, and economic resources are routed to bolster their execution. In turn these rituals shape skylines, dictate the movement of goods and people, and in some cases shape local taste and dining trends. Transcending time by connecting many games to their historic roots and simultaneously acting as stage upon which respect for teammates and occasionally even opponents can be cultivated, team meals are further,

fluid – an element of sport heritage easily adapted to meet the changing needs of each team, situation, and/or individual involved. In short, while team meals provide the food that is the fuel which moves athletes down the field, around the arena, and across the finish line, they are significant for more than just their caloric offerings.

This paper contends that team dinners represent a unique gastronomic phenomenon that is reflective of the contemporary cultural relationship spectators, fans, and the public have with sport and food, and one that has lasting effects well beyond athletic realms. It illustrates how the tradition shapes and is shaped by athletes, popular culture, college campuses, star- players and coaches, supply lines, and trends in taste. Though a seemingly universal component of sport and a ritual deeply engrained in athletic competition amongst amateur and professional athletes alike, to date the role and impacts of team meals have received almost no attention from scholars. This paper argues that given how both sport and food are deeply culturally entrenched and tied to various other aspects of contemporary society, the tradition is worthy of further academic consideration particularly through a gastronomic lens.

Across Sport

From the Highland Games to the Roman Coliseum, the Tour de France to Wimbledon, food shared amongst athletes has been a part of sport for centuries. Today the tradition of the pre- / post- game team meal is still carried out by athletes around the world. High school and college track and cross-country runners often carb(ohydrate) load as a team the night before a morning race; the typical pasta and bread-based meal meant to give athletes easy-to-burn energy for the competition. In rugby, opposing teams, regardless of level of play, carry on the age-old tradition of dining together after a match – a way to show respect for fellow players (Morrow 2012). And the NBA's (National Basketball Association) Boston Celtics even have a make-your-own peanut butter and jelly sandwich buffet before and after games thanks to a tradition started by famous players Kevin Garnett, Paul Pierce, and Ray Allen back in 2007 (Bird 2017). Likewise, numerous volleyball, soccer, lacrosse, swim, baseball and other sport teams commonly convene for group meals prior to games and many athletes credit the meals with fueling their mindset and “hyping them up” before competition (Narayan 2014). Some team meals even involve superstitions with several famous players developing eccentric and attention-grabbing pre-game eating rituals (e.g. Wayne Gretzky's four

hotdogs with mustard and onion, a diet coke, ice water, and Gatorade before and during every game).

Post-play meals shared amongst athletes are both a way to celebrate and a way to commemorate important events. Little leaguers are well known to enjoy a post (baseball) game pizza party at the end of each season. Likewise, on the other end of the sport spectrum, a champions dinner wherein previous winners are invited to eat together during the tournament has been a part of the Masters golf week since being suggested by legend Ben Hogan in 1952. Menus for the Tuesday evening feast are selected by the newest member of the exclusive victors' club and have run the gambit from BBQ to sushi, paella and tapas to haggis, and curry to cheeseburgers with the previous year's winner footing the bill (GT Editor 2018). The event is so exclusive even members of the Augusta National Club cannot secure an invite; the tight guestlist a way of signifying that those worthy of the meal have truly "arrived" to the most elite level of golf. From youth baseball to the PGA (Professional Golfers' Association) senior tour and private tennis clubs to slope side ski shacks, team meals are a tradition sport wide.

Youth Sports

Sports are widely known to influence adolescent athletes in many ways outside of competition. Numerous research studies show that participation in sport and physical activity aids in psychological and emotional, social, and intellectual development (see Fraser-Thomas et al. 2005). High school student athletes for example often have higher grades, rates of attendance, and time dedicated to homework than their non-competing peers – the positive correlation credited to the dedication, persistence, responsibility, and self-control learned through sport (Dwyer et al. 2001). Simply put, sports help young athletes in developing both hard and soft skills and cultivating both physical and emotional maturity. Given that both food and sport appeal to all five senses (see Ramshaw 2020, 37; Seaman 2022) experiences combining the two – such as team meals – are likely particularly powerful for youth in shaping habits and opinions. The experiences may have both positive and negative consequences for young athletes as they may have an opportunity to enjoy a meal not had before thereby introducing them to new foods and/or gastronomic traditions. Or the dinners might teach them about appropriate dining etiquette, eating habits, and the like.

