

Creating and Fostering Fan Identification in Professional Sports

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ABSTRACT

In the 1980's sports fans became accustomed to player free agency while in the 1990's these same fans have had to come to terms with franchise free agency. While some cities lose their professional sport franchises, others enjoy sell-outs, and lucrative television contracts. Why were Cleveland Browns fans so vehement in their protests and lawsuits in their attempt to retain the Browns, while in Houston the fans were apathetic in their response to the possibility (and subsequent reality) of losing the Oilers? The authors describe this personal commitment and emotional involvement of fans in pro sport franchises as fan identification.

In this article the authors develop a conceptual framework of fan identification and the levels, motivations and benefits of such identification. In analyzing these factors, we suggest strategies for increasing fan identification and identify possible managerial outcomes resulting from increased fan identification.

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INTRODUCTION

Fan identification is defined as the personal commitment and emotional involvement customers have with a sport organization. When a customer identifies closely with an organization, a sense of connectedness ensues and he or she begins to define him- or herself in terms of the organization (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). Sport differs from other sources of entertainment through evoking high levels of emotional attachment and identification.

The marketing and communication functions of a sports team cannot directly influence on-field success. Therefore, fan identification is an important concept because it may minimize the effects of team performance on long-term fiscal success and position in the sport entertainment hierarchy of its community. The Boston Red Sox, for example, have not won the World Series since 1906. Failure to win the championship, however, has not stopped fans from vigorously supporting the Red Sox by attending games and watching games on NESN, a regional sports television channel offering coverage of the Red Sox throughout New England.

Although people in the U.S. society are becoming disconnected from a sense of community as a result of changing lifestyles, societal interests and technological innovations (Putnam, 1995), interestingly this does not hold true for spectator sports. Spectator sports, in contrast, are deeply rooted in Rooney's (1974) concept of Pride

in Place" — meaning a key expression of community identification and expression. Sport promotes communication, involves people jointly, provides common symbols, a collective identity and a reason for solidarity (Lever, 1983). Noting the effect that sports has upon a community, Hall of Fame basketball star Kareem Abdul-Jabbar stated "Our (L.A. Lakers) collective success has forged some kind of unity in this huge and fragmented metropolis, and it cuts across class cultural lines" (Fox, 1994. P. 89).

In recent years, franchise movement, or the threat of such movement, has galvanized fan identification into not only a social force but also a political and judicial force. The recent move of the NFL's Cleveland franchise to Baltimore (where they will operate as the Ravens) demonstrates the depth of fan identification. At the time of the move, the Browns had ranked among the top five teams in the NFL in terms of attendance for 12 of the previous 20 years.

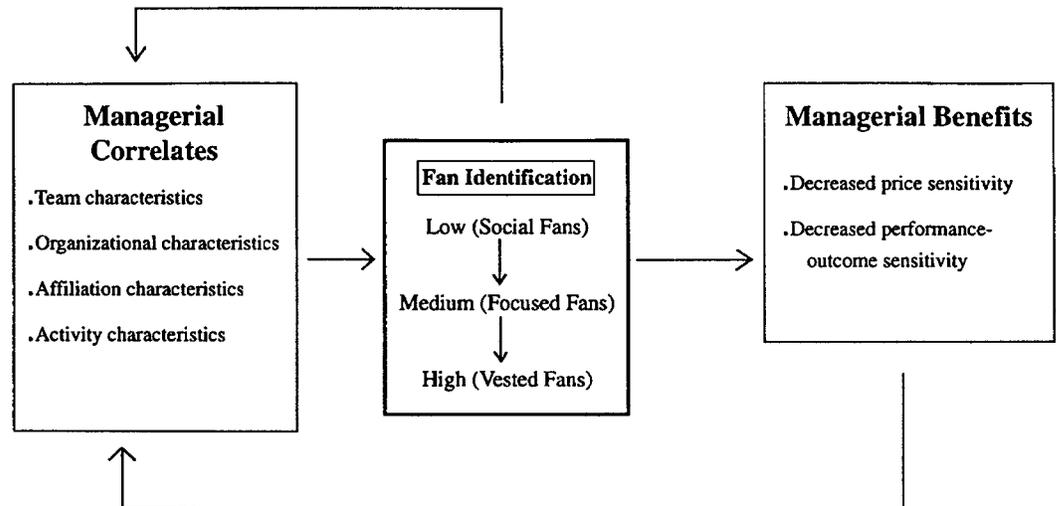
When Art Modell, the owner of the Cleveland Browns, announced he was moving the team to Baltimore, it mobilized the community into a cohesive entity with a mission to retain their beloved franchise. Advertisers responded by pulling their advertising from Cleveland Stadium. The city received a preliminary injunction against the relocation, and at least nine independent law suits were filed by Browns' season ticket holders and fan groups against Modell and the Browns (Rushin, 1995).

