

Fanaticism in Sports: How It Starts and Why It Sustains

AP Research

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### Abstract

Most people spend a significant amount of time and emotional energy being a fan and supporting a favorite team. Sports have been and will always be a form of entertainment. The purpose of this research paper is to explore the strong connection between how fans select their favorite teams and why fans identify so strongly with their teams. Data was collected in several ways in order to answer these questions along with a literature review and author correspondence. An initial data survey was taken by sports fans to obtain data on how they selected their favorite team and how devoted they are to that team. Following the results of the initial survey, an in-person follow up survey of sports fans was completed, and further data research accomplished to support a possible conclusion. The in-person survey was to find out if fans go out to be social and identify with a group and how their behavior differs from the emailed survey. Psychologist Dr. Fulton was interviewed to explore in depth fanaticism in general, to include both the positive and negative psychological aspects of this obsession. The results from the research suggests that people become fans and select their favorite teams primarily by picking winning teams. Further, these fans identify strongly with their teams because it helps them feel a sense of belonging with a community and fulfill their need to compete and to win, a common human trait.

## Fanaticism in Sports: How It Starts and Why It Sustains

The majority of Americans are sports fans. After being a long time sports fan, the psychology behind fanaticism is fascinating. How do fans pick their teams and why do they root for them so fanatically? At first thought, multiple reasons come to mind for picking a team. One of the most important factors could be that parents play a role in choosing a team because often kids grow up rooting for their parent's team from a young age. Exploring these reasons and finding out which one has the strongest correlation to team selection was a major focus of this project.

Another major emphasis was on fan psychology. What drives fans to so strongly identify with their teams? For example, people talking about their favorite team often use the word choice of "we" when describing that team. Many fans go to every game and sometimes wear team gear. Even if people have no tangible connection to the team, they act as if they are members of a team. Research into this area of psychology led to exploring additional factors influencing this phenomenon.

### **Literature Review and Relevant Scholarship**

Research for this project began with a wide reading on the fundamental psychology that underpins being a fan. Research on why people choose their teams was not readily available in the form of specific answers to the question. The primary reasons were that people choose their teams based on family preference (learned behavior), local teams, winning teams, or personal experience. But none of the articles pointed out the definitive factor for selecting a team. The results and discussion of the research conducted will address this topic.

The question of why are fans so devoted and identify so strongly with their teams was much better covered in the literature. In depth analysis of many articles resulted in the insights detailed below. Follow up email correspondence with a few authors was conducted which enhanced the answers as well. TJ Dawe, a professional writer for sports psychology who works at the University of Victoria, recommended two books for additional information and provided more insight through email. Another source was author Dr. Jim Taylor, a Psychology professor at the University of San Francisco. Their insight and expertise is included below.

In his 2013 article, TJ Dawe found among diehard fans that “there's an instinctive and powerful pull to be part of something bigger (Dawe)”. This directly indicates that as a fan base it pulls you closer to people, which is why some people watch the sport and gives them a way to make friends. There are certain feelings fans seek when it comes to sports. When people watch sports they can share their excitement with others and that will fuel and continue their excitement. Those in this field of study believe this is because many sports fans were pulled in by other fans. Fans try their best to include more people so they can experience the games with them and celebrate wins or commiserate losses together. In addition, Dawe noted that people cheer on college sports the strongest out of all sports. The fans have more of a concrete tie to the team because they are attending the school, are an alumnus, or had a relative go there.

Research by Scott Van Schaik a sports writer for ESPN concluded that people love the emotional rush caused by sporting events because it can make them feel emotions they have rarely or never experienced. The feelings experienced from watching sports is good stress, group affiliation, social involvement and sometimes euphoria (Schaik). Most people long to feel these specific emotions, which they can obtain through sports. In addition Schaik observed that long