Collegiate Sports

Team meals are an integral and influential part of collegiate sports as well. In the U.S., college sports are prolific. Almost every institution of higher learning has students who participate in both varsity and club sports. Schools with teams at the highest levels of sport competition – those governed by the NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association) and considered Division

One (D-1) are often economically and image-reliant on their sports teams. The NCAA itself was estimated to generate over \$1.15 billion in revenue in 2021 alone (ESPN, 2022). In turn, associated universities spend exorbitant sums on recruiting, training, and retaining talented student athletes.

Part of attracting and keeping on-field talent it seems is increasingly dependent on each team's food and dining options as well as the traditions surrounding them. Until recently the feeding of athletes was highly regulated by the NCAA. Regarded as a means of keeping teams with greater resources from gaining unfair advantages through food, athletes were previously allowed only minimal stipends for daily meals as a part of their sport scholarships – namely budget dining plans akin to what non-athlete students would purchase for their on-campus room and board package. When the governing body passed legislation in 2014 allowing institutions to provide unlimited food to student athletes, stakeholders recognized that meal traditions, dining facilities, and the food itself were vital in drawing and satisfying star players and helping all athletes attain peak nutritional needs (Myerberg 2015). In turn, several D-1 athletic programs have constructed facilities dedicated to the procurement, production, and distribution of meals to athletes, which ultimately shapes supply-lines and campus skylines. Some have even gone so far as to build elaborate dedicated dining spaces specifically so that teams can eat together. The 15-time American college football champion team representing the University of Alabama for instance recently spent \$15 million on a new dining hall for players. The three-time champion University of Florida invested \$60 million towards an American football facility that includes a dedicated dining hall for players while another three-time champion, Clemson University paid around \$55 million back in 2018 for a similar project. Other lower ranking schools have followed suit. Long Beach State University for instance, which has only 350 student athletes (as opposed to Alabama's almost 800) recently opened a dedicated nutrition center and dining space for team members next door to its strength and conditioning center. Even small institutions whose student athletes do not compete at the D-1 level, such as the tiny women's College of Saint Mary – their entire undergraduate student population only around 800, have built new recreation and athletic facilities with meeting spaces for team meals in mind. The dining amenities in turn, mold campus skylines as expansions added onto hundred-thousand seat stadiums; as freestanding on campus restaurant style buildings; and as dedicated areas within team training facilities.

Elite collegiate athletic programs also often treat players to lavish dining experiences before and after games. UCLA (the University of California Los Angeles) head football coach Chip Kelly spent a whopping \$5.4 million on non-travel team dining (feeding approximately 100-150 people at each meal) in 2019 alone (Fenno 2020).

Contributing to the hefty price tag, were \$40,000 worth of barbeque meals flown in for the team from a neighboring state, and menus featuring upscale dishes such as pork chops smothered in candied apples and onions regularly in the mix (Fenno 2020). Though food may be a recruiting tool amongst elite and revenue generating athletics, college teams representing numerous sports are treated with lobster dinners, fondue nights, and even filet mignon in many instances. Spending on these meals suggests both the teams and the administration backing them are dedicated to the culinary tradition and are thus willing to allow the ritual to dictate all manner of resources (e.g., financial, labor, facilities, etc.).

Given that as many as 86% of NCAA collegiate athletes live below the federal poverty line (Huma and Staurowsky 2019), for some athletes the upscale meals may be their first introduction to such extravagant menu items and dining settings. The elevated food experiences in this sense are in many cases symbolic of the athletes' ascension up the sport hierarchy ladder; the meals denoting their move from amateur to quasi-professional, from anonymous player to emerging celebrity athlete; from a typical young student's diet of dining hall staples (i.e., plain, mass produced pastas, sandwiches, salads, etc.) to fine dining curated by classically trained chefs.

