NEOLIBERAL CHICAGO

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CHAPTER 5

Sports and Blue-Collar Mythology in Neoliberal Chicago

SEAN DINCES AND CHRISTOPHER LAMBERTI

Despite the decades of factory shutdowns, union busting, and stagnating or declining wages that have become part and parcel of the neoliberal assault on American cities, Chicago remains a blue-collar town—that is, if you ask the journalists and athletes who make up the city's professional sports scene. Seemingly at every opportunity, the local sports pages celebrate the Bears, Blackhawks, Bulls, and White Sox as "blue-collar team[s] in a blue-collar town with a blue-collar history" (Vancil 2013).

At first glance, such descriptions may seem entirely at odds with a postindustrial Chicago that has seen its manufacturing sector gutted since the end of World War II and with a sports industry in which athletes and coaches earn multimillion-dollar salaries. However, as we argue below, the language of blue-collar fans and athletes—a language that, at least in Chicago, has enjoyed growing popularity in recent decades—is perfectly consistent with the politics and history of American neoliberalism. In particular, it offers an often overlooked example of how the pro sports business—leagues, teams, and media—has played an important role in what critics of neoliberalism such as Henry Giroux (2006) describe as a larger project of masking, justifying, and profiting from intensified economic inequality.

We develop this argument in three parts. The first part zeroes in on the mainstream sports media's celebration of Chicago's allegedly blue-collar fans. More specifically, it details the obvious but rarely acknowledged irony that this rhetoric

coincides with a Chicago in which the actual supply of blue-collar jobs—that is, positions in manufacturing or analogous sectors that pay relatively good wages—has dwindled to an alarmingly low level. We contend that the ongoing insistence of journalists that local fan bases are blue collar has come to function as a distraction from efforts by Chicago's sports franchises to price live games at levels that working people cannot afford and to erect increasingly high cost barriers to watching games on television. In short, asserting the persistence of a blue-collar fan base diverts attention from how teams have bolstered a model of urban leisure that caters to elites at the expense of regular Chicagoans.

The second part shifts the focus to the history of Chicago sportswriters describing professional athletes as blue collar. We show that this practice became popular only in the latter decades of the twentieth century, at the same time that usage of the term declined in U.S. popular culture more broadly. In other words, as deindustrialization undermined the material basis for traditional understandings of blue-collar identity, mainstream sports journalism preserved, and at the same time redefined, the language of blue collar by applying it to wealthy athletes.

Finally, we discuss how the explosion of commentary about "blue-collar" players precisely at the moment when pro athletes entered the ranks of the rich reflected a broader shift in American politics and media away from talking about social class as a matter of material circumstance and toward talking about it as a matter of behavior or even lifestyle. These "blue-collar" pros, glorified by the press for their "work ethic," have emerged as the poster boys for a society that sanctions profound economic inequality, provided that those at the top refrain from looking down their noses at the masses.[1]

Imagining the Blue-Collar Fan in Postindustrial Chicago

Given the opportunity, Chicago's pro athletes will tell you they play for blue-collar people in a blue-collar city. Bulls guard Jimmy Butler, for example, calls Chicago a place where "everyone has that blue-collar work ethic" (Cowley 2013). Perhaps this sentiment is strongest among White Sox players, who take the field on the city's South Side, once home to some of the nation's largest factories. Recently, White Sox centerfielder Adam Eaton called his ball club "a hard-nosed team on the blue-collar side of town" (McGrath 2014). Jake Peavy, who spent several seasons pitching for the White Sox, claimed to "love" the fans, whom he described as "blue-collar, good ol' hard-working people" (Haugh 2012).

One does not have to look far to find examples of the local or national sports media characterizing Chicago and its sports fans in the same way. In 2013, an *ESPN Chicago* reporter described White Sox first baseman Paul Konerko as

"'The Man' of the blue-collar White Sox fan base" (Levine 2013). That same year, a *Chicago Tribune* sports columnist wrote with satisfaction that Chicago was a "blue-collar town" (Haugh 2013). A senior writer at *Bleacher Report* suggested around the same time that Chicago embodied "blue-collar grit" (Rang 2013). The *CBS Sports* website celebrated its "blue-collar nature" (MacNamara 2010), and so on.[2]

