

From: Sports: Why People Love Them  
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Chapter Seven

## Sports Fans

Have you ever sat on your favorite chair all day long watching sports on television? Many people have, especially during football season. Like millions of others, one of the authors regularly watches college football coverage for up to 15 hours on Saturdays—and he rarely misses a college bowl game. If they air it, he will watch it!

But what about this: could you watch sports nonstop, without sleep, for two or three consecutive days? If you answered “yes” to this question you should enter the “Ultimate Couch Potato Contest” sponsored by ESPN. The “Ultimate Couch Potato Contest” is an annual event that began in 2003 (in Chicago) and now takes place simultaneously at the New York and Chicago ESPN Zone restaurants. The contest begins on January 1st, a day filled with college football bowl games. As with any formal event, there are rules to this contest. First, all interested couch potatoes must submit a 200 word essay to ESPN detailing why they should be selected. Entries are judged on passion for sports, competitive spirit, and overall creativity. Just four contestants are selected for each of the two locations.

Once selected, the four contestants sit in the front row of the ESPN Zone’s “Screening Room” facing a wall of HD TVs, all showing non-stop sports programming. Oddly, the contestants sit on recliners, rather than on couches—perhaps the contest should be called the “Ultimate Couch Recliner Contest”. Contestants are served an unlimited amount of food and beverages, which is really nice. However, as anyone who has consumed beverages all day long can attest, it becomes necessary to use the bathroom. This leads to, perhaps, the most challenging rule of all—restroom breaks are permitted only once every eight hours. The other critical rule of this contest is a little less challenging for a true sports fan—that is, sleeping is not allowed. Contestants

who leave their seats for an unscheduled restroom break or fall asleep are disqualified.

The “Ultimate Couch Potato Contest” is also a part of the Guinness Book of World Records and as a result contestants are competing for a chance for inclusion into the record books. As of 2009, the world record for watching the most continuous hours of televised sports was 69 hours and 48 minutes, set by Suresh Joachim in a separate 2005 event. ESPN’s aspiring couch potatoes have fallen way short of the Guinness record. In 2007, Jason Pisarik successfully defended his Chicago title of top potato with a fairly respectable time of 39 hours and 44 minutes. Pisarik’s time still fell way short of the world record. In 2008, Stan Friedman—a Manhattan librarian—emerged as the New York champion despite lasting only for an embarrassing 29 hours. Please, ESPN, get some real competitor in this contest! Friedman won when the last of his three rivals ran to heed nature’s call.

For their efforts, winners of the “Ultimate Couch Potato Contest” are rewarded with nearly \$7,000 worth of prizes, including a 42-inch LCD HD TV, a DreamSeat recliner, and a number of ESPN-related gift cards and certificates. Friedman was happy to win his prizes but admitted that he would have difficulty finding room for them in his 350 square-foot apartment.

Speaking of couch potatoes, modern medical science has developed a drug that provides some of the same benefits of exercise without the hassle of actually working out! However, before getting your hopes up too much, the drug has only been applied to date to sedentary mice. Nonetheless, recent research conducted by scientists at the Salk Institute for Biological Studies and the Howard Hughes Medical Institute have created a drug that actually burns off calories and fat from mice. Furthermore, when tested on a treadmill, the treated mice could run significantly faster and farther than untreated mice (Ritter, 2008). The scientists hope that some day this “exercise in a pill” will be available for humans. The researchers believe that the drug will help treat obesity, diabetes, and people with medical conditions that keep them from exercising.

## THE EMERGENCE OF SPORTS FANS

Sports fans come in all shapes, sizes, colors, ages, socio-economic background, and sexes. Some are couch potatoes who literally sit around all day watching sports while others are not. Sports fans are united in their love for sports competition even if they are divided by favorite teams, athletes, and specific sports. Some are fans of baseball, others of softball. Many fans cheer for football, both professional and college, while others cheer auto racing, basketball, or tennis and golf.

