

## Chapter 2

# Sell an Identity

**I**f you were asked to identify yourself to others, what would you say? Most of us would give our name, where we are from, and identify our university or organization. In so doing, you would be telling us something about the family, the community, and social group to which you belong. And since you are a sports fan, you might also add something about the fact that you are a [*put your team here*] fan or are otherwise associated with a successful team or individual.

Since no one knows where Oxford, Mississippi, is, for instance, people from Ole Miss might say that they are from Oxford, home of the Ole Miss Rebels and John Grisham. Except that he moved, primarily because he kept waking up with tour groups in his front porch or someone having a wedding in his yard without his permission. Similarly, Baylor students might identify themselves as being students at Baylor (*Jerusalem on the Brazos*) in Waco, which is close to George W's ranch, but is not close to David Koresh's compound. The point is that we identify ourselves to others by successful groups or individuals with which we are associated. We feel better about ourselves when we think that others think that we are winners in one way or another. Even if we are pathetic losers.

So, in general, individuals have an intense need to express who they are to others by means of group membership. One prominent way that individuals do that is through their identification with sports teams and individual athletes.

Within the realm of sports, **identification** is when an individual reacts to events that occur to the team or player as if the events happened to him or her (cf., Kagan 1958). If you are highly identified with a team, you feel good when the team wins and bad when the team loses. A highly identified fan will internalize or adopt the team or player's attitudes and behaviors as their own (cf., Kelman 1960). You believe that the team is a representation of who you are to yourself and to others. You practically feel as though you are part of the team.

Since how team performance affects our egos, we react psychologically, physiologically, and behaviorally in ways to protect our egos. If we win, we attribute the team's success to our being winners. If the team loses, we may justify the loss, make excuses, be overly optimistic about future performance, or simply blast the opposing team or players in a way that will make us feel better. In any case, winning or losing, our body physically reacts to the situation, as our heart rate increases and our bodies are otherwise stimulated (more on this later).

Not every one is highly identified with a team or player. However, the more the sports marketer can do to build identification with the team, the more fans will support the team. The bottom line is that sports organizations must **sell an identity** that benefits and builds fans' self-esteem.

## A Model of Identification

So, how do organizations build an identity and identification among fans? Figure 2.1 summarizes research findings (summarized in table form in the appendix to this chapter), illustrating five factors that lead to fan identification:

1. Attractiveness of players
2. Social acceptance
3. Variety seeking (negative influence)
4. Involvement with the sport
5. Performance (team/player)

Similarly, identification leads to five consequences that generally benefit the sports organization:

1. Birging (Basking in Reflected Glory)
2. Attributions
3. Support behaviors
4. Emotional enhancement
5. Spontaneous behaviors

The astute reader will note the acronym. Namely, if sports organizations treat their fans **ASVIPs** then they will have covered all of the **BASES** when it comes to fan identification.

### Attractiveness of players

Fans may find players to be attractive due to their success or similarity.

**Success.** Fans will generally find successful athletes and teams as attractive. When the team performs poorly, attractive members of the team offer fans a basis by which they can identify with the team and still protect their self-esteem. A fan of the Chicago Cubs, for instance, may identify with the team because of Sammy Sosa: “Hey, I don’t care if the Cubs win. I just love to watch Sammy play.”

Teams that do not have established star players have a more difficult time in building identification. In such cases, a team’s marketing campaign may be able to grow its own by featuring an individual rising star in their advertising and promotional efforts. In addition to featuring Jason Williams (who, despite his undisputed commitment, is still a distant #2 in the league at the guard position—behind Allen Iverson—in tattoo percentage), the Memphis Grizzlies promoted rookies Pau Gasol and Shane Battier as star players in 2001-2002. The Memphis newspaper carried an ongoing series on the life of a rookie in the NBA featuring interviews with Shane Battier during this same year. So, even when the team performs poorly, the fans can identify with the rising stars, perhaps also identifying with the struggles of Battier as he adapts to the style and level of NBA play.



The more that the team can build indirect (e.g., interviews) and direct contact (e.g., autograph signings, public social service events, etc.) with the players, the more fans will be able to identify with the players. Players that make themselves available through these indirect and direct means are valuable assets beyond what they do at game time.