Fans describe the Browns as part of the history of their families and refer to Modell as a murderer for killing their memories and future. Fan identification with the Browns was so established that the Browns Backers included over 63,000 members located in 200 chapters throughout the United States, the United Kingdom, and Japan. Despite the history, tradition, and support of the city of Cleveland, Art Modell was given permission to move his franchise to Baltimore for the 1997 season. However, in a negotiated settlement, the City of Cleveland retained the colors and nickname Browns" and are to be awarded an NFL expansion team when the city constructs a new facility (Rushin, 1995).

During the same year, the Oilers, after 35 years in Houston, announced they were planning to move to Nashville, Tennessee. Support days were planned, protests scheduled, and lawsuits contemplated in response to the potential relocation. In contrast to the Cleveland Browns' situation, fan interest and support were lacking, indicative of small amounts of fan identification with the franchise. As a result, the Oilers will be moving to Nashville after the completion of their existing lease within the next 3 years. Although fan identification is clearly a powerful social and market force, there are no guarantees that it will develop for every team.

The purpose of this paper is to present a normative model to create and foster fan identification. Specifically, our objectives are to a) discuss the characteristics that lead to, and create, the identification

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework for Fan Identification



between a sports team and its fan base and b) outline steps a sport organization can take to nurture and develop fan identification. We begin by presenting a conceptual framework for fan identification.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR FAN IDENTIFICATION

What factors increase levels of fan identification? What are the benefits of having highly identified fans? Social identification researchers believe that the level of identification with an organization depends on such factors as satisfaction with the organization, the reputation of the organization, frequency of contact, and the visibility of affiliation (Bhattacharya, Rao & Glynn, 1995).

Bhattacharya's (1995) model relates member identification to three broad factors: (a) organizational and product characteristics, (b) affiliation characteristics, and (c) activity characteristics. Organizational and product characteristics relate to members' perceptions of the focal organization and its offerings, specifically, the perceived prestige of the focal organization and satisfaction with the membership benefits. Affiliation characteristics refer to the characteristics of a person's membership, such as length of membership, visi-

bility of membership, and number of other similar organizations he or she patronizes. Activity characteristics refer to behavior patterns such as level of contact with the organization and donation of money to the focal organization (Bhattacharya, et al., 1995).

Several aspects of this model are adaptable for sport organizations. Our conceptual model proposes that managerial factors influence the level of fan identification, which then results in managerial benefits. The model depicts this process as a closed system where managerial factors are influenced by feedback loops from fan identification and managerial benefits. The feedback loops produce ever higher levels of fan identification.

As shown in Figure 1, the level of fan identification with a sport organization (team) is directly impacted by four managerial factors: (a) team characteristics, (b) organizational characteristics, (c) affiliation characteristics, and (d) activity characteristics. Each of these factors contributes to the attraction and, ultimately, the identification a fan has for a sports team.

Fan identification can be divided into three discernible levels: (a) low identification (social fans), (b) medium identification (focused

fans), and (c) high identification (vested fans). Fan identification leads to two notable managerial benefits: (a) decreased price sensitivity and (b) decreased performance-outcome sensitivity.

LEVELS OF FAN IDENTIFICATION

Fanatics, by Webster's definition, are exaggeratedly zealous for a belief or a cause. In the case of sports fans, this belief or cause is that of the team they support and the subject of their faith and beliefs. Not all fans have the same level of fervor, devotion, and commitment to their favorite team. We suggest that there are three discernible levels of fan identification, with certain key characteristics associated with each level.

Level 1: Low identification (Social Fans). This refers to a relatively passive long-term relationship with the sport — low on emotion, low on financial commitment, low on involvement, but a definite relationship exists. Fans characterized as low in identification may be attracted purely by the entertainment value of the product. Fans who are attracted to sports exclusively for the entertainment value do not, initially, have an emotional attachment to a team or a particular sporting event, but rather are attracted to the sport for its pleasure and stress-relieving qualities or the opportunities for social interaction within the community.

