



Football & friends

What is it about cheering for a team that brings people together?

by Gina Kim –

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Sacramento Bee illustration by Val B. Mina

Ever wonder how a field goal forms friendships, a contested call creates chums?

It's the story of the football friend -- the buddy made while watching a game -- and experts claim it's the 21st century-edition of social bonding. With our traditional institutions flailing, Americans are turning to football in droves and finding connections in snaps, touchdowns and interceptions.

"When people are rah, rah, rooting for the team, they're really looking for that wonderful shared experience because they're not feeling it in too many other places," says Robbie Blinkoff, managing director of the consumer anthropology company Context-Based Research Group in Baltimore.

"People are looking for these kinds of bonds that usually come from rituals; the traditional rituals just aren't there anymore like they used to be."

A higher percentage of Americans claim football as their favorite sport than ever before, according to a recent Gallup Poll. About 43 percent say it's their favorite sport to watch, more than three times the 12 percent who like basketball and almost four times the 11 percent who like baseball, the poll found.

"Connecting with people and forming social bonds is the bottom line for humanity," Blinkoff says. "People are looking for it, and it's harder and harder to make those connections. So sports does that for people, that's why the Super Bowl has become a social occasion, it's transcended football."

Calling all fans

A sense of belonging is human and comes, in part, from friendships and other relationships, experts say.

"It's natural for people to want to bond and form groups," says Tim Delaney, a sports sociologist at the State University of New York at Oswego. "This goes back to our basic survival, which was dependent upon uniting into groups whether for safety or survival."

In the past, those connections came from institutions like family, church and membership in service clubs. Today, hobbies such as scrapbooking and knitting are also creating those communities, Blinkoff says.

And sports is one of the predominant culture builders because it's such an easy way to form relationships -- you simply state you're a fan, and you're a member of the club.

"The boundaries are very permeable," says Christian End, an assistant professor of psychology at Xavier University in Cincinnati. "It's not like MENSA where you have to take a test, or a neighborhood where you have to be able to afford a house, or a church where you have to devote your religious beliefs."



Plus, sports is a relatively safe topic to discuss. While politics might lead to impassioned debates and religion can result in wars, football, in the end, is simply a game.

But there are still enthusiastic fans, especially since fandom is often instilled in very young Americans and tends to last a lifetime.

End's 2-year-old son knows that No. 4 in the colors green and gold means Green Bay Packers quarterback Brett Favre. "I'm pretty sure he doesn't know who George Washington is, but he knows who Brett Favre is," End says.

The colors of community

Finding a community through sports is relatively simple because fans are easily identifiable, with the help of jerseys, hats and other paraphernalia.

"There are these visual symbols of allegiance via clothing," says Delaney, who co-wrote a textbook about sports sociology that will be published later this year. "You don't know that person, that person's a stranger, but you're like a kindred spirit. It doesn't matter how old they are, how young they are, what color they are, how much they earn or what they do for a living -- when you're cheering for a team, this seems to just bring people together."

It's like visiting a random city and seeing someone wearing your favorite team's jersey, says Keith Strudler, who specializes in sports communication at Marist College in Poughkeepsie, N.Y. "That's one of the most special feelings because you found this stranger that loves your team," he says. "It's a very bizarre phenomenon."

Often, people seek out places where other fans are known to gather. Suddenly they become friends with the person on the next bar stool, Best pals with the people tailgating in the next parking space. The format of football, with regular timeouts and television coverage that includes instant replays, encourages the discussion of plays and calls, Delaney says.

"They do the replays over and over and that just begs for people watching to comment on it," says Delaney, adding that he watched the playoff game between the Chicago Bears and the New Orleans Saints at an airport bar where almost everyone contributed opinions on a reviewed play. "It wasn't an argument; everybody was just sharing their perspective."

And in an increasingly fragmented society, a leather ball can deliver feelings of intense kinship. "It's an easy way to connect on, arguably, a pretty shallow basis," says Kirk Wakefield, a professor of marketing at Baylor University's Hankamer School of Business who specializes in fan behavior. "Fans really think of themselves as part of the team even when they're sitting at the top of the stands. That's why it's always, 'We. We won. We lost.' And so forth."

