Winless for Wiggins: An Empirical Test of Delayed Vicarious Achievement

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In hopes of promoting image management, studies have shown that sport fans have a tendency to demonstrate purposeful support of successful teams (Hirt, Zillman, Erickson, and Kennedy, 1992). By clinging to winners, fans feel a sense of accomplishment (Funk & James, 2004) and inherently seek to be matched as similarly successful. In support of this, a study of team attachment motives found that vicarious achievement was not only related to team identification, it explained 33% of its variance, the most of all fan intentions (Fink, Trail, & Anderson, 2002).

These concepts influence well-known fan response behaviors, founded by Cialdini et al. (1976), such as BIRGing (basking in reflected glory) and CORFing (cutting off reflected failure). Fans can also BLAST by blaming others to explain team failure (Mullin, Hardy, & Sutton, 2007). Campbell, Aiken, and Kent (2004) proposed another dimension of fan response behavior, known as BIRFing. They suggested that fans may bask in spite of reflected failure to demonstrate an extreme form of loyalty, in hopes of not being perceived as fair-weather fans. However, this suggestion seems to somewhat correspond with the past literature regarding highly identified fans. Those that are high in behavioral and attitudinal connections to the team will remain fans even during unsuccessful times (Mahony, Madrigal, & Howard, 2000).

Still, another phenomenon that has yet to be tested seems to exist. Studies have yet to explore the practice of fans’ acceptance of, or even appreciation for, team losses under certain circumstances. While the tenets of team identification suggest that highly identified fans will remain loyal in the wake of loss, we suspect that some of these fans, while remaining dedicated, may hope for continued losses in anticipation of reaping positive future outcomes (e.g., higher draft picks), the chance for improved future team performance, and thus “delayed” vicarious achievement potentially greater than if the team remained status quo. This study aims to experimentally test such fan behaviors.

Though supporting the failure of one’s team would be difficult for highly identified fans (Wann & Branscombe, 1990), it is reasonable to suggest given that a benefit to losing is the possibility for greater future success. This may deter fans from cutting off long-term support and might present a different form of behavior from BIRFing or BLASTing. The idea that highly identified fans, at some point, are amenable to team failures, is an aspect of fan reactionary behavior that has yet to be examined. But given the above discussion, we hypothesize:

H1: Given a strong opportunity for productive change, team identification will positively influence fans’ receptiveness to team losses.

It is also reasonable to surmise that sport knowledge plays a salient role in a fan’s evaluation of a team’s circumstances. That is, a fan with a great deal of sport knowledge would be more likely to be amenable to a losing season when perceiving an opportunity for beneficial change. Per Brown, Rascher, Nagel, and McEvoy (2010), leagues aim to reward unsuccessful teams with better opportunities to acquire young, talented players by way of amateur drafts. Further, different leagues have varying draft structures that significantly impacts how poorly performing teams are rewarded. As such, fans that are highly cognizant of the value of these opportunities and their potential positive impact, will be attracted by the prospect of team improvement through these types of acquisitions.

H2: Given a strong opportunity for productive change, sport knowledge will positively influence fans’ receptiveness to team losses.

Certainly, there are fans that are highly identified that might not have the sport knowledge to truly appreciate the benefits of a losing season. In fact, Wann, Morris-Shirkey, Peters, and Suggs (2002) found that both fans of high and low identification had varying levels of knowledge. However, given what we know about strong loyalties and sport aptitude, the joint effect of both highly identified fans and those ripe with knowledge will have a substantial positive impact on willingness to support team failure.
H3: An interaction effect will support that fans high in team identification and knowledge will demonstrate the greatest receptiveness to team losses. Similarly, fans low in team identification and knowledge will exude the least amount of reception to team losses.

Team identification and sport knowledge will serve as moderators in this study. As such, a GLM will be used to test the hypotheses. A 2 (league; NBA, NFL) x 2 (chance of success; marginal, hopeless) design will be employed, as each participant will be randomly assigned to one of four conditions. They will be presented with a situation in which, at the midpoint of the season, their team has marginal (slightly under .500 record) or little (a .333 winning percentage) chance for success. Each will be made aware that a future star player has decided to enter the upcoming draft and is expected to be a highly sought after choice. A scouting report on the future star player will mimic statements made by draft experts on the consensus top NBA and NFL 2014 draft picks.

Three hundred participants, consisting of graduate and undergraduate students will serve as participants. Upon reading the assigned scenario, participants will be measured on their support for team failure. This will be done on a five-point range (1= strongly disagree; 5=strongly agree), consisting of a created scale, ascertaining fan promotion for team loss (“I would support team losses for the rest of the season.”), along with items based on Herscovitch and Meyer’s Affective Commitment to Change scale (α=.88). An example of this support includes, “The decision for my favorite team to lose now for a chance at future gains would be a good strategy for the organization”. Fans will also be given an opportunity to expound upon the rationale for their selected behavior. To measure fandom, participants will complete a Team Identification Index (TII) measure (Trail & James, 2001; α=.87). In addition, participants will complete a sport knowledge quiz, consisting of 12 sport-related questions of varying difficulty. Because no current measure exists, a panel of six sport field experts will be utilized to validate question difficulty for the average sport fan. Experts will be instructed to rate each question on a difficulty level (easy, medium, hard) to ensure desired consistency.

Theoretically, this study pursues to support Campbell et al.’s (2004) claim that fans may be amenable to failure for “the prospect of future pay-off” (p. 154). Such results would suggest a circumstance of delayed vicarious achievement, which has yet to be empirically examined and/or proven to exist. Practically, this study has several valuable implications. Some have suggested that it is unfair to current season ticket holders if franchises openly seek to curtail current success in hopes of future gains (Coro, 2013). However, if fans are amendable to delayed vicarious gratification, this would be less of an issue. This study can also demonstrate the differing draft mechanisms within each sport, and their impact on fan behaviors. For instance, NBA fans may be less accepting of team losses due to a lottery drafting system, whereas the NFL awards the top pick to the worst team in the league.