Speaker 1 ([00:00](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/shared/1lX8YU5yeMWqR8_Q0bCu-V-F63ttYxg4ZKzUjC-5j0EfUfPoLam5ZsjsU_1SmK0OjEUSITej6WMtItChZ6_ln_nfRSs?loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=0.21)):

My name is Ben Valenta. I'm the SVP of Strategy and Consumer Insights at Fox Sports. Basically, that just means my job is to understand fandom. I've been at Fox for about eight years. Prior to that, I spent about a dozen years as a consultant. I worked on behalf of companies like Nike, NFL, and Hauser Busch, the New York Knicks. And so really effectively my entire career has been spent studying sports fans. And I want to share a couple of the insights I've gleaned along the way that I think will be beneficial to the people in this room. And I want to start with a common misconception about fandom. People often think that fandom is fanaticism. Invariably, that word comes up whenever the topic of fans comes up. And equally, we have this cultural conception of the face painter. This is the guy who comes to mind when we think of sports fans.

([00:54](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/shared/RzSmH0gBgMIXAWS4isPRkecYjTRL9RATG7pEOS0A1bmgM9hYwlKu5c0Pmftejjz7Qzm7E6FuHfhicBr7qTWXa3Q0zUE?loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=54.33)):

And I've crisscrossed the country. I've talked to tens of thousands of fans in my 20 years of experience. And yes, I've encountered a couple face painters in my day, but the reason I push back so hard on this misconception of what fandom is all about is because it clouds our perception of what fandom can be because the face painter is fatuous and juvenile and a little boorish, and we don't really want to be around him. But I was having conversations with fans that were completely different than that. It was wholesome, it was sentimental, it was heartfelt. And I began to realize that there was something really profound to sports fandom that we were missing because we would just focus on the guy in the front row spilling beer with his face painted. And so I want to reframe how we think about fandom. That's really what my mission is now.

([01:44](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/shared/8hCNkl3lt3mWE2lWLb1ZFoHf8-oh6Zmja-Lv27RovHII7vXtygEImwrGcGyj0NEpwlTXdNaRLi6Y2NUec7InRuRxBLY?loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=104.79)):

And I want to start by reframing it through this idea of community. If there's a sort of central thesis that I have to be a fan is to be a part of a community. And I look around the room now and the lights are kind of bright, but I look around the room and I see some nodding heads because fans, I think intuitively recognize that fandom is about community. I just think the only reason that I high five a stranger is sports. That's what he was just touching on. The only reason that I talked to my dad for better or for worse sports, right? This is the through line that ties all the interactions I was having with fans together, this idea of community. And I was seeing this profound stuff happen. And again, it was sort of diametrically opposed to the cultural conception that we have of fans.

([02:34](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/shared/UhJot85FkaSn7pJt_hh7AlznhJVE5iIaCC-s7RYN8lddh9I84W-KIwSC01_Yyf4hmBfJZzBomc5Bezd7WyoMIFlvV_g?loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=154.68)):

So I want to change the conversation, but to change the conversation, I needed some evidence. So I set about to try and prove this out, and I devised a way to look at people's social networks, how many friends they had, and then I cut that data by their fandom. So on this chart, it's fairly simple, I promise I'll explain on the left, you have on the right, you have the universe of fans from low value, less engaged, your casual fan, all the way up to the high value, the more engaged, the avid fan. And what we see here is a positive relationship between ones engagement in sports fandom and the number of friends that those people have on average. It's not just that they have more friends, they actually value those relationships more. They interact with those people more frequently. And the same is true of familial relationships as well.

([03:34](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/shared/cFMkvtGufT6IyR3n4Y9e7SM7rWybm7HXXSo6M5JEd48YyjQzCopU000ls9CTymIsoVVm7FHjggqSESnHhuU0kFZAWZs?loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=214.57)):

So another way to say that is the bigger the fan, the more likely you are to have a positive relationship with your mother, your father, your siblings, et cetera. So there's a lot going on here. This idea of community manifests in some of this data. And so we pressed further, we were encouraged. And what we found as we continue down this road of understanding the effects of this socializing is that it's not just that fans have more friends, it's that socializing, those friends actually impacted their wellbeing. So we also know now that engaged fans are happier, they're more optimistic, they're more confident, they're more trusting of others, they're more satisfied in life, they're more grateful. They're more likely to give to charity. They're more likely to be registered to vote. They're more likely to read for leisure across every conceivable, objectively good thing. Fans show themselves as different from non-fans.

([04:25](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/shared/ZFEpqibQ--sJUVLsE4YyBYasw3IQ96L0mpoWna8FzjaV9uEsNuptMf89ZmYCGcs54KBsG-vnpdvxhqdcF-xYKHiGIcQ?loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=265.96)):

And I think it's because of the socialization. So I want to draw a line under that idea, because I think that's the most important thing. It's not some magic elixir that sports has. It's not some sports magic wand that makes these people happier. It's simply the fact that sports provide a structure where they can socialize. And the socialization is the thing that's doing all this hard work. It is the thing that's improving their lives. And it stands to reason then that if you are happier, you're less depressed. We've looked into that. If you have more friends, you're going to be less lonely. We've looked into that and these ideas of loneliness and depression, this is what brings us to teens. I'm not the first person to cite some of these stats today. I think basically what I've been hearing time and time again is the kids we kind of all recognize are not, all right.

