

For sports fans, the story—not the victor—makes the difference in enjoyment

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Colleen Bee is an assistant professor of marketing at Oregon State University.

A new study has concluded that sports fans love to root for a hero and against a villain, but if the game is exciting, they'll enjoy it no matter who wins.

The research, recently published in the *Journal of Media Psychology*, examines [emotional experiences](#), outcome satisfaction, and enjoyment of athletic events, particularly ones featuring individual athletes rather than [team sports](#).

Lead author Colleen Bee, an assistant professor of marketing at Oregon State University, said the Olympics are a good example of an event where fans often cheer for little-known athletes competing in little-watched sports. The allure for these casual fans is not necessarily the

sport itself. The spectacle and inherent drama associated with an athletic event is enough to make fans watch.

"Knowing something about the personal lives and personalities of these athletes gives the casual fan a reason to root for or against someone," Bee said. "The stories matter here. It magnifies the experience of watching the [game](#), and gives people a reason to watch."

In the study, Bee had participants watch speed skating competitions. She confirmed that none of the participants were familiar with the athletes before watching the event. Then she provided participants with one of two fictitious scenarios. In one scenario, an athlete was given heroic qualities such as working with ill children, a commitment to the cause of [cancer prevention](#), dedicating his performance to his mother, and being gracious and considerate. In the second scenario, the athlete was imbued with unfavorable qualities, such as testing positive for performance enhancing drugs, being arrested for public intoxication, and being ungracious and inconsiderate.

She found that viewers of the game rooted for the heroic athlete and of course hoped that the "villain" would lose. Yet, she found that all the [study participants](#) reported enjoying the game regardless of the moral qualities of the winning athlete.

"There are people who enjoy watching famous athletes compete even though they may not like them personally, or feel like they aren't good people," Bee said. "Yet, because they are exciting to watch, and in many cases because they have an exciting story, [sports fans](#) still enjoy watching them compete."

While the participants felt disappointed when the "villainous" athlete won, and similarly relieved when the heroic athlete won, they all reported enjoying the game despite the outcome.

"Casual sport fans often enjoy the experience of a highly competitive event even when the outcome is not desirable, due to the entertaining and exciting nature of suspense," Bee said, pointing to her last study which found that winning or losing games did not matter so much as whether or not the game was close.

Bee is an expert on sports marketing, particularly in the areas of sports and emotions and gender/consumer responses.

Robert Madrigal, associate professor of marketing at the University of Oregon, is co-author of the study.

Provided by Oregon State University

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