

For Better or For Worse, Fan Behavior Impacts Athletes *Sport Psychology Consultants Help Athletes Cope with Fans*

MADISON, Wis. – January 2009 – We all know of cases where negative fan behavior has driven some athletes to perform less than their best...or perhaps even knock them completely out of the competition. “Athletes want to live up to a high paying contract, as well as fan expectations. It is the same with Olympians who strive to live up to expectations. Athletes may say they are immune to fans, but we know better. It is like an adolescent who says they don’t care what their parents think,” said Daniel L. Wann, who heads the Association for Applied Sport Psychology (AASP) Special Interest Group on Fandom, and is an author of *Sport Fans: The Psychology and Social Impact of Spectators*.

According to Wann, there has been a good deal of research on fans and their ability to pump up the home team, or negatively impact the visiting team. “Some athletes thrive under this pressure, and others don’t. This is where a sport psychology consultant can help.” Wann has been studying the psychology of sport spectators since the mid 1980s, with a particular interest in fan identification (i.e., a fan’s psychological connection to a team), spectator violence, and the actions of parents as spectators at youth sporting events.

A Professor of Psychology at Murray State, Wann works with athletes, helping them learn how to address fan behavior. He works with the athletes to develop their mental abilities, while the coaches focus on their physical skills. “The key is for athletes to learn to compartmentalize what they pay attention to, to be able to tune out the fans, but not the coaches. They need to be selective between valuable information (from coaches or teammates) versus noise (from fans).”

Just as athletes are involved in their sport for varying factors, fans are motivated for different reasons. “It is important to remember that fans are driven by a variety of motives. You can’t paint them with one brush stroke. Some are driven by the entertainment of the sport, some want to see a good contest. Some are there for social reasons, while others are there to see beautiful plays,” he said.

Understanding Sports Fans

You can’t turn on the television without hearing stories of fans in the news. This time of year especially, the importance of sports fans is reinforced when you see the cost of a Super Bowl ad can be \$3 million for 30 seconds.

According to Wann, “In all of the studies that have been done, the most interesting information is the psychology of the fan. Fans who make a connection with a local team have better societal connections. Identification with local teams have been shown to be related to lower depression, lower loneliness and feelings of alienation, higher self esteem, higher energy levels and greater levels of trust in people, as well as greater satisfaction in social life.” If you are lonely and depressed...find a sports team to support!

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“Sports fandom is very social and 98 percent of the fans who attend a game meet up with other people going to, or at the game. It is more than just an event because it is voluntary. Where else do you spend big money and have a 50-50 chance of being displeased (if the team loses)? If you order pizza and it is delivered cold three times in a row, you won’t order from that business again; not so with sports fans,” said Wann.

The Association for Applied Sport Psychology (AASP) promotes ethical practice, science and advocacy in the field of sport and exercise psychology. Founded in 1986, AASP is an international, multidisciplinary, professional organization that offers certification to qualified professionals in the field of sport and exercise psychology. With more than 1,200 members in 28 countries, AASP is a worldwide leader, sharing research and resources with the public via its website, www.appliedsportpsych.org.

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