The reverse is also true. You can probably think of some players who have been successful in competition but were unattractive in some other way (e.g., Albert Belle, Mike Tyson or Rasheed Wallace). These individuals dilute identification among the majority of fans who value positive traits such as fair play and integrity.

**Similarity.** We find those who are similar to us as attractive (Byrne and Nelson 1965). For those of us with healthy self-esteem, we psychologically react to others by thinking either:

- a. “If you are similar to me, then you must be attractive—because I am attractive.”
- b. “If you are attractive, then you are similar to me—because I am attractive.”

The blue-collar fans of the Pittsburgh Steelers are likely to identify with the team more easily when the players exemplify blue-collar football: run the football and play tough defense. Pittsburgh fans love Jerome Bettis (The Bus), because they feel as though they have similar characteristics. The “Steel Curtain” defense of the 1970s is a good example of a team’s players representing similar characteristics to its fans.

The team doesn’t have to win for fans to feel as though they are similar and attractive. The old Brooklyn “Bums,” as the Dodgers were locally called before they moved to Los Angeles, had a strong fan following among individuals who could identify with the struggles and mishaps of the team. This could be some of what goes on with the Cubs and other teams with long-standing absences from playoffs and championships.

The issue of similarity and attractiveness has important implications for two primary marketing management issues of *positioning* and *personnel*. Sports organizations must consider how they will position the players they acquire and retain (within a team concept) with their target markets. If the team’s fans are primarily blue-collar (Pittsburgh Steelers), white-collar (Los Angeles Lakers) or no-collar/frequently collared (Oakland Raiders), then promotional efforts and personnel decisions should follow suit.

In summation, teams can build identification by acquiring, retaining, and featuring attractive players through indirect and direct contact with fans within a well-designed promotional campaign.

## Social Acceptance

Have you noticed that when people move from one city to another they become more of a fan of that city's teams? The extent to which you identify with some team or player is likely to have something to do with time you have spent in the hometown or state of the team or player.

From a broad perspective, Americans will identify with the U.S. representatives in the Olympics because it would simply not be American to root against the U.S. Intense social pressure exists that influences us to support the American athletes. Because of our culture, we have difficulty thinking of anything but supporting the Americans. To illustrate more vividly the role of social influence, imagine the social pressure one might feel at a local sports bar while watching the university's team play on TV against an archrival. The likelihood that anyone will stand up and yell for the opposing team is directly proportionate to the number of beers consumed. I, for one, am glad that you have better sense than to put yourself in that situation.

The point is that the extent to which the team or player enjoys social acceptance is directly related to the degree to which fans will be willing to identify with the team or player.

**Social acceptance** typically originates from at least three sources: family, peers, and community (including at the city, state, and national level). Interestingly, we tend to get our information about what the community thinks by inferring from the views of our families and peers (Wakefield 1995). So, the way to improve community acceptance is by targeting actions that will make families and small groups accept the team and sporting event. Minor league sports often do this by focusing on the entertainment value for the family, which in turn influences acceptance of the team in the community.

Two primary ways to increase social acceptance are to improve the place and to give fans ownership of the team.

**The Place.** Perceptions of social acceptance of a sporting event are directly tied to the place the sporting event is held. Which of the following sporting events do you think people are likely to perceive as more popular?

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Sporting Event "A"</b>	<b>Sporting Event "B"</b>
<b>Location</b>	Dangerous part of town with few access roads	Near other entertainment and restaurants off major roads
<b>Facility</b>	Old and deteriorating	New equipment and modern amenities
<b>Food</b>	Popcorn, hotdogs (boiled) & peanuts	BBQ, Pizza, & Chicken
<b>Parking</b>	Entry and exit are bottlenecked	Entry and exit facilitated by layout & shuttles
<b>Maintenance</b>	Dirty restrooms, food service, and seating areas	Clean restrooms, food service, and seating areas
<b>Service Personnel</b>	Facial hair, unkempt uniforms, long hair	Clean shaven, clean uniforms, short hair
<b>Comfort</b>	Cramped seating and aisles	Ample knee, arm and seat space

If you selected sporting event “B”, then you are like most other Americans who attend sporting events. If you selected sporting event “A”, then you are an Expos or Phillies fan.

A chief reason that sports organizations invest so much capital in facilities is for the obvious reason that people like nice places and they don’t like bad places. It’s that simple. If a facility becomes known nationwide as unfriendly to fans and even the players (Veterans Stadium, Philadelphia), then it is definitely time to get a new stadium or do major renovations.

