

CHRIS'LL DEAL WITH IT

episode notes



EP 50 - Shamateurism

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Recently, I read “Klondikers: Dawson City's Stanley Cup Challenge and How a Nation Fell in Love with Hockey” by Tim Falconer. It's a hockey history book about the 1905 Stanley Cup challengers from Dawson City, the small, gold rush outpost-turned-capital city of Canada's Yukon Province. After traveling for nearly a month across Canada, the Nuggets got absolutely obliterated by the defending champions in Ottawa.

While it's a great hockey book about the early days of organized hockey, it also provides perspective on that period of Canadian history. Through the turn of the 20th century, the British colony of Canada was transitioning out of the Victorian era. This was an era when many held tightly to Victorian ideals regarding amateurism in sport. Getting paid in any sense got you labelled as a professional; an affront to the prevailing ethics of sport itself. This debate continued for many decades after in Olympic sports, and still plays out today with college athletes here in North America.

And what constituted being labelled a professional back then? Simply getting paid to play. Sometimes it didn't matter if you got paid in a different sport. Hockey, and especially the Stanley Cup, were quickly gaining coverage and prominence. The desire to claim the trophy by any means necessary, and more importantly enjoying greater profits from growing audiences, brought money into the equation. Shouldn't the players, often battling through grueling, bloody matches, get a cut of the action too?

Klondikers was a wonderful, well-researched book. Within it, I heard some amazing phrases from that era, including

Shamateurism. In the context of this history, it described arrangements for players where they

weren't outright and obvious about getting paid to play. Instead, they might receive benefits for joining a particular team on the sly. This might be expensive gold baubles, or cushy jobs with employers with a financial stake in the teams and/or rinks.

But this term

shamateurism got me thinking: What are the modern differences between amateurs and professionals? How have these perceptions changed over the past century? How has modern technology changed the definitions and attainment of professionalism? On today's episode, I share my thoughts stemming from this curiously fun phrase.

Klondikers: Dawson City's Stanley Cup Challenge and How a Nation Fell in Love with Hockey by Tim Falconer

For readers of The Boys in the Boat and Against All Odds Join a ragtag group of misfits from Daws...

 <https://app.thestorygraph.com/books/9316f71d-af07-4ef6-a429-aa3f2c8c07bf>



Defining Amateurs & Pros

- The term *Shamateur* evolved out of the Victorian obsession with amateurism vs professionalism in athletic pursuits
 - It was pure "Rascality" (as they said back then) to sneak around the nebulous & inconsistent rules of amateur sports.
- The defining factor on being labelled as a professional was simple: Did you get paid?
 - As I'll argue: This definition is still the most clear-cut and appropriate.
- Regardless of whether you're labelled amateur or professional, it's important to realize that just as it was for the 'hockeyists' of 1900, most of us lack any control over how they're defined.
 - The market dictates what work & efforts are deserving of remuneration
 - Our future opportunities often hinge on positive critical reception of consistent, continuing performance; Whether that be on the ice, on the page, upon a stage, or from our desks.

Amateur Doesn't Mean Beginner

- Are you letting this definition hold you back?
 - Feeling like an amateur might prevent you from deepening your connection and/or commitment to your work
 - But this feeling is as useless as it is false: Especially in creative pursuits!
- But I feel that in modern times, the term amateur has often come to mean beginner, someone lacking experience
 - Amateur really just means unpaid: Someone who does an activity for pleasure rather than a financial benefit or professional reasons.
 - And professional means someone earning a living in an endeavor frequently engaged in by amateurs.
 - Ask yourself: Would you do the work, or play in the games, even if the activity ended up unpaid?
 - If you wouldn't do it unpaid, how do you expect to thrive doing it once money, possibly your entire livelihood becomes involved?

- It's worth noting that generally, professionalism isn't something seen in every field. It doesn't mean any job where you get paid. The term exists for activities where there are people doing it for pleasure.
- Amateurs can spend a substantial % of their lives & career in their chosen endeavors
 - This makes their work no less or more meaningful than a professionals' work
 - Again, being defined as a pro is often out of your control anyway
 - Going back to the hockey example from a century ago: You either played well or you couldn't. The better players were chosen for the top teams, a fact that's still the case today.
 - It's the same for becoming a professionally published writer: A process that involves lots of effort, heartache, luck, time, and usually financial support from other sources.
 - Even getting through to that next level of professionalism (getting traditionally published), there's still the difficulties of generating acclaim for one's work. No matter the quality of your work, getting it noticed involves even more effort, luck, marketing, and often the long tail of time.
- No matter how you look at yourself, becoming a professional still comes down to people's willingness to exchange money for your work.
 - But what triggers the differentiation between amateur and pro?
 - Total revenue generated?
 - Net profit made?
 - Hours invested?
 - Size of your network?
 - The percentage of time you've expended?
 - A gatekeeper saying "you are a professional now"?
- The process of going from amateur to pro often involves...
 - Consistently showing up
 - Dedication to excellence in your field
 - Encouraging oversight, outside observation, and critique
 - Having a network & support system around the work (you're no longer on an island)
 - 🚪 SELLING WORK & GETTING PAID! 🚪
- And yes, nearly all beginners do typically start as amateurs - but that still doesn't make amateurism a similar label.
 - The amateur is someone doing it for the love of the game, art, or work. Regardless of their aspirations to professionalism, or lack thereof.
 - Success in the endeavor is aided by maintaining diligent work, an open mind, and a willingness to experiment and learn, regardless of how your status in the field is labelled.

