Fans prefer teams that built success over time more than with purchased super stars

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When a franchise buys a superstar like Tom Brady or LeBron James, the team tends to win more games. But do the fans follow? How much team loyalty is purchased along with an expensive star? Maybe not as much as some owners might hope—in the NBA Finals between the Miami Heat and San Antonio Spurs, many fans expressed their dislike of the "bought" Miami team.

In a new paper published in the peer-reviewed Journal of Applied Social Psychology at the University of Kansas asked over 1,500 Americans how much they liked teams that purchased excellence and compared that with liking teams that built excellence from the ground up.

"People reliably preferred the 'built' teams and slighted the 'bought' teams," said lead author Omri Gillath, professor of psychology at KU. "This was true of sports teams—even if they didn't know them, such as New Zealand rugby teams—and work teams such as a squad of lawyers."

In each of five studies, people were willing to root more for the teams built over time than those assembled from free agency and deep-pocketed owners. People preferred teams of lawyers built with time and patience over those inviting in celebrities to shine and impress others.

This preference is reliable and strong. What makes the difference?

"Fans appreciate the effort and commitment required to build a team from the ground up," said co-author Christian Crandall, professor of psychology at KU. "Hard work is a central American value, and it certainly applies to work and sports—everyone loves a winner, but even more so when the backstory is based on perspiration and determination."

Potential fans thought a gradually built team would show more teamwork, operating smoothly together as a team. The cohesion was a plus, but it was not as important as seeing hard work in building a team.

Fans prefer the teams who develop their players, invest in them and cultivate their skills.

"This explains part of the appeal of winning teams and part of the appeal of faithful fans of teams that work, struggle and manage to eke out just a few wins each season," Gillath said. "It could also help explain people's endorsement of Cinderella teams in competitions like March Madness. People love to see 'unknown' teams who work hard beat highly ranked teams with top one-and-done recruits."

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