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Peter Weiss

Fan Reaction to the Favre-Packers Split

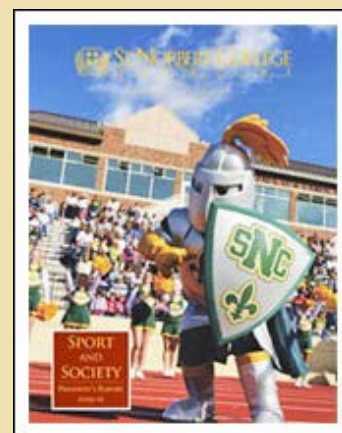
Among academics and professional people prominent in the field of sports research, **Peter Weiss**, a candidate for the master's in liberal studies degree at St. Norbert College, had the opportunity to present at the academic conference "Sport and Society: A Mirror of Our Culture." This paper derived from work in a course on the same topic offered through the "American Perspectives" thematic area of the master's program. The course ran in conjunction with the conference. The event was co-sponsored by the college and the

Green Bay Packers May 26-28, and will be repeated in 2012.

In a tearful press conference on March 4, 2008, Brett Favre retired from the Green Bay Packers after 16 seasons with the team. Like they had done so many times before, fans of Favre shared in the quarterback's emotions. Since that day, Favre returned to the NFL, was traded to the Jets, retired a second time and, after months of indecision, returned a second time to become the quarterback for Packers fans' hated rival, the Minnesota Vikings. In doing so, Favre became a polarizing force among Packers fans as they tried to reconcile their love for the team with their love for the player and make sense of the bitter divorce that ensued between the two.

Following Favre's return to Lambeau Field in November 2009, when he led the Vikings to a second victory over the Packers on the season, I found myself wondering how one individual could cause so much consternation for countless Packers fans (me included) despite the fact that most had never met the man.

This question led me to ask several others: What makes a person



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Bart Starr and Forrest Gregg

decide to become a fan of a team or a player? Why does being a fan mean more to one person than it does to another? Why do we form intense emotional attachments to certain players? And lastly, what is it about Brett Favre, the Green Bay Packers and Packers fans that has created a perfect storm of emotion such that people continue to discuss, analyze and take sides on one man's indecision over retirement?

In this paper, I will attempt to address these questions. I will approach this issue from a psychological and sociological perspective by examining three concepts: fan identification, fan motivation and hero worship.

While discussing these concepts, I will use the words of the fans themselves through interviews and correspondence to show how these ideas explain the fan reaction following Brett Favre's initial retirement and subsequent returns. I will argue that the nature of the Green Bay Packers organization as a community-owned franchise has promoted an atmosphere that facilitates high levels of identification between fans and the team.

Moreover, the personal history of Brett Favre on and off the field intensified the level of connection between Favre and Packers fans, leading to a form of hero worship. When these highly identified fans encountered a threat to their identities in the form of the divorce between their long-time hero and their team, fans developed, and continue to develop, image management techniques to try to re-establish their sense of personal identity and self-esteem.

In their book "Sports Fans: The Psychology and Social Impact of Spectators," Wann, Melnick, Russell and Pease identify distinctions between highly and lowly identified fans as one of three primary ways to classify fans. In the words of Wann and his colleagues:

"The next time you attend a sporting event, take a moment to watch the other spectators. ... Some appear rather disinterested. ... Others, however, appear to be immersed in the contest. They are dressed (and maybe even painted) in their team's colors, actively root and yell for their team, attempt to distract the opposing players, and boo loudly when an official's call goes against their team."

The level of identification among sport fans is an important distinction because various studies have shown that highly identified fans behave in certain ways that lowly identified fans do not. These studies, some of which will be discussed below, are based on the concept of social identity.

Henri Tajfel defines social identity "as that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership." The idea behind the term is that people generate understanding of themselves based on their affiliations with certain groups, including sport teams of which they are fans.

This notion suggests that people can encounter threats to their identity, even if the threat is not made directly to them, but rather to a group (or team) with which they identify. Or as Hirt, Zillmann, Erickson and Kennedy state, "Team success is personal success, and team failure is personal failure."

Having defined the concept of fan identification, I will now examine the

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concept of fan motivation. Wann, Melnick, Russell and Pease identify eight motives for someone to become a fan, including group connections, aesthetics, family and economics, among others. For the purposes of this paper, I want to focus on the family and group affiliation motives and the particular role they play in the history of the Packers and their connections with their fans.