ago people would achieve these feelings when we were in tribes and would hunt for food. The emotion of sports brings those emotions back without even knowing where they originated. Included in this paper was that fans use the word “we” when talking about a certain team even if they have no affiliation. Schaik considered this to be BIRG and CORF. BIRG means “basking in reflected glory ,” Meaning that people associate themselves and use the word “we” when the team is playing well or winning (Schaik). In contrast, CORF means “cut off reflected failure (Schaik).” Although they might refer to the team as “we,” people will begin to lose interest in their team once the team begins a losing streak. After waiting through a long down period, the slow rise back to the top connects the fans even more making them proud of staying with the team through their longest losing streaks; similar to Cubs fans who waited over 100 years to claim a World Series victory. Suffering through the losses help the fans consider themselves close to the team when the winning starts. Fans of all sports connect through the same thing: the love they have for their team. People can be more engaged and demonstrative where it is not only allowed but encouraged. They don’t have to worry about being judged as instead people join in. Sports are a great way for people who are antisocial to connect with society on the same level with other people. Most fans at sporting events are very energetic and social, therefore making it easier to connect with the crowd.

Fans become deeply devoted to their team after many hard years of nothing. If a team is on a losing streak and one continues to like them, it shows devotion for the team, leading to being even closer to them when they begin to win. This was found in a study by Daniel Geller, who said that “deep down we all believe that, one day, it will be our team’s turn to be labeled reigning champions (Geller).” This thought was also supported by Wang (see below), who notes

that being a fan of a team on a long losing streak shows your devotion and makes the connection between real fans stronger, which makes the wins so much better when they finally do come. Seen in many articles, fans just want to be a part of something that as a group they can relate to. The drive and passion to see your favorite team win is what makes sports such a unique connection. This connection will emotionally attach you to the team whether they win or lose.

Research conducted by Susan Krauss Whitbourne, a professor at the University of Massachusetts, concluded that fan bases participate and associate themselves more with the game when they have their star playing or have home field advantage (Whitbourne). Playing a star player whenever the team is home is an essential piece when fans watch the game. Without important players participating in the games fan bases become smaller and people will leave the game earlier. This is because their star players are game changers that bring excitement into the game and without them fans feel disinterested and don't know what they are watching. Teams should take advantage of their home field games because the fans would be strong and behind their team. In addition it was found that fans connect stronger when they have a routine or ritual for games. This could be wearing a certain jersey, a hat backwards, or even starting to watch the game halfway through. Fans believe what they do can really affect the outcome of the game, therefore they began to have a stronger connection to that team leading again to the use of the word "we."

A research article in 2006 conducted by Shirley Wang, a sports psychologist, found that sports bring out the true personality of people. Fans can connect through their hatred of opposing teams which helps show their loyalty to their favorite team. Being a fan of a team isn't just about winning, because it is not guaranteed that your team will win. People enjoy

participating in these sports events because one half of the fans will be happy while the others will be upset, but if your team is victorious then you have bragging rights.

### **The Goal and Approach to the Problem**

The goal of this project is to provide answers to the following two questions that are not definitively answered through the research:

1. How and why do we pick our favorite team?
2. Why do we identify so strongly with our team once chosen?

Factors to be researched include location, family ties, and other areas that relate to liking a sports team. Research also focuses on the reasons why people go through so much as a sports fan and what drives them to self-identify as part of the organization.

### **Methods**

#### **General Survey of Sports Fans**

The Literature Review was an excellent start to research this topic, but data was needed from fans to answer the posed questions. Data gathering involved having fans complete a general survey online provided through a link. The questions dealt specifically with favorite team selection and level of identification with the chosen teams. The survey included participants of all ages. The only requirement is that one must consider oneself to be a sports fan. The survey was distributed as widely as possible, primarily through high school contacts and parent/coach/teacher contacts. The survey gathered basic fan data.

#### **March Madness Fan Survey and Data Analysis from Pro Sports Statistics**

After breaking down the data from the initial survey, two more research methods were indicated and completed. The first was an in-person survey of fans as they actively watched

sports at a sports restaurant. This data was correlated with the initial survey and used to strengthen or weaken conclusions reached. The second follow up was a data search exploring the correlation between winning and the number of fans for professional sports teams. The data on Win-Loss records and attendance was obtained from the primary websites for Major League Baseball (mlb.com), the National Basketball Association (nba.com), and the Entertainment and Sports Network (espn.com). This data was compiled in a spreadsheet and used to generate graphs that supported conclusions on how and why fans selected their favorite teams.

