

# That's My Team!

**T**wenty-five years ago, I was teaching teens on Rikers Island—the world's biggest jail—to read and write. At the start of every class, I'd search for a topic to connect the students, bring them together as a group. There was something that I could usually count upon—the night before, they were all gathered around the one TV in the day room watching a baseball, football or basketball game. So I started to discuss the names of sports teams.

*What exactly is a Knick? A Cavalier? A Dodger? A Patriot? A 49er?* It was a real attention grabber, even for students who were reluctant readers and learners.

Then one day, I was standing in line at the public library. A pair of teens were waiting ahead of me. One needed information for a research paper, the other, who was wearing a Baltimore Ravens football jersey, appeared to be just keeping his friend company. The teen in the jersey looked as though he'd rather be any place in the world than a library.

I said to him, "If you're going to wear that jersey, you should know how the Baltimore Ravens received their name. Why did they choose Ravens for the city of Baltimore? The answer's in a book on one of these shelves."

One of the librarians, who must have overheard me, approached that teen and handed him a volume of Edgar Allan Poe poems containing "The Raven." He gleefully accepted it and even checked the book out. That was the moment I fully understood that the concept of learning about the world through the lens of sports teams' names would make an incredible book.

Several years later, I became an author myself, eventually writing twelve novels for young adults. When I began doing author visits at schools around the country, I would always unpack a handful of sports teams' names at every show. Their logos became part of my PowerPoint presentations. Both students and educators became excited as we began to explore the meanings and historical significance behind those team names.

A quarter-century after initially envisioning this concept, it has finally become a completed work and my first non-fiction book. It is aptly entitled **That's My Team! The History, Science, and Fun behind Sports Teams' Names** (Rowman & Littlefield, August 2019).

For those of you who are still uncertain about the connection—Edgar Allan Poe lived and died in the city of Baltimore. He is buried there today, and tourists often visit his grave. Your students might know "The Raven" more from *The Simpsons' Treehouse of Horror* episode, in which Bart Simpson plays the role of the raven. Instead of saying "nevermore," Bart's raven utters his memorable catch-phrase, "Eat my shorts."

**That's My Team!** is divided into twelve chapters, each one dedicated to an academic discipline of learning. There's World History, American History, Literature/Language/Mythology, Music/Pop Culture, Changing Society: Gender and Race, Natural World, Geography, Industrial Revolution, Foreign Studies, People and Politics, Marine Life/Meteorology, and Electives/Independent Studies.

## FROM THE CHAPTER ON WORLD HISTORY

The origins of football or *futballe* can be traced back to the beginning of the 2nd century in England. After an occupation of more than twenty years, British forces finally drove out the invading Danes. Years later, Danish skulls, unearthed from British battlefields, were kicked about the countryside for sport. Eventually, the skulls were replaced with inflated cow bladders. Contests emerged between neighboring towns. The object was to kick these bladders—the early ancestors of football pigskins—into the center of the opposing town.

## Minnesota Vikings (1961-present)

The Minnesota Vikings received their name because of a strong Nordic heritage in the Northern Midwest of the U.S., which is populated by many Danish, Finnish, Icelandic, Norwegian, and Swedish-Americans. In Norse, "Viking" means piracy, but the Vikings were more than brutal pirates. They were

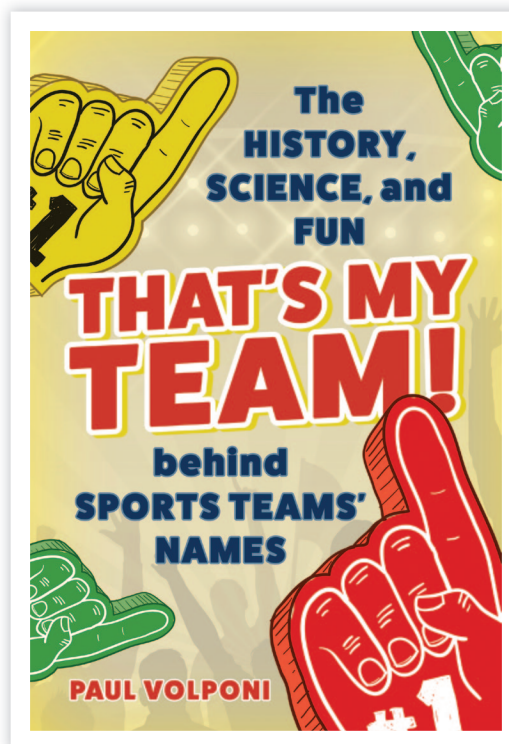




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PAUL VOLPONI TALKS WITH A CONNECTICUT STUDENT WHO IS WEARING PITTSBURGH STEELERS' GARB.