**Ownership.** Perceptions of social acceptance are also connected to the extent to which individuals in the community feel as though they have ownership of the team. Fans of the Green Bay Packers literally do own a piece of the team, but fans can feel as though they own the team in other ways. The Memphis Redbirds (AAA) baseball team’s not-for-profit status helps the community feel as though they are supporting the city when they support the Redbirds. Providing fans the opportunity to have input and communication with team ownership and management also breeds ownership feelings.

Teams that move to new communities are especially vulnerable because they may be perceived as not being “our team.” Consequently, teams relocating, as well as established teams, may consider doing as much as possible to have their social acceptance **PREPAID**:

- Proactively involving fans to give input to management and the team (e.g., publicizing the fact that you can email the team owner at [mark.cuban@dallasmavs.com](mailto:mark.cuban@dallasmavs.com) or can visit him at his day job at Dairy Queen)
- Researching fans to determine fan satisfaction and what aspects of the event they would change
- Encouraging or requiring key players to move residences to community
- Publicizing efforts to reach diversified customer base (e.g., Utah Jazz’ \$5 Value Tickets)
- Acquiring or attracting players with local connections
- Initiating and maintaining public service activities involving players and management
- Developing marketing campaigns, announcements, and other communications that include emphases that this is “your team” or “your event”

## **Variety-seeking**

While the first two factors of attractiveness and social acceptance increase fan identification, individuals who are variety-seekers are unlikely to be highly identified with the team. **Variety-seekers** attend a game simply for a change of pace. These weakly identified fans may come to the game because of a sales promotion (fireworks or concert) for a bit of excitement or to experience something new. These “entertainment hoppers” may go to the game one weekend and then not return for the rest of the season.

The importance of understanding variety-seekers is that a good deal of the sales promotions that are offered at sporting events are likely to attract variety-seekers (e.g., the Dynamite Lady or price discounts) and may do little to convert the fan into a more loyal or identified fan. Although the objective of such sales promotions may be to reach secondary or less loyal fans to fill unoccupied seats, without coordinated marketing efforts the sports organization may be wasting

sponsorship and promotional dollars on individuals who will be unlikely to return until the next promotion.

Borrowing from Wakefield and Barnes (1996),

“Sales promotions objectives are typically positioned as either maintaining customer loyalty or boosting short-term sales, although the latter typically comes at the expense of the former (Levy and Weitz, 1995)...Properly designed sales promotions may, however boost short-term sales while also building customer loyalty. If sales promotions of [sporting events] tend to attract variety-seekers, then the sales promotions could be designed not only to stimulate, but also to reinforce positive aspects of the [sports] experience that are likely to increase loyalty or perceived value of the [event]...For instance, sporting events are often sponsored by restaurants, which in turn offer coupons, contests, or drawings for free dinners. Instead of simply using the giveaways as the sales promotion, the promotion could be reinforcing and developing involvement and loyalty by giving away a limited number of free meals with members of the team.”

In short, sports marketers must evaluate what the objective and effect of sales promotions is on fans. While some infrequent spectators might attend due to a promotion and decide that the event is enjoyable enough to return more frequently, sports-irrelevant sales promotions and discounts are likely to send the signal to spectators that the event is not valuable enough to attend in its own right. In any case, the marketing manager can build identification in weakly identified fans by offering promotions that are somehow related to the team, the event, and its players.

### **Involvement with the Sport**

Within the sports setting, fans may have an enduring involvement with the sport and situational involvement with the event. **Enduring involvement** is an ongoing interest or concern with the sport on a day-to-day basis (cf., Richins and Bloch 1986). An individual who has an enduring involvement with motor sports is likely to closely follow NASCAR or NHRA results throughout the season and read or watch whatever media is available regarding motor sports. On the other hand, **situational involvement** with the sport or sporting event occurs due to the circumstances of the event itself. An individual does not have to have enduring involvement to experience situational involvement. A university alumnus may return for the Homecoming football game and become involved with the game at that time, but not be involved in any way with football or the team for the rest of the year. An individual who has enduring involvement can also experience situational involvement that heightens the emotional experience, as when archrivals meet or playoff games ensue.