Fans with this level of identification are followers of sport entertainment" and not necessarily the team. For these fans, the outcome of the sporting event is less important than the overall quality of the entertainment opportunity provided. For this group of fans, a tailgating party, post game concert, picnic at the ballpark, or enjoyment of social interaction with fellow attendees might be the most important aspect of the evening's sport entertainment experience. It should also be noted that this initial attraction to a sport for its enter-

tainment value or opportunities for social interaction can lead to a greater liking" and, ultimately, greater degree of identification with the team. It may also be the introductory phase of a relationship that could grow and intensify to a much stronger relationship and level of involvement — meeting players, attending a team function such as a team preview of draft party, purchasing a ticket plan, and so forth.

Level 2: Medium identification (Focused Fans). This refers to an association with a sport or team that is based upon some attributes or elements found to be attractive. In many cases, this level of identification may be based upon fad, social factors, team performance, or player personality. Fans attracted to the achievement-seeking aspect of sport project many of the qualities of the strongly identified fan. Although the high-achievement-seeking fan will make significant personal and financial investments for the team, the behavior is directly correlated to team performance and therefore may only be short term. These fans may also be attracted to the event" that being the big game. Examples of this attraction include the purchase of baseball season tickets to guarantee the right to All Star Game tickets or the purchase of football season tickets for Purdue University to insure a ticket for the Notre Dame game. It is at this time when the greatest short-term, emotional attachment to a team is displayed. A common behavior of the achievement-seeking fan would be the wearing of team apparel, again to build the positive association between the fan and the team. These types of involvement with the team may lead to a greater relationship and identification or may follow the fate of fads and die out after the involvement has run its course — poor team performance, identified player traded, and so forth.

Level 3: High identification (Vested Fans). This refers to the strongest, most loyal and longest term-relationship a fan/participant can have with a sport or team. This relationship speaks of a heavy investment and commitment either financially or in terms of time or both. A strongly identified fan (participant) can feel an "emotional ownership" in the sport (product), refer to the entity as "WE," recruit other fans (participants). Most importantly, according to Pooley (1978): fans who strongly identify with a team (activity) often devote significant portions of their day to following that team (activity).

The fan with a strong identification is a team" follower. Although such fans will be attracted to sports, their loyalty to their team, just like their loyalty to their community, is unwavering and long-term. Fans who view the team as an extension of their community have strong emotional attachment to the team. Although the success of the team reflects personally upon individual fans, it also reflects upon the collective identity of the community. A lawsuit was filed in Cleveland, Ohio, resulting in a negotiated settlement for the city to retain ownership of the names and trademarks associated with the Cleveland Browns and Browns (Rushin, 1995).

Wann and Branscombe (1993) found that individuals high in identification with a sports team were more involved with the team. This involvement translated into greater number of years as a fan, greater attendance at both home games and away games, and high expectations for future attendance-related behaviors. Additionally, fan identification was related to investment. Highly identified fans were willing to invest greater amounts of money and time in their attempts to follow their team. James Michener (1976) interviewed Russel Swanson, a Nebraska football fan, who noted:

Fans in other states think that football fever strikes the nation

from late summer to midwinter, but in Nebraska we follow it longer. We expect news coverage from August practice, through the fall season, including bowl practice in December and the bowl game in January. The balance of January and February are ough. We look at the line-ups in March, follow

associate themselves with the team to gain stature in the eyes of their peers and to enhance their feelings of personal worth.

The existence and success of team support groups such as the Baltimore Orioles Designated Hitters, who function as unpaid sales personnel

of the franchise. For example, recent criticism of the Browns' move to Baltimore was directed at the organization and not the team. Organizational characteristics also include the reputation of the franchise and the league/conference in which the team competes, the prestige and reputation associated with a franchise's league, and affiliated division within that structure, can contribute to fan identification. For example, the New York Yankees are one of the most prestigious teams in professional baseball. Their presence in the Eastern Division of the American League may increase fan interest and identification with the other teams in the league and the division. Teams do not exist and thrive in isolation. Teams that play in competitive divisions with well-developed rivalries typically have fans who identify with who they are, as well as define the team based upon their competition.