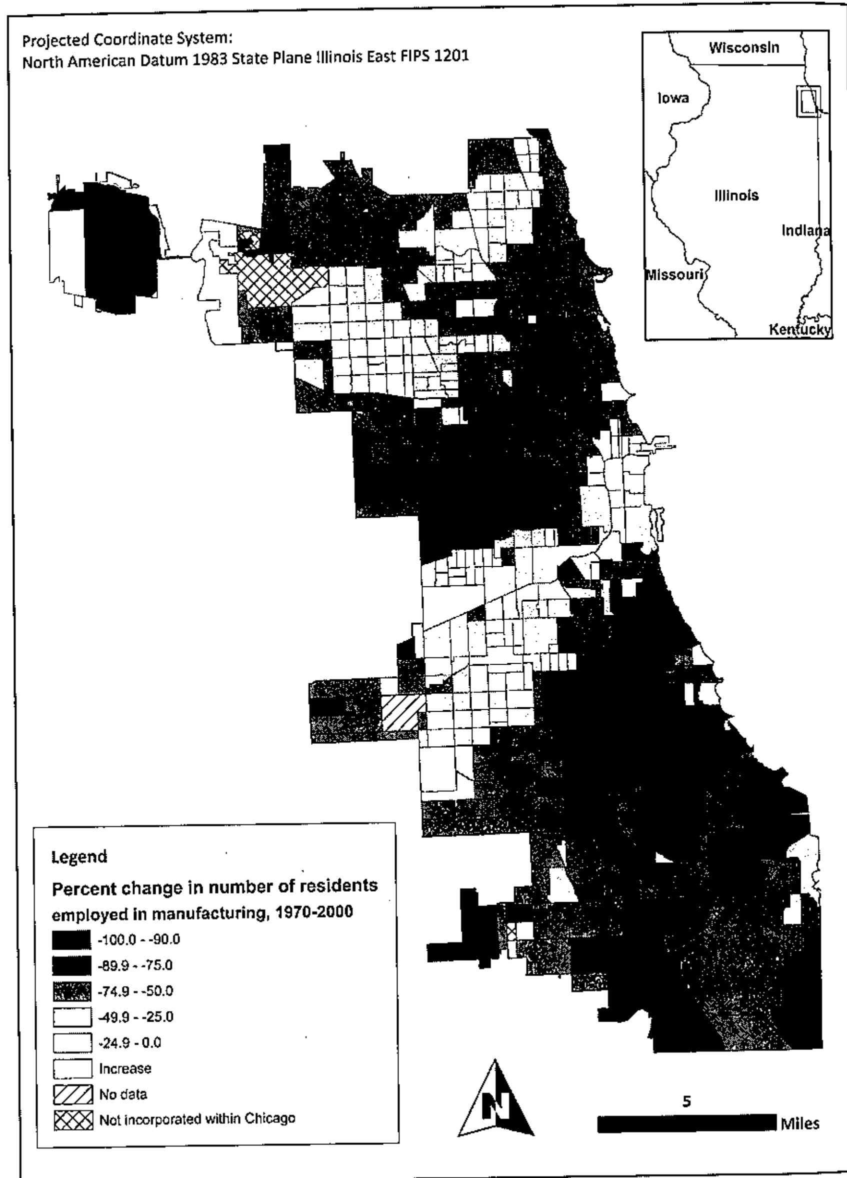
The problem with the characterization of Chicago sports fans as blue collar is that it is an anachronism, if it was ever accurate. According to the Oxford Dictionaries website, "blue collar" is a category that traditionally refers to social class and to "manual work or workers, particularly in industry." There was a time when throngs of these workers toiled in Chicago, when the city was a major manufacturing hub. As the first half of the twentieth century progressed, Chicago's economy grew to support hundreds of thousands of jobs in meat packing, steel production, consumer products assembly, and processed food production.

By the second half of the 1900s, however, things had started to change. From 1967 to 1982, the city lost 250,000 jobs, and a quarter of Chicago's factories closed in the 1970s (Pacyga 2009, 366). In 1950, 37 percent of employed Chicago residents worked in manufacturing; by 1990, that number had dwindled to 19 percent (U.S. Census Bureau 1956, 1994). This reflected a larger national trend, as the migration of domestic investment to other sectors of the economy (e.g., services) and the proliferation of international free trade agreements marked the death knell of industrial growth in the American Rust Belt.

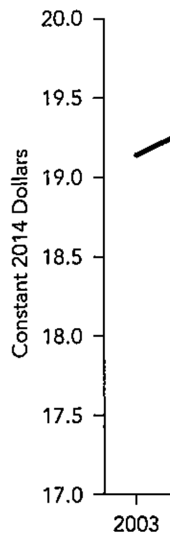
As shown in Map 5.1, every part of the city felt the effects of deindustrialization from 1970 to 2000. Of the 871 of 872 census tracts for which data is available for this period, the number of residents holding manufacturing jobs decreased in 848. The decline exceeded 50 percent in 625 tracts. While the process spared few neighborhoods, it hit hardest on Chicago's South and West Sides.

In the new millennium, manufacturing jobs in Chicago have continued to fall precipitously. Just under 12 percent of Chicago residents held manufacturing jobs in 2002, and that number dropped to 7.5 percent in 2011. Over this time span, no other sector of the local economy experienced such a dramatic decrease in its share of the work force living in Chicago. In fact, retail trade; professional, scientific and technical services; educational services; health care and social assistance; accommodation; and food services now each account for a higher share of jobs than manufacturing (U.S. Census Bureau n.d.a).[3]

Even on Chicago's South Side, home of the White Sox and (supposedly) the home of the bluest of Chicago's blue-collar fans, manufacturing jobs are scarce. In the area covered by the zip codes south of the Chicago River that divides the North and South Sides, manufacturing work accounted for only 8.5 percent of the total number of jobs residents held in 2011. That was lower than the rate in



Map 5.1. Percentage change in number of manufacturing employees by census tract, City of Chicago, 1970–2000. Sources: City of Chicago (2015); US2010 Project (2012).



