

Transcription details:

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Speaker key:

SM: Sarah McConnell, producer and host

AS: Audio Sample

NH: Nick Heath

AL: Anna Laymon

MK: Marissa Kiss

JW: James Witte

LR: Lynn Ridinger

Transcript:

00:00:00

[music]

SM From Virginia Humanities, this is With Good Reason. I'm Sarah McConnell.

AS The first video that went viral, it was probably three or four around a similar time but the crossroad dash was one that certainly went pretty big.

SM This is a play-by-play guy who in absence of actual sports is doing play-by-play parody videos that have gone viral.

AS I'm filming slightly out of the way of a crosswalk. I'm a few meters away just sort of in front of the shop façade trying not to be noticed while I'm filming members of the public on my iPhone. And yeah you've ultimately got the lights changing colors so that it goes from red to green for the pedestrians, you've got the sound that goes off as well, the beeping that signifies that they can start crossing and you've got a short distance from one side of the road to the other where these pedestrians are going. So that was the first one that took off. Crossroad dash, light turns to red, we wait for the beeps, there they

are, now they're JD sports man. He's got a decent start, leggings on the outside—oh, JD sports man bit distracted over the shoulder and leggings is going to get there. Oh, she does it again, three titles in three days, off past fate is gold, for the lap of honor. Victorious.

SM I'm Sarah McConnell. And today on With Good Reason, we talk with Nick Heath about his parody videos. And later, Trixie Fergonza a vaudeville star, feminist icon, and inspiration to the most popular sports song of all time. First, Nick Heath. Nick has earned a living as a sports commentator, lending his voice to rugby matches in the UK but everything came to a screeching halt when the pandemic struck. Sporting events had to be put on hold and for Nick no sports meant no job. So with extra time on his hands, he starts making play by play videos of strangers doing every day activities. These hilarious videos have since gone viral, delighting the world longing for any sports related content.

TH Before we were in a COVID-19 world, I was working on the women's six nations, the annual rugby tournament here in England, Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Italy, and France, and regularly commentating on various broadcasters as a freelancer. And yeah just going from game to game really club rugby, international rugby, that's the sort of bread and butter of what I do. And yeah it was then as we could obviously see that the spread of the pandemic that we then started to see more and more of these sporting engagements disappearing from the calendar. The effect of the pandemic on my work ultimately has seen my livelihood disappear before me as I think it has many people. But obviously with no sport to commentate on, it's made life pretty tough. So yeah it was a case of beginning to see that happen, understanding that some things would be postponed and perhaps in the early days hoping that might be 3 to 4 weeks but obviously we've then all got a bit more of an understanding on things that it would be longer so yeah then just wondering, okay, well how's this going to work? And while I work out what I'm doing, maybe I'll just, you know, head out, film a couple of clips, maybe this is the sort of height of sporting excellence that we're gonna get to see over the next few weeks. And I'll just record this, put a silly voice on it and see what happens. My idea was it was just gonna be a bit of fun to entertain a few mates to begin with. As a play-by-play announcer, I've sort of spent many years making sure that I could find my own voice, so it's been quite funny that actually choosing to to revisit an old parody voice that I used to do when I was an actor 20 years ago and a bit of a joke voice on what sports announcers sound like is something that I've ended up using in these videos that I've put out. So I was, yeah, just thought I would go and film a few people doing some fairly banal everyday mundane things and put a kind of sports voice on it, maybe duke people gently into feeling like they're watching a sporting occasion even though there's nothing of the sort really unfolding in front of them. And for all the time I spent trying to find my own credible voice as a broadcaster it seems that when I go back to doing the parody version, that's what people seem to have been entertained by and what people are demanding more of. The idea really came from just the situation we are in really. I

was probably just a bit bored, decided to go for a walk and yeah I just spotted an opportunity to just film a bit and do a silly voice over where I was sat. I'd love to say that there was a big strategy in it but there wasn't. It was just that I thought I'll just do that silly voice I used to do and yeah recorded the first couple of videos in situ which was a couple of guys kicking a ball around and then I spotted four women walking along with their strollers and I just thought actually it would be quite fun to make that some kind of 4 by 4 formation event. So I did that one, shot it on my phone and then, yeah, I found a couple of more situations to film and thought it might not be too appropriate to be stood behind these people bellowing into my phone. So I took those ones home and I've kind of [inaudible] over them at home since. But yeah you know the challenge has become more and more difficult under lockdown obviously, so here in London we're allowed out for our one bit of exercise and yeah for me it's a case of hoping that while I'm out doing that, I might be able to catch one or two bits that might make another video.

