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Bleeding Keaney Blue: An Analysis of Sports Fandom and the Supporters of URI Basketball

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Bleeding Keaney Blue: An Analysis of Sports Fandom and the Supporters of URI Basketball

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Part I: The Sports Fan

In America, sports constitute a large part of our culture. Teams range from nationally renowned professionals all the way down to the local little league. There are multiple channels on television dedicated to non-stop sports coverage and every newspaper, major and minor, includes a sports section. Even beyond the United States, an A.T. Kearney study found that the global sport industry is worth about \$480 to \$620 billion (as cited in Van Schaik, 2012). One researcher even argues, “sport has become a major component of modern life” (Wann, 2001, p. 16). With such a large presence of sports in our everyday lives, it comes as no surprise that millions of Americans consider themselves sports fans (Grieve, 2014), ranging from newborns donning a team onesie to the elderly who have owned season tickets for decades. Fan, coming from the Latin word *fanaticus*, has been known to mean, “insanely, but divinely inspired” (Van Schaik, 2012). At times, insane is the only way to describe fans as they sport painted faces, wild outfits, and yell raucously for their favorite team. Their prevalence in our country and their unrivaled dedication make sports fans an interesting point of study. Not only is it extremely relevant to the American culture, but also offers interesting insight into the human condition.

Before investigating deeper into the nature of sports fanatics, there are a few important things to note. First, there is a difference between sports fans and sports spectators. A sports fan has a connection to the athlete, team, or sport, whereas a spectator is simply a witness to the sporting event (Wann, 2001, p. 2). Second, this paper analyzes many aspects of fandom in three different categories, but everything discussed is interconnected.

Psychology

Perhaps the most prominent and extensive area of study regarding sports fandom is psychology. This is the study of the mind and human behavior and sports fans have proven to be

a very interesting case. How do people become fans? Why do they become so invested? What makes them so crazy? In studying sports fans, researchers have made many interesting discoveries about this group that reflect the greater human experience.

The process of becoming a sports fan begins with socialization, which is defined by Dr. Daniel Wann (2001) as the “process of learning to live in and understand a culture and subculture by internalizing its values, beliefs, attitudes, and norms” (p. 24). In other terms, it is how somebody becomes a sports fan. Barry McPherson found that there are four main socializing agents; family, peers, school, and community. Although research found that males are influenced greatly by their peers, family has been deemed the most significant factor in sports fan socialization across all populations (as cited in Wann, 2001, p. 28). Many sports fans inherit their favorite teams from their parents and cite sporting events with their parents as some of their favorite childhood memories. According to Dr. Jeffery James, children can truly become fans around eight years of age because they have developed concrete operational thinking and the ability to form long-term attachments (as cited in Van Schaik, 2012). On the other end of the spectrum, many older fans feel that their level of fandom only reaches its greatest when they are able to experience sports with their children. Sports can also be utilized as a teaching experience to emphasize teamwork, sportsmanship, and perseverance. In general, sports serves as a way for families to bond. Mark Cuban, owner of the Dallas Mavericks, said that they “are not in the business of selling basketball, ... (but) are in the business of giving you a chance to create shared experiences,” an ultimate opportunity for families (as cited in Van Schaik, 2012).

After understanding how people become fans, it is important to investigate motivation, or why people become fans. What about sports keeps people coming back? To answer this question, most researchers refer to the Sports Fan Motivation Scale (SFMS) developed by Wann. Although

the responses are subjective and often overlap, this scale utilizes eight major reasons why people are sports fans. In no particular order they are: group affiliation, family, aesthetic, self-esteem, economic, entertainment, eustress, and escape. Group affiliation stems from a need for social interaction and a sense of belonging. The family motivation means people attend games as a means by which to spend time with their families. Aesthetic is for those who enjoy the beauty and grace of the movement in sports. A person motivated by self-esteem participates to feel better about themselves by sharing the team's achievements. Economic motivation relates to possible gains through gambling. Those who are sports fans for the entertainment see the games as an enjoyable recreational activity. Fans who come to games for the eustress enjoy the stimulation and excitement aspects. Lastly, those who seek escape in sports are looking for a release during stressful times. It is very difficult for professionals to determine which reasons are the most prominent in sports fan motivation. Wann aimed to find out by averaging the results of four of his studies. He found the most common reason to be entertainment, followed by eustress and group affiliation and the least common one to be economic (Wann, 2001, p. 45).

Eustress and escape are two particularly important motivations. They reflect the need for an outlet for times of struggle. Eustress has been described as gaining stimulation and excitement. Sometimes our needs for these two things are unsatisfied by our everyday lives, but "these desires can be fulfilled through sport spectatorship" (Wann, 2001, p. 38). We often seek this because we need a release valve (Simons, 2013, p. 209). The escape motive utilizes sports as a diversion from stressful situations. In history, this was especially prevalent during wartimes like World War II, when President Roosevelt allowed professional baseball to continue. Fans resort to sports as an "escape from work and other tedium of life" (Wann, 2001, p. 39). Multiple studies found that this can happen with people experiencing both under and overstimulation.

Analysis showed a “positive relationship between the respondent's level of escape motivation and their perceptions of life as boring and stressful” (Wann, 2001, p. 40). Author William Leitch described it this way: “The world is a terrifying place, with grays, complexities and confusion at every turn. Sports afford us none of this: If our team wins, we are happy, if they lose, we are sad” (as cited in Simons, 2013, p. 210).

