

NO STADIUM, NO SPORTS BAR: THE CHALLENGES OF SUBSTITUTING DIGITAL FANDOM FOR IN-PERSON GATHERING FOR CHEESEHEADS

Lisa Beckelhimer, University of Cincinnati

A *Popular Science* article on sports fandom (Ferro 2013) begins: “Whether you’re lamenting the devastation of your March Madness bracket or gearing up for the excitement of a baseball-filled spring, sports fandom can be an emotional roller coaster.” Seven years later, in March 2020, the roller coaster goes off the rails: a global pandemic has devastated lives and health systems, and neither March Madness nor a baseball-filled spring happened. As spring warmed into summer, the virus continued to control summer sports: the PGA revised its schedule of golf tournaments and required players to be tested daily (Hoggard 2020); NASCAR began its season by racing around empty tracks built to hold between 50,000 and 250,000 fans; the Tokyo Olympics postponed opening ceremonies to July of 2021. As summer cools into fall, the pandemic has its sights set on a significant American sport: football.

The impacts of the pandemic on players, teams, and owners are the daily focus of sports media. But what of fans? How are avid versus casual fans impacted differently, and what about members of formal fandoms? How and when do fans want sports to “reopen”? How are fandoms coping with digital substitutions for live

games? Are digital fandoms enough or are they poor excuses for the social benefits a physical sports fandom can provide? Many of those questions can be answered in multiple ways and depending on whom is asked. This brief analysis is based on the author’s experiences as a life-long sports fan who currently lives in a region of the Midwest known for college basketball and professional baseball. That said, the author and her partner are far more obsessed as founding members of a fan club for the NFL football team, the Green Bay Packers. The author’s local fan club, three states and 517 miles away from Lambeau Field in Green Bay, Wisconsin, has more than 600 members on Facebook. On a game day against a rival such as the Minnesota Vikings or Chicago Bears, the small pizza pub and bar where the group meets fills to its seating capacity with nearly 200 of those members.

Nationally, sports fandoms are suffering the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, ranging in severity from competitions without fans in the stands to completely cancelled seasons and events. Narrowed to the microcosm of the author’s fandom and viewed through this author’s lens, it is clear that the pandemic has amplified that “emotional roller coaster” for

sports fans—particularly members of tight-knit fandoms that rely on personal contact. Additionally, this negative impact comes at a time when sports might be the one form of entertainment that would provide a soothing balm to fans reeling from a pandemic, social unrest and racial inequality, and a politically divisive culture.

To investigate the pandemic's impact on sports fandoms, it is important first to distinguish what differentiates a typical sports spectator from a fandom. Participation in a sports fandom can demand a considerable amount of time and commitment to what Tarver (2018, p. 2) refers to as “something that looks very much like work.” While spectators might read about their teams, study statistics, and spend money to wear team apparel, fandoms often travel to see their teams play live and revolve their lives around gathering with others in their fandoms on game days. Green Bay Packers fans, or “Cheeseheads,” as they are called, were dubbed by *Forbes* as the number one most passionate fandom of 2020 among North America's 123 professional sports teams in the NBA, NFL, NHL, and MLB. The Packers are the NFL's only publicly-owned team, and more than 350,000 fans own shares. The last time the team offered shares for sale, in 2012, more than 250,000 were sold, totaling more than \$67 million. The season ticket waiting list is 137,000 names long, meaning that most Cheeseheads will not live long enough to get a stab at buying season tickets. The team has a social media following of more nearly 7.5 million (Settimi 2020). Locally, the author's fandom is listed on a depository website called Packers Everywhere, where fans can

find Packers gathering places all over the country.

Mumford (2004, qtd. in Tarver 2018, p. 25) characterizes such a “deeply felt allegiance to a team” as “analogous to those allegiances one might feel to one's spouse or family.” Indeed, the author's fandom remains friends during the off-season, celebrating birthdays and anniversaries together, gathering to watch local sports teams compete, and even vacationing together. In other words, fans who identify with a specific fandom such as Cheeseheads do not, on the whole, watch as mere observers or spectators, but they integrate the sport or team fully into their lifestyles.