So there's the international push chair formation final and well we've got the outfront pair, Yohanson and Erickson from Sweden and they're in with the Brits here. And Smith and Black and they're doing particularly well at staying quite close with this very delicate bend. Of course they're very familiar with this course and that's what sold them to come to European Champions just a few months ago. Great to see them back.

When the videos first started taking off, it was a bit of a surprise. I hoped that I might get a handful of likes from some followers, entertain a few friends that might acknowledge the situation I was in, but I think the first four videos got over 60,000 views within a couple of hours and then I was played on one of the major BBC radio and breakfast show, one of the big stations over here so I could then sense that people were interested in them, so I decided that while the interest is high, I'll stick a few more out. We could have a little bit of fun here. And then it really went crazy and my following on social media across various platforms has sort of gone up by I think a collective of 180,000 people over there stateside, and in Canada, and just everywhere just interested in hearing more from this stupid sounding British play by play announcer guy. I think the videos have struck a chord with people because there is no sport to watch and ultimately sport isn't just about one guy taking on another or one girl beating her previous time or even teams doing it. It's the look of it, it's the presentation of it, it's the sound of it. Although it's very tongue-in-cheek, I think people are perhaps being slightly duped into this sounding like the sport they need. It's acting as a bit of a placebo for the real sport in their lives and maybe it's kind of scratching that itch of them feeling like well maybe I have just watched a top-flight sporting occasion due to what I've just heard, when it might just be someone at a market buying some fruit.

Regional qualifiers for market bartering here in Tuting Market. A [inaudible] here in a blue headscarf and beige coat. She's a regular in these parts. Classic technique of hanging behind [inaudible] shopping here. She's already told the trader she's willing to walk away and it looks like she might have got what she wants. Oh! She's even taking

the shopping of the woman next to her. Well that's the pro. That's what we're used to seeing. Her price is final. It's a few chili peppers and some tomatoes, the order we've come to know and love. Top job.

00:07:49

The fact that so many people have watched the videos, I think I counted that sort of known videos I'm up to is just short of 10 million I think now which is flabbergasting really but yeah it's been pretty humbling, the fact that so many people have been entertained by them, so many people want more which is a bit of a responsibility I think. I'm the sort of person that likes a joke to kind of go out when it was at its funniest but we're in unprecedented times, aren't we? And I think there are people out there who are maybe front line key workers whether they're working in healthcare whether they're maybe even just family members worried about people who are sick. And I've had hundreds if not thousands of messages from people saying, "Look, you've given me my first belly laugh of what was feeling like a pretty tough day," or "I've been working a 12 hour shift and this was just the entertainment I needed." That kind of thing. And that's a humbling gift to be giving people. It's incredible that it's gone as far and wide as it has. I have said a couple of times I think it's helped me that I'm playing to what is in the most literal sense ever, a captive audience.

While you join me live, it's the last green arena for the canine cruiserweight bout here between Shadow and Sprocket. Shadow getting a couple of blows in there, well it is Friday, so nifty on his feet. Sprocket turning the other cheek, seeming somewhat disinterested as Shadow tries to tempt him into more but it's rather fizzling out this one. It's not been quite the contest we'd hoped it would be. It's no Louis against Tyson but at least the bars opened. Shadow's on his way, mind an old fashioned.

I think the impact of the clips overall that we've seen from different announcers in the States and over here in the UK with the likes of Andrew Kotter, a Scottish guy who does a lot of major sporting events over here. Look, I'm not going to overstate it and overplay our role in anything. It could just be a bit of fun, and when we're in this bubble, it's appealing to a lot of people. And things will go back the way they were. But there is a bit of me that's really interested in how a lot of non-sport people have been entertained and interested by the sort of style of presentation. And Andrew Kotter's clip of a couple of dogs playing over a plastic bone. I think it's had 25 million views here and so perhaps broadcasters might need to think about how the sort of serious tone of voice they use to cover a lot of sport these days... because it's high stakes, you know, we know there's a lot of money in it. These are athletes being paid at the highest level to do what they do but actually maybe we're tapping into an audience here that are willing to be entertained that want to find the humor in stuff that want to find it a bit more lighthearted and perhaps sport might need to consider its role to these sorts of people and whether actually there's a way of finding that area for an audience so that it might give sport a whole new market

place or at least a second market place to play alongside those that are more committed to the serious side. It certainly opened my eyes to that and whether someone wants to listen to this parody character for a full 80 minute rugby game, I'm not so sure, but to be able to provide more levity in and pure entertainment through it rather than necessarily the details of sort of sporting announcing and that sort of thing is something work thinking about.