While studies have shown that the family motive is one of the least cited reasons for sport fandom (Wann, et. al.), I propose that Packers fans are an exception to this rule. This exception is evident from an anecdotal perspective as well as from a sociological perspective.

Of the 10 Packers fans interviewed for this paper, many responded to the question of how they became fans by drawing some connection to their families. For brothers Rick and Jerry of California, they became fans despite growing up in California because their father was a fan since his childhood in Oconomowoc, Wis. (interview, 11/21/09 in Green Bay).

Likewise, Mike from South Dakota became a fan when his aunt married a Green Bay native (interview, 11/21/09 in Green Bay). While these accounts are anecdotal, they indicate that familial connection can play an important role in individuals becoming Packers fans.

From a sociological perspective, one can see the important role of family in the Packers organization's season ticket policy. Because season tickets have sold out since 1960, the organization has developed a policy that allows for transfer of season tickets to other family members including "spouse and 'blood' relatives who are not more than first cousins" (Packers.com).

In other words, Packers season tickets have become such a commodity that the team has developed policies that make them family heirlooms. The bond that families build while cheering for the Packers fosters a high level of identification between the fans and the team.

Like the family motive, group affiliation is another important motive as it relates to Packers fans. Again, the evidence for this is both anecdotal and sociological. Ann and Sandy of Neenah, Wis., who have been fans for 30 and 50 years, respectively, indicated that they became fans because it was the "thing to do" (interview, 11/21/09 in Green Bay).

The group motivation for Packers fans is likewise evident in the game day ritual of tailgating, where fans arrive at the stadium hours before kickoff to drink beer, eat burgers and brats, and socialize. Some fans without tickets even attend tailgate parties simply to be a part of the social atmosphere leading up to game time.

Heere and James outline the sociological basis for the importance of group affiliation when they cite the example of Packers fans wearing cheeseheads as evidence that identification with the team is also a way to show pride in one's community. They further argue that fans should be "thought of as part of a sports organization." In terms of the Packers, one could argue that this has already occurred, since the team is community-owned, the only such franchise in the NFL.

Moreover, one sees the community's close identification with the team in the middle school and street named after Hall of Fame coach Vince Lombardi as well as the various businesses with some variation of the word Packer in their name. The close affiliation of the Packers organization with the community makes group affiliation a primary motive for many Packers fans and heightens the level of identification

between fans and the team.

Having discussed the concepts of fan identification and fan motivation, I will now turn to the notion of hero worship to better articulate how fans have come to identify strongly with Brett Favre.

In an article on the role of public relations in the creation of sport celebrities, Summers and Morgan highlight some of the expectations that fans have of their sports heroes. Among these is the belief that these heroes ought not only to excel on the field but also "to demonstrate consistently high standards of behaviour or moral conduct." Likewise, Vande Berg believes that "modern sports heroes... are models of athletic competence and of social values."

In both definitions, athletes who have earned the designation of heroes are expected to exhibit excellence on and off the field. Vande Berg highlights these dual aspects of heroes in her assessment of Nolan Ryan, who she indicates was recognized because "he performed great deeds" on the field as seen through his many baseball records, but also because of his "untarnished embodiment of mainstream cultural values."

When one examines the portrayal of Brett Favre through the media and through his fans, it is easy to see that he meets the definition for sports hero as outlined above. On the field, Favre holds nearly every major career record for quarterbacks: most touchdown passes, most yards, most pass attempts and most pass completions, among others (NFL.com).

But if one listens to Favre's fans, it is not just that he excels at the game; it is the way that he plays the game. According to Rick and Jerry of California, it is his willingness to play hurt; for Ann and Sandy of Neenah, it is the fact that he has "fun playing the game"; for Jerrel and Darrin of California, it is the fact that he is a "winner" and that he has "dedication and love for the game" (interviews, 11/21/09 in Green Bay).

In addition to his on-field accomplishments, Favre may be just as well known for his off-field endeavors, from the charitable work that he does with his family foundation to the hunting and fishing trips that he takes with his buddies, to the fact that no matter what obstacles he has faced in life, he has continued to show up to work every day.