An organization's reputation depends on a history of on-field success, constant commitment to excellence from team ownership, and a record of dealing with the surrounding community with integrity. Commitment to excellence is reflected by the continuous striving to bring in top coaches/managers and a willingness to invest financial resources to acquire available impact free agents. Strong community relations and forthright and honest negotiations with community representatives regarding stadium leases and capital improvements (new or enhanced facilities) reflect high levels of organizational integrity.

3. *Affiliation characteristics.* Community affiliation is the most significant correlate of fan identification. This component

The expression of common symbols, history, shared goals, and the fan's need to belong links the team to the community and provides an identity for the team that is inseparable from that of the community.

spring practice in April and attend the spring Red-White squad game in May. Somehow we manage through June, but pro football with some former Big Red players starts in July, which carries us back to August practice. (Quoted in Michener, 1976, p. 276)

to help promote the team, are excellent examples of personal image-enhancement and prestige-building associations. As noted, this attraction may be short-term and heavily dependent, for many people, upon team performance. Fans may avoid associations with a team when team performance falters as a means of protecting their (the fan's) own image.

Similar findings can be found when examining the purchases of professional team sports apparel. Consistently, the merchandise sales of championship teams outrank that of the competition. For example, merchandise sales for the National Basketball Association's Houston Rockets increased 397% after their 1994 NBA Championship season. Thus, people associate themselves in terms of interest, appearance, speech, and behavior with winning sports teams to enhance their prestige in other's eyes and very probably to increase their own self-esteem.

2. *Organizational characteristics.* Organizational characteristics differ from team characteristics in that they encompass the "off-field" image of ownership, decision making, and tradition

MANAGERIAL FACTORS

Fan identification with sport organizations (teams) is impacted by four factors under the direct influence of managers. By manipulating these factors, managers can incrementally increase levels of fan identification with their teams.

1. *Team characteristics.* Successful teams and seasons attract fans who desire the positive association to be reflected upon them. In many cases, this results in jumping on the bandwagon" and embracing teams such as the Atlanta Braves, San Francisco 49ers, Chicago Bulls, and Dallas Cowboys, who have been very successful and popular. Also worth noting is that fans of a team, described as *affiliated others*, can attract the achievement-seeking fan. If, for example, the team is perceived to attract a socially desirable fan base, other fans will look to

is potentially the most instrumental in building fan identification and, consequently, has the strongest long-term effects. The community affiliation component was derived from the friendship and bonding research and is defined as kinship, bond, or connection the fan has to a team. Community affiliation is derived from common symbols, shared goals, history, and a fan's need to belong. The expression of common symbols, history, shared goals, and the fan's need to belong links the team to the community and provides an identity for the team that is inseparable from that of the community. As an embodiment of the community, a fan's affinity for his or her community is associated and extended to the team.

This association, or "BIRG" (Basking in Reflective Glory) phenomenon, was found to manifest itself in a number of ways by Cialdini et al. in their 1976 study of college students. In this study, students used the pronoun "WE" to describe a team victory while using the pronoun "THEY" to describe a team defeat. It was also discovered that the wearing of school-related apparel increased after team victories.

The community-affiliation component comprises of individual's need to belong. As the friendship research suggests, individuals seek a sense of belonging and an opportunity for communication and interaction. A sports team provides the individual an attachment to a larger community with similar interests and goals functioning much like a fraternal organization. Proprietary research conducted through focus groups for the Orlando Magic reveals that ticketholders form relationships in their seating section to exchange tickets

during the season and often have social activities after the season with their new friends" who are also season ticketholders (Audience Analysts, 1993).

4. *Activity characteristics.* While attendance at the actual event can lead to increased involvement, so can the exposure received via electronic and print media coverage and programming. The combination of opportunities through the purchase of tickets and/or the access through the media insures opportunity for stimulation and exposure at various levels of economic investment and time commitment, as well as geographic considerations for fans living outside the immediate area. As technology, particularly media-related developments, has evolved, so has the opportunity for the fans to become more and more identified with respect to the object (team or player) of their identification. National and regional 24-hour sport television networks, World Wide Web home pages, radiocall in shows, pay-per-view television, print media devoted exclusively to particular teams, and fan clubs have all provided the sport fan access to whatever degree of identification he or she wishes to achieve. For example, a cable television subscriber in western Massachusetts has access to three 24-hour-a-day sport channels (ESPN, Sport Channel America, and the New England Sports Network [NESN]), plus sports coverage through WTBS (Atlanta) as well as limited sports offerings available through USA Network, The Nashville Network, and the regular networks (ABC, CBS, NBC, & Fox). In addition, the cable subscriber also has access to many pay-per-view sporting events throughout the year.