SM Nick Heath is a sports commentator and sports journalist. To watch more of his videos, search "life commentary" on YouTube. Coming up next, the woman who inspired Take Me Out to the Ballgame. Listen to this next clip. This is a famous turn-of-the-century vaudeville star named Trixie Forganza.

AS [singing]

SM That was Trixie Forganza. She was a famous vaudeville star in the early 20th century and aside from her work on the stage, she was also an outspoken feminist who used her celebrity to advocate for women's right to vote. But her incredible story doesn't end there. Anna Laymon is the executive director of the women's suffrage centennial commission. She says Trixie was also the inspiration behind the classic baseball song Take Me Out to the Ballgame. Anna, how in the world did you discover the feminist women who inspired one of America's most famous songs?

AL You know, I first came across this incredible story about Take Me Out to the Ballgame and Trixie Forganza in the Library of Congress' 19th amendment exhibit called Shall Not Be Denied. They feature the original sheet music of Take Me Out to the Ballgame in their exhibit about the 19th amendment and they go into all of this incredible detail about Trixie Forganza and how she's connected to the story. And that's what really piqued my interest and so I started doing a little bit of my own research from there.

SM What story did they unearth at the Library of Congress that told them the song was inspired by a feminist?

AL So in addition to the more traditional papers and photographs that the Library of Congress has in their collection, they also have this enormous collection of original sheet music from early American history. So it's just this like great Americana. And in their collection, they have the original sheet music of Take Me Out to the Ballgame when that song was copyrighted and published in 1908. And so what you have with this original sheet music, you can go to it and use it as this historical resource. On the cover of this original sheet music, you have a picture of Trixie Forganza and she is representative of the woman who is described in the song Katie Casey. So you have right there on the cover of Take Me Out to the Ballgame you have Trixie Forganza on the cover of the sheet music which makes any researcher pause and say, "well who is this woman and how is she connected to the song?" And so that's what the historians did. It was this

great historical mystery of 'where did this song come from? What's the basis of it? Who is Katie Casey?' And that's how they started.

SM But that's interesting. Katie Casey. When I hear, "Take me out to the ballgame, buy me some peanuts and crackerjacks," what's that got to do with Katie Casey?

AL So most Americans know those few lines of the song. And that's the chorus, that's the heart of the song but then there are these other verses of the song that most Americans have never heard.

SM Sing me some, sing me some.

AL So you've got what I love, right, you have this woman, Katie Casey, and the song is describing her wanting to go to the ball game. So we all know the lines right, "take me out to the ballgame, take me out to the crowd," we all know that. But it's the other lines that we've never heard. And so here's what you have in this song. You had this woman named Katie Casey and this man comes to her and he wants to take her out on a date right? He gives her a call and he's like, "Katie. Let's go see a show." And Katie responds to him and she's like, "no I don't wanna go to a show. Take me to the ballgame." And that's where that line comes from—take me out to the ballgame. But then the song goes on to describe Katie Casey and it describes her ask baseball mad. She saw all the games. She knew the players by their first names. And she told the umpire he was wrong. And it just goes onto describe this like over the top woman. In the song, she's sitting in the front row. You can picture her she's like turning around and she's leading the crowd in songs. So Take Me Out to the Ballgame, it just describes this woman who wants to be in the front row, she wants to be in the action, and she's saying, "Don't take me to the show. Take me out to the ballgame. Buy me some peanuts and cracker jacks." Like, "what's wrong with you? Forget the show." And so that was the question that researchers started with, was, is Katie Casey a real person? Is she based on someone real? And that's what led historians to discover that she is in fact based on someone real and that someone is Trixie Forganza.

SM Oh, so Katie Casey is a pseudonym for Trixie?

AL Exactly.

SM So, who is Trixie and why was Take Me Out to the Ballgame based on her?