But a number of questions have to be asked, including: “Where do all these sports fans come from?” and “Why *are* people fans of sports?” Let’s begin with the first question. Socially, sports fans come from all socio-economic levels, that is, rich and poor, and all those in between. Often, people from different socio-economic classes prefer one sport over another. The rich, for example, enjoy yachting and horse racing—the sport of kings—while the middle class prefers football and baseball. But sports have a way of transcending social class, so it is common for people all social classes to enjoy the same sport(s). American sports fans come from the east coast and the west coast, from the northern states to the southern states, and throughout the Midwest and mountain regions. They come from big cities like New York and Los Angeles and small towns. They come from our families and yours. Most sports adherents have been fans since childhood. Life-long sports fans who were not athletes developed an identity based on their sports enthusiasm. Former youth, high school, and college athletes transform their identities from athlete to sport fan. And, when professional athletes retire, they become sports fans as well. In short, sports fans come from everywhere.

The answer to the second question—“Why are people fans of sport?”—is a little more difficult to answer because the explanations are so varied. So, let’s start with what we know for sure, that there have been sports fans throughout history. That is, whenever sporting events have been staged, people have been there to cheer the athletes. The ancient Greeks began the tradition of idolizing athletic victories in monetary, literary, and bronze and marble (statues) form. And while the Greeks thought about sport and leisure a great deal, the ancient Romans sought to drown themselves in sports. Roman leaders used sport activities to train soldiers but also as a means to provide the masses with entertainment spectacles. For the Romans sports became a show, a dramatic event for the purpose of diversion. As mentioned in Chapter 2, by 300 C.E., one-half of the days on the Roman calendar were public holidays. Their overindulgence in sports and leisure would lead to the demise of the Empire.

After the collapse of the Roman Empire and throughout the Middle Ages, sporting events took a back seat in priority to the masses’ simple pursuit of survival. However, as French sociologist Emile Durkheim (1858–1917) explained, the French Revolution would revitalize the Roman tradition of celebrating secular holidays, as France established a cycle of holidays that were designed as mass leisure ceremonies to celebrate the secular values of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Sports and leisure provided a means for the masses to uphold and re-affirm collective sentiments based on rites and ceremonies. Modern sports provide the same type of secular collective sentiments.

Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), a contemporary of Durkheim, also took note of the fact that culture was changing quite dramatically during the age of industrialization. Because many people in society were now able to satisfy their basic needs/necessities (food, clothing, and shelter), they sought other avenues in their quest of reaching personal fulfillment. Freud believed that the pursuit of leisure was a fundamental aspect of the “pleasure principle.” The pleasure principle is a psychoanalytic notion centered on the idea that people seek pleasure in their everyday lives and attempt to avoid anything that brings pain. It is a hedonistic concept. Thus, humans seek pleasurable experiences, such as attending or watching a sporting event, rather than participating in less enjoyable behaviors like visiting a sick friend or relative in a hospital or nursing home. With this notion in mind, people would rather consume their time with sports than with dealing with more serious problems like the economy, politics, or the environment.

Decades earlier, Karl Marx (1818–1883) provided a similar analysis in his condemnation of religion when he referred to it as “the opiate of the masses.” What Marx meant by this statement was that, as long as people have religion in their lives—which provides the promise of salvation and happiness in the afterlife—they become passive recipients of the socio-political system that controls their daily lives. Today, many conflict theorists argue that sport is the opiate of the masses because it serves as a diversion from real, serious problems. Thus, the ruling class encourages a mass consumption of sport because it distracts people from more important issues.

Just as spiritual believers never took Marx seriously, sports fans are not very likely to accept the “sport as an opiate” view. Sports fans generally take sports at face value. That is, they know they like sports and they know they like to cheer for sports. Sure, sports fans are upset with intrusions from reality such as a referee fixing NBA games so that gamblers can win a bet; but most fans want the story to disappear and prefer to think of such acts of deviancy as isolated events. To think otherwise would distract from the pleasure that sports are supposed to bring. Furthermore, sports fans do not feel the need to apologize for the fact that they often turn to sports—purposely—because it does provide a diversion from the more serious concerns of life.