explorers, warriors, and merchants as well. The Vikings both plundered and colonized the coasts of Northern and Western Europe from the 8th to 11th centuries. They possessed advanced sailing and navigational skills and traveled in longboats that used both sails and oars for added speed. The Vikings, though, were generally a non-literate culture, recording little of their history in books. Most of what we know about the Vikings comes from other cultures.

The horn emblems that decorate the Minnesota Vikings' football helmets are meant to mirror those once believed to be worn by real Vikings. However, these warriors never actually went into battle with horns on their helmets. Why? The Vikings' close-quarters style of combat would have caused severe harm to their fellow troops if sharp horns had been attached.

#### **Tampa Bay Buccaneers (1976-present)**

The Buccaneers get their name from the French word *boucan*—a grill used for smoking the dried meats once served on ships at sea. That means buccaneers were among the earliest fans of jerky. During the late 17th century, buccaneers were sponsored by England and France to disrupt the rival Spanish shipping industry in the Caribbean. Authors such as Robert Louis Stevenson and Jonathan Swift glorified the adventures of these organized bands of pirates who democratically elected their captains and evenly divided their stolen spoils under the principals of liberty, equality, and fraternity.

Robert Louis Stevenson's **Treasure Island** is a famous tale of buccaneers and buried gold. Check it out from your local library and read about teen Jim Hawkins' adventure aboard the pirate ship *Hispaniola*, as he tries to keep a treasure map from falling into the hands of a one-legged buccaneer named Long John Silver.

Of course, just like rooting for your favorite team at a sporting event, I wanted to make this text interactive. *That's My Team!* contains 15 separate "Challenges" (small mini-assignments for students) spread throughout the book. They range from learning about alliteration (seen in teams like the Jacksonville Jaguars and San Antonio Spurs), how to use and decipher Roman numerals (which designate the Super Bowls), and a writing assignment on creating your own sport (much the way J.K. Rowling invented "quidditch" for the *Harry Potter* series). Just examine the excerpt from World History (above). It informs us that the Vikings were at their peak from the 8th to 11th centuries and that the Buccaneers were in force during the 17th century. How many of our students can confidently put a year to those centuries? One of this text's Challenges is to learn which years belong to which centuries. In essence, this text inspires learning through sports-driven material.

## FROM THE CHAPTER ON AMERICAN HISTORY

Once, when I was doing a school visit in Philadelphia, I had nearly one hundred students sitting before me in a library. I asked them, "What's the name of the basketball team in your city?" Almost in unison, they immediately shouted back "Seventy-Sixers." I then asked why a team from the city of Philadelphia would be given such a name. The library remained silent, and the students stumped. It's a good thing that the library was on the first floor, because I can assure you, their history teacher, who attended the presentation, was at that moment thinking about jumping out the nearest window.

#### **Philadelphia 76ers (1963-present)**

The NBA's Philadelphia 76ers owe their name to the year in which the United States was born. On July 4, 1776, the Continental Congress adopted the Declaration of Independence. The document was penned by Thomas Jefferson, with help from John Adams and Benjamin Franklin. It officially separated the thirteen American Colonies from Great Britain and outlined the principles by which our new nation would govern itself.

#### **Charlotte Hornets (1988-2002, 2014-present)**

Charlotte, North Carolina was named after the wife of England's King George III. While occupying the city in 1780, British Commander Lord Cornwallis received such hostile treatment from the locals that he referred to Charlotte as "a hornet's nest of rebellion." The city even adopted a hornet's nest as its official emblem. The NBA's franchise there is perfectly nicknamed the Charlotte Hornets.