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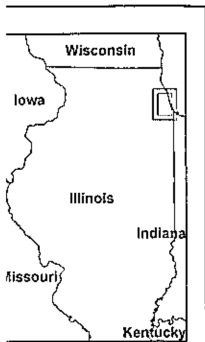

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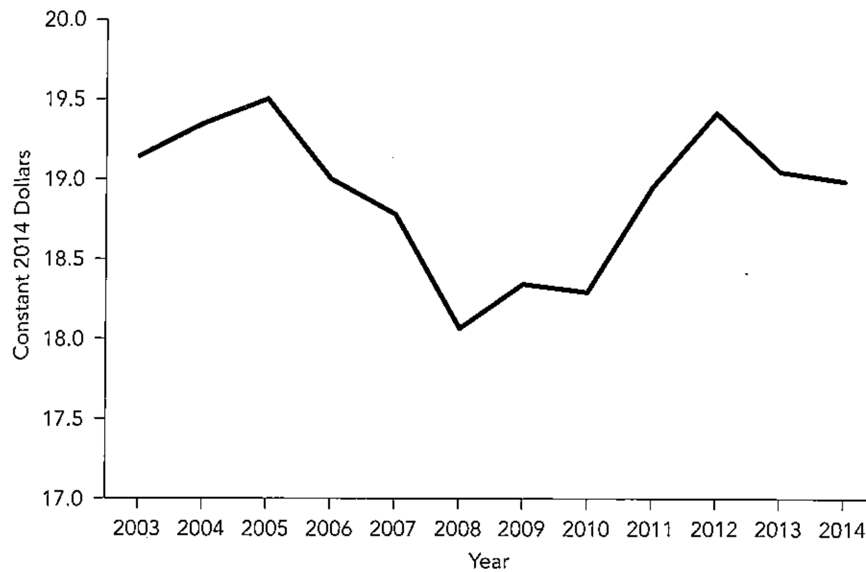


Figure 5.1. Annual average hourly earnings for manufacturing employees, Chicago-Naperville-Arlington Heights, Illinois, metropolitan division. Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (n.d.b; n.d.c).

the Chicago metro area (10.4 percent manufacturing workers) and the state of Illinois (10.9 percent). Despite Chicago's reputation, the South Side, Chicagoland, and Illinois do not rate well regionally. As a point of comparison, in Wisconsin and Indiana the rate of manufacturing jobs among employed residents was 18 and 17.9 percent, respectively, in 2011 (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.a).[4]

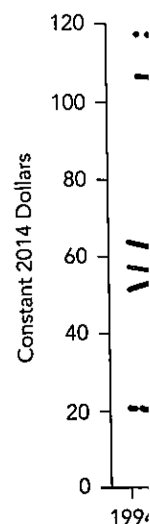
Characterizing Chicago as a blue-collar sports town deserves scrutiny not simply because of the dwindling numbers of actual blue-collar Chicagoans. The description is also problematic because it obscures the fact that fewer and fewer blue-collar sports fans can afford to partake in the sports entertainment experience. In the postwar era, blue-collar work was a ticket to a middle-class material existence, as high union density in the American industrial sector made factory jobs among the highest paid in the private sector. But the offshoring of unionized industrial plants, investment in manufacturing facilities offering lower paying and non-union jobs in the American South and "right-to-work" states, automation, and increased unemployment have led to the reduction or stagnation of manufacturing wages (Tankersly 2013). Indeed, the Bureau of Labor Statistics numbers in Figure 5.1, which show average hourly earnings for manufacturing workers in Chicagoland from 2003 to 2014, indicate that in terms of wages, blue-collar employees have been falling behind or at best treading water in recent years.

While manufacturing workers in Chicago have found it more difficult to make ends meet, Chicago sports team owners have indulged in dramatic game-day price increases. Long gone are the days of a century ago when admission cost 25¢ at Comiskey Park, the old home of the White Sox (Farrell 1998). These were modest prices even by early twentieth-century standards.[5] By contrast, the cost of entertaining a family of four at the various stadiums and arenas in Chicago in 2014–2015 ranged from $210 to $597 (Fort 2015).[6] According to estimates derived from the 2012 Consumer Expenditure Survey, the average household expenditures on fees and admission charges for spectator sports in the U.S. amounted to about $65 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2014). It is fair to infer, then, that the aforementioned prices put live professional sporting events beyond the reach of most contemporary wage earners and their families.

Data on fan demographics included in team brochures produced by the White Sox and Blackhawks in order to attract sponsors confirm thoroughly white-collar game-day crowds. The Blackhawks cite a 2007 study of NHL fans that found an average household income of $103,825 among ticket buyers (Chicago Blackhawks n.d.). A brochure recently published by the White Sox boasts that their attendees "are 38% more likely to have a household income of $150,000-$250,000 than the average Chicagoan" (Chicago White Sox 2014). Compare these figures to the median household income of $47,831 (in 2014 dollars) in the city of Chicago, as estimated by the U.S. Census Bureau (n.d.b) based on American Community Survey data for 2010–2014.

The displacement of working-class fans from live games in Chicago is part of a much larger trend within the professional sports business over the last twenty to thirty years. As the economist Robert Baade (1996) points out, the growing income inequality that accompanied the halt of wage growth for American workers pushed major-league franchises to refocus their marketing and sales efforts on expanding the base of fans who want and can afford luxury experiences. This has meant the expansion of "premium" tickets for sky boxes and club sections, which have typically displaced more affordable seats. Thus, luxury seating and associated amenities have become increasingly central to a neoliberal growth strategy in the pro sports business that caters to urban elites' desire for exclusivity at the expense of the common fan (Lamberti 2013, Dinces 2014).