Unless individuals understand the nature of the game and something about the participants in the game, they can't identify with the team. For those of us who grew up in the south, where it was difficult to get involved with ice hockey due to the lack of ice (see article in January 18, 1968

Bryan-College Station Eagle, “Hockey Sticks Wash Ashore Lake Bryan: Dozen A&M Students Presumed Drowned<sup>1</sup>”) we find less people identified with hockey teams.

Sports marketers can increase fans’ enduring involvement with the sport and thereby increase fan identification. Table 2.2 illustrates methods to increase enduring involvement.

**Table 2.2 Increasing Fan Involvement**

<b>Method</b>	<b>Example</b>
Increase opportunities for sports <b>participation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sponsor local sports teams and leagues</li> <li>• Offer sports clinics staffed by coaches and players</li> </ul>
Provide <b>information</b> on <b>rules</b> of the game	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feature something like what the ESPN/NHL’s “NHL Rules” on websites</li> <li>• On broadcast and live games, show “You make the call!” programming that illustrate rules.</li> <li>• Announce the availability of printed rules of the game at stadium information centers or from section attendants.</li> </ul>
Provide complete game and <b>player</b> information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Handout halftime stats in the stands</li> <li>• Install scoreboards that post real time games stats</li> <li>• Introduce players with personal information</li> <li>• Feature in-depth player information in freely accessible formats (read: not only in expensive programs)</li> </ul>
Facilitate <b>media</b> exchange	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Give ready access to players &amp; management for reporters</li> <li>• Arrange player/coach appearances in nonsports settings</li> </ul>

Increased situational involvement is likely to result in more strongly felt emotional and social exchanges and reinforce team identification. Situational involvement can be increased by promoting key match-ups and pivotal games and including in-depth information about the opposing team and players.

### **Performance**

Countless studies confirm the fact that winning increases team identification and attendance. It is important to point out, however that the team’s history plays a role in this relationship. For teams with strong winning traditions, fans do use team performance as a source of identification. However, for teams without winning traditions, fans overlook objective performance records and focus on either relative performance or the other positive sources of identification (see Fisher and Wakefield 1998).

Fans may perceive their team as performing relatively well even if the team is below .500 with justifications such as:

- We’re better than last year!
- At least we beat the #1 team.
- We’ve got the talent, we just haven’t put it together yet.

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<sup>1</sup> This headline is not entirely accurate. A&M refers to Texas A&M University. Reader should insert name of school’s archrival in place of A&M in headline.

- Given how small our budget is, we do pretty well compared to the big guys in the league.
- We've got some of the best player(s) in the league, we just need one more (pitcher, lineman, point guard, etc.).
- Wait till next year.

Although improved performance in the standings will nearly always lead to increased attendance, it is the *fans' perception of performance that influences attendance*. Marketing managers can influence this perception by focusing on the achievements and performance of individual players, progress from previous years, isolated successes (e.g., Top 10 Finish in a Winston Cup race or PGA event), or changing the point of reference from winning to some other trait on which the team or organization performs well. For example, a hockey team can be characterized as scrappy, tenacious, hard-nosed, or even "guys who like to fight" whenever they hit the ice. Fans can identify with the style of play and justify focusing less on the won/loss record. Of course, winning usually helps<sup>2</sup>.

Since objective performance is a fickle marketing element from season to season and even game to game, even for the best of teams, sports marketers are better off promising something besides a winning effort. *Fans are satisfied when expectations are met and dissatisfied when expectations are not met*. Promotional campaigns are frequently prepared in advance of the season. Campaigns that essentially promise or refer to a winning team while during what turns out to be a downturn will not resonate well among fans. Rather promotional campaigns should focus on benefits of identifying with the team that the organization can be certain of delivering.

## CONSEQUENCES OF IDENTIFICATION

### BIRGing

Highly identified fans are likely to *Bask in Reflected Glory* by doing such things as wearing team-identifying apparel after a team win, describing team wins in terms of what "we" did, and, in general, seeking to enhance one's public image by connecting with positive aspects of the team (Cialdini 1976). BIRGing is also recursive, in that it also serves to reinforce one's identification with the team.

BIRGING has three related consequences.

**Self-esteem.** As you have likely observed, highly identified fans will BIRG in other ways. If you attended a sporting event featuring your favorite team or player winning on Saturday or Sunday afternoon, why do you watch the sports report of the event on TV that night? Why do you eagerly read the newspaper account of the event the next day? Why do you recount the game over and over with your friends? You are BIRGing because it reinforces your self-image and public image. The result of BIRGing is enhanced self-esteem in the highly identified fan.