### **In Depth Interview with a Psychologist**

The final research method was an in-depth interview with psychologist Dr. Chris Fulton. He provided important information and insights the literature review lacked. He was the best data source on the psychological underpinnings of fanaticism, and aided throughout the project with research direction suggestions and follow up interview questions. The interview with Dr. Fulton sought to answer questions specifically dealing with the psychological reasons for becoming a fan. This included positive and negative effects of fanaticism, worst case scenarios, his experiences in this area, and professional opinion on being a sports fan.

Most of the archival work took place at a high school or local businesses.. The first survey was done online and the second conducted at a sports restaurant. Demographically, a majority of participants are high school students. The interviews were performed through emails.

### **Results and Discussion**

The results and discussion of the research will be split into two sections. The first covers why fans pick their teams and the second on why fans identify so strongly with their teams.



## **How and Why Favorite Teams are Picked**

### **Initial Survey Results and Discussion.**

The initial survey had 86 respondents. Among the participants surveyed there was substantial data collected to answer the research question involving team selection. The first question asked what was the favorite sport of the participant and why. As expected in America, the top 3 sports were football, basketball, and baseball; two from which I utilized website data.

When determining how long people have been a fan of their favorite team, more than 50% of the participants have been a fan of their favorite team for longer than 15 years and over 67% for more than 10 years. Due to the demographics of this survey being mostly high school students, this indicates that the majority have had a favorite team most of their lives.

Next, fans were asked if their favorite team played locally, and separately if their team had a family affiliation (player, parents like them, etc.). From evidence in the literature review, these should be major reasons for selecting a favorite team. However, the data did not support this. The data found that location was not a decisive factor on whether someone liked a team or not. The breakdown was almost exactly 50%/50% (Figure 1). Therefore, it is concluded that the location of a team does not drive the selection of a favorite team.

The same was true about teams with a family connection. This was also nearly a 50%/50% result (Figure 2). Again, this is not a driving factor for the decision of a favorite team.



Figure 1. Local Teams.

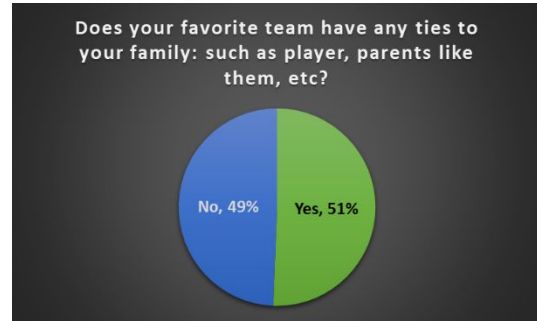


Figure 2. Teams with Family Connection.

Next up to survey was how recently won championships affected selection of a favorite team. My data showed that 76% of the teams people liked had won a championship in the past 20 years (Figure 3). When correlated with the longevity of fans noted above, this means that most of the teams selected have had a championship during or right before the selection of favorite teams by the fans surveyed. This suggests the strong probability that people began to like the team because they were deemed “good” or had just won a championship. Follow up research is necessary to corroborate this result.