Dinner with the President

Representing perhaps the pinnacle of athletic achievement are team meals hosted by heads of state at premier government properties. Collegiate sports teams and their professional counterparts deemed champions by their respective leagues are regularly invited to the White House for a celebratory meal. These team dinners typically draw the attention of the press particularly when individual athletes or even whole teams decline the official invitation as a means of voicing political opinions and/or opposition to the country's current leadership or their stance on a particular issue. A number of notable athletes have refused to join their teams at the White House for various reasons. In 2012, Boston Bruins ice hockey team goalie Tim Thomas refused a celebratory white house dinner invite citing his disappointment with the modern state of the country feeling the U.S. federal government was broken and that both parties were to blame. Bill Clinton was deemed a "draft-dodging baby-killer" by Tom Lehman who along with rest of his 1993 Ryder Cup golf team declined to attend a celebratory dinner put on by the then-president. During Donald Trump's term about half of the championship sports teams typically invited for a meal at the iconic state house either refused or (aware the invitation would be declined) were not invited at all (e.g., the 2016-2017 University of North Carolina Tar Heels, men's basketball champions; 2016-2017 Golden State Warriors, NBA champions; Tom Brady, star quarterback of the 2016 New England Patriots, NFL champions) most

pointing out that the then-president's politics did not align with their own beliefs and values (Gaines 2019).

Each sitting president's selected menu, meal setting, and the speeches given during the event are also heavily scrutinized by both journalists and sports fans alike. Trump's choice of fast food for the visiting NCAA football champions the Clemson Tigers in 2018 for example was almost as controversial as his term in office; both the leader and the meal itself generating a massive wave of passionate and vocal responses from supporters and opponents alike. The move marked an unusual departure from the traditional White House high-end fare for teams planned and prepared by the state house's highly trained executive chef and kitchen staff. When asked about the choice, Trump was accused of making classist and even racist allusions in comments like "I would think that's their favorite food," referring to items procured from McDonald's, Chick-fil-A, and Wendy's. Many of the players agreed. However, while the comment was likely meant as a reference to college students' stereotypical junk-food heavy eating habits, critics pointed out that many of the team's athletes were black and that the school itself rears from the foothills of the Appalachia in the American South – regions long seeped in poverty and racism and plagued by obesity and food deserts even today (Jennings 2019). Thus, the choice to serve the team fast food rather than a traditional upscale menu was speculated to be based on stereotypes about both the players and the region as a whole. Conversely others noted that Trump likely saw the menu as 'classy', himself (possibly due to a fear of being poisoned) a staunch believer in the notion that fast food is safer than food sourced elsewhere due to its streamlined and standardized processing (Taylor 2018). Either way, feeding elite athletes a buffet of fatty, greasy, sugar- and carb-loaded fast food generated talk for weeks with journalists, scholars, and sports fans alike questioning notions of food and class, health, and culture (Chiu 2019; Jennings 2019).

Professional Sports

Professional teams not only engage in the tradition of the pre-/post- game group meal, but they also take it quite seriously. The dining ritual at the highest echelons of sport is often overtly directed at negotiating and displaying both individual and team status. And, in doing so has started food trends as fans look to eat and drink what their favorite team has consumed; the dining acting as a form of pecuniary emulation wherein diners portray their status by eating as the stars do.

The NBA (National Basketball Association) is a \$2.6 billion organization with 30 teams across the U.S. and viewership averaging 1.9 million per game and as high as 12.5 million viewers during the league's final championship series (NBA). Headlines following the San Antonio Spurs' fifth NBA title win and consecutive winning seasons

credited the team's lavish group meals as the secret ingredient in their success (Holmes 2020). Coach Gregg Popovich is passionate about them. As such, he has made a name for himself in celebrity chef circles and regularly hosts his players to pre- and post-game meals at high-end restaurants. In each city the team visits, Popovich himself carefully chooses where his guys will dine. One team meal in Sacramento, California drew attention with its wine tab alone totaling between \$15,000–\$20,000 USD (for a party of around 35 individuals). For weeks after the visit, restaurant patrons asked for the same food and beverage selections enjoyed by the legendary coach and his guests thereby positioning Popovich as a literal tastemaker in his own right. In turn, "sommeliers and restaurateurs claim to owe their careers to the man" (Holmes 2020). While Popovich's menus and the people that prepare them receive widespread attention from the culinary curious, the rest of the details of the dinners remain closely guarded secrets – likely perceived as having strategic on-court value. Regardless, the special team meals are not only credited with moving the Spurs up the league rankings, they're also clearly influential in escalating eateries to notoriety.