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<sup>2</sup> Winning does not always help. The Pittsburgh Pirates won division and league titles with Barry Bonds as the NL MVP in the early 1990s, yet were near the bottom of the league in attendance. The Boston Celtics won 9 straight NBA titles but suffered through poor attendance. The New Jersey Nets were first in their division in 2002 and were next to last in the league in attendance.



**CORFing.** Fans may engage in CORFing (*cutting off reflected failure*) following a loss, seeking to distance themselves from the team in a way that will protect their self-esteem. While some evidence exists that CORFing occurs for those who are identified with a group (Synder, Lassegard and Ford, 1986), research related to those identified with a sports team or player suggests that the highly identified fan will do less CORFing than the less identified fan (Wann and Branscombe 1990).

Highly identified fans are likely to BIRG and *not* to CORF. That is, they will refer to wins and losses in the same way: “We won” and “We lost.” Less identified fans are likely to BIRG (“We won.”) and to CORF (“They Lost.”).

**Positive Word-of-Mouth.** Highly identified fans expend considerable amounts of time expressing positive sentiment regarding the object of their identification. This positive word-of-mouth may take the form of oral or written communications with family and peers, as they encourage others to join them in attending the sporting event or otherwise supporting the team or player. This positive word-of-mouth is also likely to influence social acceptance among families and peers, which, in turn, builds fan identification.

Like any other services marketing, generating positive word-of-mouth is critical in determining the success of the organization. Building highly identified fans may serve as a form of a temporary firewall against negative word-of-mouth when some aspects of the sports experience may deteriorate. For self-esteem reasons, highly identified fans are less likely to denigrate the team and organization with which they have identified. To do so causes internal psychological tension (“If this team is so bad, then why I am associated with it?”). Obviously, at some point, fans will recognize poor performance, weak social acceptance, or unattractive players and reduce their identification in order to protect their self-esteem (“I used to be a Cowboys’ fan, but I just couldn’t take it any more.”)

## **ATTRIBUTIONS**

People make inferences about themselves and others based on behaviors and situations they observe (Kelley 1967). If you see someone going to church, you might attribute religious convictions to that person. If you are attending the same church, you might attribute religious convictions to yourself. If you frequently see that person in church, you might consider that person as a member of your group who has affiliated with that church and make positive inferences about that person. Conversely, while passing by the church on your way to Sunday brunch, you might attribute hypocritical actions to those entering the church and consider them to be a group with which you do not want to associate. This is a good thing, because you gave up being hypocritical some time ago.

The point is that people make inferences about themselves, groups, group memberships, and group characteristics. If one is in a group, a good deal of research shows that the person will make self-serving attributions, assume responsibility for group decisions greater than is deserved, and will be biased in favor of the in-group and be biased against an out-group (see Folkes and Kiesler 1991).

Within the sports setting, highly identified fans do these same things. We make self-serving attributions regarding how smart we were to support (or wager) for a particular winning team, as much as we are to attribute the winning context to the team—as if we actually had something to do with the outcome. Highly identified fans will actually take credit for successful team strategies, such as completing a long touchdown pass: “I’ve been saying that we should just throw the ball deep. Haven’t I been saying that?” It’s a good thing the coach was listening.

While self-serving attributions are more internal in nature, in-group favoritism, out-group derogation and perceived community acceptance are more externally focused.

**In-group favoritism.** Highly identified fans are likely to attribute positive characteristics to other fans of the same team or player: “He must be pretty smart. He’s a Rams fan.” Deeper than that, however, highly identified fans spend a good deal of time with other fans and are likely to know them better than they do fans of other teams. The relatively rich social experiences and relationships developed by fans, combined with selective memory, leads highly identified fans to attribute positive traits to other fans, as well to the team or players.

One favorable consequence of in-group bias is that fans tend to accommodate and cooperate with other fans. Highly identified fans see each other as part of a group, facilitating positive fan behavior. Another favorable consequence of in-group bias is that fans attribute positive characteristics to the players.