### Sports as a Diversion

During the contemporary era, people turn to sports for a number of reasons: athletes often present us with marvelous feats of accomplishments; athletes and sports teams create history in front of our very eyes; and while sports bring us continuity via a variety of traditions, they also present us with something new. And yes, sports provide us with a *necessary* diversion. Consider

just a few occurrences in 2008 that people desired a temporary escape from: gas prices that topped the \$5 mark in some areas of the country, before falling back to a national average below \$4; two wars that continued to rage in Iraq and Afghanistan, costing thousands of American (and other) lives; a presidential election year filled with general, and specific negativity; the collapse of banks; people losing their homes to foreclosure; and so on. Most of these social problems are beyond the control of the average person. Is it any wonder people like to watch a ballgame or the Olympics?

Major college and professional sports are a business. We know it, we don't like it, but we deal with it. Make the games and sporting events entertaining and we are happily diverted from the everyday life. We want to be entertained. We want all kinds of entertainment. We want to see the *Dark Knight* at the movies and, like the ancient Romans, we want our athletes to put on a show. Enter sports. There is no mistaking the reality that sports are a form of entertainment. Sports are so entertainment-driven that many of the commercials aired during sporting events are also entertaining. The Super Bowl receives a great deal of attention from non-die-hard sports fans because they want to watch the commercials!

In brief, there are millions of sports fans in the United States alone. They come from all parts of the country and from all social groups. Sports fans exist for a lot of reasons, some of which were described above. Every individual sports fan will have his or her own unique explanation as to why they are sports fans. They were raised in a family that consumed sports, they played sports, or simply, they find sports to be an entertaining diversion from the more serious problems of everyday life.

## SPORTS AND THE COMMUNITY

There are fans who cheer for their favorite team or athlete in the privacy of their own home. They do this for a number of reasons. For instance, after working all day, the sports fan comes home, has dinner, and turns on the TV. Bam! A ball game. Some people are shut-in and watch sports by themselves not so much because they want to, but rather, because circumstances have created the situation. Someone who is traveling and away from home may end up watching a game in a hotel room or hotel bar. There are also times when people prefer to watch a game at home, alone (or with a very select few others) because of the game's importance. That is, they do not want any interruptions from others who do not share the commitment and passion for a particular game. Undoubtedly, there are other reasons people may watch a sporting event alone. However, most people like to watch sports *with* others

because such an occasion affords an opportunity for bonding. Furthermore, entire groups, neighborhoods, cities, or even nations can unite as a community of sports fans.

### The Community

What is a community? Is it a physical locale, or is it a “state of mind?” The traditional way to view a community is presented by Turner (2006), who defines a community as “social structures organizing residence and activities of people in physical space” (p. 106). The organizational aspect refers to such things as roads, schools, churches, government, work place, and other structures. This interpretation of community was adapted from Hawley’s (1981) view of communities as social structures that organize people’s residence as well as their activities within physical boundaries or geographic space. The physical boundaries of communities vary in size, of course, from a small rural community to a large megalopolis. The view of a community as that which is found within certain physical boundaries has been prevalent since the agrarian era when humans settled in one area and learned to “work the land” rather than constantly moving as the hunters and gatherers had.

However, one would assume that the hunters and gatherers had a *sense* of community. They lived and traveled together. And, they found safety in the numbers that the “community” provided. In other words, a community need not be restricted to a physical location. Due to a number of complicated socio-economic factors (e.g., “capital flight,” geographic relocation, long commute times, and so forth), there are a number of physical communities throughout the nation where neighbors do not know each other and do not socialize with one another. This may be the case because neighbors may not share the same social characteristics as one another; they may not even speak the same language. Thus, there are people who do not experience, or feel, a “sense of community” in the geographic area where they reside. As a result, many people seek alternatives to the “traditional” concept of community. They seek a community based on shared ideas and values, rather than one based on physical proximity.

Alternative views include the idea that a community may best be defined as a network of social relations marked by mutuality and emotional bonds. A community characterized by shared interests and associations is known as a “community of interest” (Foster, 1990). Nisbet (1969) describes community as a fusion of feeling, tradition, commitment, membership, and psychological strength. Athletes in a particular sport share a community. Teammates share a sense of community. Fans of sport have formed leisure-based communities, or booster groups to support their favorite team. Fans of auto racing will often

camp out near the racetrack for days leading up to a race. They bond over their love for the sport and argue over who is the number one driver.