Determining who pays the bill for the lavish professional team dinners has prompted its own set of power plays and face offs. In the NFL (National Football League), it is common for the team's rookies to pick up the dinner tab of the more seasoned players, who of course often consume a purposely excessive meal in such situations finding the expense of the resulting bill a way to haze the newcomers. The tradition seems to echo the same hazing techniques used in corporate business and organized crime syndicates. The comparison however may be apt as the NFL is a powerful organization replete with criminal characters and monopolistic control over their market; one whose traditions run deep. In 2010 the Cowboy's Dez Bryant's refusal to pay for several of his senior colleagues' Cristal and cognac laden dinner at a Dallas area steakhouse caused an uproar. Teammates told media outlets Bryant was out of line. The tradition was important in cementing one's place on the team by showing respect to the veteran guys on the field (Rohan 2018). Star player Roy Williams, reminiscing about his own hazing that involved not only paying for team dinners but also bringing sandwiches and donuts for the airplane when traveling for away games, explained:

I was drafted number seven [overall] – I still had to do it [...] Larry Fitzgerald had to do it, and he was number three! It's just an unwritten rule, man. You just have to do certain things. I always looked ahead and said, 'when the next crop of guys come in, I'll get to enjoy the donuts.' (Rohan 2018).

Bryant's Pappas Brothers Steakhouse bill for the Cowboys offense (about 30 players) totaled \$54,896 over a decade ago. Thus, it is evident that even at the professional level, team dinners are essential in cultivating team identity, moving athletes from individual players to a cohesive unit.

Team Meals Perpetuated in Popular Culture

The notion of the pre-/post- game team meal as a traditional part of sport is further perpetuated in popular culture. Time and again these rituals are depicted as events where teams come together; where bread is broken, differences overcome, and comradery is cultivated. In many cases the team meal on screen represents a turning point or pivotal moment in the film or show's storyline. The scene usually sets in motion a change in the trajectory of the protagonist athlete's or team's journey by allowing the characters to identify and demonstrate their shared goal, humanity, and/or matured characteristics – elements needed to "win" in the face of challenges whether metaphorical or in the form of a rival team. In the film *Remember the Titans* for example, the newly integrated high school football team begins to bond over a meal together. In the poignant scene, players long separated by generational racism, find commonality at the dining table when a player, asked by the coach (played by Denzel Washington) to tell the team something he learned about a teammate of the opposite race replies with a joke about the other player's choice of under garment. The quip gets a laugh out of the whole team and it's the first time the film hints at a growing comradery amongst the players. Similarly, in *Little Giants* the kiddie (American) football team dines together over pizza before their 'big' game. At the event, the coach surprises the kids with new jerseys in turn fueling the players sense of team. In *Tin Cup*, the main character (Kevin Costner as a washed-up college golfer going for redemption later in life) meets with his support group (caddie, girlfriend, etc.) at a Waffle House (a dive staple of the Southern US) while traveling for a tournament. During the meal, the team reminisces, bonds, and ultimately pumps him up about his game and the upcoming competition over cheap comfort food. Echoing scenes in *Talladega Nights* (depicting NASCAR), *Blades of Glory* (ice dancing), and *Cool Runnings* (bobsledding), onscreen the pre-game meals shared together affords the team comfort (food) and bonding in the face of adversity in the form of athletic challenge (or the unknown/unfamiliar). In each case, the meal scenes demarcate a turning point – one that ultimately results in improved individual and team performances both on and off the field.