In addition to the differences in how and why people become sports fans, there is great variation in the level of identification and involvement. Some enjoy games casually, while others live and die for their favorite team. In an effort to quantify the “extent to which a fan feels psychologically connected to a team”, the Sport Spectator Identification Scale (SSIS) was created (Wann, 2001, p. 3). Participants are asked a series of questions including how important is it that the team wins, how strongly they see themselves as a fan, and how often they display the team’s insignia. The answers are ranked on a scale of 1-8. The greater their ending score, the greater the fan’s identification. For those with high identification, sports and their favorite team are highly important. Dr. Rick Grieve (2014) found that undergraduates identified most strongly with sports over other aspects of their lives, including religion and community. Eric Simons (2013) found that people often change jobs, move locations, or abandon their faith, but nothing could be worse than separating a sport fan from their favorite team (p. 111).

Many die-hard fans consider supporting their favorite team a part of who they are, which brings to light a very important psychological aspect of fandom: identity. The human brain searches constantly to answer the question “Who am I?” In this exploration of self, many turn to fandom. One researcher considers this experience to be unique to America. Other places do not have large populations separated from their home country and experiencing a loss of identity. This results in a “nation of immigrants (that) fills identity gaps by embracing sports teams”

(Simons, 2013, p. 110). Sports offer people an institution to invest in. In fact, the “more opportunities the team gives you to establish an identity for yourself, the more firmly you anchor your support in it, the easier it is to answer the question “Who am I?” (Simons, 2013, p. 110).

A sports team becomes a part of an individual's identity by means of a process called social expansion. This phenomenon includes two main principles. First, humans instinctually try to expand themselves, a principle known as the social prosthetic system. Most are familiar with the saying, there is strength in numbers. Humans have evolved the desire to work in groups because it is a way of distributing themselves and reducing the risk of being harmed as an individual. For sports fans, this means joining a fan base made up of other followers of the same team. They go from being an individual, to being a part of something greater. Second, we incorporate “other(s) in our concept of self” (Simons, 2013, p. 140). We include traits of the group into our own personalities and identities. In terms of fandom, this is most recognizable in the use of the word “we”. For a fan, a team’s success is equivalent to personal success. Dr. Daniel Wann identified several behaviors of fans that reflect their inclusion of the team in themselves. When their team succeeds, they bask in reflected glory (BIRG) as if the accomplishment was their own. When their team fails, they cut off reflected failure (CORF) by temporarily dissociating from the group or downplaying the mistake or loss (as cited in Simons, 2013, p. 67).

As a result of the social expansion a fan experiences, they often form relationships with the fan base and team. The brain is programmed evolutionarily to form relationships as a means of ensuring survival and over time, this same model has been used and applied to other contexts. When we encounter sports, the brain searches for a way to make sense of it and ultimately uses its method of processing relationships. However, the relationships are parasocial, meaning they

are one-sided. The sports team is unaware that the relationship exists. For the sports fan, the asymmetrical relationship is safe, allowing them to invest “without any risk of criticism or rejection” (Van Schaik, 2012).

An interesting aspect of sports fandom that arises as a result of the quasi-relationship that fans have with their team is cognitive bias. This is a mistake in reasoning or cognitive processes due to personal preferences or beliefs. Cognitive bias allows people to see the world as they want to, not how it really is. For fans, this results in deep favoritism for their team. The culture of being a fan affects their cognition. When the brain receives new information that could undermine their connection to their team or other fans, there is a “strong and unconscious emotional prejudice against it” (Simons, 2013, p. 157). It also relates to confirmation bias, which means that individuals look for information that confirm what they already believe and disagree with or ignore what contradicts it (Van Schaik, 2012). This is the reason some fans vocally disagree with every call a referee makes against their team, regardless of whether it is justified or not.

It is evident, especially for the more dedicated fans, that they have a great deal of pride for their team. Pride is not simply intrinsically favoring a team, but it is showing an affiliation to them for recognition by others. For example, pride is a fan cheering their team on more when the game is televised, “not just because (they) want them to do well, but because (they) know others are watching” (Simons, 2013, p. 103). In a research study, Dr. Lisa Williams and Dr. David DeSteno found that when their participants were given a tedious task, they tried harder when they were “receiving social acclaim” (as cited in Simons, 2013, p. 105) and were motivated the most by pride. The same holds true for fans of losing teams. They will brag about the devastation of losing and how their life spiraled downward as a result, as if it were a trophy. Furthermore,

groups of fans will reminisce about the biggest losses when they group together. Odd as this practice is, it displays a fan's passion for their team, even when the team loses continually. Williams and DeSteno described pride as "motivating people to continue a behavior that has negative consequences when there's a good chance for long term benefit" (as cited in Simons, 2013, p. 106). It is for this reason that fans continue following a losing team with the hope of praise when their team wins later in the season or in years to come.