#### **San Francisco 49ers (1946-present)**

In 1849, "Gold Fever" struck San Francisco. Gold was discovered in the streams and riverbeds of the Sierra Nevada Mountains east of the city. That's when prospectors, otherwise known as 49ers, raced across the country to California. The fever was so bad that ships sat abandoned in the local harbor, and San Francisco's two newspapers shut down, because everyone was out prospecting for gold.

#### **Oklahoma Sooners**

The University of Oklahoma's teams are nicknamed the Sooners. Why? In 1899, Congress opened up almost 2,000,000 acres for settlers. It was referred to as "The Land Run of 1899," because when official permission was given, the settlers raced onto the land to claim the best plots. However, close to 10,000 homesteaders near Oklahoma Station entered the area *too soon*. They hid in the countryside. Once the "run" officially began, they jumped out to stake their claims ahead of the rest. Hence, we have the Oklahoma Sooners.

## FROM CHAPTERS ON DISCRIMINATED GROUPS

At almost every school visit, the girls seem one step ahead of the boys—not only in knowing these team names but also at explaining how those names were chosen. So when I sat down to write **That's My Team!**, I knew the text needed to be very inclusive. I wanted to make sure that a strong number of women's teams were included, as well as the journey of women in sports. Similarly, I wanted to ensure that the history of prejudice in sports was tackled head-on, as well as the subject of sports teams' names inspired by Native-American culture.

Over the past half-century, the names given to women's sports teams have changed dramatically. In the early 1940s, The All-American Girls' Baseball Professional League (1943-1954) was

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founded by chewing gum mogul Philip K. Wrigley who was worried that World War II would draft all of baseball's best male players for soldiers. Wrigley also believed the public would only accept female athletes who projected soft, non-threatening images. He sent his players to charm school and made sure they received tips on fixing their hair and makeup. Forget about long pants for sliding—Wrigley had his players competing in fashionable skirts, raised several inches above the knee. The nicknames of the teams also followed suit—Racine Belles (1943-1950), Rockford Peaches (1943-1954), Grand Rapids Chicks (1945-1954), Fort Wayne Daisies (1945-1954), Muskegon Lassies (1946-1950), and Chicago Colleens (1948-1950).

The National Hockey League's Tampa Bay Lightning owe their nickname to central Florida's "Lightning Alley" where more lightning strikes occur than anywhere else in the U.S., with as many as fifty strikes per square mile each year. In 1992, lightning struck in a different way as female goalie Manon Rheume became the first woman to compete against men in professional hockey by playing in a pair of preseason contests. Though Rheume never played in a regular season NHL game, she did win a silver medal in the 1998 Olympics for the Canadian women's team. Her autobiography is aptly titled **Manon: Alone in Front of the Net** (HarperCollins Canada, June 1993).

#### Notre Dame Fighting Irish

The University of Notre Dame calls its sports teams the Fighting Irish. In the early 19th century, there was a strong anti-Catholic sentiment facing Irish immigrants who'd come to the U.S. Signs were actually posted at work sites looking to hire that read: "Irish Need Not Apply!" or "Irish Go Home!" The phrase "Fighting Irish" was a slur in New England during this time. Notre Dame, which is located in South Bend, Indiana, embraced the nickname to represent people who suffer from discrimination.

#### Philadelphia SPHAS (1917-1953)

The Sphas were an acronym—an abbreviation used as a word. It stood for the South Philadelphia Hebrew Association, which had a basketball all-star team comprised of primarily Jewish players. From 1933 to 1946, the Sphas were a dominant force in the American Basketball League, winning seven championships during that span. Throughout their history, the team endured many anti-Semitic remarks from the press and opposing fans who contended that the Sphas' Jewish heritage somehow made them genetically superior to play the game of basketball.