Even seats that remain outside of expanding premium sections have, in the last quarter-century or so, become a luxury that most working families cannot afford. In 1985, the average, inflation-adjusted cost of a non-premium White Sox ticket was $12.69 (2014 dollars). In 2014, the average White Sox ticket price was $26.05. Admission to a Bears game was $31.90 (2014 dollars) in 1985, but in 2014, it was $108.44, a 240 percent increase in real terms (Fort 2015). These are not isolated examples: in recent decades, all of Chicago's teams have imposed steep price increases. Figure 5.2 shows the real change in ticket prices for the



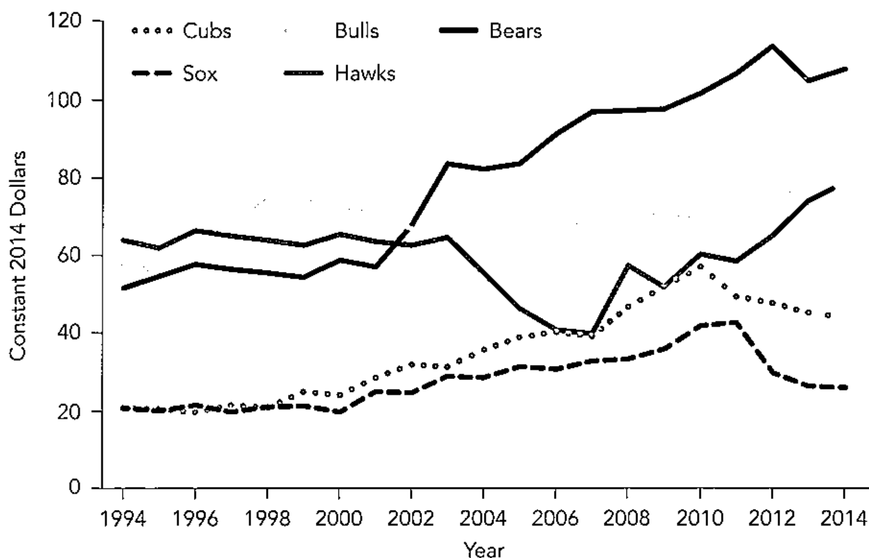


Figure 5.2. Weighted average ticket prices for Chicago's Major League sports franchises, 1994–2014. Source: Fort (2015); U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (n.d.b).

five major sports teams since 1994 in constant 2014 dollars. Ticket prices have dropped in particular years due to poor team performance, lockouts, or economic downturns, but overall the average stadium admission price has risen much faster than inflation since 1994.[7]

The cost to fans of following professional sports via television broadcasts has also risen significantly in Chicago and across the United States. This owes much to cable and satellite affiliate fees paid to national and regional sports networks, which are passed on to household subscribers. For example, ESPN alone costs consumers over five dollars a month in affiliate fees (per-customer charges for certain channels included in one's overall cable bill) (Thompson 2013). Comcast SportsNet Chicago (CSN; 80 percent of which is owned by the Bulls, the Blackhawks, the Cubs, and the White Sox) is the city's regional sports network and major broadcaster of Cubs, Whites Sox, Bulls, and Blackhawks games. In 2012, CSN Chicago's monthly affiliate fee was $2.75 and rising (Ozanian 2013). Because of increases in sports broadcast and other programming fees, the cost of cable has outpaced the rate of inflation by 47 percent since 1998 (Zara 2014).

These fees may seem insignificant. However, marketing research on Chicago-area sports fans suggests that such charges have resulted in an overrepresentation of wealthy fans among those who view games on cable. Survey estimates by Scarborough Research (see Figure 5.3) indicate that in 2011, while residents

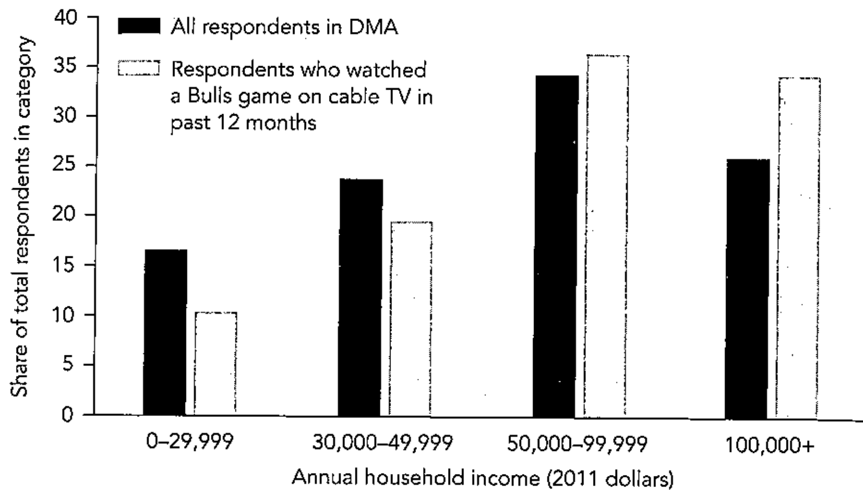


Figure 5.3. Percentage of residents in Chicago Designated Market Area (DMA) having watched a Chicago Bulls game on cable television in the past year, 2011. Source: Brad Sherer, e-mail correspondence with Sean Dinces, March 19, 2012; Scarborough Research (2012).

whose annual household income exceeded $100,000 made up about 26 percent of respondents from the Chicago Designated Market Area, or DMA, residents from this category made up 34 percent of those who reported having watched a Chicago Bulls cable broadcast in the previous twelve months. Conversely, residents whose annual household income amounted to less than $30,000 made up between 16 and 17 percent of total respondents, but only about 10 percent of respondents who reported having taken in a game on a cable network (Brad Sherer, e-mail to Sean Dinces, March 19, 2012).