These stories resonate with fans because they depict Favre as more than just a football player making millions of dollars who lives a life unlike their own. As a result, fans have developed stronger emotional ties to Favre than to other athletes.

Having established that fans of Favre and fans of the Packers display high levels of identification, one can begin to examine the general behavior of highly identified fans. In particular, studies have shown that highly identified fans develop image management techniques in response to threats to their identities.

One such technique is the way in which highly identified fans attribute success and failure. Wann and Dolan examined this phenomenon in a 1994 study entitled "Attributions of Highly Identified Sport Fans." The study was based on research by Hastorf and Cantril from 1954, which determined that fans of opposing teams "seemed to have been observing a different game."

Wann and Dolan also sought to examine prior research by Miller and Ross from 1975, which indicated that "persons tend to internalize

success while externalizing failures.” The study examined the responses of basketball fans following a win and following a loss.

Prior to the game, fans were asked to complete the Sport Spectator Identification Scale, a tool used to determine the level of identification they exhibited with the team (in this case, the Murray State University men’s basketball team).

Following the game, fans were asked to complete a questionnaire with 15 items to determine who or what was most responsible for the outcome of the game: (1) Murray State players and coaches, (2) Murray State fans, (3) Murray State’s opponents, (4) the referees or (5) fate. The first two options were considered internal attributions, while the last three options were considered external attributions.

The results of the study confirmed that highly identified fans attribute success to internal aspects of the game, while attributing failure to external aspects. Moreover, the study indicated that lowly identified fans did not exhibit these similar behaviors. In the researchers’ words, “Evidently, highly identified participants strategically manipulated their attributions after a loss in order to protect their self-esteem. Lowly identified participants were less bothered by the team’s defeat and as such were less motivated to use these strategies.”

Besides attributing positive and negative outcomes differently than lowly identified fans, highly identified fans also exhibit other coping mechanisms. In a 1976 study by Cialdini, Borden, Thorne, Walker, Freeman and Sloan, the authors coined the term BIRG, which stands for the tendency to “bask in reflected glory.” While this phenomenon is exhibited in other group settings, the authors conducted studies that showed that fans seek to connect themselves with a successful team in order to build their own self-esteem.

In one study, fans were contacted by experimenters and asked to respond to six questions based on campus life. In an effort to build up or break down the participant’s self-esteem, the experimenters then indicated that the fans had either performed above average or below average. Following this questionnaire, fans were asked to describe a recent football game at their school. The results indicated that following wins, fans were more likely to use the term “we” to discuss the team, while following losses, fans were more likely to use a “non-we” to discuss the team.

In addition, the study showed that fans who failed the initial test were more likely to exhibit this tendency because “their public prestige was in jeopardy.” This and the other experiments conducted by Cialdini’s group confirmed the belief that when faced with a threat to their self-esteem, fans will seek an opportunity to repair their image by connecting with a successful team.

In a subsequent study conducted by Cialdini and Richardson, the tendency to bask was compared to the tendency to blast a rival in order to build up one’s self-esteem in response to an identity threat.

Like the study discussed above, participants in this study were asked to complete a test and were told that they performed average or below average. Participants were then asked a series of questions about the quality of their school or about the quality of a rival school. The results of the study indicated that when faced with a threat to one’s identity, participants basked or blasted accordingly based on the opportunity afforded them; that is, participants asked to discuss their school sought to build up its image, while participants asked to discuss a rival school

sought to tear down that school's image in order to repair their personal image.

This study further confirmed that highly identified fans develop strategies to ensure that their public prestige remains high despite threats to their identity.

Based on these studies, one would expect Packers fans to exhibit image management techniques in response to the threat to their identities that occurred when Brett Favre and the Packers parted ways. After all, if fans define a part of their identity in relation to the team, any threat to the team's identity could be interpreted by the fans as a threat to their own identity. (Note: The goal is not necessarily to establish that Packers fans have exhibited the particular image management techniques discussed above, but rather to establish the fact that their behaviors indicate a need to try to maintain a positive identity.)

In the case of the Favre-Packers breakup, the need for response is more critical due to the fact that fans not only highly identify with the team, but many also highly identify with Favre. This complication creates a serious identity crisis for fans as they are forced to choose which part of their identity to follow. Regardless of their choice, fans will likely behave in certain ways to reconcile the loss of the other portion of their identity.

