

FAN or FANATIC:

Sporting events and our mental health

By KIMBERLY FLAHERTY

With six Super Bowl rings, five World Series championships, three Stanley Cups and a decades-long tradition of winning college football and basketball teams, western Pennsylvania has a rich sporting history.

In addition to the all-star legends and Hall of Fame members who have played for Pittsburgh teams, numerous professional athletes were either born or raised in this area. Our region has produced such a multitude of NFL quarterbacks, it's been dubbed the "Cradle of Quarterbacks."

Pittsburgh often shows up on lists of "best sports towns." Most recently, in 2009, Sporting News named Pittsburgh "Best Sports City," harkening back to the 1970s when we earned the nickname "City of Champions."

It's more than on-field performance that make us champions. Factor in fan fervor. We Pittsburghers love our sports teams. When they win, we feel like winners. When they lose, we feel like ... well, like losers.

Following any competition of consequence, you can sense a change in the atmosphere in Pittsburgh. With victory comes a communal euphoria. With loss, a palpable feeling of melancholy hovers over the city like a dark cloud.

Are such emotional reactions to sporting events real or imagined? More importantly, are they healthy?

A positive attitude is **CONTAGIOUS**

Sporting events provide a few hours of escape, a healthy release of emotion, an endorphin rush, the opportunity for social interaction and the chance to live in the moment. When you're intently focused on watching a game, you're likely to forget about the rude driver who cut you off in traffic yesterday and the commitments you face tomorrow.

Strong affiliations with sports teams also help us forge a sense of community.

"Sports are something positive to rally around," according to Curt Constant, therapist and adult behavioral services director for Mercy Behavioral Health, part of the Pittsburgh Mercy Health System and sponsored by the Sisters of Mercy.

"When we're wearing black and gold or waving our Terrible Towels, we see what is similar in one another rather than notice our differences," said Constant. "That common bond brings together people from all backgrounds and walks of life."

Even the anticipation leading up to a game has benefits.

"In the days before a big game, people tend to

be upbeat," notes Constant. "Conversation in your neighborhood and at work centers around the upcoming game. People look forward to it in the same way they might look forward to a big family celebration.

"Plus, the economic impact of hosting important sporting events boosts the general good mood of a city."

Fan or **FANATIC?**

People who watch professional and collegiate sports range from casual spectators to zealous fanatics. A person whom you might classify as extreme on game day may be the woman next door or your co-worker. Painting your face in team colors and taking road trips aren't necessarily an indication of the state of your mental health. They may simply reflect the intensity of your interest and how you choose to demonstrate your passion for the sport.

However, it is possible to go overboard. An extreme example is when passion turns to violence.

Many studies have shown a link between sports and aggression. Adding alcohol or other drugs to that mix can exacerbate the situation.

"Alcohol is initially a stimulant, then later is a depressant," explains Constant. "It can certainly fuel aggression in fans."

That's why the city takes extra precautions following major sporting events, particularly in neighborhoods known to be post-game gathering places like Oakland and the South Side.

As long as you are enjoying yourself and are not causing any harm to yourself or others, says Constant, nearly any level of enthusiasm for sports is acceptable.

The **AGONY** of defeat

No one enjoys seeing his or her favorite team lose.

"If you've invested a lot of time and energy over the course of

a season, it's natural to feel let down after a big loss," explains Constant. "It can be hard to let go."

Following a loss like the Super Bowl, people may describe themselves as feeling "depressed." According to Constant, it's more likely "disappointment" that a healthy person is experiencing.

"Fans may go through a kind of grieving process," he continues. "A healthy person will accept their team's loss, move on and look forward to the next sporting event or season."

What if you have trouble moving on? Constant notes some warning signs.

"When your obsession with sports — or anything, for that matter — keeps you from fulfilling your responsibilities to yourself, your family or your employer, that signals a potential problem," he says.

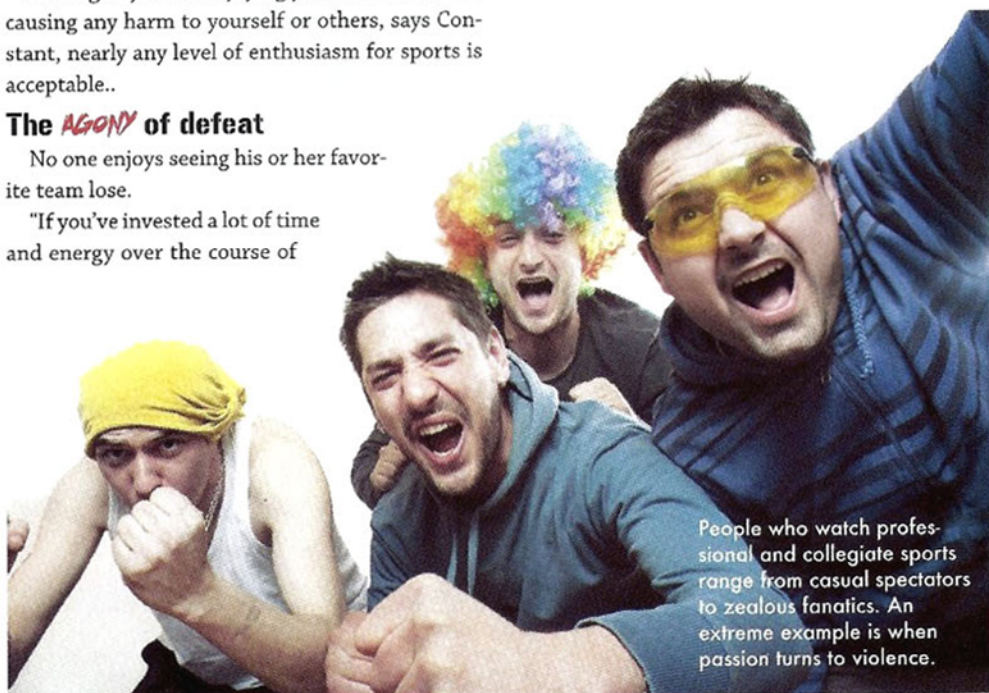
Other red flags that your fanaticism may have gone too far: you can't function or think clearly for an extended period of time after your team loses. You're going into debt over tickets, travel expenses or gambling, and not meeting other financial obligations. All of these indicate potential problems that should be addressed.

According to Constant, there is one upside to losing.

"A loss brings people together to commiserate, so it's not all bad," he says.

And there's always next year.

Flaherty is public relations coordinator for Mercy Behavioral Health.



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