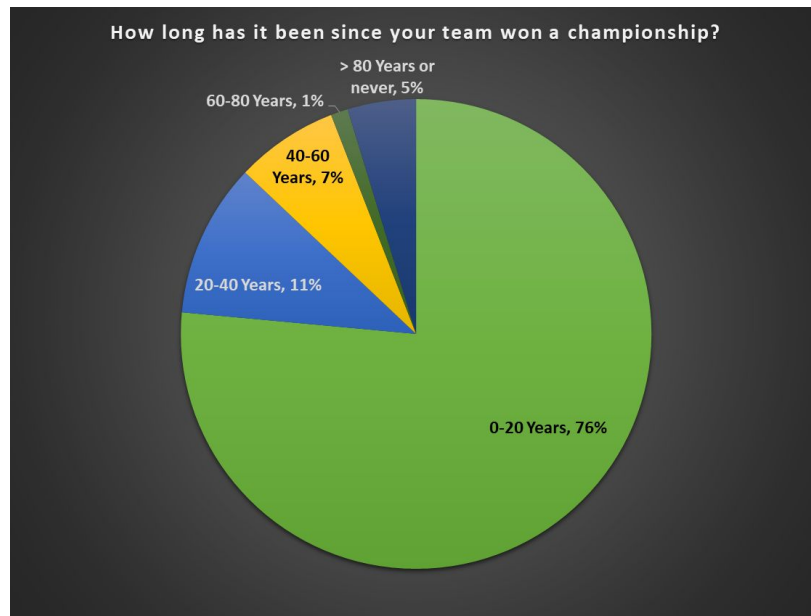


Figure 3. Length of Time Since Team Championship.

**Follow-up data analysis results and discussion.**

Data was obtained from Major League Baseball, the National Basketball Association, and ESPN sports network to determine if winning teams tend to have more fans. Data was put in a spreadsheet and number of Wins was graphed compared to total yearly attendance to look for trends. This data almost completely correlated with fans picking winners. See the Houston Astros and Los Angeles Dodgers history in Figures 4 and 5 below.

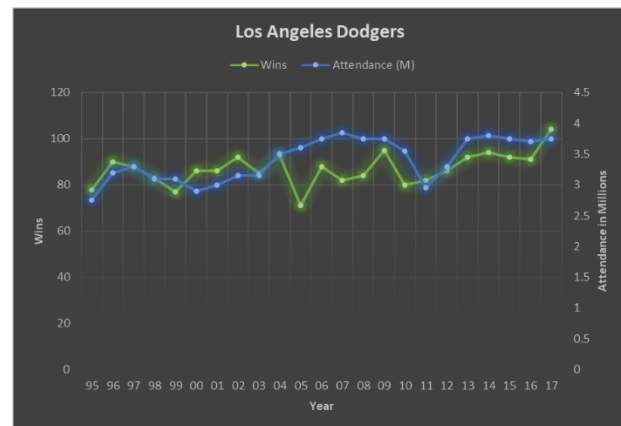
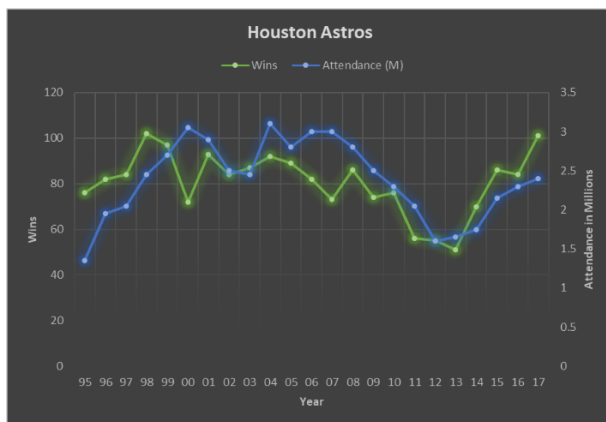


Figure 4. Houston Astros Wins vs. Attendance.      Figure 5. LA Dodgers Wins vs. Attendance.

The green line for wins tracks very closely against the blue line for attendance. This is a clear indication that fans flock to winning teams. The only time this did not hold true was for a few well established teams (Lakers, Cubs, Packers, etc.). In Figure 6 below, it is reflected that for the Los Angeles Lakers, the number of wins doesn't affect the fan base. They sell out whether they have 17 wins or 67. Interestingly, the Los Angeles Clippers (Figure 7) clearly follow the basic rule of wins = fans. Same game, same town, same available fan base, yet very different results. Understanding the Lakers phenomena would require further research.

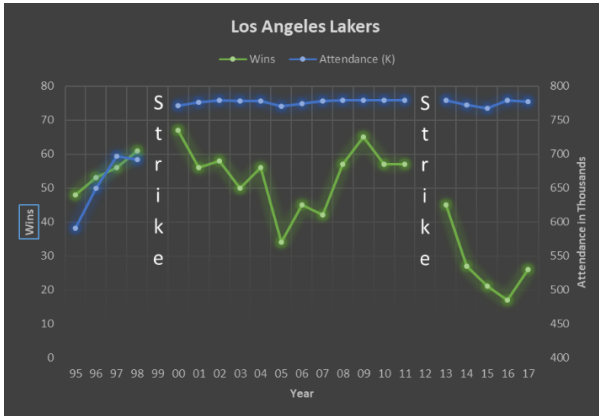


Figure 6. LA Lakers Wins vs. Attendance.