AL So Trixie Forganza was a vaudeville star living in New York City. She was larger than life. She was the person that you would bring into your vaudeville show or to your movie if you needed comedic relief right she would fall over, she would dance, she would sing. And she was dating the man who wrote Take Me Out to the Ballgame. His name is Jack Norworth. So this is where things get interesting, and they go from maybe PG to PG-13.

So Jack Norworth was a fellow vaudeville star. And he was married and he was having an affair with Trixie Forganza. And so he published Take Me Out to the Ballgame right around the time that he divorced his wife and his affair with Trixie Forganza went public. What is even better about this story was that one month after he officially divorced his wife, he remarried. But he didn't remarry Trixie Forganza. He remarried a different woman that he was also having an affair with that Trixie Forganza knew nothing about. So he remarried, much to Trixie Forganza's surprise, a different woman. But here's what we know about Trixie and her connection to Take Me Out to the Ballgame. So of course we know that it's her picture that's featured on the cover of the sheet music. But we also know that Trixie was this new woman of the 1920s. So you have the turn of the century into the 1900s and the world that women occupy starts to change significantly. In the 1800s, the woman was meant to stay at home. That was her space. She wasn't really meant to be in public or be seen in public. As you get into the 1900s, things start to change for women. So women stop wearing dresses, they start wearing bloomers, which were these you know early version of pants. Women start riding bicycles. They have mobility, they have freedom that they've never had before because they can hop on a bicycle and they can go. And this is the new woman of the 1920s and that's what Trixie Forganza represented to Jack Norworth. And in addition to being larger than life on the screen, as vaudeville star, she was larger than life in her political and social activism. So we know that in 1907, one year before Jack Norworth published Take Me Out to the Ballgame, that Trixie Forganza started getting deeply involved in the suffrage movement. Suffragists had been demanding the right to vote since 1848. Sorry, can you hear my kids screaming in the background?

SM I love that. That's your two-year-old. We're all shut in. Who is that?

AL Um, that is my sweet little buddy, that's Bennett, my two-year-old. It's naptime and he's not happy about it.

SM That's great.

AL So yeah so you can hear that happening in the back. Sorry.

SM I'm with you. No problem. He's got daddy who will figure it out.

AL He's got daddy and he's got lungs to let us know how he feels about the situation.

SM And by the way, if you wanna stop, help him out, cause I know I wouldn't...

AL Oh, no.

SM You're good? Okay.

AL Yeah, no, this is a good excuse to not have to be involved in getting him down for a nap. Yeah give me one second.

SM Yeah, yeah, yeah.

AL So...

SM She gets involved in the suffrage movement which is doing what?

AL So the suffrage movement in the early 1900s, right when Trixie's career is really heating up, so is the suffrage movement. And the suffrage movement of the early 1900s, they need young, dynamic, strong vibrant women like Trixie and so she was out there in the streets making speeches, wearing the suffrage sashes that the women would wear—purple, gold, and white, in the suffrage colors, while they marched along the streets demanding the right to vote. And she has this quote that I absolutely adore. During one of these rallies where she is standing in a group of people, you know, loud, proud, giving a speech, she says “I do not believe any man at least no man I know is better fitted to form a political opinion than I am. And the crowd cheers right and goes wild. And, but these were radical ideas, right? The idea that a woman could have a political opinion was radical in 1908 when she said that.

SM Was she still around when the women's right to vote was finally ratified?

AL She was. So historically, what we know about Trixie's time in the suffrage movement was really limited to 1907 and 1908, which is interesting and speaks to how many historical mysteries are still out there. There's no way that Trixie became that hot and heavy and interested in the suffrage movement in 1907 and 1908 and then just backed away. But we don't know what happened to her activism after that and I would love to know. So if there any historians out there who can tell me, I would love that information. But we don't know. And it's so interesting with women's history because, for so long, the stories of women and our impact on the world and what we were doing and where we were and how and what we thought and why, all of those stories have been lost for so long. And so to be a part of the movement of people that is digging those stories out, telling those stories, uncovering those stories, and bringing light and life to those stories, is really just such a privilege and there's so much more work to do, which is both frustrating and exciting.

SM How did Jack Norworth actually come to pen Take Me Out to the Ballgame. What inspired in addition to Trixie?