While it may seem obvious that highly identified fans will think and say positive things about the team, it is interesting to observe the effects of in-group vs. out-group bias with respect to player trades. Identified fans have an amazing ability to change their minds about a player once they arrive on their team. Similarly, when a player is traded away, fans highly identified with the team (as opposed to the player) will likely make disparaging remarks about his ability (“He wasn’t that good anyway.”) However, if fans highly identify with the player, trading the player may decrease the fans’ identification with the team.

**Out-group derogation.** It is probably no surprise to you that highly identified fans think and say bad things about the opposing team and its players. Although fan behavior at events can be problematic (see right), the positive effect of out-group derogation is primarily in building a home-field



advantage. Highly identified fans tend to make opposing teams and fans feel unwelcome, making some venues extremely difficult for visiting teams to succeed.

**Community.** A consequence of in-group/out-group bias is that it serves to build community and solidarity among fans. Again, you can see how identification has a circular effect. High identification leads to greater feelings of community, which, in turn, is likely to influence fans' perceptions of community acceptance. One can observe, for instance, highly identified fans congregating for tailgating with other fans prior to sporting events. Entire communities of campers, RVs, and tents can develop overnight on many college campuses on football game days and at NASCAR events.

### SUPPORT BEHAVIORS: 3Ms

Spectators reinforce their identification with the team by engaging in support behaviors. The more identified fans are, the more they will engage in:

- **Meeting** (games, events, fan clubs, etc.)
- **Merchandise buying** (souvenirs, licensed logo items, etc.)
- **Media consumption** related to the team (online, newspaper, TV, radio, etc.)

These support behaviors are the primary sources of revenue for sports organizations.

**Meeting.** Fans will seek opportunities to meet or join other fans to support their favorite team or player. An obvious effect of identification is that highly identified fans will attend games (home and away) and other related events. Highly identified fans will join fan clubs and other support groups, such as university booster clubs.

A critical outcome related to this willingness to meet and join with others is the willingness to expend money in support of the team. Highly identified fans are likely to see their expenditures as an avenue of supporting the team, as opposed to simply paying money in exchange for a good or service. Further, highly identified fans who expend significant amounts to obtain luxury box seats or other signs of team-related prestige are able to represent themselves to others as important team fans. While there may be other motivations, identification and self-representation to others is likely to explain why anyone would be willing to donate \$36,488 to Duke University's sports program in order to be a "Cameron Wade Donor." Although not well-researched, identification and self-representation may also be the principle motivation for corporate sponsors who spend upwards of \$250,000 to meet with other executives and clients in skyboxes, *plus* the cost of a dozen or more tickets for each event (see Lambert 2001).



Sports marketing managers can facilitate meeting opportunities by:

1. Offering **promotions** geared toward bringing highly identified fan groups together, such as the Dallas Mavericks “Self-Expression” contest (sponsored by Cingular Wireless) that invites fans to paint or otherwise dress themselves to compete for free prime seats (see above).
2. Including fans in public service efforts or other **community events**, such as the Masters Series ATP tournament’s Lady’s Day (see right) that includes a fashion show moderated by players and an autograph session at the end.
3. Building and supporting booster **fan clubs** which allow more access to players and athletic facilities. In addition to traditional booster club efforts, some minor league hockey clubs arrange for families to adopt players during the season—inviting them into their homes for meals or other activities. During this time, families can offer helpful advice concerning dental care, personal hygiene, and social skills<sup>3</sup>.



**Merchandise.** Fans buy team or player-related merchandise to **reinforce** their identification and to **represent** themselves to others as fans of the team or player. This has important implications for *promotions* and for licensed *product* sales.

Identified fans will desire promotional items that are somehow related to the team or event to enhance and reflect their self-concepts. Team jerseys, t-shirts, equipment, and other items (e.g., bobble-heads on office desks) that are frequently on display to others are likely to be highly desired by fans. Items that are unrelated to the team and not frequently on public display are likely to have less appeal to identified fans (e.g., Sears sponsorship of ice scrapers to Chicago Bulls fans).

Licensed logo apparel sales are an important source of revenue for many sports organizations. Since identified fans are seeking to bolster their self-esteem by associating themselves with the team or player through how they *appear*, it is critical that the quality and styling of the apparel is obvious to those wearing and observing the apparel. Although price sensitive segments exist among sports fans, the majority of sports fans who are willing to spend money on season tickets are likely willing to spend proportionate amounts on team or player merchandise.