The convenience and affordability of satellite programming now offer the fan the opportunity to follow a favorite team regardless of the location of that team in relationship to the residence of the fan. The National Football League has in fact created a package with RCA's Direct TV satellite package to promote this opportunity to its fans throughout the United States. Similar programs are also offered by the National Basketball Association, National Hockey League, Major League Baseball and the NCAA.

MANAGERIAL BENEFITS

The four factors described in the preceding paragraphs lead to the establishment of fan identity and are essential in preserving and expanding the levels and types of expressions associated with that fan identity. From a managerial perspective, fan identity produces two beneficial outcomes, decreased price sensitivity and decreased performance-outcome sensitivity.

1. *Decreased price sensitivity.* The relative price inelasticity among sports fans is demonstrated annually for each sport franchise or organization. In spite of ever increasing ticket prices, sports teams continue to attract fans in record numbers. Entering their respective 1994-95 seasons, the average ticket prices for the major sports in the United States were as follows:

National Basketball Association.....	\$27.12
National Football League.....	\$31.05
National Hockey League.....	\$33.66
Major League Baseball....	\$10.45

(Team Marketing Report, 1994)

This price insensitivity has also manifested itself in several other

forms of commitment. First of all, as the level of identification increases and the fan becomes a ticket-plan holder or season-ticket holder, the fan must pay for these tickets as much as 6 months in advance prior to the first game of the next season. This willingness to pay in advance has not been lost upon the more astute sport marketers such as Max Muhleman of Charlotte-based Muhleman and Associates, who created the concept of personal seat licenses (PSL) for the Charlotte Panthers of the National Football League. Modeled in part after the priority seating systems that are prevalent in college sports, PSLs are advance payments by the fan merely for the right to purchase a ticket. This "right" can be permanent or, as in the case of the NFL's Oakland Raiders, can be for a fixed term (20 years).

2. *Decreased performance-outcome sensitivity.* As the degree of fan identification and involvement increases, the less likely the fan's behaviors will be impacted by team performance — it has been over 70 years since the Red Sox won the World Series, yet attendance (percentage of capacity) consistently ranks among the highest in the league. This is due in part to "vesting" — which in this context refers to improving seat location on an annual basis to the point that it would be foolish to lose the prime location that the fan has "earned" as a result of renewing his/her tickets. Other sport teams are in the process of developing benefit packages based upon accumulating points — similar to frequent flyer/buyer programs — for their fans. This type of program essentially rewards a fan for increased involvement and investment in the team.

STRATEGIES FOR INCREASING FAN IDENTIFICATION

Although a number of the environmental influences on the team or a sport, such as history, rules, and team composition and team performance, are beyond the scope of teams' marketing and communication strategies (Mullin, Hardy & Sutton, 1993), this examination focuses upon strategies for increasing fan identification that are within the control of sport managers and marketers.

1. *Increase team/player accessibility to the public.* Crosset (1995), in his study detailing the relationships between players and fans on the PGA tour, explains the concept of reciprocity. This reciprocity is in marketing terminology, an exchange process between the athlete who gives of his talent to the fans who in exchange "give" their adulation and support to the golfer. This mutual exchange is a critical ingredient in establishing and maintaining fan interest. The gift that fans want more than any other is accessibility, and in the 1990s this is the gift that players and the team are most reluctant to give. Thus when accessibility is offered, it is highly valued and appreciated.

Accessibility of the team and its players will lead to greater attraction for the team among fans. Advertising and exposure relating to player appearances, autograph sessions, and grassroots events, such as fan festivals, pep rallies, and youth clinics, are all methods of increasing the team's exposure in the community. It has become common practice in the NBA for each team to host its own "Draft Party" in conjunction with the annual NBA Draft in June. These events often feature current and past players as well as team personnel who

interact with the fans in attendance throughout the evening. These types of events create the sense of community essential in building fan identification.