Figure 7. LA Clippers Wins vs. Attendance.

The answer to the question why and how do fans pick their favorite teams is definitively that they pick winners. While family, location and personal experience are factors in this decision, they play a minor role compared to the outsized influence of picking a winning team.

**Why Do We Identify So Strongly With Our Team**

**Initial Survey Results and Discussion.**

The initial survey continued with questions relating to how much fans identify with their teams. The data showed that 65% of the respondents used the term “we” when talking about their favorite team. The ones who used “we” were more devoted and connected to their team. Also, the survey showed that 86% of the participants wore at least one article of team apparel when they went to a game, with almost a third wearing more than one. Having their team’s apparel is a public commitment to the team and shows commonality, further giving a sense of affiliation with the team and fan base.

The next questions dealt with direct participation with the team, an indicator of emotional engagement. Of those surveyed, 95% watched games at home. When they did, 88% were emotionally involved in the game in one fashion or another (Figure 8). It was also found that

when people go to the game they interact with the people around them by cheering with them and high fiving random strangers (almost half). But more importantly, all but 2% of the fans were emotionally engaged with the teams.

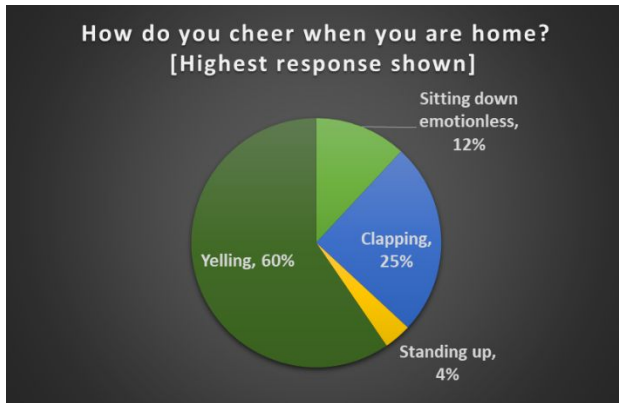


Figure 8. Cheering at Home.

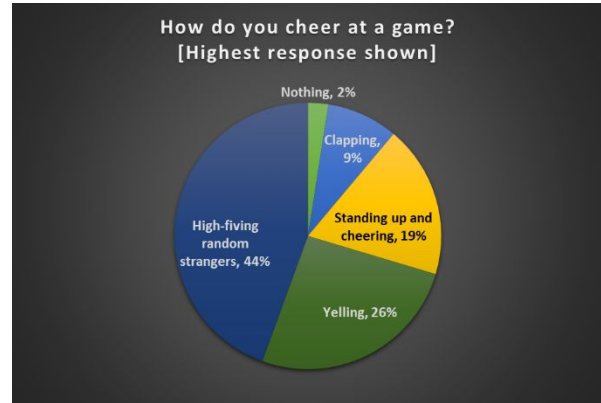


Figure 9. Cheering at Games.

**March Madness survey results and discussion.**

The results of the in person survey (Figure 10) amplify the results of the general survey.