AL So Jack Norworth was riding a train in New York City in 1908 and he's staring out the window thinking about whatever he's thinking about and he sees a billboard advertising a baseball game. And he looks at the billboard and it says, “baseball today, polo

grounds,” and, for creative people, sometimes that’s all it takes. And in an instant, he had this idea for Take Me Out to the Ballgame. And he had an envelope in his pocket that he pulled out. He had a pencil, he grabbed it, and on the back of this envelope, he hastily writes out the lyrics of Take Me Out to the Ballgame. And he looks at this and he says, “I think I have something here.” And he goes immediately to his friend who’s a musician, Albert von Tilser. And Albert is the one who writes the tune that we now know is Take Me out to the Ballgame. He sends the words to Albert, Albert writes the tune, and this incredible song is born. And what’s even better about this is neither Jack nor Albert had ever been to a baseball game when they wrote the song. But baseball, just as it is now, was such a part of the American imagination and the American story in the early 1900s that it didn’t matter that they’d never been to a baseball game. He knew enough about it to be able to write the song and to imagine and to bring this character Katie Casey to life.

SM How soon did the song take off?

00:25:38

AL You know, it took almost 70 years for the song to take off. So, when Take Me out to the Ballgame was published and copyrighted in 1908, there were hundreds of other little sort of tunes about baseball, some more popular than others, but none had ever managed to be the song to absolutely capture the national imagination and become the song associated with baseball. It really wasn’t until 1977 when the White Sox announcer, Harry Carey started to sing Take Me out to the Ballgame during the seventh-inning stretch that this song started to pick up in popularity. So we really had Harry Carey who would go over the loudspeaker over the whole stadium and he would sing that song and then the crowd got used to it and the crowd started to sing with him and that’s where it sparked and that’s where it became associated so inextricably with American baseball and with the seventh-inning stretch was back in the 1970s with the White Sox.

SM Anna Laymon, thank you for sharing your insights with me on With Good Reason.

AL Thank you so much for having me. This has been great.

SM Anna Laymon is executive director at the Women’s Suffrage Centennial Commission. For more on the commission, visit [womensvote100.org](http://womensvote100.org). Welcome back to With Good Reason from Virginia Humanities.

AS [sports commentating, cheering]

SM From Albert Pujols to Jose Altuve and Aroldis Chapman, major-league baseball is stacked with talented players who are born outside the U.S. But the major leagues weren’t always so diverse. James Witte is a sociology professor at George Mason

University and Marissa Kiss is a PhD student at GMU. They've been studying the demographic shifts of foreign born players in the major leagues and have uncovered an interesting connection between the percentage of foreign born players and US immigration policy. Jim, you are a sociologist. How did you get into studying baseball? What is your baseball affiliation?

JW I played a lot of baseball when I was little and through high school. Before I came to Mason, I taught at Clemson and, at that time, Clemson still is a big sports school. It was even better in baseball then than in football and a couple of my colleagues in the sociology department were big baseball fans and we would go to games once in a while and just kind of talk baseball.

SM And Marissa your whole dissertation is focused on this, how did you become interested in really drilling down on immigration and baseball? Are you a baseball fan?

MK Yes, I am a huge Nationals fan. I did grow up in New York and we are a house divided. My dad and I were Mets fans and my mom and brother were Yankees fans. But growing up with an older brother, I played every sport, I ran track, I ran cross country, I played soccer, so I always loved sports and enjoyed them. And you know we're all families of immigrants and so immigration and telling stories of our families has always been important as well.

SM You have studied the increase in foreign born players in major league baseball over many years. What are the numbers? What did you find?

MK Um, so over time, the numbers have consistently increased, but they also have fluctuated with the passage of immigration laws and also historical events as well. Back in the 1870s, the portion that were foreign born was significantly less. It was around 8% and from up until 2017, it's about 25-26% of players are foreign born in the MLB.

SM And the foreign born back in the 1800s was predominately from where?

MK 2/3 were from Europe and about a third were from Canada and when you actually look at the US population during that time, about 90% of immigrants were from Europe, so you do see trends looking at the US population, who were immigrants lineup pretty well with the players who are foreign born from the countries that they were from as well.

SM So from predominantly Europeans who were the immigrants playing American baseball, today we have players who immigrated from which countries primarily?

MK Predominantly from the Caribbean. So we have a majority are from the Dominican Republic. You also have a large population from Cuba, and then also when you look at

South Americans who make up about 25% of the players in the MLB, majority are from Venezuela.

SM When do we start seeing so many players from the Caribbean and South America coming to major league baseball? What was the genesis of that?