It would appear, then, that even within the confines of Chicagoans' living rooms, watching pro sports has become an increasingly elite endeavor. Nevertheless, the rhetoric of so-called blue-collar fans continues unabated. Chicago's teams may still enjoy a large following of wage-earning devotees, but they have nonetheless done much to marginalize them as spectators. Whether intentionally or not, the purveyors of this rhetoric have directed attention away from this marginalization, and distraction of this type has real stakes. In particular, it minimizes the scrutiny directed toward major-league franchises that secure massive public subsidies and political favoritism by arguing that they help foster a unique sense of civic pride and community cohesion. It has made more palatable the ongoing efforts by Chicago's major-league franchises to displace actual blue-collar fans from the ranks of those who are welcome as full-fledged consumers within Chicago's postindustrial entertainment economy.

The Rise of the "Blue-Collar" Athlete in Chicago

The journalists, players, and team officials who conjure up images of Chicago's blue-collar fans rarely go into much detail about the types of jobs these fans hold. This sidestepping makes sense, given that the most visible fans (i.e., those regularly attending actual games) are elite. Delving into any detail about their actual occupations might draw attention to the hollowness of the rhetoric.

At present, one of the few jobs actually discussed in commentators' celebrations of Chicago's alleged blue-collar identity is playing (or coaching) a professional sport. A recent *Tribune* retrospective on the career of Chicago Bear Brian Urlacher insisted that the linebacker "ideally fit an image immediately embraced by our big, blue-collar town. . . . Urlacher looked like a meat packer and worked as if he signed a time card instead of autographs" (Haugh 2013). This is not unique to football. A *Tribune* piece on the 2013 Chicago Blackhawks earnestly referred to team members as "blue-collar workers" who "get physical" (Hamilton 2013). Not to be outdone, a 2014 article on the Comcast SportsNet Chicago website reminded readers that the "Chicago Bulls are known as a blue-collar team with a blue-collar head coach who demands the absolute best night-in and night-out. . . . The team is filled with hard-nosed players who leave it all on the floor, especially two-time All-Star center Joakim Noah" (Comcast SportsNet Chicago 2014). All of this may come as a surprise, given the fact that most of the athletes on any of Chicago's major league rosters are millionaires. However, as we detail below, the increasing promotion of professional athletes as blue-collar icons of the city is the logical outcome of a broader shift in popular conceptions of class in the United States.

Regular use of the modifier "blue-collar" to describe professional athletes by Chicago's popular press began just as its use within broader American popular and intellectual culture declined. When we conducted a systematic search of the digitized books in American English that help make up the larger Google Books corpus (using Google's Ngram Viewer), we found that writers hardly ever used the expression before 1950, but that by the late 1950s they were beginning to do so more frequently. In the 1960s, appearances of the term "blue collar" in books continued to increase. Usage peaked in the mid-seventies, and since then it has plummeted.

It would appear, then, that the rise and fall of "blue collar" as a component of the American lexicon coincided more or less with rise and fall of the economic fortunes of the U.S. working class. Such a pattern makes sense. In the quarter-century of boom times that followed World War II, American wage earners shared in an era of "unprecedented affluence" characterized not simply by widespread unionization and higher incomes but also by widespread

(government-subsidized) homeownership, strong purchasing power, and the promise that parents could send their children to college and toward a life of upward mobility. Moreover, relatively high union density gave workers a meaningful political voice; the Democratic Party in the immediate postwar period catered to the working class more than at any time in history (Schulman 2001). In other words, the lived experience of wage earners emerged in the minds of many as cause for celebration, and the cultural embrace of terms such as "blue collar" reflected the rising fortunes of wage earners within American society.

By the 1970s, the lived experience of being blue collar had begun to lose its luster. Stagflation and the significant advances made by movement conservatism in the United States readied the American political landscape for what social critic Mike Davis (1986, 157) describes as the "seismic shift rightward . . . at every level of American politics." The oncoming neoliberal onslaught would ultimately bring American organized labor to its knees, mercilessly squeeze wages by prioritizing anti-inflationary monetary policy, and shift public investment away from basic social programs toward military spending and corporate welfare. That there have been few causes for celebration for workers amid the unmitigated political and economic disaster of the last forty years makes it understandable that usage of "blue collar" has declined significantly. Moreover, the institutions that went hand in hand with its definition—unions and a relatively progressive system of economic redistribution—have withered, leaving the term with little resonance in twenty-first-century America.