2. *Increase community involvement activities.* The community relations efforts of professional sports teams and their players play a significant role in building fan identification. As supported by friendship and attraction theories, community involvement demonstrates the team's shared goals, in this case, improvement of the quality of life in general for the community. Underscoring the activities that the team is endorsing is the fact that they usually take place on the "turf" of the community and not necessarily in the facilities owned by the team. This gives the activities more credibility and makes the gesture on behalf of the team/players more meaningful. Community relations programs are often grassroots oriented and may include any or all of the following: charity work, social cause projects, involvement with literacy or reading programs at elementary schools, drug education programs, and programs designed to develop leadership abilities in youth. Many of these programs are handled by various departments within the organizational structure of the team, whereas other teams, most notably the Orlando Magic, have established a nonprofit charitable foundation to coordinate their efforts and programs.

Philanthropic efforts reinforce the team's position in the community and reflect positively on the team as well as its fans. As the achievement theories demonstrate, a positive effort by the team will reflect positively on the fans and, con-

sequently, draw more fans to the team through the positive association. It is important to note that in addition to implementing the community relations efforts, the team must increase awareness of these efforts to receive maximum benefit. Proactive media campaigns should be developed and implemented to communicate the goodwill efforts of the team to its constituency in order to impact their levels of fanship. Teams often promote these activities during telecasts of their games by showing film of the actual programs and activities.

Teams must also capitalize on community acceptance and the abilities and interests on their individual players as well. Shaquille O'Neal, while a member of the Orlando Magic sponsored an annual Shaqsgiving celebration in November, whereas the community involvement and image of the Boston Red Sox' Mo Vaughn was a critical consideration in his recent contract extension.

3. *Reinforce the team's history and tradition.* When possible, and wherever applicable, the reinforcement of a team's history on the playing field/court and in the community can also be a method of building fan identification. The evocation of childhood memories and associations can increase entertainment value by eliciting positive memories, emotions, associations, and loyalties. Additionally, the reinforcement of the team's history will serve to increase the connection between the team, the community, and the fans. This same reinforcement will also enhance the sense of belonging for the fans. A team's history will communicate the fact that a fan group spans not only

seasons, but generations. Finally, the sense of belonging is increased by providing vehicles for communication through the expression of opinions and emotional responses.

Common vehicles to accomplish this reinforcement of history and tradition include, Turn Back the Clock Games where both competing teams wear replica uniforms of past teams to commemorate their success and history; Old Timers games and events which provide the heroes of the past with an opportunity to meet their past fans and allow the current fans to meet the legends and traditional heroes of the game; creation of Halls of Fame and retirement of uniform numbers; construction of new facilities that are actually a celebration of the past such as baseball parks like Camden Yards in Baltimore and Jacobs Field in Cleveland; and contests to select the all-time team, etc., which again creates awareness of the ties between the city and the team while also generating publicity promoting this relationship. Finally, geared to the more active fans are fantasy camps, which provide fans an opportunity to play and compete with their heroes of the past in the game that they love. For Pittsburgh Pirate fans, the Pirates offer an annual fantasy camp at the Pirate's spring training site in Bradenton, Florida. Here the campers socialize and are coached by former Pirate greats such as Bill Mazeroski and Elroy Face. The week then culminates in a fantasy game in which the "campers" actually play a game against the former Pirate stars. Product extensions involve uniforms and personalized baseball cards.

4. *Create opportunities for group affiliation and participation.* Fans look to sport as a means of belonging. Teams should strive to promote this sense of belonging and affiliation. Teams need to communicate the fact that the fans are "part of the team", that this is "their team" and that "WE" compete together as a unit. Establishing fan clubs and newsletters and organizing trips to away games, etc., are all effective methods of promoting affiliation and participation.

Additionally, marketing communications should reinforce and display positive group behaviors of attending an event and following a team, as well as positive attributes of the fan group. Again, fans want to be associated with positive others. If the followers of a team are perceived in a positive way, more fans will be attracted to the fan group and, in turn, the team.

Labor disputes in the National Hockey League and Major League Baseball have impacted many fans at various levels of fandom. Franchise and player movement, and salaries that the fans cannot relate to but must still help finance are detrimental to the growth of fan identification. The concepts set forth in this paper can be part of a long-term relationship-building process with the fans that will ultimately be determined by the accord between labor and management and the acceptance by fans that sport is a business involving many more activities and considerations than those that take place between the lines of a playing field or court.

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