The traditional idea that a community is a physical location with boundaries is, of course, still relevant today. Additionally, sports are as important to local communities today as any other time in history. “Big League” cities must have professional sports and the requisite corresponding stadium to show off to other cities—no one wants their home team playing in a deteriorating stadium, as it is a negative reflection on the entire community. College communities have the same idea as Major League cities; they want a winning team and a huge stadium filled to capacity. In fact, the largest stadiums in the United States are on college campuses. As of 2004, the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor has the largest stadium in the nation. Known as the “Big House,” this stadium has a capacity of 107,501. The second largest is Beaver Stadium at Penn State (106,537), followed by Neyland Stadium, on the campus of the University of Tennessee at Knoxville (104,079), Ohio Stadium at Ohio State University at Columbus (101,568) and the Rose Bowl, home to UCLA, holds 95,000 people. The importance of sport in the community continues all the way down to high schools and little league baseball.

Every community values athletic excellence. They honor and glorify sport heroes with statues (e.g., Michael Jordan’s statue outside the United Center in Chicago), books, publicity photo opportunities, stretches of highways renamed in honor of athletes, and an endless array of print and visual media that glorify their pursuits. Athletic coaches are often important figures in any community. Many coaches have buildings and streets named after them to show appreciation and honor for their successes in the sports world. If college coaches can bring home a national championship it is often said that they could successfully run for political office. Communities like to post signs declaring their hometown athletic achievements. This is true whether a high school sport wins a state championship or an individual athlete accomplishes some noteworthy achievement. And, what community wouldn’t want to post a sign proclaiming: “Welcome to <BLANK>, Home of the Little League Champions?”

Sport plays a vital role in many communities. Sport is often the focal point that brings a community together. Generally, sport serves to unite a community; but occasionally, sport can divide a community.

### **Sports Unite a Community**

Sport unites a community in many ways. For example, most people within a community believe that youth sport participation has positive consequences. In simplest terms, it is better to have children playing organized sports than

running around the neighborhood without guidance and structure. Individuals not engaged in socially-approved activities are more likely to become involved in social deviance. This idea reflects the Social Bond/Control Theory tenet that emphasizes individuals must form a bond with society in order to fully accept society. Travis Hirschi (1969), a social bond theorist, specified four elements of the social bond:

1. Attachment—A tight connection to significant others; especially parents, peers and school.
2. Commitment—Involves the amount of time that individuals spend with conventional behavior and their dedication to long-term goals (delayed satisfaction). The more time that individuals spend with conventional activities the less time they have for deviant ones.
3. Involvement—Actual participation in conventional activities, such as doing homework and athletic training and practicing.
4. Belief—Believing in the legitimacy of the community, society, and law.

Sports incorporate all these elements. Typically, becoming an athlete, whether on a team sport or an individual sport, involves attachment and great commitment. Sports are consumed by rules and regulations. Participants learn the value of following the rules, and thus, become good citizens. Involvement in sport leads to a belief in the legitimacy of the system. Harry Edwards (1973) argued that sport participation reflects seven specific value orientations found in society: character building; discipline; competition; physical fitness; mental fitness; religiosity; and nationalism. For example, there are numerous occasions where athletes give freely back to the community with their time and/or financial generosity. Athletes routinely visit sick people in hospitals; take part in the “Make a Wish” foundation; hand out turkeys at Thanksgiving and toys at Christmas; and so on.

Sports help to bond a community in many other ways as well. Consider, many communities host a variety of sporting events such as 10K/5K (kilometer) walks or races—often for charity. These events provide wonderful opportunities for people in the community to gather together, centered on a healthy, physical endeavor. It is a “can’t miss,” “feel good” type of activity guaranteed to unite people through a sense of community spirit. Of course, there are those who complain because they are temporarily inconvenienced by the traffic restraints of a small number of street closings. (Note: this serves as an example of how sports can sometimes divide a community.)