Tarver (2018, p. 3) further claims—and the author confirms—that this investment in the sport or team is multiplied when experienced as a group. Fans, for example, will “shout, wail, leap from their seats, cover their faces in horror, hug and kiss strangers in moments of unmitigated joy, crumple in despair, scream loudly and long enough to lose their voices and give themselves headaches, and spread their arms wide while tilting their faces to the heavens.”

What, then, when most of this behavior is not allowed by CDC guidelines?

There is no precedent for how sports should respond to the pandemic. While athlete health and the financial impact of closures are important, guidelines that discourage mass gatherings are most impactful to fans. Historically, sports have paused and then returned to full strength when deemed “appropriate” (Martinez 2020). For example, sports debated whether or not it was appropriate to play during world wars, shortly after 9/11, and after

John F. Kennedy's assassination. Martinez points out, however, that sports shut down for coronavirus not because it seemed inappropriate to play while people were dying of a virus, but because the virus threatened the health of the athletes: "The hubris of the call to carry on in these circumstances became apparent in one twenty-four-hour spell when a Utah Jazz player and Arsenal's manager across the Atlantic both tested positive. That meant lights out." That was 12 March. On 1 June, college football players went back to voluntary workouts and by 22 June, more than 100 college athletes across the nation tested positive for COVID-19 (Dodd 2020). Will those cases ultimately result in the cancellation of college football?

Members of the author's fandom reflect the mixed emotions of sports fans everywhere as fall football season approaches. A Seton Hall poll conducted in April 2020 found that 72% of fans would not attend games without the development of a vaccine (Gardner 2020). Each time the Packers play at home in Lambeau Field, about 600,000 people convene in the city of Green Bay (Ryman 2020); 72% of 600,000 means a loss of more than 400,000 fans. And if the virus spikes in winter flu season, as some medical experts expect, would fans want to attend a game in the stadium known as the Frozen Tundra anyway? Gardner further questions, "When sports do return, will fans be eager to squash themselves into tightly bound stadium seats or walk through sardine-packed concourses?"

Some international sports leagues have returned to play without fans, and that option is being considered by sports leagues

in the US. But many fans are worried about (or in denial that) this "new normal" will change the atmosphere of sports dramatically. Martinez (2020), writing about his experience at the last soccer game in Mexico City before the pandemic shut it down, described the atmosphere as "creepy to watch . . . It's like spying on a private scrimmage." Sports media have described games without fans as "weird" or "surreal" and have begun referring to games without fans as "ghost games." Chau (2020) wrote that "Fandom is a sense of community held together by the power of collective imagination—the feeling of belonging to a greater whole. . . . The pandemic has created an environment of fear and uncertainty among sport fans and the resumption of play has drawn a mixed response."

The author's Packers fandom is most concerned, of course, about the pandemic's impact on their own gathering place, but also about the mass gathering location of Cheeseheads everywhere: Green Bay, Wisconsin. At one time supported largely by the meat packing industry, Green Bay is now reliant on the Packers' 81,441-seat Lambeau Field and associated tourism. If the Packers play without fans, the result could mean a loss of more than \$150 million (Ryman 2020): "It'll be a devastating impact on the Green Bay economy to not have any fans," said Brad Toll, CEO of the Greater Green Bay Convention & Visitors Bureau. "This has kind of been a nightmare. This is the kind of thing you go to the movies and see."

Hotels, bars, and restaurants have suffered all summer due to the virus' effect on the team's annual training camp. Leading

up to the season, the Packers' annual training campus draws thousands of fans, including members of the author's fandom, to the small town to watch players parade from Lambeau down the street to the training field, where fans wait in line for the chance to sit in the stands and watch the team practice. Additionally, the Lambeau Field Atrium and the new Titledown District of restaurants and activities such as ice skating and a sledding hill are a year-round tourism and meeting place; both remained closed for the majority of the pandemic. The impact on tourism will continue well into the season, as an economic impact study conducted in 2009 concluded that more than 80% of fans attending Packers games traveled fifty miles or more (Ryman 2020) and therefore needed hotels and restaurants.