#### Baseball's Color Barrier

Negro League Baseball fielded teams from 1867 to 1962, before and even after baseball became desegregated in 1947 when Jackie Robinson joined the Brooklyn Dodgers. Hall of Fame players such as Satchel Paige of the Kansas City Monarchs (1920-1965), Josh Gibson of the Pittsburgh Crawfords (1931-1940), and Hank Aaron of the Indianapolis Clowns (1930-1955) played in these leagues. Some clubs used the designation "Black" in front of their nicknames to separate them from the teams of Major League Baseball. These teams included: Birmingham Black Barons (1920-1960), Washington Black Senators (1938) and New York Black Yankees (1931-1948). The Genuine or Original Cuban Giants (1885-1915) were based in the city of Newark, New Jersey. Despite their nickname, they began with no Cubans on the team. The club's promoter chose the name to appeal to a broader audience after the Cuban Giants, who were entirely African-American, defeated many all-white baseball teams.

#### Native Americans

Sports teams named after peoples or aspects of various cultures have become an extremely sensitive issue. Does the name honor the chosen group, or does it reduce them to mere mascots, creating an atmosphere of inequality? To this point, pro football's Washington Redskins (1932-present) have become a true lightning rod for serious debate. The term "redskin" was originally used to describe the scalps that bounty hunters provided as proof of their killings of Native Americans. Initially, little attention was paid to the outcry of Native Americans about this issue, but as social awareness increased in the 1960s and 1970s, the matter became more contentious—and continues today. Native Americans and other groups contend the name "Redskins" promotes harmful stereotypes in our society. They point to examples such as a 1998 headline from the **Washington Post**—"Cowboys Finish Off Redskins." In sharp contrast, representatives of the team have presented the argument that the nickname symbolizes the greatness and strength of native people, appropriately honoring them.

#### TIMEOUTS

In addition to the fifteen Challenges, **That's My Team!** also includes three "Timeouts" spread about the text. In each one, readers are given the opportunity to create a name for their own team. The initial prompt asks readers to literally create a *home team* by formulating a name for a franchise in the city where the reader lives—using the knowledge of their familiar surroundings. For the other two opportunities, readers are given the background of a pair of cities—Wichita (KS) and Hartford (CT). At the end of the text, readers have the chance to create a team deed, which bears their name as the owner. They also have the option of creating a logo and even a mascot for their team. Yes, it could be a baseball, basketball, football, hockey, or soccer team. It could just as easily be a debate, chess, or math team, as well. This interactive aspect of the text lends itself to the library and the classroom.

Last year, the public library system in San Jose, California, invited me to speak to their students. On my first night in town, their NHL franchise, the San Jose Sharks, was playing the Winnipeg Jets. I asked the librarian for multiple copies of two specific classics, promising that I would get them checked out by students after my performance. Well, I accomplished that, and the excerpt below is what I communicated to make it happen.

#### Center Ice/Center Stage

*West Side Story* is a famous musical inspired by Shakespeare's tragic play, *Romeo and Juliet*. These modern star-crossed lovers

are named Tony and Maria. It's set on the Upper West Side of New York City in the 1950s. Interestingly, hockey's version of *West Side Story* occurs whenever the San Jose Sharks (1991-present) faceoff against the Winnipeg Jets (2011-present). Do you know why? Well, the teams' nicknames mirror the names of the two rival gangs in the musical—the Sharks and Jets.

## THE CONNECTION BETWEEN MYTHOLOGY AND SPORTS TEAMS' NAMES

On the college football field, who would win between the University of Southern California Trojans and the Michigan State Spartans? Why, Greek mythology assures us the Spartans would triumph, of course. They have a sweet trick-play called the "Trojan Horse." Homer was a Greek poet who lived in the 8th century B.C. According to his epic poem the *Odyssey*, twenty-five Spartans, led by Odysseus, hid inside the hollowed out stomach of a huge wooden horse. The horse was left at the gates of Troy as the symbol of the Trojans' victory over the Greeks in a long, bitter war. Once inside the city, the Spartans snuck out under cover of night and burned the city full of drunken Trojan soldiers who believed the war was over.

## EXPLORING DIFFERENT CULTURES

There are sections explaining team names from Australia, Canada, China, Cuba, England, and South Korea.

### Arsenal Gunners (1886-present)

The Arsenal Football Club is a professional soccer team based in London, England. The club was formed in the late 19th century by workers at the Royal Arsenal in the Borough of Woolwich, south-east London. An *arsenal* is a collection of weapons of military equipment stored in a group. The Arsenal F.C. is nicknamed the Gunners, sporting a trio of cannons on their crest (or team badge), because of the long military history surrounding the area, including the Royal Arsenal, Royal Artillery Regiment, and various military hospitals.