Losing is another interesting area to investigate in the study of sports fandom. It is easy to be a fan of a team that wins consistently, as there is constant reward for their dedication. However, it is not as simple to support a team that loses. Many hardcore sports fans will stand by their team no matter what. In fact, one study found that a team's success or failure was not the most prominent reason why fans decide whether to follow a team or not (Wann, 2001, p. 6). Dr. Edward Hirt of Indiana University asserted that within each fan is a hidden masochist, as some suffer for years without victory, yet return the next season regardless (as cited in Van Schaik, 2012). This does not come without consequence though. One animal study performed by Dr. Klaus Miczek aimed at mirroring this circumstance exposed rats to repeated defeat and stress similar to that experienced by sports fans of losing teams. Those rats exhibited symptoms similar to human depression and were more likely to show an interest in cocaine as a means of compensating (Simons, 2013, p. 125-127). This brings about an interesting discussion of sports fans as individuals who are addicted. They are unable to break their habits and stop watching their team even when it contradicts their best interests and ends in perpetual disappointment. When a fan's team does win, they experience an intense high that the brain cannot forget. After that, fans are driven to chase that high again, simply because they know it is possible. A psychologist named B.F. Skinner tested pigeons and found that when the birds are rewarded

occasionally and unpredictably, “it will take (them) much, much longer to stop chasing the reward after the reward stops arriving” (as cited in Simons, 2013, p. 185). The same is true of sports fans. The occasional victory keeps them invested, even during periods of non success.

Despite the losses, researchers have discovered that for fans, there is great sense of duty and loyalty. For some fans, their loyalty to their team even borders on obsession. Interestingly, these die-hards with unwavering dedication historically resent bandwagon fans as if they have not earned the right to share in the team’s success. Only those who have suffered and stuck with the team through the good and bad seasons have the privilege of enjoying their times of victory. This term has been coined the social glue hypothesis. Professor Mark van Vugt explains “belonging, cooperation, and fellowship are most important when the game gets rough because that’s when the appeal of leaving becomes strongest” (as cited in Simons, 2013, p. 238). Many will even make public demonstrations of their loyalty to assure group members of their allegiances.

Some fans are so loyal to a single team that they feel a sense of responsibility to them. Dr. Wann found that they “frequently view it as a responsibility to attempt to influence the outcome through acts of support such as cheering” (as cited in Grieve, 2014). Another very prominent demonstration of this responsibility is shown in the prevalence of tradition and superstition. The principles of superstitious conditioning that sports fans experience include two components; certain behaviors ensure wins and others can cause loss. Some characteristic traditions fans believe will ensure wins are not missing a game, wearing a certain jersey, or sitting in the same seat. Others feel that when their team is losing, turning away or moving seats will change their luck.

It is necessary when speaking about the psychological aspects of sports fans to mention their behaviors. The stereotypical fan is a “screaming lunatic” that is lazy, drunk, and shallow. While one researcher found that aggression can temporarily increase with sports, the stereotype is generally untrue (Simons, 2013, p. 268) . Sports fans in college have higher GPAs and are more likely to believe they will graduate college (Simons, 2013, p. 205). This is not to say however, that the behavior of sports fans is not unique. One interesting aspect to study is disinhibition. This is when fans may do things they normally would not do because normal restrictions on behavior do not necessarily apply (Van Schaik, 2012). The simplest example is cheering and yelling. Most fans would not partake in these behaviors in their everyday lives, yet do so at sporting events. They “act on the basis of their immediate emotions and motivations, without considerations that might otherwise prevent their behaviour” (Van Schaik, 2012). Another characteristic of sports fans behavior involves deindividuation. This occurs when a person becomes part of a large crowd and feels a “loss of self-awareness and sense of diffused responsibility” (Van Schaik, 2012). Fans stop caring about what others think and those around them act to reinforce their behavior. Some credit deindividuation as the reason sports fans can become barbaric and uncivilized, but Professor Stephen Reicher asserts that they are “just shifting the way they think about themselves from individual identity to social identity” (as cited in Simons, 2013, p. 270).

From a psychological perspective, fans offer many points to study. We join into fanship in different ways and engage for a variety of reasons. To some, sports are unimportant, but to others, sports are everything and are a part of who they are. They form a relationship with their favorite team and become a part of something greater than themselves. They exude pride and loyalty even in the face of loss and partake in traditions that endure through generations. Some

argue that we place too much meaning in sports and that it truly does not mean anything. However, people's attachment and investment in it certainly does. Simons (2013) expressed that as we learn more, it is clear that "sports fandom is a uniquely human endeavor that offers a surprising window into the emotional, rational, and irrational, behaviors that have always made us what we are" (p. 14).

Sociology

Sociology is the study of social behavior and society and there is no doubt that sports fans are an interesting group to examine. They have a culture all their own and exhibit many characteristics as a whole. However, they also unconsciously separate themselves by team and create smaller, more personal groups. Although the rise of the sports fanatic seems like a modern trend, these tendencies are deeply rooted in our ancestors and human history.

To begin, every day our brains are bombarded with information and are charged with making sense of the things we encounter. We are able to do this by dividing the world into groups. Eric Simons explains that our systems of perception are naturally programmed for instant categorization. For instance, when we encounter new people, "we stereotype them based on obvious categories we can apply to them" (Simons, 2013, p. 219). Although stereotyping often has a negative connotation, it allows us to access our memories, apply them to the situation in front of us, and make a quick decision. If you saw a person with a gun, you would stereotype him as a criminal. You would recall from your memory that criminals are associated with danger and may cause harm to you, then quickly decide to either leave the area or fight. For sports fans, the same principle applies. We sort people based on certain team logos and colors. If you encounter a new person and their attire is indicative that they support the same team as you, you deem them acceptable and now have an unspoken connection (Simons, 2013, p. 225). For

example, a New England Patriots fan would see someone wearing a Tom Brady jersey and instantly have something in common with them. However, if you meet somebody wearing the rival's colors or donning the symbol of the opposition, it is instant dislike.

