

The mind of a sports fan

This year has been a good one for sports lovers. On top of the normal annual sporting events, there have also been the Winter Olympics and the football World Cup.

The sports fan is an interesting phenomenon. A football fan, for example, will typically dress from head to toe in their team colours; will paint their face and then shout and sing noisily at many points during a match. A football match is an unusual place, whether you are watching it live, or sitting with other fans around a TV set or in a bar. Strangely, in this situation it is seen as acceptable in many cultures to publicly show extreme dislike – even hatred – for other people: the opposite team. This is shown mainly through shouting or in football chants, and just occasionally it can turn nasty.

The word *fan* probably originates from the word *fanatic* (Latin: *fanaticus*, meaning 'insanely but divinely inspired'). The amount of support which a fan gives and feels for his or her team, makes a sports 'fan' different from a sports 'spectator'. However, the notion of being a fan is much older than the word itself. In Roman times, horse-and-chariot racing attracted huge numbers of fans. What is more, after the event, there was often intense fighting between different supporters, rather like the violence that we occasionally see today in some sports.

People become fans for different reasons, but the main one is to give oneself an identity, and to show belonging to a particular community. In doing so, it gives people an interest, and even a reason for being. Wearing the same colours, singing the same songs, waving the same flag, all help to make a fan feel part of a group. Fans often identify so closely with their team that their moods are affected by the match results: if their team loses they feel low, and if they win they feel high.

In the old days, players were inspired by love for their team, their city, college or country. However, in today's world where sport is a huge and powerful business, money can be a key motivation for top players. Although the huge amount of money involved is off-putting for some fans, most fans forget the fact that their team's players are generally inspired by money and fame these days, not simply loyalty. When watching a match, innocence and faith is restored. Being a fan is like being in love – you see only what you want to see. Being a sports fan gives people the chance to believe and belong, as a child does.

- 1** Discuss the following points in small groups. Do not read the text yet.
 - 1 Why has this year been a good one for sports fans?
 - 2 What does a fan do to show that they support a team, at or around match time?
 - 3 Do you think 'fans' existed in the 1800s, 1700s, or even earlier in history?
 - 4 Why do people choose to become fans of a particular team? Try to think of psychological reasons too.
 - 5 What really motivates players to become professional sports people? Choose three of the following: love of the sport; love of their team; love of money; desire to be famous; desire to be very fit; desire to please fans; love of their area / town / region / country. Any other reasons?.

- 2** Now read the text and see if your ideas were the same.

3 Read the text again and answer these questions:

- 1 What else does a typical sports fan do, besides wearing their team's colours?
- 2 In what way is the sporting context an unusual or strange one?
- 3 In what two ways were the Roman chariot races similar to today's big sporting events?
- 4 How can the result of a game affect the moods of fans?
- 5 In your own words, describe why being a fan is like
 - a being in love
 - b being a child.

4 Look at these sentences from the text. Each one contains a commonly used phrase or collocation, written in bold. Try to complete the phrase without looking at the text.

- 1 **On** _____ **of** the normal sporting annual events, there have also been the winter Olympics and the World Cup.
- 2 The sports fan is an _____ **phenomenon**.
- 3 This is shown mainly through shouting or in football chants, and just occasionally it can **turn** _____ .
- 4 A football fan, for example, will typically dress **from head to** _____ in their team colours.
- 5 Wearing the same colours, singing the same songs, waving the same flag, all help to make a fan feel **part of a** _____ .
- 6 If their team loses they **feel low**, and if they win they **feel** _____ .
- 7 **In the** _____ **days**, players were inspired by love of their team.

5 In pairs or threes, design a poster about 'Fan fever'. Draw a large fan in the centre, and then draw arrows coming off different parts of his body to show 'symptoms', both short-term and long-term.

Glossary

- acceptable** (*adj*) - if something is acceptable, most people approve of it or accept it
- chant** (*noun*) - a word or phrase that people keep shouting or singing many times
- chariot** (*noun*) - a vehicle with two wheels and no roof that was pulled by horses in races and battles in ancient times
- innocence** (*noun*) - lack of experience of life that lets you trust people: *The children were full of innocence and did not understand what they had done*
- inspire** (*verb*) - to give someone the enthusiasm or idea to do something: *His paintings were inspired by the sea*
- loyalty** (*noun*) - support that you always give to someone or something: *He showed great loyalty to his brother*
- motivation** (*noun*) - a reason for doing something: *Our real motivation is to make a profit*
- off-putting** (*adj*) - used to describe something that you want to avoid because it is not nice: *We went into the hotel, but the smell was rather off-putting so we left*
- phenomenon** (*noun*) - an event or person who is surprising or unusual
- violence** (*noun*) - violent behaviour; behaviour using physical force to hurt someone or something: *Violence against women must stop*