JW Well I think one thing that really started it was Jackie Robinson and sort of the breaking of the color barrier in major-league baseball. That really open things up and you know this is right after World War II. There was greater integration through the Armed Forces so as you see those changes in society...we see them in sports and in particular baseball.

SM So if Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier in baseball and opened it up to people with brown skin, when did we begin to see the emergence of players from the Dominican Republic, Cuba, and Venezuela?

MK You also start to see that starting in the 1960s, so along with integration of Jackie Robinson, there was also the Hart and Celler Act that abolished the previous quota systems which increased opportunities for individuals to migrate to the US from Asia and Central America and Mexico and Africa and Middle East and other parts of Europe. So along with the changes in immigration, you also saw an increase in immigrant ball players from these other parts of the world too. But starting in the 1990s to to pretty much the present day, especially after September 11th, there's a restriction in immigration, increase in border enforcement, but what's interesting is that, during this time from the 1990s to 2017, there has been a substantial increase in foreign born players so while there's been a curtailing of immigration coming to the US, there has been an increase in MLB players even though there were stricter enforcement along immigration laws.

SM And what does that suggest to you?

MK That major league baseball continued to practice their recruiting and exploiting players from foreign countries primarily in the Caribbean.

SM In other words, they got good at finding ways to bring in key players that they wanted?

JW Yeah and I think that's one of the biggest things is if you think about not the big major league stars but the people who come from say the Caribbean, from the DR, as minor leaguers who—one of the one of the most interesting things I find about the way the major league baseball organizations have attempted to tap into foreign talent is the fact that each of the major league baseball teams has set up an academy in the Dominican Republic and that's where they bring kids even if young as 14 who live there and, yes, there's some educational component but mostly they play baseball all day. And there are

scouts, there's showcases, there are ways for the best of these young kids to be identified as potential prospects and eventually sign contracts. To me, the two interesting things there is where you can think about exploitation. What's happened to the kids who don't make it, who have not gotten a good education, and there's also opportunity, you can't deny that, for the ones who do make it. But both of those things, the exploitation and the opportunity are being facilitated by the business of baseball. For a young teenager from the Dominican Republic to get to the United States to play in the minor leagues, they typically come on an H2 visa to be a seasonal worker. They don't know how to do that. This is all organized and run through major-league baseball and its affiliates. Once they're in the major leagues, they have a different visa status and I think this is also a really important aspect of why we look at immigrants and professional baseball is that it is an example of, first of all the complexity of our immigration system...the different types of visas. The major league baseball players come in on a visa that's based on extraordinary talent, the minor-league players as seasonal workers, and they have to leave when the seasons over—the minor-league players. But that this is an example of the complexity of the system and also the extent to which our immigration system is shaped in part by economic factors and forces that can influence our immigration policy.

SM How much are these young immigrant, let's say from the DR training camp players, paid? The ones that are brought here as seasonal workers?

JW Not much. I don't know the exact figure but you know they're living on the road with sort of minimal food and housing allowances and then you know when the season in the United States ends, then they go back to the DR or other places where there are continuing leagues in play for minor-league players to continue to develop their skills and also then hopefully, from their point of view, be noticed for a possible return to the United States and eventually the goal of making it into the major league part.

MK Part of my dissertation is looking for whether foreign born players are paid less compared to native born players. And when I look at from 1990 to 2017, it's actually that they're paid more, both batters and pitchers who are foreign born actually get paid more than native born batters and pitchers which is extremely surprising given what we know about a lot of the exploitation that occurs. But what I did find is when you look between 1990 to about 2004, foreign born players actually paid less. So there's this big switch starting in the year 2005 when foreign born players were actually paid more.

SM Do you think that's because a lot of the foreign born players became the bigger stars?

MK Agreed because they actually, when you look at performance, they actually performed better than the native born players.

JW Yeah and I think that's one of the things that's really a goal with some of this work is to figure out how much of it is—the difference in earnings can be explained by differences in performance and then also differences in the process by which they come to the United States. We've learned of a couple of businesses that actually speculate in the future careers of foreign players where they'll scout in the DR and elsewhere trying to find the most promising prospects and then offer them a big advance, couple hundred thousand dollars, and in return they were going to get a percentage of the players future earnings. So they're basically gambling on the prospects, the futures of foreign born players and that they're more likely to take that because a lot of them are coming from severely disadvantaged backgrounds and so some upfront money means a lot to them.