This categorization results in the mental construction of two distinct groups: the in-group and the out-group. The in-group is the one the individual belongs to and consists of people similar to them. In contrast, the out-group is the one that the individual feels they do not belong to and is made up of people unlike them. When looking at sports fans, the in-group is made up of people that support the same team and the out-group consists of fans of the opposition. Fans as a whole are actually very similar in many respects, dedicating parts of their life to a team they enjoy watching. The only thing that truly distinguishes them is which team they to root for, yet they hold this fact above everything (Van Schaik, 2012). Interestingly, studying sports fans has revealed that, to many of them, "the tribe appears to be more important than the competition" (Simons, 2013, p. 217). The game itself becomes secondary to their inclusion in a fan group.

Now that our brain has categorized the people we have encountered and determined which group they belong to, we adjust our behavior accordingly (Simons, 2013, p. 220). Instinct causes us to connect with the in-group, which we belong to and, as a result, we automatically favor its members. Lab studies have even proven that people are more likely to reward members of the group to which they belong (Simons, 2013, p. 222). Recalling the discussion of cognitive bias earlier, sports fans will always believe their team is right and oppose every foul called against them. The same applies to fan interactions. People are generally nicer to members of the same fan base even if they do not really know each other.

However, with this in-group favoritism, we also unconsciously denigrate and discriminate against members of the out-group (Simons, 2013, p. 231-2). It is no secret that

sports fans dislike fans of the opposing team. In the heat of competition, this can even result in verbal arguments and aggression. However, one interesting perspective on the matter is that “true fans partially exist only because of the outgroup they claim to despise” (Van Schaik, 2012).

There would not be groups to oppose if another group did not exist. On the other hand, Dr. Marilynn Brewer found in her research that out-group discrimination might be misunderstood favoritism (as cited in Simons, 2013, p. 232). Sports fans exhibit mostly in-group love and how much they prefer their own group is not necessarily a reflection of how much they dislike the others. It is only the presence of competition that turns the groups against each other.

Although sports fans exemplify these sociological principles, these behaviors stem from our ancestors and early human tribes. People originally grouped together for survival. It was easier to prosper as a tribe with more people working towards the common good. At first, there was not much competition for resources and there were not many other groups around to fight with. This indicates that in-group love has been more prominent since early human history. Anthropologist Douglas Fry asserted that humans are naturally a nonviolent species and noted that, historically, an effort is made to avoid it. Early tribes would use ritual competition to avoid true fighting and ostracize violent members (as cited in Simons, 2013, p. 250-1). Even today, violent criminals are imprisoned.

As the human race grew, war became more prevalent. It was necessary to fight for resources and defend yourself and your people, but war also created selection pressures (Van Schaik, 2012) giving rise to what is known as the male warrior hypothesis. Dr. Mark van Vugt explains that men are motivated to improve their access to women. Therefore, they will “risk death by warfare if that would lead to decreasing the number of other men and increasing the number of available women” (as cited in Simons, 2013, p. 257). This is where out-group

discrimination may have begun. Needing to kill those threatening your land, food, and women does not allow you to like them.

What lies in between love and war and dominates today is parochial altruism, which is the idea that “in-group love makes sense evolutionarily only if it’s coupled with out-group dislike” (Simons, 2013, p. 252). The groups in history who prevailed were made up of those willing to fight with outsiders when threatened because of their love for their own group (Simons, 2013, p. 253). The human brain continues to think this way, and sports fans are the perfect demonstration. Each fan deeply favors their own team and a sporting event serves as a threat to their team’s success, resulting in dislike for the opposition and their fans.

Sports fans serve as a perfect example for examining aspects of human sociology. Our brain’s instinct to categorize the world around us creates two groups; us and them, our team and theirs. Just like our ancestors grouped together for survival, sports fans group together based on their common love for a team. Although in history we have often discouraged true violence, the presence of competition creates tension. The heat of the game might turn some fans against each other, but in the end, we are all still there to celebrate athleticism and revel in the world of sports.

Physiology

As stated before, fandom has deep roots in our ancient ancestors. However, not only are our behaviors influenced by the first humans, but our physiology is also rooted in evolution. Eric Simons (2013) states “competition awakens some pretty old instincts” (p. 22). As a result, watching sports is an extremely physical experience. The human body reacts subconsciously in a variety of ways to watching teams compete.

One of the reasons sports fans feel so invested in the game they are watching is because of mirror neurons. Researchers found that the same areas of the brain are activated when you

perform an action and watch that action. Each time, the “brain runs a full scale simulation of the motion that you see” (Simons, 2013, p. 64-5). Therefore, when a fan is sitting in the stands, their body cannot tell the difference and acts as if they are actually the ones playing, mirroring the athlete the entire game. Furthermore, the more familiar you become with an action through playing yourself or repeatedly watching, the more intense the mirroring becomes.

This phenomenon is responsible for anticipation. For example, when a basketball player takes a shot, there is a split second when a fan holds their breath and anticipates the result before it happens. This is directly a result of them mirroring the player. Mirror neurons also involve a fan’s motor system. Since the brain thinks it is performing the action being watched, fans can find themselves moving at times without conscious control of it (Simons, 2013, p. 87). This accounts for why they stand up, jump onto chairs, or throw their hands up when something exciting happens, almost like a reflex. An emotional side also feeds into it. Fans are happy when the team wins and sad when they lose, as if they were playing. The mirror neurons account for the spectator investment but the limbic system handles the emotions. There is also input from the medial prefrontal cortex and anterior cingulate cortex which are involved in decision making. These structures determine which stimulations from the mirroring make it to the limbic system (Simons, 2013, p. 87).