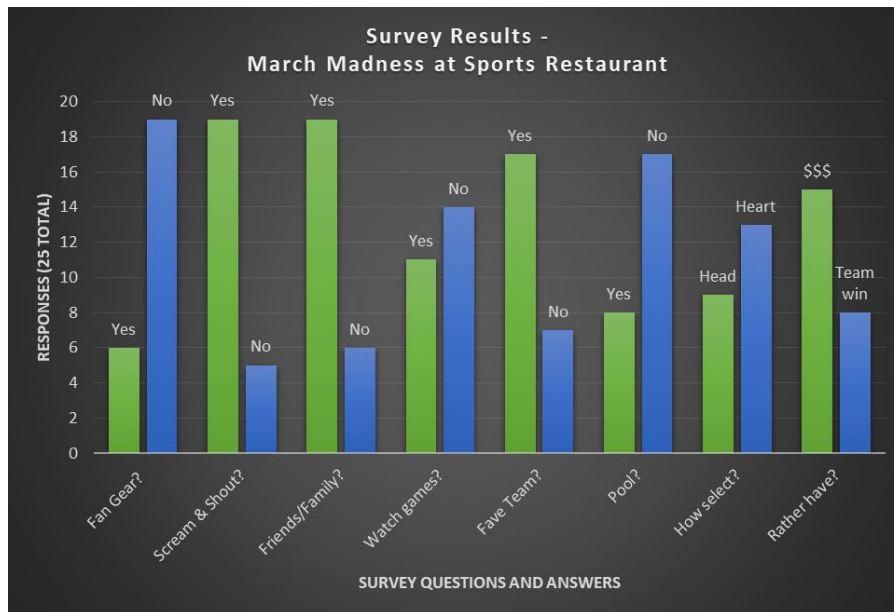


Figure 10. March Madness Survey Results.

The first question was about wearing team gear. The percentage of fans wearing team gear was flipped from the initial survey. The fans indicated this was because during March Madness nobody actually had their favorite team playing (the game was a semifinal between Loyola-Chicago and Michigan). So none had team gear for those teams. The percentages for emotional engagement through active participation was about the same, backing up the initial survey. Over 75% were there with family or friends and half came just to watch the games, which supports the literature and data that indicates that being a fan is a social activity.

A very interesting statistic involves picking a favorite team for this particular game. Over 70% of the fans actually picked a favorite team of the two playing, even though they had never been fans of either team before. Questioning them revealed that for them, the games were just more fun having a team to root for during the game.

Finally, questions were asked about being in a March Madness betting pool. Only about a third were in pools this year but most had been before. Interestingly, the majority pick their winners using their heart instead of their head. However, if given the choice of winning the pool money or having their favorite team win, most would take the money. This was the only piece of data that spoke against emotional engagement (money is king).

Research into this topic would be considered a horizontal slice of data, information near the surface of the topic over a broad range of ideas and actions. The next step in research was to have an in depth question and answer session with Dr. Fulton, the psychologist. This is more of a vertical slice of data on a specific part of sports fanaticism: the psychology of being a fan.

**In-depth interview with Psychologist Dr. Chris Fulton results and discussion.**

Because there is not extensive qualitative research in this area, qualitative and descriptive research regarding the specific topic of fanaticism and fandom was completed. The qualitative data was gathered through an interview with a local professional psychologist, Dr. Chris Fulton. The critical question may be is it a natural state of being for us as humans to be fans? In a way, being a fan could satisfy a basic instinct we all share (e.g. affiliation, competitiveness, commitment). Dr. Fulton is a licensed clinical psychologist and the founder of the Fulton Psychological Group. He has been working in the field since 1990 and received his doctorate degree from the California School of Professional Psychology, Los Angeles in 1994. He specializes in family psychology. He had in depth knowledge of the psychological factors that go into being a fan.

The discussion started on the basics. What are the psychological underpinnings of being a fan? Why do people become fans? Dr. Fulton talked about how being a fan creates a sense of belonging and affiliation. It can build a family where there is not one to begin with. In his words, “most people have an innate desire to be associated with something or to belong to a group.” He went on to say that competition is an innate part of who we are, but this often divides us from those who are not a part of our group. Being a fan can create a sense of being a part of something. It also can satisfy the need to win, which is a basic part of human nature. This leads to the question of is everyone a fan; is it just human nature also? Dr. Fulton explained that he thought that while it is in many people's nature, it is not in all people's nature. “I think the less competitive people are, the less likely they are to be a fan.”

