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Fueling fan passion is never out of fashion

RICK BURTON

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Something, probably the NBA All-Star Game finish, got me thinking the other day about great moments in sports and I realized that, to a degree, my ongoing passion for sports has been drawn from the collective of those magic minutes.

Growing up under the beatings of two older brothers, I learned the details of Don Larsen's perfect game and the Colts' sudden-death victory over the Giants in the "Greatest Game Ever Played."

As I developed into a fan of football, baseball and hockey, I studied the victories and defeats those professional sports created. For whatever reason, I became a Yankees fan (in large part to spite my Dodgers-loving brother) and a Colts fan.

For many years, the Fates blew ugly. The '64 Cards beat the Yankees and the '67 Packers beat the Unitas-less Colts (remember halfback Tom Matte playing quarterback?). The worst event ever had to be Joe Namath and the Jets beating the Colts in '69. Like many Baltimore fans my age (12), I believed that my watching the game had caused the Colts to lose.

Two years later in Super Bowl V, I left the TV room before Jim O'Brien kicked the game-winning field goal to ensure the Colts beat Dallas. It's funny to think that I still have that framed photo on the wall of my office.

As the years have passed, the moments I recall have become fewer and farther between. I can tell you how crowded the dorm room was when Carlton Fisk hit his home run to beat the Cards in Game 6 of the 1975 World Series.

I clearly remember Mark Fidrych grooming the Tigers' pitching mound while I sat in a bar on a Monday night in 1976. Or exactly where I was when Bucky Dent hit his home run to beat the Red Sox in that one-game American League playoff in 1978.

After that, my memory starts to fade.

Some of you may blame that on the beers, but the truth is that for many folks, the connection to the game, a team or league can diminish as a fan ages. Bernie Mullin (now at the NBA), Bill Sutton (University of Massachusetts) and Steve Hardy (University of New Hampshire) charted some of this material in their book, "Sport Marketing," when they looked at participation and viewing trends.

The short version goes like this: When you are young, you play a lot and watch (or at least used to) a little. As you age, you play less and watch more. The older you get, the less you watch. Then you die.

Along the way, you may become a fan of heroes, teams, sports and relationships.

Today, our sport broadcast model is built on leagues remaining relevant to a mass audience and advertisers using the broadcasts to sell their sodas, beers, tires and burgers. The key word, though, is relevant.

What actions or events guarantee that a league or team remains contemporary? In an age of cable choice and Internet interactivity, I keep reading about empty seats and slipping ratings. The broadcasters say the games still matter, but I'm guessing, based on the overnights and ratings/share, that pro sport is possibly becoming less important.

Maybe I'm looking at it the wrong way. Maybe the games are just as popular as ever. Maybe new fans have more than replaced the old fans who passed on in the last 20 years. Maybe the new generation of skateboard-jumping, Web site-designing kids are hip to the various sports leagues.

Then again, maybe they're not.

So I went to one of our professors here at Oregon, Dr. Bob Madrigal, who has spent the last four years researching fans and fan avidity, and I asked him if he thought fan behavior had changed in the last couple of years.

True researchers never like to say anything has happened until the r-squared or betas have been crosschecked, but Dr. Bob did allow things were different.

"In the area of pro sports, I think there's been a certain level of cynicism that has really grown since the advent of free agency," he said. "What was once looked at as an extension of the community has changed, and now sports are often seen as a business."

I took that to mean that some fans might not see the game as simple or as pure as when Norman Rockwell painted baseball for the Saturday Evening Post. But did that mean fans had a different relationship with the game? Were they less avid? Were they more easily moved away from the professional sports? Were their passions less developed?

It's a thankless question for a researcher. But here's what Dr. Bob said:

"People still care deeply about those things in their lives with which they identify. What has happened in professional sports is that the connection between player and fan has disintegrated in recent years.

"While it may be unfair, the perception exists today that athletes care more about themselves than the games they play. Additionally, due to widespread and sometimes biased coverage by the media, many fans have come to believe some players are always on the make for a more lucrative contract.

"If you add to that the unsavory, even criminal, behavior exhibited by a number of athletes, throw in team relocations and rising ticket prices, it's hard to work up much enthusiasm for falling in love with a lot of sports teams."

Okay, maybe that's what researchers and older fans think. But if you ask me, that statement alone may suggest a whole lot of league and team folks better get busy rethinking what makes their young consumers passionate.

Rick Burton is director of the Warsaw Sports Marketing Center at the University of Oregon's Lundquist College of Business.

FADING FAN FERVOR
Changes in fan avidity as measured
by the Twelve-Sport Index

Age	January 1, 2001	January 1, 1996	%
			change
12-17	59.2	61.8	-4.4%
18-24	58.3	57.9	0.7%
25-34	56.9	58.1	-2.1%
35+	56.9	60.1	-5.6%
Total	57.4	59.6	-3.8%

The Twelve-Sport Fan Index, the combined average fan avidity of the NFL, MLB, NBA, NHL, NCAA basketball and football, pro golf, pro tennis, pro soccer, pro figure skating, auto racing and pro boxing. The index is tracked year to year and month to month.

Source: ESPN Sports Poll, a service of TNS Intersearch. Based on responses from fans who, when asked to rate their level of fan avidity of sports, gave themselves a rating of 5 or above, with 10 being the most avid.

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