Watching a sporting event also initiates a series of hormonal changes that affect both your actions and emotions (Simons, 2013, p. 20). Throughout this discussion it is important to remember that the processes all differ based on the individual person. Everybody reacts differently and it is highly influenced on their personality, investment in the game, and how they perceive the outcome.

The first hormone that experiences prominent changes during sports is testosterone. This

hormone increases a person's physical power and brain power and while some associate it with aggression, researchers have found it does more to assert dominance (Simons, 2013, p. 24). The challenge hypothesis proposed by neurobiologist John Wingfield explains that testosterone will increase at the start of competition or when an individual is confronted with a challenge. When he studied birds, he found that producing high testosterone levels all of the time would be costly in terms of time and energy. Therefore, the hormone remains at lower levels until confronted with a challenge (Simons, 2013, p. 25). Along with this comes the biosocial model of dominance. Dr. Allan Mazur explains that if testosterone contributes to performance, then winners would have higher levels than losers "as a way of maintaining social order" (as cited in Simons, 2013, p. 25). If sports represent the competition in the animal kingdom, then one would think these changes would only apply to athletes, but the same changes occur in spectators. A study by Dr. Rui Oliveira saw a rise in the testosterone of fish that observed a fight. He concluded "the endocrine system of spectators responds to social interactions in which they themselves do not participate" (as cited in Simons, 2013, p. 23). This is known as vicarious dominance competition, in which fans experience testosterone changes too. Dr. Paul Bernhardt sought to see the evidence of this in sports fans and saw a 20% rise in testosterone for fans of the winning sports team and an equal decrease for fans of the losing team (as cited in Van Schaik, 2012).

This response varies between the sexes. Dr. Steve Stanton attributes this to location of hormone production, speed of response to situations, and speed of transport throughout the body. Testes are faster to respond to social situations, especially regarding asserting dominance. The ovaries do not operate the same way, accounting for the different responses between men and women (Simons, 2013, p. 40).

Another set of changes the body undergoes during sports involves the sympathetic nervous system. This is most commonly known for activating the body's fight or flight response, but more generally responds to stressful situations. For highly invested fans, sporting events can be extremely stressful. Outsiders are threatening your team's success and games very close in score cause fans great worry. As a result of this stress, the adrenal gland increases the production of cortisol. This causes an increase in heart rate, sweating, and breathing rate. Leander van der Meij from Amsterdam found that "the people who identified most strongly as fans released the most cortisol and were the most stressed, partly because they had no actual control" (Breyer, 2014). Adrenaline also participates in this response, but usually for more short-term reactions than the prolonged stress endured by fans. Paired with the sympathetic nervous system is the parasympathetic nervous system. This brings the body back to rest after the elevated stress, accounting for the highs and lows fans experience during the game.

In addition to cortisol and adrenaline, the dopamine reward system is active in sports fans. This hormone is responsible for the feeling of pleasure and is released in happy situations. When your team wins or scores a goal, the ventral striatum, or pleasure center of the brain, is activated and dopamine is released making you feel happy (Birch, 2015). Your brain remembers this feeling and actively seeks it again, contributing to why fans return to see the team play again. The same activation happens to some extent as the pain of a rival.

On the other hand, there are pain areas of the brain; the anterior insula and the anterior cingulate cortex. These activate when you experience a disappointment. For sports fans, this can happen when their team loses because of their deep investment. Some fans even cry. Dr. Karla Ivankovich described the tears as a release of stress needed for the body to return to equilibrium

and Dr. Art Markman explained that the tears can also act as a way to communicate emotions to others (as cited in Birch, 2015).

Given what deep involvement the body has in spectating sports, there have been a number of studies investigating the effects of sports on fans. First, there are cardiac implications. Dr. Robert Cloner found that there was a direct correlation between cardiac deaths and game results. In 2009, there were 25% fewer cardiac deaths in Pittsburgh when they won the Super Bowl and 20% more in 2008 in New England when they lost (Breyer, 2014). A similar trend exists with traumatic accidents. Dr. Stacy Wood observed there were more “auto-related deaths in cities where the local college and pro football and basketball teams had just won by a close margin” (as cited in Breyer, 2016). Dr. Ian Birky, sports psychologist and director of counseling at Lehigh University noted the presence of depression after tough losses. “Loss is one of the most psychological disappointing experiences that a person can have,” but the depression is usually temporary (as cited in Breyer, 2016). Lastly is the effect sports has on diet. In general, sports fans have worse eating habits than non-sports fans (Hill, 2012). Furthermore, if your favorite team loses, there is a decrease in self-control. A study of NFL fans found a rise in consumption of saturated fat by 16% for fans of losing teams (Breyer, 2016). For the winning fans, fat consumption decreased by 9% and calorie consumption decreased by 5% (Breyer, 2016).

From a physiology perspective sports have a profound effect on the body. Testosterone gears you up for the fight, cortisol leads to the anxiety and worry during the game, and dopamine gives you the elation as your team takes home the win. You mirror every action you see as if you yourself were the athlete. You can feel every success and failure in your body, contributing to why fans are so invested and why they hold their team above everything.