At this point the discussion moved to questions about how being a fan would affect a person. Is it harmful or helpful? What role does being a fan play in everyday life? The psychological perspective, according to Dr. Fulton, is that like anything there is good and bad. “Being a fan can create that camaraderie people often seek. However, too much competition creates aggressiveness and a lack of empathy for the other team.” So being a fan can lead in a good direction (positive outcomes emotionally) or a negative direction (aggression and anger). For some, a little aggression and anger can be a good thing. Depending on your personality type this may even relieve stress. But how far is too far? Dr. Fulton explained that this happens when people get too aggressive and forget to put things in perspective. When fan behavior leads to beating up the opposing fans or rioting in the streets (looting, stealing, damage to property and person, etc.) it is clearly bad for all involved and the people around them. There are also the cases of sports fans going into clinical depression when their teams lose. This can cause serious emotional damage. The bottom line is that all of us fans need to “put it all in perspective.”

The worst case illustrating the negative effects of fanaticism Dr. Fulton has observed was the murder of a soccer player in South America by a crazed fan. Upon researching this incident, it was a Colombian player who accidentally scored a goal into his own net, giving the United States a goal in the 1994 World Cup. A fan was so angry that he shot the player (Andres Escobar) 6 times and killed him. It doesn't get any worse than that.

The discussion moved on to the more positive aspects of being a fan, primarily the way it brings folks together and forms a sense of community. Dr. Fulton definitely sees that being a fan creates a sense of community. According to Dr. Fulton, “that is the main benefit of being a fan.” Sports is something that gives us a reason to get together with friends and family. He used



college games as a great example. The college students come together as a community to watch their team play. This gives the student a sense of being a part of a particular group while away from home. He is such a proponent of this kind of communal experience that he does “recommend to patients to be a part of a greater community, including being a fan at their school games.” Sports often has a great outcome of bringing many disparate people together from different cultures, backgrounds and experiences. Having that unifying experience makes us better as human beings, especially bridging gaps between us.

One common way for being a fan of a particular team is to be passed down from generation to generation. This is done in families for their own schools they attended or for teams that represent their community. Dr. Fulton thought this could be a good thing to pass down being a fan of a particular team to other family members. This can create a way for grandparents, parents and kids to bond with each other. However, if it is forced, resentment could build, not only to the team but to the parent or family member pushing it. This will very commonly result in a backlash. His advice was that “the influence needs to be measured.”

Sports can play a huge role in families, especially between two partners. How they are fans and how they interact can have an enormous effect on both their relationship and the way children will view relationships. What are the effects of differing intensity, differing teams (for example USC vs. UCLA), and not adjusting to these differences? Dr. Fulton thought that if a couple are fans of the same team it could bring them closer. As for all fans, rooting for the same team builds trust and camaraderie. Your emotional states align (positive or negative) which leads to being in the same boat together. This is a very common way to build strong relationships. However, he didn’t believe that if the couple were fans of opposing teams (or one

was not a fan at all) that it would necessarily damage the relationship. For any mismatch, the goal has to be to make it a fun rather than being too intense about it. Fun bets like the loser wearing the winner's jersey or having to do the chores can take the bite out of rooting for opposing teams. He did caution that "being at war over teams would likely lead to conflict, resentment or mean spirited statements." All of those things are deadly to a partnership and need to be worked out in a positive fashion, or the differences could well lead to permanent damage to even a normally strong relationship.

Being an expert in relationships and issues that can affect families and individuals, we talked about how Dr. Fulton uses what he knows professionally to help him and his family when it comes to being a fan. At a basic level he is a fan and thinks it can be a really healthy thing. His biggest advice to himself is to keep his intensity as a fan to a moderate amount. He tries to put things in perspective and not get too caught up in the moment (although he admits this does happen). He feels the passion is a good thing. "The passion gives us something to look forward to, hope for and work toward." So on the whole, he is a big believer in being a fan. If you keep the passion under control, don't let your emotions explode, have fun with it both with fans on your side and the other, you can really make fandom a fun and constructive thing.

The discussion ended with the question of what was missed in this interview. Dr. Fulton generalized the typical fanatics who get out of control as "self-centered individuals with too much testosterone." He also noted that the high majority of troublemakers in fandom are male. "People who get too much into their fan life to the point of aggression and hostility usually don't have other things in their life to create balance." Finally, he pointed out that alcohol and/or drugs and sports can be a very bad mix. Rabid fans tend to get intoxicated and get out of control.