How strange, then, that sportswriters started to use "blue collar" in reference to athletes (or quote athletes using the phrase in reference to themselves) only after its wider usage began to wane. The research for this chapter included systematic searches for the phrases "blue-collar" or "blue collar" in conjunction with either "Bears," "Blackhawks," "Bulls," or "Sox" in the *Chicago Tribune*, the only local newspaper that has a comprehensive, searchable database covering the entirety of the twentieth century. Bob Logan, beat writer for the Bulls for much of the 1970s, appears to have been the first to talk about pro athletes in Chicago as "blue collar." During the 1974 season, Logan (1974) described "just an ordinary, workmanlike Chicago Bulls team back on the job . . . a bunch of blue-collar lunch pail toters who hammer out . . . victories on an assembly line." It would be several years before sportswriters at the *Tribune* adopted variations of this ode as standard practice. In fact, in the case of the Bulls, Logan appears to have given it up after that first over-the-top effort. Bob Sakamoto eventually resurrected and made prolific use of it during the mid-1980s to describe unheralded Bulls players such as Gene Banks and Charles Oakley as "blue collar workers" or "blue-collar overachievers" (Sakamoto 1986, 1987a).

Discourse around other local teams followed a similar chronological trajectory. Bob Verdi, who covered the White Sox for the *Tribune*, first referred to the

team as a "blue-collar gang" in articles appearing in the late 1970s (Verdi 1977a, 1977b). It wasn't until the 1990s, however, that in any given year readers could encounter a new generation of Sox writers labeling the squad a bunch of "blue-collar guys" or quoting players such as Lance Johnson describing themselves as "blue collar" and claiming to "punch in every day, play hard and hustle" (Jauss 1991; Holtzman 1992).

A handful of *Tribune* articles on the "blue-collar Bears" appeared between 1979 and 1985, but it wasn't until Bears coach Mike Ditka famously declared, "We're a Grabowski" when describing his team to the press in January 1986 that the local media pounced on "blue collar" as a descriptor for the hometown football team. As one reporter put it immediately in the wake of Ditka's statement, "Grabowski" was a synonym for "the shot-and-a-beer, hard-hat, lunch-bucket guy who gets his muscles through toil" (Myslenski 1985; Galloway 1986). Since then, it has been standard operating procedure in all mainstream Chicago papers to let readers know that the "blue collar still fits" Bears players. Even in an era when athlete salaries have reached Himalayan heights, so they tell us, we should listen to and take seriously statements from the likes of tight end Martellus Bennett that "I'm a blue-collar player, and that's what I always will be" (Verdi 1992; Jahns 2013).

Descriptions of hockey players as blue collar appeared as early as the late 1970s in the *Tribune*, but they did not become de rigueur in the paper's sports coverage until the beginning of the 1990s, when Blackhawks beat writer Mike Kiley made it a centerpiece of his coverage (Verdi 1978). By that point, Kiley wasn't the only one touting the "blue-collar career" of players such as wing Dirk Graham or likening other Hawks to "blue-collar, crew-cut plumber[s] who expect a full day's pay for a full day's work" (Kiley 1994, 1992). Hockey coverage in the *Sun-Times* followed a similar pattern, advertising the Blackhawks as "blue collar guy[s]" who "roll up [their] sleeves" and "give you a full day's work, and often more, for a full day's pay" (Gould 1993).

What did these writers actually mean when they talked about athletes as blue collar? Certainly it had little to do with their class position as measured by income. By the mid-1980s, mean salaries in MLB, the NFL, and the NBA all reached well into six figures, while average "total money income" for U.S. households barely topped $30,000 (Staudohar 1998; U.S. Census Bureau 1988, 8).

Instead of signaling income or job category, "blue collar," when used to characterize pro athletes, has indicated a broad range of behavioral attributes. Some of these are sports-specific. Dedication to the unglamorous art of defense, for example, has proven a quick way for a player or team to earn the blue-collar badge. "You see," wrote Bulls beat writer Sam Smith in 1995, "defense is associated with . . . digging in and all the good clichés of sport," or in other words, with "that blue-collar Chicago ethic" (Smith 1995).

Sportswriters have also equated blue collarness with traditionally masculine traits such as aggressiveness, toughness, and a willingness to sacrifice one's body in the name of victory. A recent post on the website of Comcast SportsNet Chicago carried the title "The 'Blue Collar' in these Blackhawks." It explained, "While they still may lose some of the physical numbers that are totaled up on the stat sheet, their willingness to pay the price in attacking the net . . . has provided the definition of toughness this team really needs" (Boden 2013).

Much more than specific references to defense or toughness, though, sportswriters in Chicago have designated pro athletes as blue collar when they demonstrate a strong work ethic or a commitment to hard work. Pick out any Chicago sports article containing the term "blue collar," and chances are you will also find the phrases "work ethic," "hard work," or some variant thereof. A 2000 *Tribune* retrospective on former White Sox catcher Carlton Fisk lauded his "gritty, blue-collar work ethic." A similar piece in a 1997 edition of the *Sun-Times* celebrated former Blackhawks Jeremy Roenick and Ed Belfour for their "work ethic and blue-collar style" (Reynolds 2000; Leptich 1997). The list of pieces like these goes on and on.