Conclusion

After analyzing fans in depth, it is clear that they are not simply the mindless worshipers of athletes that the media often portrays. They are not uncultured and uncivilized: they simply love their team. The fan experience is deeply rooted in biology and watching sports has a profound effect on the human body, but also the mind. Teams become integrated into personal identity and changes an individual's cognition and behavior. It gives fans something to be proud of and invest in through the good times and bad. Finally, sports are a means of connecting with the people around you and provide fans the fulfilling opportunity to be a part of something greater than themselves.

Part II: The Rhody Faithful

At the University of Rhode Island, men's basketball is one of the main athletic attractions. It draws thousands of spectators and has become a large part of the identity of the school and surrounding community. As a member of the Ramettes Dance Team, I have attended every home basketball game for four years and have seen first hand how crazy and passionate the fans are. They wait all year for the beginning of basketball season to start. The Rhody fans have a history of being crazed. Years ago, they would wait at the train station in Kingston for the team to return after away games and sit in the banisters at the gym when all of the seats were taken (Woodward, 2002, p. 23, 31). This excitement still resonates with the fans today. Given this, in addition to the research, I spoke to some URI basketball fans about their experiences in an effort to see if the same principles applied to sports fans in our own community.

Psychology

From a psychology standpoint, many aspects of my research mirrored what I heard from fans. First, I looked at socialization and found that, like the research suggested, there are many ways people become fans. Recalling the work of Barry McPherson, there are four main socializing agents; family, community, peers, and school and Rhody fans identified with all four. In terms of family, B. Lombardi recalled that he became a fan because both his father and grandfather attended the University of Rhode Island and their dedication led to him growing up attending the basketball games (personal communication, April 12, 2016). A female fan, C. Nally, described the influence of the community when she explained that she began going to URI basketball games when she moved to the Kingston area (personal communication, April 12, 2016). Peer influence was evident when talking with A. Duarte, a member of the band, who said he did not enjoy basketball as much, but got more involved after spending time with his friends

in the band and in the presence of other fans (personal communication, April 22, 2016). Lastly, the most prevalent influence was school. The majority of fans I talked to became fans after enrolling at URI, whether it was in 1965 or just last year.

Although family was present as a socializing agent for fans, there were varied degrees of family involvement. Some fans do not connect with their families in regards to sports. Other families all worship Rhode Island Rams basketball together. In talking to some of the other members of the Ramettes dance team, some interesting trends emerged. When I asked R. Silva, a sophomore, if her family were also URI fans, her answer was, “Yea. They don’t really have a choice” (personal communication, April 3, 2016). Many of their families began coming to the URI games sporting their Rhody T-shirts to support the dancers as the halftime entertainment, but since then, their dedication has evolved. C. Clifford stated that her mother and younger sister started coming to watch her perform, but now go primarily for the basketball (personal communication, March 30, 2016). They attend as many games as they can and watch the ones they cannot attend on TV or online. Another dancer, H. Ritchie, said she even taught her family the cheers so that she can run around the house yelling “Rhody! Rhody! Rhody!” and during the games they can respond “Rams! Rams! Rams!” (personal communication, April 14, 2016).

Even for the older fans, family plays a significant role. G. Norris, a member of the Class of 1974, said that when his son was in the high school band, he would play the fight song for his dad before every game (personal communication, April 12, 2016). Another fan, T. Gray, described his family as “all URI people” (personal communication, April 14, 2016). Both parents attended the University of Rhode Island and have owned season tickets since the 1960s, with his mother at one point serving as the head of the Alumni Association. His brother also attended the school, later naming his dog “Rhody”. Gray and his wife, also URI alumni, go to as

many games as possible with their daughter, who graduated in 2015, often purchasing floor seats for the occasion. It is undeniable in talking to the Rhody basketball lovers, that family is a huge part of their experiences as fans.

One interesting trait I found throughout the interview process was the immense dedication of the URI basketball fans, best shown by their attendance at games. It is important to remember that dedication exists on a spectrum and not every URI fan attends as many games or follows the team as closely as the ones I spoke with, but in this case, we discuss the die-hards. M. Stone, a member of the band who continued playing even after graduation, told me he has missed less than five home games since he came to URI (personal communication, April 3, 2016). He has also attended both away games against Providence College, three Atlantic 10 tournaments, and the Mohegan Sun Invitational. However, this story is not unique. C. Nally has owned season tickets since 1956 and used to attend away games with a group of fans that organized bus trips every week (personal communication, April 12, 2016). One fan I spoke with, A. Zartarian '69, exemplifies dedication. He told me that he could count the number of home games he missed on one hand and that he had seen every URI NCAA tournament game win. In our discussion, Zartarian recounted every single player and coach in the program and gave play-by-play recaps of games that happened over 40 years ago (personal communication, April 14, 2016).

With the age of technology came a new way for fans to follow the team. H. Ritchie, a student and Ramette from California, told me that when she is not at the game, she will watch it on television, find an internet live stream, listen to it on the radio, check the ESPN live statistics, or check Twitter updates (personal communication, April 14, 2016). Social media has become a useful tool in connecting fans that cannot attend every game. I heard a prime example of this by

fan B. Lombardi (personal communication, April 12, 2016). After graduation in 2006, he began his first year of law school in New York City. After the big win of the URI Men's Basketball team over Syracuse, he sought a place to let out his excitement and talk about it. He and his friend Matt started their own website to stay connected. Thus, the Keaney Blue website was born (<http://keaneyblue.com>). The URI Basketball Forum is now home to 681 members strong and nearly 140,000 posts.

