

**Going Down: An Empirical Study of Sport Fan De-Escalation**

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**Marketing**

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**20-minute oral presentation  
(including questions)**

**Abstract 2013-150**

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The vast majority of empirical studies of North American professional sport fans are studies of current fans; consequently, sport fan researchers know a great deal of the motives behind current fans' thoughts, feelings, and behaviours (Andrijiv & Hyatt, 2009; Fairley & Tyler, 2012; Gladden & Funk, 2001; Ross, 2007). What is less known, however, is why people who were once team fans become non-fans (Funk & James, 2001; Mullin, Hardy, & Sutton, 2007). For example, Wann, Tucker, & Schrader (1996) studied people who stopped cheering for a team. They found losing, changing time commitments, loss of certain players, and geographical reasons as the most commonly listed factors. In another study, Smith, Patterson, Williams, and Hogg (1981) asked deeply committed fans of North American pro sport to speculate if they would ever stop being fans. Most said no, but some suggested that player greed or changing family commitments might conceivably end their fandom. Both studies identified different factors that could cause fans to disengage from their favourite sport teams. Nevertheless, both studies are limited because of methodological shortcomings (Wann et al. (1996) did not ask if fans started following another team in the same league) or empirical imprecision (it is difficult to draw conclusions based on fan speculations). With this in mind, we began our project to empirically study fans who stopped cheering for their favourite teams and to answer our research question:

"Why do some sport fans de-escalate their commitment to their favourite team?"

As this study was conceptualized, we believed that the process of fan de-escalation would be multi-faceted and complex. As such, we employed qualitative interviews in the interpretive paradigm. This methodology has proven useful when the goal is one of understanding processes embedded in unique contexts (Neuman, 2006). We began the study in the spring of 2011.

Electronic postings, paper flyers, and word-of-mouth were used to recruit former NHL team fans. For their stories to be used as data, participants had to not only self-identify as a former team fan, but also had to provide evidence during the data gathering interview that they were once at either the attachment or allegiance stages of the Psychological Commitment Model (Funk & James, 2001). To date, 16 former fans have been interviewed, face-to-face and one-on-one, either in person or via Skype. These interviews have ranged from 19 to 59 minutes. The sample includes 13 men and three women between the ages of 20 and 66 (40 avg.).

The interview protocol contains eight questions on becoming a fan, being a fan, the process whereby the team-fan bond was severed, the place hockey has since had in their lives, and whether or not they could see themselves being a fan of an NHL team in the future. As we have not reached the point of theoretical saturation (Neuman, 2006), the data collection is ongoing. Our preliminary analysis is based on a coding process outlined by Merriam (2001) and Rossman and Rallis (1998) whereby transcripts are read with the goal being to identify interesting emerging themes. The coding process began after only a few interviews, and subsequent interviews were coded once transcribed. As new themes were discovered, earlier interviews were re-read and re-coded. Interesting insights emerged from this iterative coding process.

The most common reasons given for the de-escalation of team identification, were: league-based (e.g., labour disputes); followed by life-based (e.g., less time or money); team-based (e.g., perceived "abuse" of the fan base); hockey-based (e.g., the game is now too dangerous); media-based (e.g., the stories have grown stale); player-based (e.g., disloyal star leaves town) and sports-based (e.g., too much societal emphasis on spectator sport). Some of these findings mirror previous research as life-based, league-based, and player-based reasons have been noted by others (Smith et al., 1981; Wann et al., 1996).

As well, interesting generationally-based cohorts emerged from the analysis. Thirteen of the sixteen former fans belong to one of the following three groups: 1) "older" fans (avg. age of 62) who became NHL fans in the pre-

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expansion era who lost interest in part because of league expansion; 2) “middle-aged” fans (avg. age 48) who loved the beauty of the game and are now turned-off by the violence and perceived ‘goonery’, and 3) “younger” fans (avg. age of 27) who were turned-off by the 2004-05 season-cancelling lockout and/or found other things to do during the lockout.

Two other interesting findings involve themes that are intriguing when juxtaposed with existing fan research. First, previous research notes how common it is for children to be socialized by their parents into becoming fans of their parents’ favourite team (e.g., Kolbe & James, 2000; Wann et al., 1996). We discovered some parents/grandparents who speculated that they might become fans of NHL teams in the future should their children/grandchildren become highly identified fans, resulting in a situation where they might start following that team to stay connected and share a bond with their child/grandchild.

Second, Wann et al. (1996) found that losing was the overwhelmingly largest reason to stop cheering for a team. However, we found next to no mention of losing per se. Instead, losing was couched in terms of the frustration felt when people concluded that the team was making no effort to improve. It was as if the fans would have accepted losing if they believed the team was doing everything they could to become a winner, instead of the team being perceived to maximize profits in lieu of winning. On the topic of winning and losing, we also found one fan who noted that he was attracted to his former favourite team when they were up-and-coming underdogs, and actually listed the team’s winning the championship as one of his reasons for his de-escalation of fandom.

While producing interesting insights, we acknowledge the limitations of this study. The sample is relatively small, well-educated overall, and based primarily in one geographic region. The stories told are based on recollections, and we noted how some fans had difficulty remembering the details of a process that may have happened decades ago. Ideally, future research on this topic should involve a much larger, geographically-dispersed sample of former NHL (and other leagues’) fans who are studied longitudinally, so that the process of the team-fan bond disintegration could be understood as it happens.