In fan letters published in the Green Bay Press-Gazette, one can see a shift in fans' demeanor towards Favre from the time of his initial retirement to the time when he decided he wanted to return to football. Following the announcement of his retirement, Lee Nelson of Seymour, Wis., wrote, "Brett Favre doesn't owe us anything. He went out on a high note. It's just too bad his last pass was an interception." (March 5, 2008)

A few months later as Favre began to indicate he might have a desire to return, the feelings of some fans had begun to change. Barbara of Oconto, Wis., wrote, "Hey, Brett, it's time to move on and be gracious enough to allow our new quarterback the anticipation of his first season without all the hassle of wondering whether or not he'll even get a first season this year." (July 25, 2008)

The shift became more apparent a few months later, as seen in this letter from Chris of Wauwatosa, Wis.:

Brett Favre should apologize for his childish, self-centered arrogance as he dragged the organization through his own psychological issues, creating unparalleled division among fans he claims to love. ... I'm glad he is increasing his all-time interception record somewhere else. ... Thank goodness we have an intelligent QB now instead of a hillbilly. (October 22, 2008)

One would have had difficulty finding such vitriol directed towards Favre following his retirement, but since the split between Favre and the team occurred, comments like this have become more prevalent as fans try to repair identities that have been damaged by this split.

Fans who chose to side with Favre also displayed image management techniques to reconcile their love of Favre with their love of the Packers. While at the time of his retirement few if any fans placed blame on the Packers, these sentiments have shifted in the time since Favre began to consider returning. In a July 2008 letter in the Press-Gazette, when considering that the Packers might not welcome Favre back to be the starting quarterback, John of Greenleaf, Wis., lamented

that "a storied franchise is allowing this to happen." (July 27, 2008) The blame towards the team became more pointed as the Packers' disappointing 2008 season came to a close. Jeff of Elk Grove, Calif., wrote, "Time for change! Ted Thompson and Mike McCarthy should be ashamed of themselves for destroying one of the greatest franchises in sports." (Dec. 18, 2008) One can clearly see that a shift occurred among many fans in their opinion of the team, just as a shift occurred among other fans in their opinion of Favre.

Another way that fans have tried to repair their identities has been by taking sides on the issue, and basking and blasting as needed. Rick and Jerry, brothers from California, indicated that the breakup between Favre and the team has caused a split in their family. (interview, 11/21/09 in Green Bay). Likewise, the newspapers have become a battleground for fans to argue who deserves the blame and why. In a Feb. 21, 2009, edition of "Fan Mail" in the Press-Gazette, one sees both sides of the issue. Dean of Waukesha, Wis., wrote:

"For me ... Brett Favre's legacy is tarnished and can never be repaired. A year ago, I would have called him one of the all-time greats, a true competitor, a player who gave his all for the game. I now am forced to consider him so much less. The unnecessary and unwarranted vitriol toward (Ted) Thompson, the decision to come back merely to stick it to him ... leave me thinking of him as simply another egocentric jock who thinks much too highly of himself." (Feb. 21, 2009)

A letter by Kregg of Waterloo, Iowa, provides a counterpoint:

"I was a Packers fan from the earliest days I can remember in 1970 until August 2008. However, I have to be honest and say that as long as Ted Thompson is the GM, I cannot and will not support the Packers again. His lack of respect for and shabby treatment of the greatest player in the history of the franchise does not allow me to continue as a Green Bay fan." (Feb. 21, 2009)

These letters clearly depict the manner in which each author has tried to make sense of the split. Both men indicate that prior to the split they felt strong allegiances to Favre and the Packers, but following the split each man chose a side and separated himself from the other side in order to maintain his personal identity.

The nature of the Packers organization's connection with the community, the level of hero worship that developed towards Brett Favre and the need for highly identified fans to manage their image resulted in the fan reaction to the split between Brett Favre and the Packers. In trying to reconcile the sides of their identities that opposed each other, fans altered their views of Favre and the Packers to coincide with the identity that they chose. In addition, fans took sides and in doing so left behind one part of their identity.

Perhaps what this saga can teach is that fans should be careful in how much of their identity they find in a group or person to which they have no personal connection. Being a sports fan can offer many positive rewards, but using sports as a way to build one's identity and self-esteem can only lead to the type of crisis that many Packers fans know all too well.

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