For older fans, it is clear that their love for URI has persisted through time, but many expressed a concern that younger fans might not remain as connected to the school as they are. I personally already purchased my season tickets for next year, but I find I am usually the exception not the rule. I was curious as to the future of my generation of URI fans, and asked them if they would still support the team after they graduate. Some of the answers I received were “Duh!”, “Of course I will be a fan”, “I plan on supporting Rhody until I die” and “I will love URI basketball forever”. It is true that these are the people highly invested in the program and obviously not all students will return to support URI basketball after graduation. Regardless, it is strangely moving to know that this community of fans that we are a part of is enduring. Someday we are going to become the old fans that have had season tickets for decades and reminisce about games in the “old days.”

As previously noted, Dr. Daniel Wann cited that fans often feel a sense of responsibility to the team. The same can be said of the URI fans, many of whom truly believe that they have an impact on the team and their performance. R. Keelan, a URI student, described the crowd as the 6th man (personal communication, April 3, 2016) and senior D. Genco expressed that “the more energy the crowd brings the more energy the team has” (personal communication, April 11, 2016). It seems everybody does their part to make this happen. Some cheer and applaud to give

the team more motivation, others try and distract the other team with signs and chanting, and some feel they contribute best by yelling at the referees after bad calls. In the words of alumni T. Gray, filling the stands are the best advantage you can give the team (personal communication, April 14, 2016).

During my conversations with URI basketball fans it was evident that everyone had a great deal of pride for their team. As described earlier in the paper, pride is not just intrinsic, but also involves displaying their dedication to other people. One way of doing this would be to wear team gear. During the games, the Ryan Center looks like a sea of blue, but interestingly, nearly everyone I interviewed was also sporting Rhody colors even outside the game setting. One woman even had a RI logo sticker on her front window and an entire room in her house dedicated to URI sports. All fans, even the less dedicated ones, feel proud when the team they support wins, but student R. Keelan expressed that part of this pride comes from the fact that you earn the right to brag about your team to others (personal communication, April 3, 2016).

During the interviews, many recounted some notable fans that went to the next level to show their pride. One is known as the “Blue Man” as he used to run around the Ryan Center during every game as a student wearing all blue. Just last season, he proposed to his girlfriend during a URI game and they took their engagement photos right on the court. Another character at the Rhode Island basketball games is Jay Lurgio, informally known as the “Sign Guy”. He makes signs for every game to hold up from his courtside seats and distract the other team. He even attended a taping of the Dan Hurley Radio Show at night after he was married that very afternoon. In an interview with Cox sports, he said himself “There is no substitution for a great fan base” (O’Leary, 2015).

Even given their extreme pride, they also expressed how being a Rhody fan can often come with a lot of disappointment. Earlier in this exploration of sports fans, we learned that many would continually return to support a losing team. The Rhode Island Rams is a Division I basketball team and has had good years in which they advanced to the NCAA Tournament, but they are not always so successful. Rhody fans have been known to describe themselves as long-suffering, so I asked if they have ever been tempted to give up on the URI basketball team. T. Gray told me that he often says, “I’m done!” just to blow off steam, but never means it (personal communication, April 14, 2016). R. Keelan, a current URI student, expressed that he feels more disappointed after losses and wishes they would stop making stupid mistakes (personal communication, April 3, 2016). Furthermore, Ramette C. Clifford explained how she gets frustrated because she knows the team is extremely talented and does not always live up to their full potential (personal communication, March 30, 2016). Some fans were able to see URI’s tendency to disappoint almost comically. When asked the same question, H. Ritchie answered, “No way! I’m mostly just tempted to drag them all to the Ryan Center to practice free throws” (personal communication, April 14, 2016). Band member M. Stone said, “URI could lose to a high school team and I would not give up on them” (personal communication, April 3, 2016). In summary, the true fans could never give up on their team. In the research, professionals also found that fans see loyalty over the difficult seasons as a way of earning the right to celebrate during the successful ones. This was directly mirrored in the words of senior band member D. Genco: “Supporting teams through the good and bad times is so much more rewarding” (personal communication, April 11, 2016).

Throughout my interviews with some of the fans, I asked them about their fondest memory of URI basketball. Interestingly, many people cited the same games, many of which

involved post-season tournaments and big wins. T. Gray remembered the win against Syracuse in 1998 to send URI to the Sweet 16 (personal communication, April 14, 2016) and A. Zartarian's most memorable game was watching URI beat No.1 ranked Kansas in the 1998 NCAA Tournament (personal communication, April 14, 2016). However, it seems the most exciting year for some of the older fans was 1999. Nearly everyone recounted the Atlantic 10 Tournament Finals against Temple, where the score was tied and Lamar Odom hit a buzzer-beater shot for the win. As they spoke to me, smiles spread across their faces and I could feel their excitement about it still after over 15 years. Although URI has not had as successful of a season since then, the same principle applied to the younger fans as well. Many of them cited the URI win over the nationally ranked Nebraska team where the students stormed the court as their fondest memory of Rhode Island basketball. H. Ritchie stated that the game was "unreal" and that she "did not think that it was possible to be so happy, excited, and proud of a sports team" (personal communication, April 14, 2016). In summary, it is clear that these games and certain events really do have a lasting impact on the fans.