The author's Packers club regularly traveled together and vacationed in Green Bay during training camp and also chose at least one game per year to attend together. In 2020, that game will be 22 November against the Colts in Indianapolis; however, it is still not clear that fans will be allowed to attend in mass numbers by then. And if they are, will a percentage of those with tickets get scared and back out of the trip? As for games in Green Bay, the Packers announced in early July that Lambeau will have "significantly reduced capacity if fan attendance is permitted," offering season ticket holders a chance to opt out and have their 2020 payment refunded or credited to 2021. The team posted to its website (*Packers update* 2020) that "Although the organization remains optimistic, there is a possibility that Lambeau Field will be unable to host fans for games this season."

Additionally, the team was forthright that: "Face coverings will also be required, and other necessary precautions will be in place. As a result, the special experience to which fans are accustomed at Lambeau Field will look and feel very different."

For sports fans who consider themselves mere spectators, the pandemic's impact is manageable whether or not fans are allowed to gather at stadiums or in restaurants and bars. They can, for example, watch old games re-aired on TV while they await televised new seasons. Additionally for younger fans, Singh (2019) cited a report, "Navigating the next generation fan: How football is social," stating that 64 percent of young sports fans find social-based coverage more engaging than TV broadcast, while 52% prefer to consume their sports news through social channels. For a fandom such as a fan club that gathers weekly to watch games together on television, however, social media and digital gatherings are a poor substitute for face-to-face interaction.

Of the 600 members in the author's Packers fandom, about thirty attempted to gather virtually on Zoom to watch the NFL draft in April on social media. That is a small number, even when compared with the roughly 150-200 who engage beyond the casual browsing and posting on the group's Facebook page to watch games together at the bar. Checking the Brady-Bunch-like Zoom video squares regularly revealed an even lower level of interaction, as it appeared that fewer than half that number actively engaged with one another, while the rest merely had Zoom open on their laptops and watched the draft in isolation from the group. Communicating was also hard when

people tried to talk over each other, and no one wanted to mute their microphones even though not doing so created a screeching feedback sound.

If the Zoom NFL draft party was any indication, this fandom is in trouble this fall. McConnell (2015) quotes Gardner, Pickett, & Brewer (2000) that “social connectedness is a critical human need, and one way we establish it is through symbolic affiliations with others.” What if there can be no interaction with others? The bar where the Packers club meets is decorated with Packers memorabilia. On a typical Sunday, few others aside from Packers fans are present, including fans from the city’s own NFL team. The “symbolic affiliation” is clear. However, only answers to logistical questions about the 2020 season will determine the fandom’s course this fall, namely: Will fans be allowed to attend NFL football games, and will bars and restaurants be allowed to fill to capacity with fans? In late June, the author’s state allowed restaurants to fill to 50% capacity, and it is possible that full capacity will be allowed by September. However, it is also possible that virus cases will spike in the state as they have in many others, and that restaurants and bars will again close. It is also unclear how many of the usual 150-200 fans who showed up at the bar the past few years will be willing to do so again if it means packing the place from door to door.

Case in point: members moved quickly to support the bar when restaurants in the state closed dine-in seating on 16 March. Members routinely ordered carry out food, posting pictures to the Facebook page to encourage others to do the same. The first

night of the NFL draft, members participated in a virtual raffle fundraiser for gift cards that could be used later, when the bar was back on its feet, resulting in more than \$1,000 raised for the cooks and serving staff. Given that level of fervor, one might think the fandom’s members would be thrilled when restaurants opened with limited seating on 22 May. However, when the restaurant reopened with outdoor seating and limited indoor seating, the vast majority of members still picked up carry out and took it home. Only about ten or so gathered at an outdoor table, and one later admitted that he felt uncomfortable, as if they were seated too closely together.

On a national scale, experts differ on how and when fans will be allowed and feel comfortable enough to gather. Daniel Wann, a Murray State professor who is known as Dr. Fandom and has a Ph.D. in social psychology, has been studying sports fanhood for more than three decades. “When fans are given the opportunity to go back, they’re gonna go,” Wann said. “I can’t point to a specific study or data set that says that because, believe it or not, we actually don’t have any research on how fans respond to pandemics because this has never happened before” (Gardner 2020). An ESPN-commissioned study, however, points to a possible shift in the way many fans consume sports to favor television and social media even after the pandemic. Conducted by ESPN Research & Insights, the study surveyed the 1,004 fans, aged eighteen and over, 17-20 April, to investigate current perceptions around the coronavirus pandemic and its impact on sports moving forward. The survey found that not only

would fans watch games without spectators, but that they expect to consume more sports digitally once the games return (Farrell 2020).

