

The Washington Post

Constitutional lawyer explains his viral Caps/Leafs Frankenjersey

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April 21, 2017

The first principle of modern fan nihilism holds that we should not judge any fan for his individual choices, no matter if they differ from ours. Want to show up late and leave early? That's fine. Want to read Tolstoy's "Childhood, Boyhood and Youth" from your seat rather than watch the action? Sure, go ahead. Want to check out of a playoff series entirely due to fears of impending doom and instead take a Segway tour of Capitol Hill? Prices start at \$35. If it's all just entertainment, you choose the path that is most entertaining, and we won't judge you for it.

I've lately made exceptions to this code to make fun of fans who wear ridiculous apparel to games — an Eagles jersey to a Cowboys-Redskins game, a Penguins sweater to a Caps-Rangers game, a Philadelphia Soul T-shirt to a Valor-Brigade game — because that sometimes feels like a pure quest for attention dollars, conducted in a rather trollish manner. And so I thought I was on safe ground last week when I saw a guy in a hybrid Caps/Leafs jersey walking down 6th Street. I wrenched my car to the side of the road and frantically took photos, and then I posted the image on Twitter, along with a rather snarky message.



But of course, soon enough, I was talking to Ilya Shapiro inside Verizon Center, and it turned out his justification was valid, as most fan justifications turn out to be.

“In the bathroom, some guys were ripping me, like ‘Choose one, I don’t care which one, you’ve got to choose one,’ ” Shapiro told me. “And honestly, normally I’d probably be one of these guys. But this runs deep.”

Ilya Shapiro is conflicted. (Dan Steinberg/The Washington Post)

Shapiro, you see, spent his entire childhood in Toronto. As we talked, he pointed to a random man wearing a Doug Gilmour Leafs sweater; “I had that jersey when I was in high school,” he said. They were his favorite team in the world, playing his favorite sport in the world.

But he moved to Washington more than a decade ago for work. (He’s a constitutional lawyer at the Cato Institute, because of course he is.) Caps tickets were cheap then. You could get 400-level tickets and move down to the 100-level. His college classmate at Princeton, Jeff Halpern, was one of the team’s leaders. Hockey remained his favorite sport. And so Shapiro became a regular.

And then, as with all of us, life took over. He became a season ticket holder. He took a woman to a Caps game for their first date, and they wound up getting married. It became clear that he wasn’t going to move back to Toronto. The Leafs and Caps were never rivals, had never played in the playoffs, had no particular reason to hate each other. Washington’s team began occupying a place in his heart, and Toronto’s team never left it, so that eventually Shapiro decided his two favorite teams in all of sports were his hometown Leafs and his hometown Caps.

Then this season happened: the Leafs young and exciting, the Capitals established and dominant. As the playoff possibilities finally strained down into just a few realistic outcomes, Shapiro kept hoping that the Leafs would move up in the Atlantic Division, avoiding the wild card and the Caps. But the matchup was finalized, and he had his Game 2 tickets, and he didn’t know what to do. He loves the teams equally. He roots for them equally. So he came up with a solution befitting his profession, taking his Caps jersey and his Auston Matthews Leafs jersey and attaching them together with safety pins, right down the middle.

“At Cato, we take pride in saying we’re not on either the red team or the blue team; here I am living this out in another context ” Shapiro pointed out, in a quote that should be submitted to the Washington D.C. Archetypical Sports Fan Hall of Fame.

Of course, things got a little sideways when his jersey went viral-ish last weekend. NBC’s NHL account tweeted about him. CSN invited him to be on its postgame show. Don Cherry Parody accounts mentioned him. Fans he met in the arena asked, “What are you doing?” Most of the feedback I saw online was, shall we say, skeptical.

Having considered the context, though, I’m headed back to the safe shores of fan nihilism: Sure, whatever, why not. They’re his two favorite teams in the world. He didn’t mess up the jerseys. They both can still stand on their own. He recognizes that it’s all a bit blasphemous, but he just isn’t able to choose. He doesn’t even have a preference for who wins this series.

“Honestly,” he said. “I’m gonna be both happy and sad when this series is over.”

I checked in with Shapiro this week, and his feelings haven’t changed.

“Really hard to watch,” he wrote. “Not in the sense of nail-biting agony, but I just can’t cheer for anyone. When there’s a nice play by anyone, I feel a rush, and then I feel guilty.”

And so yes, he will be back in Verizon Center Friday night for Game 5. And yes, he will probably be wearing his Frankenjersey. I’d tell you not to make fun of him, but the rules say you’re allowed to do whatever makes you happy.