Sociology

In terms of sociology, the behavior and attitudes of the URI basketball fans are similar to what was found in the research. As discussed earlier, there is an instinct to categorize people and when sports fans see someone sporting their team's colors or logos, they instantly have something in common. Interestingly, D. Genco mentioned, "I have been places and been wearing a URI shirt and had people come over and talk URI basketball with me" (personal communication, April 11, 2016). Also, there is a great presence of in-group favoritism and many see the fan base as a community, which has been coined the "Ram Fam". One student kindly defined the term for me: "Ram Fam (noun): a community of students, alumni, and fans of the

University of Rhode Island Rams who share an indescribable and unbreakable bond as a result of their love for Rhody; people you know you can count on to share the same feelings as you when it comes to anything Rhody-related” (personal communication, April 14, 2016).

Along with the in-group favoritism, out-group dislike is also present. Ramette sophomore R. Silva even stated that her favorite part of the basketball game is when the other team loses (personal communication, April 3, 2016). URI fans, like most other fan bases, dislike the supporters of the opposition just on principle. Our student section enters into Twitter arguments with the University of Massachusetts fans on a regular basis. However, URI fans cannot hate anybody more than the fans of the Providence College Friars. Some fans phrased their hatred mildly. C. Nally only said, “I cannot cheer for them” (personal communication, April 12, 2016). D. Genco simply told me that he has not liked PC since he was hit with a slice of pizza that a PC fan threw during the annual rivalry game (personal communication, April 11, 2016). Others were not so reserved when asked how they felt about Providence College. Although many of his friends and family attended the school, B. Lombardi expressed that they have “no idea how much I hate PC” (personal communication, April 12, 2016). The dislike seems to go even beyond just the fact that they are basketball opponents. T. Gray explained given his experience in the media that there is a distinct bias against URI (personal communication, April 14, 2016). A. Zartarian talked about the arrogance of the fans and their general irritating air of superiority despite their history of criminal players (personal communication, April 14, 2016) and M. Stone elaborated, stating that “these fans don’t think that their program is better than URI’s, they actually believe it” (personal communication, April 3, 2016). The fan who I feel articulated the feelings towards Providence College best is H. Ritchie, who said, “the hatred is real, so real that even seeing someone wearing a Friars hat or sweatshirt makes me instantly burn inside”

(personal communication, April 14, 2016). While I knew that Providence and Rhode Island fans have been rivals for years, it is interesting from a sociology standpoint to see that the disdain is universal and widespread.

Physiology

It is difficult to assess a fan's physiology out of the context of the game since given the equipment needed and the complicated methods. However, given that physiological processes are responsible for emotions, I asked fans about how they felt during games. One student's favorite part of the games is the "atmosphere and the hype of basketball" and went on to describe the feeling as a thrill ride (R. Keelan, personal communication, April 13, 2016). Furthermore, a band member explained that during close games he probably cycles through every emotion imaginable. B. Lombardi recounted the time he traveled to North Carolina for the 1993 NCAA tournament game against Purdue University. When URI secured the win, he stood there with his painted face crying tears of joy (personal communication, April 12, 2016). Ramette H. Ritchie describes the feeling of tunnel vision she experiences during the games: "When I'm cheering on Rhody basketball, nothing else matters. My only focus is the team, the players, and Dan Hurley. I love how I can yell until my voice literally doesn't come out anymore, and how I can stand and jump until my feet are literally numb. The pure joy that I feel when Rhody is winning is like no other" (personal communication, April 14, 2016).

According to the fans I spoke with, the same surges of emotion also happen with great disappointment. M. Stone spoke of his feelings after this season's last second loss against Providence College: "Being in that state where you don't wanna yell, or cry about what happened, you just sit there in agony" (personal communication, April 3, 2016). However, perhaps the most devastating memory for Rhody fans came at the first game of the 2015-2016

season, when E.C Matthews fell to the ground with a knee-injury that took him out of the game for the rest of the season. The student fans recounted the Ryan Center going completely silent. One comically compared his emotions to that of Simba when his father Mufasa died in the Lion King and could remember being in denial that this could have happened to their most important player. B. Lombardi described the experience as one of the saddest things he had ever seen, not only in basketball, but in his entire life (personal communication, April 12, 2016). H. Ritchie summed up the experience by saying, “Tears that were flowing from my face explain it all” (personal communication, April 14, 2016). As the research found, the physiological reaction of each person depends on the individual's personal investment and what the event meant for them. This was especially true for the URI fans after the E.C. Matthews injury. On top of the heartbreak, they said it was hard to be positive because they could see the season slip away from them and the hopes and dreams of an NCAA bid died. To an outsider, listening to people describe basketball this way would make them wonder how a basketball game could bring about all of this. One fan describes this unique experience best; “The feelings that I experience during a game are feelings that only other Rhody-obsessed fans can understand” (H. Ritchie, personal communication, April 14, 2016).

Conclusion

I set out at the beginning of the semester to write a research paper. I would study the theory of sports fandom and apply the principles to our own school's community of basketball fans, producing a research project worthy of the university honors program. While I did gain extensive knowledge on sports fans, I found that my research was not just about writing a paper. It became more about the lived experience of the project. The research became a way for me to engage with the world around me. I gained a greater understanding of my world and the people

that I was surrounded by at every basketball game. I was able to connect with people who shared the same passions as me and who are a part of my own “tribe”. Their faces light up when they talk about the basketball program and you can tell that it is a truly meaningful part of their lives. It was an honor to be able to connect with them and share in their love.

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