Often after local or national tragedies, sporting events provide a sense of continuity, and serve as ways of bringing communities back together. In other words, sports provide normalcy. For instance, after the September 11, 2001

terrorist attacks on the United States, the National Football League postponed its games for one week. Many fans noted that, when games resumed the following week, they appreciated the sense of normality this brought back to their world. After the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina in 2005, numerous athletes, sport teams, and sports leagues donated huge sums of money to help the victims of this tragedy. When the I-35 west-bound bridge collapsed in Minnesota in 2007, sports helped to put things in perspective. Some of the people that were on the bridge (or died because of the calamity) were on their way to the Metrodome to watch the Twins play baseball. Fans, players, coaches, and other personnel already at the game were concerned about their loved ones—were they on the bridge? The Twins front office decided to keep playing the game, fearing that people leaving the Dome would cause greater traffic problems. Everyone in the Minnesota community, and throughout the nation for that matter, understood the magnitude of the bridge collapse and the relative unimportance of playing a game. And yet, baseball and other sports would be played in Minnesota because life must go on. *Star Tribune* (Minneapolis) columnist Jim Souhan (2007) sums the role of sport in a community:

What in Minnesota, other than our local sports teams, can command the attention of millions of people hundreds of days a year? What else can persuade thousands of unaffiliated people to flock to the same venue wearing the same colors? What, other than the weather, provides easier entry into a conversation with an acquaintance? Yes, sports and sportswriters and sports debates can be shallow or overwrought. These silly ballgames, though, can stand as symbols of normalcy and community in a splintered world (p.C-2).

Sports not only stand as symbols of normalcy and community, they provide people with a diversion, a temporary escape from the mundane, everyday life. We marvel at athletic accomplishments and cheer for the spectator. When a local team (at any level) is enjoying a successful season the intensity of every remaining game/event increases and builds into a fever pitch within the community. A high school state championship, especially in such sports as football and basketball, will generally energize members of the community to organize a parade honoring the athletes and coaches. The school colors appear in various forms throughout the community as well. In addition, winning major sporting events such as the World Cup in soccer can unite an entire nation, and bring a sense of joy to a country that few, if any, other events can match.

### **Sports Divide a Community**

Sports can also divide communities in many ways. For example, citizens like the idea of youth playing sports; it keeps them off the streets where they may

be tempted into delinquency. Schools need funds to run sports, and it keeps getting costlier to fund sports. Often, the local schools will propose school budgets that will lead to a tax increase. Most people do not readily agree to a tax hike. Typically, sports are among the first items to be trimmed (the arts are often victimized as well) when school budgets do not pass. Consequently, athletes are sent out into the community in an attempt to generate support for the school budget—usually with signs and posters that read “save our sports!” This often causes a division within the community. People don’t like feeling coerced, or made to feel guilty, to do things like vote for a budget that will cost them more money. The people who voice opposition (to supporting sports) are made to feel like they are not “good” citizens and may be ostracized by the community. Conversely, those who promote increasing taxes in order to support sports at school risk being ostracized by the community if they are clearly in the minority.

Players’ disputes with management often divide fan loyalties, especially when the disputes involve money. Many fans believe that players are overpaid already and consequently are often unsympathetic to their demands for higher pay. The average person will be lucky to earn two million dollars over the course of an entire life-work span, while marginal professional athletes in the major sports will earn millions of dollars in a year or two. Then again, frustrated fans are not sympathetic to billionaire owners. Fans have the right to demand that ownership provide the best team possible. We want a trade to be made if it will help our team. In short, the fans do not care about money disputes between players and owners; they want to see the athletes play. Period.

STOP

## TAILGATING

Among the most joyous aspects of attending certain sporting events is the tailgate party. This is especially true if the fans involved are cheering for a team with a losing record and/or little chance of winning. At least there is fun to be had at the tailgate party, many fans reason.

And yet, despite the fun atmosphere associated with tailgating, very few sports actually involve fan tailgate parties. The sport most closely associated with tailgating is football. This is true both at the professional and collegiate levels. (Tailgate parties are a feature at a number of high school football games as well.) The one game a week format of football is a major contributing aspect of this association. Further, professional football teams are only guaranteed eight regular season home games that are spread out over a four month period. This adds to the critical nature of the home team