**Media.** In order to feed their feelings of identification with the team, highly identified fans will spend more time following their favorite team or player in the various media. A highly identified fan of NASCAR and a given driver will get online at [www.nascar.com](http://www.nascar.com) and its related sites, watch NASCAR races on ABC and Fox’s Speedvision Network on cable, read motor sports

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<sup>3</sup> This sentence is meant to be funny. Unfortunately, it is not. At least not to those hockey players who have few remaining teeth, shave on a weekly basis, and settle most disagreements with a swift blow to the head.

newspaper articles and NASCAR magazine, listen to NASCAR radio broadcasts, and pay attention to virtually every other communication regarding NASCAR. Odds are that this fan is also wearing his choice of NASCAR socks (right) while consuming these media.

Since merchandise and media are so important to the success of sports organizations, they are the primary subjects of chapters in this text. However, by now, you should understand that identification is the driver that leads to sports success.



## EMOTIONAL ENHANCEMENT

Individuals react to events and places along a circumplex of affective responses (see Figure 2.2). The highly identified fan is likely to experience more positive affective responses to the sports organization, team and players than will less identified individuals in terms of excitement, pleasure/enjoyment, and relaxation. Less identified fans may find sporting events to be sleepy, boring, displeasing, and perhaps distressing due to lack of identifying with the team or players. Even as a hard-core sports fan, you may have experienced this when flipping through the TV channels, as you pass by games or events that do not include teams or players that you cared about. This, of course, doesn't mean that you won't watch Australian rugby matches if that's the only sports programming available.

In addition to enhanced feelings of excitement and enjoyment, evidence suggests that one's identification and involvement with a sports team in some ways makes the highly identified fan feel immortal. While sports fans pass on like everyone else, identification with a sports team seems to shield against the potential consequences of death (Dechesne, Greenberg, Arndt and Schimel 2000). For instance, highly identified sports fans are likely to be more optimistic when reminded of death concerns, as their interest in the sports team acts as a form of buffer against death. Highly identified sports fans are in search of the "perfect moment" in sports, that when experienced (e.g. Christian Laettner's turnaround jumper that allowed Duke to beat Kentucky with time expiring in the 1992 Final Four), gives them feelings of salvation and victory that last a lifetime (Grimshaw 2000).<sup>4</sup>

Sports organizations can enhance fan excitement and enjoyment in a variety of ways:

- Pregame music and video that fits the demographics of the fans.
- Innovative player introductions that build excitement and chances to BIRG even before the game starts.
- Event-specific music and sound effects that ignite fan excitement at key points in game.
- Post-game rallies on the field or court (helps if team comes back out) after big wins.

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<sup>4</sup> Yes, this does all seem a bit out there. But that's the point. Building highly identified sports fans transcends normal goods & services marketing.

## SPONTANEOUS BEHAVIORS

Just as affective responses are involuntary, highly identified sports fans learn behaviors which become spontaneous or automatic. Highly identified sports fans can't make themselves not feel excited when they go to see their favorite team play. Highly identified fans also can't help but respond **physiologically** to the sports environment, actually experiencing higher blood pressure, endocrine levels, and among males, actually producing greater levels of testosterone when winning (Bernhardt, et.al. 1998). Similarly, many highly identified fans have learned through conditioning processes to respond to game stimuli (people, events and circumstances) in some relatively negative ways.

If you are a highly identified fan at your favorite team's game, what have you learned to do when the referee makes a call against your team? If you are like most other fans, you will affirm the referee on the good job he is doing. You will tell your friends that it sure must be difficult making those tough calls within a split second and thousands of people watching. You will think to yourself or mention to others, "That's the way it goes. Maybe we'll get the next call."

No, actually, if you are like most other highly identified fans, you have likely learned that the appropriate reaction is to begin **blasting** the referees, the opposing players, their fans, their coach, and their bus driver, if available. It doesn't matter if they can hear you or not. You can be sitting on the top row near the rafters and you will still want to offer your words of encouragement to the referee. You might even be watching the game on TV and still attempt to communicate your disagreement with the call to the referees.

The point is that highly identified fans are more likely to be aggressive and to engage in blasting at sporting events. This can be a serious problem for event management.