SM What do you think will happen now with coronavirus virtually halting immigration to and from the United States?

JW That's a very very good question. Again, our main argument is sports is part of society. And so we would expect they're gonna be some differences in major league baseball, short term as well as medium term and long term. Short term, nobody's playing major-league baseball. Medium term, I think people are going to figure out how to do it in a more controlled environment because of the risk of the coronavirus. But I think longer-term, it is going to make much of American society more insular, and so I would not be surprised to see a decline in the proportion of foreign born ball players, starting with the minor leagues and then working its way up to the major leagues.

SM James Witte is a sociology professor at George Mason University. He's also the director of the Institute for Immigration Research. Marissa Kiss is a sociology PhD student at George Mason University. Coming up next, disturbing trends behind the shortage of sports referees. If you played youth sports, you've probably witnessed this scene countless times. Kid plays sporting event, parent roots for kid, referee makes a controversial call, parent yells at ref, but far too often, those yells turn into harassment or violence and it's contributing to a major shortage of referees. In fact, a survey by the National Association of Sports Officials found 80% of new referees quit within the first two years. Lynn Ridinger is a sports management professor at Old Dominion University. She says verbal abuse is one of the many reasons why young referees are leaving the profession. Lynn, you studied the nationwide shortage of sports referees. What got you interested in the first place?

LR Well, I have done some officiating in the past myself. I've been in a field hockey and lacrosse official for probably about 15 years. I did some coaching and then once I got out of coaching, didn't have time for that, that's when I took up officiating. Also I have a brother that's a baseball umpire, I have lots of friends to officiate, so it was a personal interest of mine and being involved with officiating, I saw the dire need for more officials. And in my two sports especially, there was always a shortage, and then as I got into

doing research, I found out that this is almost all sports at all levels, we're seeing a decline in sports officials.

SM Are we mostly talking about, let's say high school, middle school sports sponsored by schools or are we talking about teams unaffiliated by schools usually?

LR My research has focused primarily on high school officials but I've also looked at research across the globe at all levels.

SM And what do you find typically to be the gender and age demographic of the referees you survey?

LR Oh yeah, this one is consistent. It's primarily men, almost 90% male, heavily Caucasian. about 80% white males. Most of them are college educated, about 75% and one of the most alarming statistics is the age. And what we found in our study of over 2,000 officials was that the median age was 54, and that gets a little tough to get up and down the field with a bunch of 17 and 18-year-old sometimes so we're seeing an aging of officials and we're not seeing a cadre of younger folks wanting to join the ranks and stick with it and so when these older folks retire, who's going to take their place?

SM Why do you think there's not more diversity and not more women?

LR Yeah there definitely is an opportunity there to try to get more diversity within the officiating ranks but I think just in the past, historically, traditionally, sports have been a male domain and a lot of the associations that run these sports officials and things have been run by males. And they tend to probably reach out and recruit people they know and that are like them and maybe there hasn't been enough effort in reaching out to other folks because we see, as far as high school athletes, there's a large number of female athletes these days. But you don't see those same numbers in the officiating.

SM Tell me about the survey that you did of referees. How many people did you survey and how wide a net did you cast?

LR Yeah I've done several studies but the one that you're referring to, we sent out a survey to the officials that were associated with the Virginia High School League and then also the high school league in North Carolina and we had a response of about 3000 officials.

SM And what do you want to share with us that we should understand about how people get into the field and why they leave?

LR Yeah another alarming statistic is that only about 20% of new officials stay for more than two years and so some of the initial attractors that we found in our research is that a lot of folks get involved because of this enjoyable affiliation. They have some connection,

they love the game, they want to stay involved, they want to give back, they like the challenge of officiating and being a part of the competition. And so that's huge. That's huge as far as attracting them initially and also for them to keep with it, dealing and coping with the stress is important but also being educated and trained and so that you're comfortable in the field and the rules, the mechanics, also dealing with people, that's part of the training. Dealing with coaches and players and fans, and having a mentor is also important. I remember saying to a younger official one time, you know, I've been officiating for 15 years and I'm yet to call the perfect game. I always do my best, I always try, but nobody's perfect and I challenge, I doubt if there's a player who's played the perfect game or a coach who's coached the perfect game, so yeah, it's just part of being human.

SM How big a factor in burn out do you think verbal abuse is?