It is worth noting as well that pizza may not seem particularly suited to the diets of serious athletes – particularly before a game. The dish, in the U.S. (and predominantly on screen) is usually oozing with cheese, laden with numerous salty toppings, and baked on a thick butter crust. Nonetheless, pizza features prominently as the preferred dish at (particularly youth) sport team dinners in a number of films. While somewhat accurate given that many youth teams dine on pizza before and after big games, the simple meal appealing to a variety of palates and often a cheap way to feed a large group, the pizza portrayed on screen is almost always extra greasy, cheesy, and shown

alongside extra-large soda and no other accompaniments. Repeated depictions of specific rituals and phenomena in popular culture are well known to influence viewers behaviors (see Schroeder and Seaman 2018). Thus, these renderings, wherein pizza is shown as a quintessential part of the team dinner tradition yet not as a part of a nutritious meal – may contribute to myths or misconceptions about the relationship between food, sport, and possibly even health. In the American version of *The Office* for example the bumbling boss misinterprets the idea of ‘carb loading’ before a running race and attempts to eat an oversized portion of fettucine alfredo *while* competing in a 5km contest. Hilarity aside, the scene highlights the deeply engrained relationship between pre- and post-game meals and sports and though exaggerated hints at the potential lack of understanding amateur or uneducated athletes may have about eating and competitive performance. More positively and reflecting speculations about the influence of team meals on young athletes previously discussed, team meals may offer opportunities for young athletes to cultivate manners relative to the era and/or specific settings. Capturing this notion was Vince Vaughn’s *Fred Claus* wherein the namesake character reminds the little league baseball players he coaches that “there’s no hats at the table” as the uniform-clad boys begin to dig into a spread of... you guessed it – pizzas – meant to celebrate the team’s win in the last game of the season. Such examples show how team meals could shape beliefs about what and how to eat especially in the context of sport.

Conclusions and Future Research

Team dinners are at once both flexible and fixed in tradition, functional and full of unspoken rules and strategic plays. In this sense, team dinners are virtually a sport in and of themselves. Moreover, the ritual is emblematic of the culmination of a host of other constantly changing cultural and physical elements of sport such as the increasing college sport dining facility ‘arms’ race; the rise of players to star athletes; and the procurement and execution of particular private meals for champions. Given the deep and meaningful links team dinners seemingly have to sport, food, culture, personal identity, and even higher education, the gastro phenomenon is ripe for interdisciplinary scholarly exploration. Researchers should consider how these meals influence and are influenced by various other factors such as supply lines, economic resources, sustainability, trends in food and taste, political agendas, and depictions in popular culture.

Future research lines might investigate how team meals influence young athletes’ eating habits and beliefs about food and health, particularly in the context of athletic performance. An investigation of team meals as a phenomenon that bestows culinary capital upon certain restaurants and dishes would also be helpful in understanding how taste trends emerge and dissipate. Of

further interest to cultural scholars in particular would be the ways in which high-profile team meals work to bind certain dishes and/or ingredients to the area’s local sense of place. How for instance do NBA teams select which restaurants they will visit? Is the selection based on quality? Regional specialties (e.g. hot chicken in Nashville, crab cakes in Maryland, shrimp and grits along the Carolina coast)? Notoriety of the chef? Given the impact professional athletes and teams may have on these businesses and even local food trends, the process of selecting where the team eats might be of interest to restaurant owners, local tourism entities, and scholars studying gastronomy and culture. Finally, it would be interesting to explore the links between team dining traditions and both individual athletic performance and team competition outcomes. What makes for a competitive edge? Is it simply about nutrition or does the experience of enjoying a meal together afford athletes other competitive benefits? What elements of a team meal correlate to winning?

In short team dinners act as a platform upon which individual and team identity is negotiated and cultivated. They are experiences that ripple beyond sport. They represent movement by sculpting college campus skylines; provoking political sparring; signaling an athlete’s social climb; propelling fictional characters along sporting plotlines; and likely contributing to the construction of individuals’ perceptions of nutrition, health, and athletic performance through youth sport and/or popular culture (i.e. *The Office*). Within this phenomenon, food plays an important part in accentuating these movements. Thus, while the relationship between food and sport more generally has been largely overlooked by scholars, team meals in particular represent a unique and fascinating universal facet of sport that necessitates further investigation.

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