Professional Sports and the Neoliberal Redefinition of Social Class

One interpretation of the proliferation of references to blue-collar fans, athletes, coaches, and teams in postindustrial America is that it embodies the growing fixation on personal responsibility at the heart of neoliberal ideology. Indeed, the obsession with the term "work ethic" in local sports coverage often seems to be cut straight from the rhetorical playbook Ronald Reagan developed in the late 1970s. As social critic David Sirota (2011, 58) explains, acolytes of the Reaganite world view have "been banging the American Dream's drum about a country where there are supposedly no economic or racial barriers" for those willing to roll up their sleeves and engage in "a little hard work." According to Sirota, the "Just Do It" philosophy popularized in the 1980s—not just in political discourse but also in the lionization of African American superstar athletes such as Chicago Bull Michael Jordan—has left many convinced that "the difference between success and failure is individual desire and willingness to persevere through impossible trauma." Incessant talk of athletes as "hard workers" by sportswriters, it would seem, became an ideal vessel for such rhetoric, since it spotlighted this so-called desire and perseverance while conveniently passing over an outside world in which the economic policies popularized by Reagan—not to mention New Democrats such as current Chicago mayor Rahm Emanuel—have radically reduced social mobility in the United States.

No doubt there is some truth in this reading, but it is important not to overstate it. As sports historian Allen Guttmann (1978) points out, notions of meritocracy and individual achievement through hard work have permeated modern sport for centuries. Moreover, much of the blue-collar rhetoric enveloping athletes in cities like Chicago has placed their efforts in the context of teamwork—a concept at odds with the hyperindividuality that neoliberal ideologues glorify (Sirota 2011).

The relatively recent rise of the so-called blue-collar athlete as a rhetorical device is important to an understanding of the history of neoliberalism for a different reason: it sheds light on how conversations about sport have emerged as a forum for undoing the presumed link between one's class and access to economic resources and for redefining class in terms of culture—that is, in terms of behavioral norms. Just as striking as how often Chicago sportswriters have linked athletes' supposed blue collarness to their work ethic is how frequently they describe it in terms of "approach," "attitude," "mentality," or "style." Bears great Walter Payton won over fans with his "blue-collar mentality" (Sherman 1999). Blackhawk fans "appreciate the blue-collar approach of white-collar players" (Kiley 1989). "Chicagoans turned out in record numbers" in 1987 "to savor the Bulls' blue-collar, work-ethic style of basketball" (Sakamoto 1987b). These formulations, all of which refer to players earning six- or seven-figure salaries, invariably uproot working-class identity from the realm of economic status and power and relocate it squarely within the context of image and demeanor.

That many if not most Americans have, in the last thirty to forty years, come to understand class in cultural terms rather than economic ones is not a new observation. The consensus among historians such as Jefferson Cowie (2012) and David Farber (1994) is that Richard Nixon's successful "blue-collar strategy" in the 1968 and 1972 elections marked the pivot point of this transformation. Nixon's appeals to white working-class voters on the basis of patriotism and traditional morality offered them solace in the face of feeling "forgotten" amid the Civil Rights movement, anti-war activism, and second-wave feminism. According to Cowie (2012, 164–165), these appeals ultimately "helped to push the concept of 'worker' out of the realm of production and helped drive a long process of deconstructing the postwar worker as a . . . materially based concept." Detached from the "realm of production"—that is, from a world in which the descriptor "working-class" unambiguously signaled one's identity as a wage earner—a modifier like "blue-collar" was up for grabs in a way it had not been previously. In reviving "blue-collar" as a way to talk about professional athletes, Chicago sportswriters have played an overlooked role in the larger reappropriation of language traditionally used to denote someone's place in the capitalist hierarchy for use in describing personality or image.

This phenomenon also tells us much about how neoliberal rhetoric around class has worked to legitimate profound material inequality. As Walter Benn Michaels (2006) argues, for some time public debate in the United States has avoided acknowledging economic inequality as an ethical and political problem in and of itself. Instead, such debate has moralized about the importance of being sensitive to the "diversity" of class backgrounds from which people come. The "problem" of class, in other words, has been redefined as a "'condescension' problem," with journalists and intellectuals insisting that "what's wrong with elite institutions is the way they make poor people feel their poverty," as opposed to their role in perpetuating poverty itself (Michaels 2006, 95).

This perverse philosophy of justice is either implicitly or explicitly at play in almost all of the journalistic references to "blue-collar" athletes. For sportswriters, what makes these "hard-working," "gritty," "tough" millionaire athletes palatable—and, indeed, respectable—is their refusal to act spoiled or superior to fans even when, in economic terms, they *are* superior. By highlighting the fact that major-league players embrace or even embody the cultural mores and behavioral norms of less privileged fans, sports pages in cities such as Chicago have sent the message that obscene disparities in wealth are acceptable so long as the haves refrain from "looking down" on the have-nots (Michaels 2006, 103).

There is something more at work, however, behind the language of "blue-collar" fans, athletes, and coaches than the erasure of class as a material reality or a political problem. Its use has also emerged as an important marketing tool for those involved in the professional sports business. In Chicago, this was made clear in 1987, when Mike Ditka recorded a music video in which he and a handful of hand-picked Chicagoans (including a former police officer and a sewer worker) performed the "Grabowski Shuffle." The lyrics accompanying the "30-minute romp highlighted by a 5-minute 'polka-funk' dance number" tapped into Ditka's self-styled blue-collar identity. "We like to work, we love to play," Ditka and his backup "Grabowskis" sing. "We do them both, about the same way!" Apparently, the message resonated with Christmas shoppers in Chicago. One local woman who purchased a copy for her father explained, "My dad's a big fan of Ditka's. . . . He's a blue-collar guy. He likes Ditka's work ethic." According to the producer, the "Grabowski Shuffle" sold 50,000 copies by the end of the year (Obejas 1987; Found Footage Festival 2013; Kogan 1987).

