

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

## ABSTRACT

Most people spend a significant amount of time and emotional energy being a fan and supporting a favorite team. 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 such as a beginning survey for basic data, an in-person survey at a sports bar, a data analysis, and an interview with psychologist Dr. Fulton. 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.

## REFERENCES

Thanks to: Ashish, D., Dawe, T., Entertainment and Sports Network, Geller, D., Major League Baseball, National Basketball Association, Simons, E, Taylor, J., Van Schaik, T., Wang, S., and Whitbourne, S. K.

Special thanks to:  
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## INTRODUCTION

Fanatic or Fan: “a person who is enthusiastically devoted to something or somebody.”

The majority of Americans are sports fans. This research project sought to explore the fan phenomenon. Multiple reasons come to mind for picking a team. For instance, one important factor could be that parents play a role in choosing a team because often kids grow up rooting for their parent’s team. Exploring this and other reasons to find out which one has the strongest correlation to team selection was a major focus of this project. The other major emphasis was on fan psychology. 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.

## METHODS

A literature review was conducted which explored the introduction into sports psychology. The literature defined what sports psychology is and revealed how it can affect some people.

A general survey included questions that 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 be a sports fan.

Inconclusive data in some areas drove another in-person survey that was conducted. 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 fan attendance for professional sports teams.

The final data collected was via an interview with Dr. Chris Fulton. 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.

## RESULTS/DISCUSSION

### How and why favorite teams are picked?

Substantial data was collected to answer the research question involving team selection. Several items of basic information were gathered first (favorite sport, longevity of being a fan, etc.). Then the effects of both local teams and family inspired teams were investigated and they were both nearly a 50%/50% result. This shows that they are not a driving factor for the selection of a favorite team. How recently the favorite team won a championship seemed to have a direct positive effect on selection (76% 20 years or less). When correlated with the longevity of fans, most of the teams selected have had a championship during or right before the selection of favorite teams by the fans surveyed. Further data was obtained and analyzed from Major League Baseball and the National Basketball Association to corroborate the survey data. When Won-Loss record was compared to Fan Attendance data there was a direct relationship suggesting also the strong probability that people began to like the team because they were deemed “good” or had just won a championship. This was by far the strongest correlation of data from all sources.

### Why do we identify so strongly with our team?

Survey data showed that 65% of the respondents used the term “we” when talking about their favorite team. Over 70% of casual fans watching March Madness actually picked a favorite team of the two playing, even though they had never been fans of either team before. 86% of fans wear team gear. 98% are actively involved in cheering at games. From the interview, Dr. Fulton talked about how humans have an innate desire to belong, and it is human nature to want to compete and win. Watching sports can fill this need. The negatives include too much emotional investment that can lead to depression, and when coupled with substance abuse, loss of inhibitions leading to erratic or violent behavior. But being a sports fan 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.” Being a fan creates a sense of community and brings people together from different cultures, backgrounds and life circumstances. It can be a unifying experience that makes us better as human beings, especially bridging the gaps between us.

## These are not the reasons we pick teams:

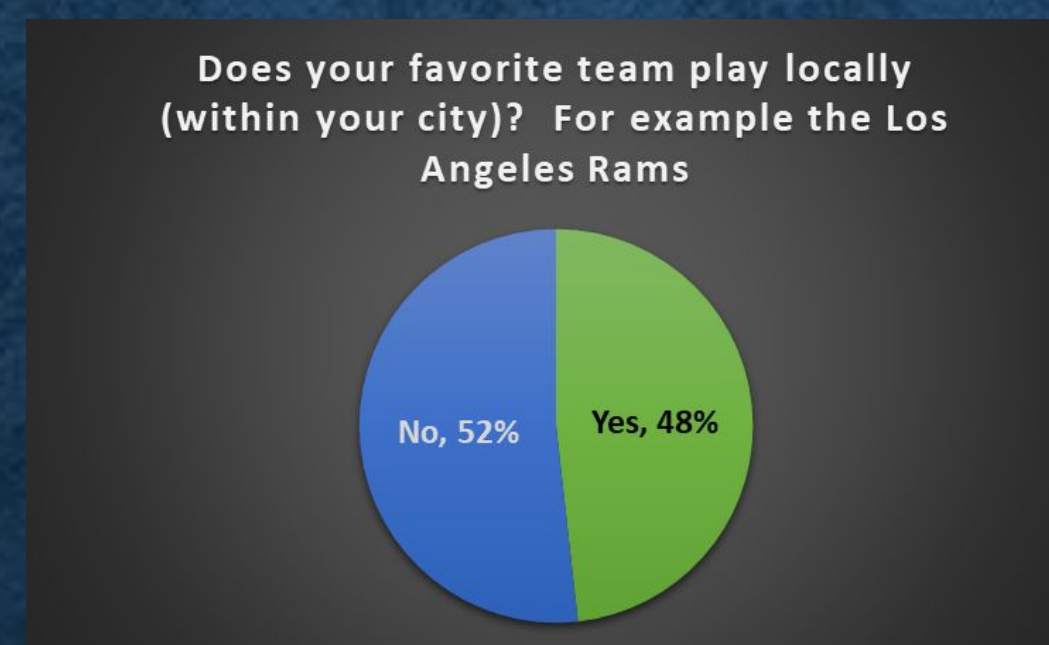


Figure 1. Location effect on favorite team.