LR Well interestingly there's a number of studies that have looked at that and what they have found is that stress and the burnout is actually quite rare. That most officials, and it could be who they've been surveying, because they're surveying people that have been officiating, and that have learned to deal and cope with the stress, and so they're sticking it out and they have those skills. But for a lot of officials that are still officiating, they accept it and they expect it. It's part of the game and so it doesn't really bother them. It's the younger officials that I'm concerned, it does get to them and that's why we're seeing that only 20% stick it out for more than two years because I think, a lot of them, they are concerned about getting yelled at. I did a study several years back with college lacrosse players and just finding out, you know, had they thought about officiating? Would they consider it? And why or why not? And one of the biggest concerns was they saw their coaches yelling at officials and they didn't want to be at that end of getting yelled at.

SM Remind me, did you say you officiated at the high school level, not college?

LR I did division III college a little bit, and high school, and middle school, and some youth. But I never did division I.

SM Did you ever get verbal abuse yourself?

LR Um, yeah I'm sure I did. I was one of those people that I just kind of expected it and sometimes I found it amusing, as I'm running up and down the sideline listening to some of the parents who don't really know the rules and yeah no it happens. But I personally I didn't see it as problematic but I know, working with some of the younger officials, I had to take them under my wing and talk to them a few times. And sometimes you have to go and you have to talk to the coaches and I think it's learning those relationships and establishing yourself right at the beginning when you walk out on the field. You introduce yourself to the coach. You now become a person and then being respectful of the players. You make a call and then say, "Okay number 15, I know you didn't mean it, but

you did trip her.” And you have to, you know, that was a foul. So just showing that respect I think you get that back.

SM Give me an example of a moment you remember when somebody startled you with an outburst.

LR Yeah, I can't, there's not any particular situation or case that's coming to mind but I do recall several times with some parents who might be saying something and I'm thinking to myself I want to turn around and yell back at them. Well, no, that's not the case because you don't...that's not the rule. But you know I don't have time to explain it to them nor is it my job to do that and so I just keep on running and then.

SM Right, you can run away.

LR That's right! You can run...And in my sport, you run up and down the field. And in the sports that I did, field hockey and lacrosse, a lot of people actually weren't as familiar with the rules and so I probably didn't get yelled at as much as officials in basketball or baseball and softball where folks think they know it all.

SM So you never got a, “Hey ref, you blind?”

LR Oh yeah, yeah, we all get that. Oh sure. Everybody sees it through, no matter what you call, you're going to...half of the crowd's with you and half of the crowd's going to be against you. But that's just part of the job. And I think most of the officials that stick with it, they realize that.

SM What are you hearing at your college, Old Dominion University, about the prospect for the fall? Whether there, for instance, could be a basketball team playing on the court with no fans—that kind of thing.

LR I think they're looking at all options at this point. I know the sports world, they're definitely concerned. There's all sorts of issues, of course with safety is the number one issue. But there's a lot of financial issues as well with athletics and if the seasons don't go in the fall, there's going to be all sorts of teams and schools that are going to be struggling.

SM Do you think we'll have home team games with loud fan noise is piped into the arena to simulate a home team game?

LR Who knows? We'll see. Because it would be strange for the athletes that are used to playing in front of large crowds to be in an empty stadium. I'm sure that would be a little different experience. It'd be back to the schoolyard days when you're playing without crowds.

SM We'll have to throw in a few abusive fans, right?

LR Oh, yes, yes, you need those people yelling at the officials, so that's part of sports, and I think it's all, I'm not saying that people shouldn't yell at officials but you know I think there's a place on when folks cross the line. When things become abusive and hostile, that's when it gets damaging.

SM Well, Lynn, thank you for sharing your insights on With Good Reason.

LR Yes no it's been my pleasure.

SM Lynn Ridinger is a sports management professor and chair of the department of movement sciences at Old Dominion University. Major support for With Good Reason is provided by the law firm of McGuireWoods and by the University of Virginia Health System, using advanced cardiac imaging to better diagnose conditions before they become serious health issues, UVAhealth.com. With Good Reason is produced in Charlottesville by Virginia Humanities. Our production team is Allison Quantz, Matt Darroch, Allison Byrne, Lauren Francis, and Jamal Millner. Some of the music is by Blue Dot Sessions. For the podcast, go to [withgoodreasonradio.org](http://withgoodreasonradio.org). I'm Sarah McConnell. Thanks for listening.