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Do Sports Fans Go Too Far?

Shouting maniacally at the TV. Weeping in the stands. Smashing windows. Are we taking sports a bit too seriously? BY SAM APPLE

It looked like a war zone. Angry mobs ran through the streets hurling rocks and smashing storefronts. Police in riot gear fired rubber bullets and shot tear gas into the crowd. Terrified parents clutched their children and ran for safety. Before order was restored, 15 officers were injured and at least 60 people were arrested.

The strangest part?

The violence had nothing to do with war or politics. It wasn't a protest against a terrible **injustice**. It was all about—wait for it—a *soccer game*.

Soccer fans in Buenos Aires, Argentina, were so furious that their team had lost to Germany in the 2014 World Cup final that they went on a rampage.

What happened in Argentina is certainly an extreme example of fans going *waaaaay* too far. But many of us can relate to feeling super-passionate about a

team. Plenty of us dress up in elaborate costumes to show our support. We spend oodles of money on team apparel. During games, we scream and cheer and shout hysterically at our televisions. We worship our favorite athletes like gods and feel their wins and losses as if they were our own. When a referee makes a bad call, we feel deeply cheated. And yes, we have been known to weep like babies over a missed basket or fumbled pass.

It's all part of the fun of being a fan . . . or is it? No doubt about it: Sports are really, really, *really* important to billions of people. But might we all be taking sports just a little too seriously?

MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH

There have been out-of-control fans for as long as there have been sporting events. In the sixth century, fans of the chariot races in Constantinople

were **incensed** when some of the racers were imprisoned. The fans burned the city and tried to overthrow the emperor; 30,000 people died. In England, soccer “hooliganism,” as it’s called, can be traced to the 14th century, when villagers were getting so violent during games that the king had to ban the sport (which, incidentally, was then played by kicking not a ball but an inflated pig’s bladder). And today, fan brawls are so common that major cities around the U.S. have to put extra police officers on the streets after big games.

So what is it that makes fans so, well, *nuts*?

Some psychologists believe that it all goes back to a distant period in history when humans lived in tribes. These tribes fought each other for food, land, and power, and the battles were truly a matter of life and death. You rooted for your tribe’s warriors because they were fighting for everyone you knew and loved. Losing a battle could have meant the obliteration of your village.

Cheering for today’s “warriors”—that is, athletes—can **evoke** the same life-or-death feelings. That’s why in the excitement of a close game, winning may feel more important than it really is.

Feeling that way isn’t necessarily a bad thing. After all, few experiences are as exhilarating as standing amid tens of thousands of **deliriously** happy fans after a touchdown or home run. To watch LeBron James fly through the air and throw down a dunk is to witness a thing of beauty. According to Adam Earnhardt, a professor at Youngstown State University in Ohio, it’s the same kind of thrill you get on a roller coaster or during a scary movie.

The problems occur when strong feelings **linger** hours or days after a game has ended and start to interfere with life. For example, some fans get so depressed after a defeat that they skip work or school. There have even been suicides.

SENSE OF BELONGING

On the other hand, being a big fan can actually make you a happier, healthier person. Research shows that if you have a strong connection to a particular team, you are more likely to make strong connections with people. In fact, devoted fans tend to be less lonely and to have more enjoyable social lives.

It makes sense. Being a fan gives you a sense of belonging. You can be in a faraway place and feel an instant connection to someone just because he or she is wearing the hat of your favorite team. Going to games gives you a chance to bond with people from all walks of life whom you might not otherwise meet.

Fandom also **fosters**



BY THE NUMBERS
HOW SPORTS MEASURE UP

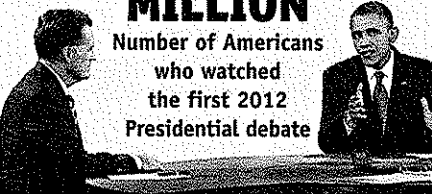


111.5 MILLION

Number of Americans who watched the 2014 Super Bowl

67.2 MILLION

Number of Americans who watched the first 2012 Presidential debate



\$3.4 MILLION

Average salary of a professional baseball player



\$68,000 Average salary of a nurse



13.9 MILLION

Number of LeBron James’s Twitter followers



9.2 MILLION

Number of the Dalai Lama’s Twitter followers

SOURCES: NIELSEN; MAJOR LEAGUE BASEBALL PLAYERS ASSOCIATION; U.S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR; TWITTER, INC.

PHOTO: AP/WIDEWORLD; (BOTTOM LEFT) BRUNO MAGALHÃES/AP PHOTO; (BOTTOM RIGHT) ISTOCKPHOTO.COM (INSET); STEVE SANDER/GETTY IMAGES (LEBRON); THOMAS LORRINE/GETTY IMAGES (DALAI LAMA)

loyalty. Many fans are extremely devoted to their teams, even when those teams give them little to be excited about. Just ask any of the thousands of Chicago Cubs fans. It's been more than a century since the Cubs won the World Series, yet fans come out to cheer on their team every season.

Besides, it's not as though losing always brings out the worst in people. Even after the U.S. team suffered a crushing World Cup loss to Belgium, American soccer fans were able to celebrate goalie Tim Howard, championing him for his skill and work ethic. How wonderful that sports give us an opportunity to practice finding the good in "failure"!



Perhaps having a strong attachment to your team can be a meaningful part of your life. Maybe it's OK even natural to cry when your team wins or loses—especially if you've been supporting that team for a long time. You know how hard the players have worked and how much they mean to your community. If the sometimes make you a little crazy, it's only because

you love them so much. On the other hand, all that time, money, and energy could be spent doing something more useful and important, rather than on something that can turn violent and depressing. Because no matter how much you love the game, at the end of the day, it's just that: a game. ●

What Do You Think?

Do fans take sports too seriously? Identify evidence from the article that supports each side of this debate. Write the information on the lines below.

YES

IT'S JUST A GAME.

- 1 Sometimes fans riot when their teams lose.
- 2 _____
- 3 _____

NO

IT'S SO MUCH MORE THAN A GAME.

- 1 _____
- 2 _____
- 3 _____

EXAMINE POINTS ON BOTH SIDES OF THE DEBATE—AS WELL AS YOUR OWN BELIEFS—and decide what you think. State your opinion in one sentence below. This can become the thesis statement for an argument essay.

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