

**The Purpose of College Sports:
Building a Brand and Providing Pride
by Case Garner**

Editor's Note: Case Garner is a student at Lafayette College in Easton, Pennsylvania. His paper addresses the origin of the sports-as-business phenomenon. Later in life, college graduates will have positive memories of their sports background, and will fuel the sports tourism industry by participating in events as athletes, spectators and parents of athletes.

In the realm of college sports, the spectators play a vital role to the overall experience of the sporting event. However are all spectators fans, or is the word "fan" reserved for only someone who has a certain level of dedication to a particular team? If so, what is the requisite level of affinity with a sporting team that makes one a fan?

There is also the distinction between fans of a professional team and fans of a college team. Loyalties to a professional team may lie with deeply-rooted childhood allegiances and memories. Whereas, associations with a particular college team may come from attendance at that institution. The latter creates a more personal connection to the team because of the tangible connection to the school that the team represents. The colors, traditions, fight songs, and all the pageantry that comes along with college sports makes being a fan a thrilling experience.

This is not to say that being a college sports fan is always easy. Professional sports teams have players that stay with a team for several years and some sign multi-year deals ensuring them stability in the tumultuous world of professional sports. Fans can easily become enamored with certain athletes and develop quasi-relationships with these athletes simply because they are so familiar with seeing them on the field. The fan of a professional sports team is undoubtedly sad to see their favorite players retire or get traded, but they can at least take solace in the fact that it is ultimately a business, and perhaps the players they adore left for reasons that were beyond their control-salary cap issues, front office decisions, etc.

However, the college sports fan does not have the potential for a long-lasting relationship with athletes. One can simply look at Kentucky men's basketball to see that the sport is increasingly becoming a springboard for the elite high school players to refine their skills before leaving for the NBA. At the highest level of college football, a star player only is around for a year or two. Typically, players sit out their first few years in college and play toward the end of their time at school. The players who are gifted enough to play in their first few years of school are then deemed ready for the NFL by the time they get to their junior or senior seasons, and declare themselves eligible for the draft.

My personal connection to college athletics is on the football team at Lafayette College, an FCS level school, formerly known as Division I-AA. As a walk-on kicker at the nation's smallest Division I school, I know both the intensity of a Division I school, as well as the low student attendance that comes with being a small school. I say "low," but it is all relative. If 800 students attend a football game, they can easily get lost in the crowd if they are not all sitting together. But 800 students is a good percentage of our students. Considering that Lafayette has 500 student-athletes across 23 sports, 800 students at a football game is 40 percent of the student population not involved in athletics.

One thing that is evident from looking at Lafayette student attendance records of men's basketball and football is that students' decision to go to games is heavily dependent on the success of those teams. In 2010, Lafayette football was 2-9 but the season before they were 8-3 and could have won the Patriot League Championship on two separate occasions. Student attendance reflected students' belief that the team could be successful, yet also showed students unwillingness to see a losing team. Twice the student attendance records reached over 1,000, but there games in which only 244 and 509 students came.

The following year was even worse, with an average attendance rate of 354 students, a year in which the team was 4-7. However, the 2012 season began with an upset road victory of heavily favored William and Mary. The next game was home and 709 students showed up. After starting off 4-2, a total of 1,026 students came out to the game against Holy Cross, again showing that students will support a successful team.

Men's basketball shows a similar trend of students supporting a team that wins. During the 2010-2011 season, one in which the team made it to the Patriot League Final, student attendance averaged 226 students. The next season did not go as well and the average was 145 students. This season the team is also struggling and the average attendance for students is 104.

These numbers bring up an interesting idea and that is the role of the college sports fan. Is a student supposed to remain loyal to their institution through the good and bad times and still show up despite the team's record? College fans who are students attend games for the social aspect. I personally had a girl ask me after a football game what the orange sticks were that kept going up and down the sidelines following the play of the game. Clearly, she was not attending the game to see if our defense would blitz heavily on third and long or if our offense would exploit our opponents weak secondary by constantly throwing downfield. She was at the game because her friends were there.

For so many students, athletics provides a respite from the stressors of college life. In a time when the job market is difficult to break into and college is becoming an increasingly more pressurized environment for young adults, a few hours to unwind with ones friends at an athletic contest and be able to be a student is a welcome distraction. Yet for many, it is not welcome if the entertainment is poor. Just as many people would not see a movie that received bad reviews, the harsh reality is that students don't want to see bad athletic teams.

The struggle for athletic directors and those involved with athletic administration is how can they make students come to games despite the team's record. After speaking with Dr. Bruce McCutcheon, athletic director of Lafayette, he stressed the need to develop a better 'game day' environment, one that will keep students coming back. He pointed to things as simple as 'good customer service' as important aspects in creating a positive game day experience. McCutcheon pointed out the fact that ultimately Lafayette Athletics is part of a larger business, Lafayette College, and treating athletic events more business-like will help increase student attendance.

The dean of athletics for Lehigh University, Joe Sterrett, touched on a similar idea of looking at the game day from a business perspective, yet he did so while affirming the true core initiative of college athletics. He claimed, "At our institutions, we have to be conscious of business principles, let's not be stupid about what we do, but let's not forget that we wouldn't even have these teams if it was for financial reasons. There has to be another reason, and that is education. And I think people get that at some level that's

why it matters, because they recognize that these are really neat kids who deserve support and attention for what they're doing."

With this comment, Sterrett showed the true intention of collegiate athletics, and that is as a part of the educational development of a young adult while in college. The concept of being a fan is part of this development as well. Athletics is a microcosm of life and as a fan, being a part of that environment can help enrich the college experience for students.