While the "Grabowski Shuffle" was not an official Bears endeavor, by the last two decades of the twentieth century, officials from all of Chicago's pro franchises had come to understand the cultivation of a blue-collar image as a crucial part of their marketing toolbox. In 1990, the *Tribune* described how Blackhawks coach Mike Keenan very consciously pushed players to cultivate a working-class identity in order to sell more tickets. "If the Hawks would just submit to a lunch-bucket mentality, Keenan figured, they'd have the local folk

eating out of their hand," the paper explained. "His assessment was accurate," the article continued. "The Hawks have sold out 29 straight home games" (Kiley 1990). More recently, the White Sox developed the "Grinder Rules" and "Back to the Grind" ad campaigns, which, according to the *Tribune*, "play[ed] off the team's blue-collar image" (Meyer 2007).

Players have also learned to market themselves to fans and sponsors using the same language. White Sox players such as Adam Eaton and Jake Peavy have readily adopted "blue-collar speak." Bulls guard Kirk Hinrich is another local sports pro who has developed into a consummate self-promoter in this regard, broadcasting his belief that he was "kind of meant to play in Chicago. . . . The city is blue-collar. It's how I play. I'm a guy willing to do the little things" (Smith 2004). Some player-related merchandise even contains imagery that refers to players' alleged blue collarness (Cubby Tees 2014).

All of this—the promotion by merchandisers, team officials, and players themselves—captures the degree to which the sports business has transformed the idea of class into a commodity. It is not simply that professional sport in the United States has helped divorce definitions of class from the realm of production; it has incorporated new cultural conceptions of class into its contemporary growth strategy.

As local athletes and teams have harnessed the rhetorical power of a widely appealing "blue-collar" aesthetic and leveraged their influence in the realm of popular culture in order to cash in on it, the increasingly precarious position of Chicago's wage earners has receded from public view. Part of this owes to the fact that the healthy base of relatively well-paid manufacturing workers that the city once incubated has shrunk drastically over the last half-century. Another part owes to the fact that the low-paying, hyper-exploitative service jobs that have largely replaced an older generation of relatively well-compensated, unionized jobs in manufacturing are poorly suited to the journalistic romanticism at the heart of conversations about so-called blue-collar fans. That major-league athletes themselves have become, if we are to believe the local sports pages, the standard bearers of Chicago's blue-collar identity exemplifies the degree to which neoliberalism has obscured the notion of social class as an indicator of one's position in the economic hierarchy.

Notes

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1. Chicago is not the only city in which the papers fawn over so-called blue-collar fans and athletes. Other notable sports towns such as Detroit, Indianapolis, and Pittsburgh have incubated the same rhetoric. However, the local concentration of teams and news outlets make Chicago a prime case study for our analysis.

2. Cubs fans are the lone exception to this trend, and the difference is geographic: followers of Chicago's North Side baseball team stand in contrast to their South Side rivals. In a newspaper interview during the run-up to a crosstown Cubs–White Sox series in 2008, sports historian Richard Davies described tensions between Chicago baseball fans: "What you have is the upper-middle-class professional group who is located near Wrigley Field on the North Side of town and are Cubs fans. . . . And on the South Side you have minorities, ethnics and working-blue-collar folks who root for the White Sox" (Friedman 2008). According to this common sense, the Cubs are the exception that proves the rule that Chicago is a blue-collar sports town.

3. Data generated from the U.S. Census Bureau's On the Map website, which draws from the Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics Origin-Destination Employment Statistics (LODES). The specific figures in this paragraph are derived from a "Home Area" analysis of "Primary Jobs" for "Chicago city IL." "Home area" indicates that the job numbers are for Chicago city residents (whether or not they work inside city limits), and "primary job" indicates the highest-paying position held by each resident (U.S. Census Bureau n.d.a).

4. Data generated from the U.S. Census Bureau's On the Map website by conducting a "Home Area" analysis of "Primary Jobs" in the "Manufacturing" industry sector for "Chicago city IL," Wisconsin and Indiana, and Zip Codes 60616, 60609, 60632, 60638, 60653, 60615, 60621, 60636, 60629, 60652, 60620, 60637, 60619, 60649, 60617, 60628, 60643, 60655, 60633 and "Home Area Profile Analysis: Chicago-Joliet-Naperville, IL-IN-WI from Metropolitan/Micropolitan Areas (CBSA), Detailed Report" (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.a).

5. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (n.d.a) online "CPI Inflation Calculator," a 25-cent ticket in 1913 would be the equivalent of $5.98 in 2014 dollars.

6. "Cost of entertaining" based on *Team Marketing Report*'s "Fan Cost Index" (FCI), which includes the cost of four average-priced tickets, four small soft drinks, two small beers, four hot dogs, two programs, parking, and two of the cheapest adult-size caps. The 2014–2015 FCI's for Chicago teams are as follows: 2014–2015 Blackhawks, $463.20; 2014 Bears, $596.76; 2014–2015 Bulls, $477.32; 2014 Cubs, $304.64; and 2014 White Sox, $210.18 (Fort 2015).

7. Averages weighted by number of seats at each price level, excluding premium seating (i.e. club seats and luxury boxes).

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