### Land of the Rising Sun

Japan was given the name "Land of the Rising Sun" by ancient Chinese imperials, because of its position east (where the sun rises) of China. Baseball is considered to be Japan's national pastime, and the country has adopted some of our most famous teams' names. For example, the Yomiuri Giants (1950-present) sport the same team colors and basic uniform design of our San Francisco Giants (1958-present), which were once the New York Giants (1886-1957) before relocating to the west coast. Japanese baseball also boasts teams named Tigers, Lions, and Eagles. Of course, Japan is an island nation, surrounded on all sides by the Pacific Ocean. Hence, many of their nicknames are inspired by the sea—Whales, BayStars, BlueWave, Pearls, Marines, and Carp (a type of fish). In Asian culture, the dragon is a symbol of power, strength, and good luck for deserving people. Also, anyone who becomes outstanding in their chosen field of work—music, martial arts, painting, teaching, farming, and so on—is considered to be a dragon. Aspiring to that highest level of skill, Japanese baseball features a team named the Chunichi Dragons (1950-present).

### Dictators and Baseball

Yes, they've played baseball in China for a long time—that is, whenever they're allowed. The Shanghai Baseball Club came into existence sometime before 1863. Mao Zedong (1893-1976), former Chairman of the Communist Party, however, actually banned base-

ball in China because of its association with the West and freedom. The ban took effect in 1966 and lasted ten years, until Mao's death. In 1959, Fidel Castro (1926-2016) ditched his army fatigues and donned a baseball uniform to play an exhibition game for a team of revolutionaries nicknamed *Los Barbudos* (The Bearded Ones). Castro seized military and political power on the island nation of Cuba that same year, holding it for nearly six decades until his passing.

Despite its seriousness about joining the concepts of sports and learning, there is an extraordinary amount of pure fun found in the pages of *That's My Team!* For instance, Scottsdale Community College in Arizona calls its teams the Fighting Artichokes. It all stems back to a disagreement between students and administrators, who wanted to spend extra money on athletic programs for publicity and not on basic educational needs. Of course, the Artichokes were followed by copycat college teams such as the Fighting Pickle (UNC School of the Arts), the Fighting Okra (Delta State University in Mississippi), and even the Fighting Radish (Japan's Tokyo University of Agriculture.)

Finally, the book examines the names of many sports teams from literature, film, and television, including Springfield's nuclear power plant team, called the Isotopes in *The Simpsons*, and the South Park Elementary Cows in the animated series *South Park*. There's also the NHL's real-life Anaheim Ducks, a name that springs directly from the Disney film *The Mighty Ducks*, about a youth hockey team.

How can we have an NBA team called the Utah Jazz (there are no jazz roots in Utah)? What impact did the University of Florida Gators have upon the sports drink Gatorade? Why is a team in Los Angeles named the Lakers? What exactly are Mavericks? What caused the owner of the NBA's Washington Bullets to change his team's name to the Wizards? **That's My Team!** answers all of those questions and a lot more.

In total, almost 350 sports teams' names are discussed, dissected, scrutinized, and mostly enjoyed. Just imagine a stadium or arena packed to the rafters with highly-motivated fans ready to bring their passion and fervor to the fore for their favorite sports franchise. Well, I believe that every one of them, including our sports-crazed reluctant readers and learners, will at some point in the pages of this text, leap to their feet and shout, "*That's My Team!*" ■

Paul Volponi is an author, educator, and journalist. He is the recipient of twelve American Library Association Honors (a combination of Best Book Young Adult and Quick Pick, inspiring non-readers to read). His novel **Black and White** is the winner of the International Reading Association's Children's Book Award.

His novel **The Final Four**, recipient of five starred reviews, is on the New York City Chancellor's Ninth Grade Reading List (NYC Reads 365). You can see all of Paul's books, as well as receive information on his author visits, at <http://paulvolponibooks.com>.

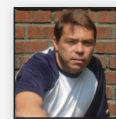


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