The study also found a difference—sometimes significant—between the views of those identified as “sports fans” with those identified as “*avid* sports fans” (italics are author’s). For example, about 88% of *avid* sports fans said they cannot wait until live sports are back on television and plan to watch as much as they can, compared with just 56% of all sports fans who feel that way. In addition, while 67% of casual fans said they see sports as a great way to feel normal again amid the pandemic, 88% of *avid* sports fans felt that way. Overall, nearly twice as many fans, 65%, would prefer to watch televised sporting events without crowds than the 35% who believe sports should only restart when fans can experience the game in person.

What about formal fandoms that rely on gathering in person, though? Certainly, they are considered “*avid*” fans. Members of the author’s fandom generally sit shoulder-to-shoulder to watch a dozen TVs all tuned to the same channel. The goal is to emulate as much as feasible the atmosphere at the Packers’ hometown Lambeau Field. Members of the fandom dress in team colors, the bar has added Wisconsin’s trademark cheese curds to the menu, and a Bluetooth speaker plays the same chants and music and songs (such as “The Bears Still Suck”) during timeouts and halftime. In other words, fans are recreating the fandom present at the game. Watching a game without fans on television will not provide the same experience for fandom members,

particularly if CDC guidelines do not even allow them to gather in the same numbers or proximity as usual.

As disconcerting as pandemic and post-pandemic television trends might seem to fandoms that rely on gathering in person, equally concerning is the shift toward social media over physical interaction. In a positive sense, Gardner (2020) says, “Social media has transformed the way fans take in sports and sports information. The industry has shifted from requiring a TV to consume broadcast or attend a game in-person, to having access to the latest plays and stats in the palm of our hands.” Positive for casual fans and spectators, yes. But for in-person fandoms? No.

An analysis of the author’s fandom’s Facebook engagement since the pandemic reveals that it has been an adequate substitution for physical interaction during the pandemic but will not suffice when football season begins. The fandom’s page was created February 2017 after a small group of fans had begun to gather at the restaurant and bar to watch games. General posts prior to pandemic largely included links to Packers news. Rules are simple: Packers-only related posts, posts and comments must be rated PG for families and kids, no politics, and no selling, as the fandom has a separate Facebook page for that purpose.

Posts unrelated to or impacted by the pandemic between 11 March and 30 June numbered 144; in comparison, posts related to or impacted by the pandemic during that timeframe numbered 249. Of those unrelated to the pandemic, most related to general chatter about players, the team, and rival

players and teams, and about merchandise, fifty-five and forty-six posts respectively. Holidays recognized were St. Patrick's Day, Easter, Cinco de Mayo, Mother's Day, and Father's Day, plus birthday wishes to six members over those three months.

The remainder of posts unrelated to the pandemic were draft comments, five; jokes and memes, thirteen; and just three posts related to Packers' team and player remarks about racism and equality after George Floyd's death. This low number of posts were left on the page, but the posters did fear that they would be considered "political," which could also explain why so few posts commented on racial unrest. The three posts included: an article about how Vince Lombardi championed equality, to which one member said, "Amazing since Green Bay was, by race, the least diverse city in the NFL at the time. Lombardi was a true leader"; Packers CEO Mark Murphy's statement on behalf of the team that began, "The Packers community has been horrified at the killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery and so many others. For their loved ones, the loss must be agonizingly magnified by the fact that if the victims were white, they would likely still be alive. I can't imagine that pain"; and a video called It's Time for Change, produced by quarterback Aaron Rodgers and featuring several players. Interestingly, a look at the "likes" and "loves" revealed that more liberal leaning members responded, along with a few moderates or those who have not indicated their political leanings. Not one of the members who are openly politically conservative responded to any of those three posts.