Profalssionals

- I wondered what the opposite of a Shamateur might be. I came up with *Profalssional*, or the false professional.
 - It's possible to see your work, no matter how unpolished, as worthy of the trappings of professionalism. "Look at me, I wrote a book!"
 - There are lots of 'vanity presses' out there, praying on this desire to appear professional & say that you're published.
 - Is someone more interested in fast-tracking their ability to tell others "I'm a published writer" than they are in the journey itself: Putting in the often daunting effort of building their craft to the point where they earn those first

professional sales?

- Or to put it more bluntly: Are they interested in the optics of status rather than the output they produce?
- This mentality can push people towards quantity over quality. There is often little craft involved, such as: Editing, rehearsal, study, or responding to feedback. Just churning out content.
- Recent developments in AI tools such as ChatGPT & Dall-E are supercharging people's perception of how easy it is to produce professional-looking work.
 - Even worse it's adding a lot of noise into the marketplace, making it harder to discern the quality, human-generated work out there.
- Regardless of the paths used, dressing oneself in the trappings of success without acquiring the true equity of a pro is a fools' errand.
- And what is the true equity of a pro?
 - Experience
 - Honed skills (*notice I'm not mentioning talent!*)
 - Leverageable industry connections
 - *Earned* respect & critical acclaim: Or in other words *fans*
 - Invitations to perform at higher levels of one's field
 - Having something on the line
- For me, being a pro means the activity is one of the major methods a person uses to make a living.
- Worth considering: Is being a pro a binary, yes-or-no definition? Or can it be a sliding scale?
- It's important to remember: Being a pro is never a permanent state
 - If people stop paying for your goods and/or services, when & how do you 'revert' back to amateurism?
 - Sure you can say "I was a pro" - and sometimes that former status carries meaning in the field. This is especially true in sports where there's a physical component.

▮ *In hockey, all roads lead to beer league.*

- Therefore, never rest too heavily on your laurels.
 - If the award winning writer stops writing, when do they shift from being a professional writer to someone who once wrote an award-winning book? Likely when publishers stop paying for their work. Which, in the case of the the creator that stops producing, that's when the royalty checks stop providing notable income.
 - If the Most Valuable Player stops pushing themselves to excel, they'll likely find themselves fighting just to stay in the league.

Modern Shamateurism

- Who are the Gatekeepers?
 - In many fields, there are few (if any) gatekeepers or arbiters who can define you as a "pro".
 - Even in the Victorian era, it was as simple as "did someone pay you at some point?"
 - Technologies like the Internet, desktop publishing, and print-on-demand have greatly reduced both the quantity and sway of institutional gatekeepers.
 - It takes a lot of resources to be a major publisher, especially financial. Even with all the technology available, these bigger houses have built reputations, consumer trust, and a distribution network that enables them to greatly expand

the reach of a person's work.

- They still serve an important purpose, but they're no longer the only path to professionalism, especially with creative work.
- This is where self-publishing, video streaming services like YouTube, or even start-up sports like pickleball come in.
 - If people exchange money for the goods, services, and/or entertainment you produce, or to advertise on your platform, you're on the path to professionalism.
 - The pickleball example is relevant here, as it's the fastest growing sport in America. There are professional leagues and associations springing up all over. Various rule sets are being debated and codified in a process similar to the birth of organized hockey (and professional sports in general) over a century ago.
 - For example: The National Hockey League's first season was in 1917-1918. Yet the Stanley Cup's first winner was in 1893, where it was awarded to the top amateur team "in the dominion", who then defended it against challenges issued to a committee of trustees.
 - There have been rival leagues, leagues in other countries with their trophies, and multiple paths to professionalism.
 - The fact that there are many varied ways of becoming a professional is true in most fields.
- So the question becomes: Can we approach our work like a pro, regardless of our actual status?
 - We can choose to consistently work to the best of our abilities
 - We can study and learn new techniques to improve those abilities
 - We can seek mentors to guide us
 - We can attend industry events to build our network and learn from others
 - We can read & support industry publications
 - We can participate in industry discourse & opportunities
 - We can be open to unexpected opportunities
 - We can allow our work to evolve
 - We can allow ourselves to change tactics, or even entire fields
 - We can treat people consistently well, regardless of the perceived benefits to our own work
 - We can choose to forgo the traditional gatekeepers by forming our own business and taking our work directly to the consumer

Episode 50 Quote:

I've always found great encouragement from this quote, which comes from Shane Parrish's Farnam Street newsletter. I feel it's a great encapsulation of the mentality of those striving towards greatness:

The courage to start.

The discipline to focus.

The confidence to figure it out.

The patience to know progress is not always visible.

The persistence to keep going, even on the bad days.

That's the formula.