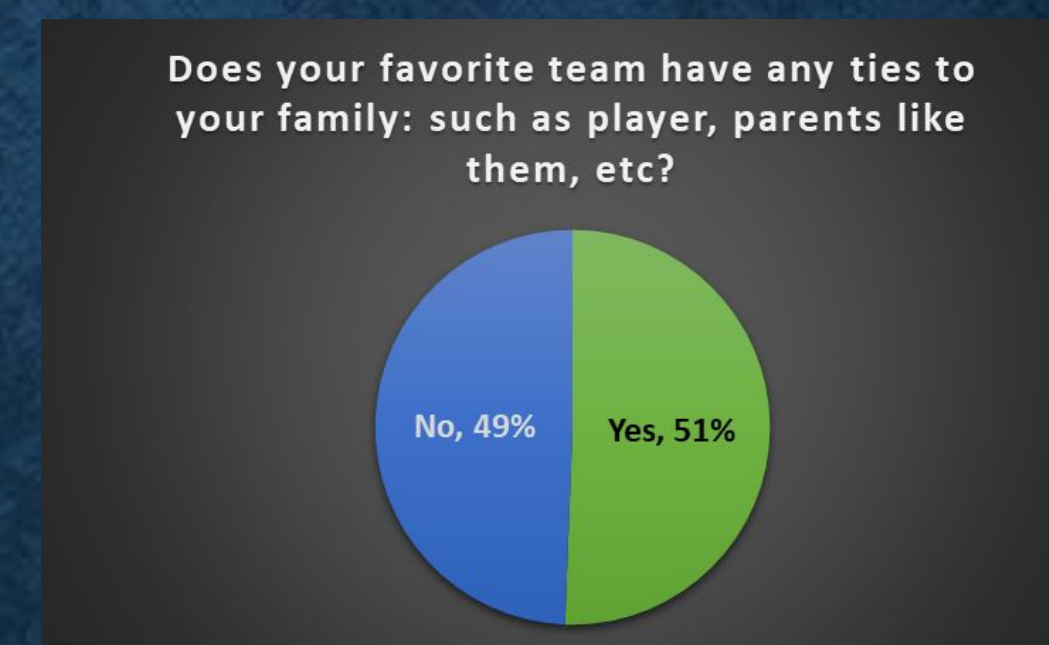


Figure 2. Family effect on favorite team.

## This is:

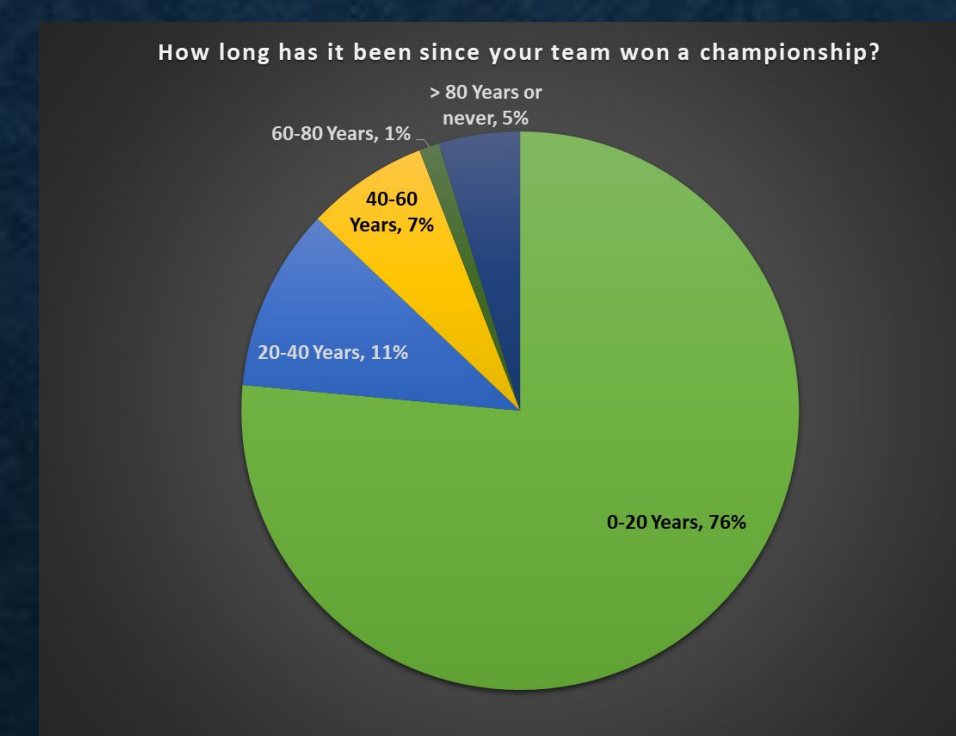


Figure 3. Recency of Championship.



Figure 4. Wins vs. Fan Attendance.

## CONCLUSIONS

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. 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. The second question was also thoroughly researched to include in depth psychological analysis of fans. People want to be accepted by others and sports is a way to tie people together into a group or community. It can tie us to our family more deeply as well. Two main conclusions came out of this research about how people identify so strongly. They identify this strongly because doing so gives them both a sense of community and the feeling of belonging. In addition, when we come together over sports it makes us better humans because of the engagement with other people. Sports bridges the gaps in human experience.