Posts related to the pandemic varied widely, including jokes and memes related to the pandemic, photos and posts in support of the fandom's restaurant/bar, and pandemic related activities. Posts break down as follows:

- Jokes and memes: Twenty-six posts, beginning with the first pandemic-related post showing Chicago Bears fan apparel as a potential substitute for toilet paper. Another on the same day joked that anyone wearing a Minnesota Vikings jersey would be sure not to catch anything, referring both to a football and to the virus.
- A significant ninety-one of the 245 posts related to the NFL draft being held in virtual form. Several of these early posts also sought to advertise the fandom's group Zoom watch party.
- Sixteen of the posts were photos of members wearing Packers masks. Only one person, not an official member but family of a member, commented even though "we don't really believe in the mask thing" that they wanted to order a Packers mask.
- A smattering related to merchandise other than masks related to the pandemic, such as items that could be ordered and shipped from Wisconsin when members were not able to safely travel there.
- On the lighter side, twenty-eight of the posts related to pandemic activities such as free games on TV, puzzles, LEGO kits, and old games

and documentaries airing on television.

Posts related to the closure and reopening of the fandom's meeting place were interesting. Just one post, the first to announce the bar's closure (though it is also a restaurant, so it was allowed to stay open for carry out), was negative in tone and blamed the state's governor (a Democrat). The same person who posted that angry post posted again encouraging members to gather at someone's house as early as March 19; only a few members even "liked" the post, and no one commented, indicating that this member might have been alone in wishing to gather so early in the pandemic. Most of the remaining related posts, thirty-five of them, were supportive of the bar, posting photos of food ordered for carry out and encouraging others to do the same, and advertising the fundraiser for the staff during the draft. Seven of the posts discussed the reopening of the bar and restaurant for dining outside and limited dining inside. As noted, though, only about ten people gathered when that seating did re-open.

Finally, eleven posts related to eventual reopening of NFL football. Another six shared links to articles about the possible cancellation of the season, including one 13 May CBS Sports article that suggested that the season would continue but no fans would be allowed; only one person said, "sure hope they allow fans by the time the season starts." Six posts shared the Packers' 2020-2021 schedule. The Indianapolis game generated eighteen posts as fandom members bought tickets and booked hotel rooms; of those, only one member seemed to

seriously consider how the virus might impact the group's ability to travel together and attend the game, saying, "I seriously doubt fans will be allowed in stadiums. If they do, I'm there but no bus."

In short, the author's fandom utilized the Facebook page to replace in-person interactions during the pandemic. However, many of the posts, such as memes, jokes, and those about at-home activities and masks, sought to deflect the pain that members were experiencing because they could not gather, and their season is still unclear at this point. The increase in activity around the NFL draft, even though it was virtual, indicated that the fandom was eager to get back to discussion of football, the Green Bay Packers in particular. This does not bode well for the fandom if the pandemic continues to impact football to the point that games are not played, fans are not allowed to attend, or fandoms are not allowed to gather at bars and restaurants.

Martinez (2020) called the pandemic "a humbling time for the world's most powerful form of live entertainment," and wrote that "Even die-hard fans are having to reevaluate their priorities and the relative importance to their lives of various institutions—your local grocery store might suddenly seem a lot more essential to you than your hometown NBA or NFL team." That might be true for casual or even some avid fans. However, for a fandom that relies on in-person gathering and personal relationships, the extraction of the fandom from a person's lifestyle is devastating. The "relative importance to their lives" for fandoms is high.

Formal fandoms such as the author's Packers group rely on their fandoms for positive mental health and emotional support. Fandoms treat their status as fans as part of their lifestyle. In that sense, the pandemic feels not just like an "emotional roller coaster," but, as noted earlier, as if the coaster is going off the rails. Factor in racial unrest and political division, and sports fandoms become even more important in their members' lives. Martinez (2020) noted, "Our enforced timeout is forcing us to reassess the meaning of sport, and in particular sport fandom—where it stands in the spectrum of essential-to-frivolous activities in life." For fandoms such as the author's, the answer is simple: fandom is more essential during the pandemic than ever before.¹

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¹ The journal solicited editorials, opinion pieces, autoethnographies, and similar items for the present edition in response to how people were engaging with media as a coping mechanism while quarantining during the COVID-19 Pandemic. This item is one of those pieces. – Ed.

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