Sports organizations that desire to curb overly aggressive behavior can alleviate the problem by:

- Developing announcements and presentations by the head coach and players to encourage fans to follow specific rules of behavior while at the game. For example, Duke's Coach Mike Krzyzewski (pronounced "K") spends time talking to students before games to encourage them to be model fans.
- Training and placing event attendees in each section to actively look for potential dysfunctional fans. This often includes evaluating sobriety, which leads to the next issue.
- Having no-drinking sections in the venue and eliminating the sale of alcohol late in the game (e.g., after 7<sup>th</sup> inning, etc.).

## CONCLUSION

Sports organizations must build fan identification through attractive players, building social acceptance in the community, converting variety-seekers into more identified fans, building local involvement with the sport, and fielding competitive teams in a way that fans can have some source of feeling like a winner. The sports organization that increases its numbers of highly identified fans will reap the consequences of increased support—namely more fans in the seats, giving more money to support the team, watching more broadcasts, and buying more team merchandise.

Figure 2.1 Model of Identification

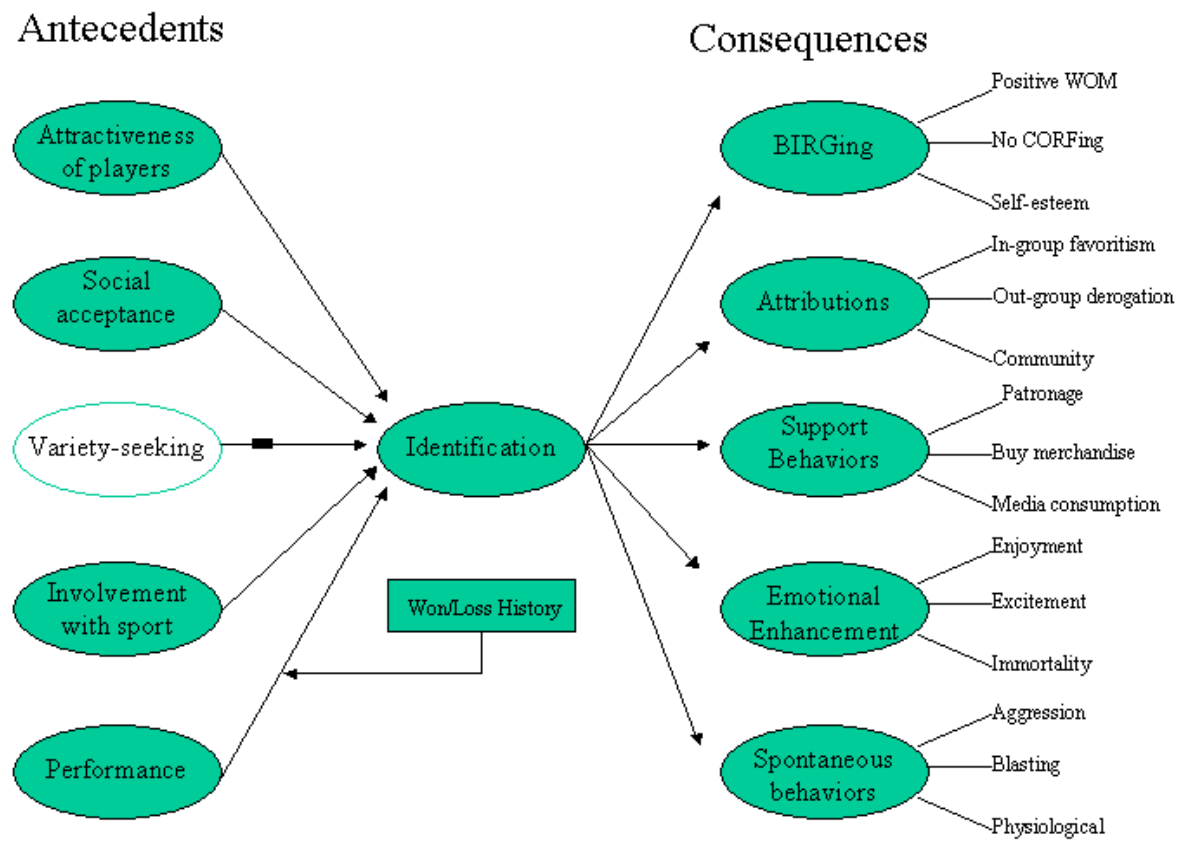


Figure 2.2 Circumplex of Emotions

