

Basking in Spite of Reflected Failure: Sports Fans' Obsession with a Losing Team

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A plethora of previous research on attendance has revealed a strong correlation between winning and spectator attendance (Baade & Tiehen, 1990; DeSchrive & Jensen, 2002; Pan, Zhu, Gabert, & Brown, 1999; Shackelford & Greenwell, 2005; Whitney, 1988). However, not all marketers are blessed with winning teams. Their challenge is to identify methods to increase spectator attendance without the benefit of a winner on the field. One approach to this problem is to further explore the concept of basking in spite of reflected failure (BIRF). Campbell, Aiken, and Kent (2004) described BIRFing as fans reveling in fandom despite poor performance by their favorite team. While previous research has demonstrated the tendency for sports fans to bask in reflected glory (Cialdini et al., 1976) and cut off reflected failure (Snyder et al., 1986), research has not examined key questions related to BIRFing. Specifically, why will fans of a losing team still openly support their team even when they lose?

The purpose of the current study is to begin this line of research by examining (a) the relationship between team identification and BIRFing and (b) the possible antecedents to BIRFing behavior. From a review of the existing literature (e.g. Campbell, et al, 2004; Bristow & Sebastian, 2001), six possible predictors were identified:

Importance of team identification - the importance of being associated with a specific team over other teams.

Honor - the value spectators place on being loyal to their team even when it is losing.

Cognitive dissonance - believing the team is good even when they are not to avoid cognitive dissonance.

Lack of alternatives - staying with a team because there are no acceptable alternatives.

Rebellious individuality - supporting a losing team in order to feel different than the masses.

Camaraderie - the feeling of solidarity that comes from supporting a losing team.

To examine the first research question, seven-point Likert scales were developed to evaluate spectators' enjoyment responding to team wins (BIRG) and team losses (BIRF). The Sport Spectator Identification Survey (SSIS), developed by Wann and Branscombe (1993), was used to measure the level of team identification. To examine why spectators may BIRF, items were generated for each variable, and a pilot study was utilized to refine the questionnaire and test the internal consistency of each variable. Each variable was found to be reliable with Cronbach's alpha coefficients greater than .80.

Data were collected by distributing and collecting questionnaires from 252 spectators attending a Chicago Cubs baseball game at Wrigley Field in Chicago. This population was desirable for this type of study due the high loyalty of Cubs fans despite a long history of losing (Bristow & Sebastian, 2001). A stand was set up outside the main gate of Wrigley Field two hours before a game and every tenth fan passing was asked to participate in this survey. Subjects were mostly male (75.0%) and two-thirds of the sample was between the ages of 18 and 29. Spectators attended an average of 15 games per season.

Results revealed team identification was correlated with BIRFing behavior ($r = .528$) indicating spectators who identified strongly with their team were more likely to derive enjoyment from following the team despite poor performance. Several steps were taken to examine which variables predicted BIRFing behaviors. An exploratory factor analysis revealed five unique factors. Items related to "lack of alternatives", loaded on two different factors and were eliminated from the analysis. Multiple regression analysis with backward deletion revealed the combined set of variables predicted BIRFing behavior [$F(3,248) = 32.312, p < 0.001$] explaining 42% of the variance. Importance of Team Identification ($p < .001, f = .327$), Honor ($p < .001, f = .294$), and Camaraderie ($p < .001, f = .218$) each significantly predicted BIRFing behavior. Neither Cognitive Dissonance ($p = .274$) nor Rebellious Individuality ($p = .348$) predicted BIRFing behavior. Results indicate spectators who have a need to be identified with a team, believe it is important to stand by their team despite adverse circumstances, or want to be part of a strong group are more likely to experience enjoyment despite a loss by their team.

The findings from this research indicate team identification plays a strong role in BIRFing behavior concluding that the more vested a fan is in his or her team (in this case the Chicago Cubs), the more likely that fan is to BIRF. Spectators who are highly identified will not only derive enjoyment from a win, but will find a way to derive enjoyment from supporting the team despite a loss. Three antecedents were identified which may explain this behavior. First, importance of team identification was the most

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important predictor, indicating spectators who felt their association with their favorite team was much more important than their association with other teams were more likely to BIRF. Second, honor was the second most important predictor. Spectators who felt it was admirable to stick with their team through the good and bad times were more likely to BIRF. Finally, camaraderie predicted BIRFing behavior indicating customers who sought social bonds through sport were more likely to experience enjoyment despite a loss. Given not all marketers are blessed with winning teams, results from this research provide insight into reasons why spectators may derive enjoyment despite losses. These results should provide a basis for developing marketing strategies to maximize the benefits and/or minimize the negative outcomes of losses. For example, marketers could focus their advertisements on the "fact" their fans are the best because they support the team during both the good times and bad times. They could also do more to build camaraderie among fans through fan clubs and special events for frequent attendees.

However, more work is still needed in this area to fully understand the reasons for BIRFing. First, one of the factors identified in the current study, "lack of alternatives," should be examined in future research. The factor was eliminated because of problems with items that were generated. However, it is still possible that this is an important factor and generating new items could be helpful. Second, while a large portion of variance was predicted, there may be other factors that impact BIRFing that were not identified in the current study. Third, the current study only examined fans of one team in one sport. It is possible that the factors impacting BIRFing may vary across sports and/or teams. Additional analysis would help to provide sport marketers with the best strategies on how to promote the team and maintain interest during the periods when the team is performing poorly.