Finding football friends

Fred Radcliffe argues with some of his football friends about politics, music and other interests that sometimes form the base of friendships. But they are pals simply because they root for the same team.

"We mostly see each other at football games," says Radcliffe, 33, a Human resources technician for the state. "I've got friends who have completely opposite opinions about other things, but because they're Cleveland Browns fans, we're friends."

Radcliffe met most of these friends at the two or three Sacramento bars He frequents on game days. For him, it's tradition. "Every Sunday during football season, you know what you're going to be doing Sunday morning at 10 o'clock," he says. "It's comforting knowing it's there. For some people, it's church."

The best part about football friends is there's an unwritten code among them. It requires them to chat and offer good-natured ribbing, maybe even buy each other beers.

But once the clock runs out, there's no expectation you'll call, help your football friend move or visit each other in the hospital. It's often a fleeting friendship that lasts only as long as the game does. There's not a whole lot of commitment past buying them a shot," says Blinkoff, the consumer anthropologist. "So it has kind of a feeling of a one-night stand -- I'm going to go to the bar and find this kind of person and it's nice, then, it's done."

Super Bowl Odds and Ends Gender makes a difference Favorite sport to watch by gender:

- Football -- 50 percent of men, 36 percent of women



- Basketball -- 9 percent of men, 14 percent of women
- Baseball -- 11 percent of men, 11 percent of women
- Auto racing -- 5 percent of men, 3 percent of women
- Golf -- 3 percent of men, 2 percent of women
- Figure skating -- 1 percent of men, 4 percent of women
- Soccer -- 3 percent of men, 2 percent of women
- Ice hockey -- 2 percent of men, 3 percent of women
- Boxing -- 2 percent of men, 1 percent of women
- Tennis -- less than 0.5 percent of men, 2 percent of women
- Gymnastics -- less than 0.5 percent of men, 1 percent of women
- Other -- 3 percent of men, 2 percent of women
- None -- 7 percent of men, 16 percent of women

-- Source: Gallup Poll

The odds

NFL analysts at BetUS.com, an online sportsbook, predict odds of the unexpected:

- The first touchdown celebration will include:
 - Spiking the ball: 10-15
 - Jumping into the stands: 20-1
 - Hugging the goal post: 15-1
 - A victory dance: 2-1
 - Kissing a cheerleader: 150-1
 - Kissing a teammate: 35-1

The color of the sports drink will be:

- Yellow: 12-10
- Red: 5-2
- Blue: 7-2
- Orange: 3-1
- Clear: 2-1

This will occur during Prince's halftime show:

- Announcement of a new name: 10-1
- A duet with Carmen Electra: 50-1
- A wardrobe malfunction: 2-1
- A fine for indecent behavior: 5-1
- A power outage: 20-1

Fast facts

Conversation starters so you can look like you know what you're talking about:

Did you know?



- Dallas has been in the Super Bowl the most, eight times; followed by Denver and Pittsburgh, six times each.
- Buffalo has been in the most consecutive Super Bowl games, playing in the four games from XXV through XXVIII.
- Three teams tie for winning the most Super Bowls, with San Francisco, Dallas and Pittsburgh all winning five games each.
- Jerry Rice holds the record for most Super Bowl touchdowns, scoring eight in four games with San Francisco and Oakland. He is followed by Dallas' Emmitt Smith, who scored five in three games.
- The Super Bowl trophy is made by Tiffany & Co. of New York.
- The NFL pays for up to 150 Super Bowl rings at \$5,000 per ring.
- The next Super Bowl will be in Arizona.

Source: www.superbowl.com

Graphic Text Associated Press Events such as the Super Bowl featuring the Indianapolis Colts, top, and the Chicago Bears offer an easy way for fans to form friendships. Sacramento Bee illustration / Val B. Mina
Favorite sports Americans claimed baseball as their favorite sport until 1972, when football moved to the top and stayed there. According to a Gallup Poll taken in December, more Americans than ever say football is their favorite sport to watch. Here are the results:

- 43% Football
- 12% Basketball
- 11% Baseball
- 4% Auto racing
- 3% Golf
- 3% Figure skating
- 2% Soccer
- 2% Ice hockey
- 2% Boxing
- 1% Tennis
- 1% Gymnastics
- 3% Another sport
- 12% No favorite

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