Importantly, in his experience, the folks in this category usually do this in other areas of their lives as well, so it is not specific to their sports teams and being a fan.

### **New direction/questions**

In researching this topic I identified two other areas for further study. The first was mentioned earlier asking why the Lakers sell out every year even when they have only 17 wins while most teams attendance tanks when they lose. A detailed look at these untouchable teams would be very interesting.

Also, further research through scholarly articles led to another question: do a team's decisions (relocation, personnel issues, stadium renovation, etc.) impact the number of fans and what could teams do to increase their fan base through their decisions? A look at decisions such as this and their effect on the fan base should be researched as a follow on topic.

### **Conclusion**

The goal of this project was to determine how and why fans selected the teams they did as their favorites, and then to determine why they identify with their teams so strongly. In depth research was conducted that included a literature review, follow up email contact with authors and experts; a survey through email links; an in-person survey with interviewees; data collection from websites followed by analysis; and an in depth interview with a psychologist discussing fanaticism.

The first question was thoroughly researched and explored, including: family ties, locality of teams, success of teams, and personal experiences to understand how and why fans selected their favorite teams. The answer to this question was that nothing was pivotal to this decision except winning. Every other input to the decision was about a 50%/50% shot for

whether or not someone picked a team. Over 75% picked winners and there was strong corroborating data from professional sports leagues to support this finding.

The second question was also thoroughly researched to include in depth psychological analysis of fans. Two main points came out of this research that led to the conclusion that people identify so strongly because it gives them a sense of community and belonging. It can also tie us to our family more. A sense of belonging is something many people search for throughout their lives. People want to be accepted by others and sports is a way to tie people together into a group or community. Because being a fan creates this sense and feel of community, folks from all backgrounds, races, religions and economic status get pulled together to unite on this one endeavor. In addition, when we come together over sports it makes us better humans because of the socializing and engagement with other people around us. Sports bridges the gaps in human experience.

The conclusion to this research project is that being a fan can be a tremendously beneficial experience for anyone that engages in a positive manner and in moderation. Pick a team, join the crowd, let your spirit flag fly and enjoy a lasting sense of community and belonging.

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**APPENDIX A:**  
**GENERAL SPORTS SURVEY QUESTIONS**

1. What sport does your favorite team play?
  - a. Football
  - b. Basketball
  - c. Baseball
  - d. Hockey
  - e. Soccer
  - f. Other
2. Why is that your favorite sport and team? [written answer]
3. How long have you been a fan of a sports team?
  - a. 0-5 years
  - b. 5-10 years
  - c. 10-15 years
  - d. Longer than 15 years
4. Does your favorite team play locally (within your city)? For example: Los Angeles Rams
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
5. How long has it been since your team won a championship?
  - a. 0-20 years

- b. 20-40 years
  - c. 40-60 years
  - d. 60-80 years
  - e. 80 – more years (or none)
6. Does your favorite team have any ties to your family: such as player, parents like them, etc.?
- a. Yes
  - b. No
7. Do you refer to your favorite team as “we” when talking about them?
- a. Yes
  - b. No
8. When you go to a game do you...?
- a. Wear one article of clothing supporting them
  - b. Wear more than one article of clothing
  - c. Wear nothing supporting your team
9. If you are at a game do you cheer by?
- a. Clapping
  - b. Standing up and cheering
  - c. Yelling
  - d. High-fiving random strangers
  - e. Nothing
10. Do you watch games from home?



- a. Yes
- b. No

11. How do you cheer when you are home?

- a. Clapping
- b. Standing up
- c. Yelling
- d. Sitting down emotionless

12. Have you ever switched your favorite team?

- a. Yes
- b. No

13. If so, why did you change your favorite team? [written answer]

**APPENDIX B:**  
**MARCH MADNESS SURVEY QUESTIONS**

1. Are you wearing any fan/team gear?
2. Do you scream and shout during games?
3. Are you here with a group of friends or family?
4. Did you come here specifically to watch the games?
5. Do you have a favorite team and if so why?
6. Are you part of a pool for March Madness?
7. If so, do you pick with your head or your heart?
8. If you could win a pool or have your favorite team win the tournament which would you choose?