([05:12](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/shared/O2VtNQ_Q2D5dbnE4z4Zh4WfckwR7up7eWf-gHqqwMbgWAcP4jh8o60U4Olu_wvo4KhcoJfzlEY3ZLRSjUnpRYOF8ohQ?loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=312.19)):

So these are some stats that we took from the American time use study and the CDC. And we see, and I'm not the first person to cite this again, time with friends is down for kids, and time spent alone is up and alongside that depression and rates of suicide are also up. So that's just sort of the objective reality. And so this is floating around in the air. I'm not the first person to tell you guys this. And at the same time that this is floating around the air, that this is in all the headlines, I happen to be sitting on this trove of data that says fans are happier, less lonely, they have more friends, they're less depressed. And so I wanted to then investigate, well, maybe this impact extends into teens. And so we polled about 5,000 teens a few months ago, and what we found is that the data is exactly mirror in teens as what it is in adults.

([06:00](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/shared/Bq6RXv_bFiuQondYrQMkFlMlOU6BhtA__aN1M8-sVF4Q38UgS_kNx6JpcboXlYLOZdQ0hfRoVyx4PB7Ht3X-43WPmy0?loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=360.65)):

That is teen fans. The bigger the fan, the more friends, the more likely they are to hang out with those people more often. The more likely they value those relationships, the better off their relationships are at home, so on and so forth. And then very specifically, they're less depressed. Now, to measure depression, we use something called the personal health questionnaire. It's a nine question battery that clinicians use as a diagnostic tool to diagnose rates of depression in their patients. And if you score a 10 or higher on this set of questions, you would be considered having moderate depression or worse, the depression level goes up, the higher the score. And what we see here is that same positive relationship existing specifically when it comes to teen mental health, teen depression, the rate of depression goes down as you engage in sports fandom. And again, it's not just the sports fandom that's doing it, it's the socializing that's doing it.

([06:55](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/shared/I35-K9Q6o2yiPp-7JcPLjlX7XIBDheQ0xltpf9gy60GOgIZGwZIHUSMYs0zW3JdbEGf4jwm8BhoHquZbBEM4gZkcwtE?loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=415.37)):

That's what's doing the hard work here. So teen fans are less depressed. This got us thinking what other extracurricular activities might have a similar effect? So we looked at a bunch of different extracurriculars. Now, I know it's probably hard to read this chart from where you're sitting. Let me help you. It comes as no surprise to this room. I'm sure that sports has the most positive impact on mental health among teens. So kids who participate in sports between the ages of 13 and 17, 18% of that group experiences moderate depression or worse. That stands in stark contrast to, let's pick on photography. 41% of kids who are in the photography club experience moderate depression or worse. Now, this isn't a disparage photography club. I myself was a member of the photography club in high school. It's all well and good, right? But it doesn't do the same job and the same hard work that sports does.

([07:50](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/shared/MuzK-TqxutXz2CC75Kx-sc-HjVeL3IoqVPYniDaiiaQ3QQFW6CH5RmQAEiEKrP2NNjdP0lIEsOFzEHOC836wVIi5e28?loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=470.9)):

And I think everyone in this room is already a firm believer of that. So I don't have to belabor that point. But the thing that I do want to focus on here is the chart here is relatively straightforward, but there's a lot happening beneath the data. Gender plays a role. Social media use plays a role. There's a lot going on. The simplest way to think about this though is to simply recognize that the activities on the left, that is where the kids suffer less depression, are the activities that specifically pull you into in real life, interpersonal interactions regularly. That's the secret sauce here. The things on the right, the things where the kids suffer worse, depression rates, they don't do that. They might do that, but they don't necessarily do that. Sports necessarily does that. And that's really the magic here. That's what's going on.

([08:38](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/shared/sBlnGm_8-gdP5qsoKoqEhScB1viTd0-b3MEq8kpyHkGvTOMBftHIttomJO708Md_omO2AqwbhoWkuYxLEUnSA2K9Wi4?loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=518.18)):

And so just like when we started this, I wanted to reframe the conversation around fandom. What I'm arguing for here is that we also reframe the conversation around sports participation for teens. There's a lot of good reasons why kids should participate. And I've heard doctors talk about cortisol levels, and that's all. Well, good. I would not dispute that. I want my kids to participate for those same reasons. But the real thing that's doing the hard work to improve the mental health of teen participants is simply the fact that sports pulls you in to these in real life interpersonal interactions. You frequently have to join the team, come together, deal with things, and have friendships that are predicated upon sports. That's really what's going on here.

([09:22](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/shared/EbARX1cXJ3pDoX5DMILOgf0R7KaVcwr3d3wtVDjGCZWdvAHhTVcCSDeD9MVMDX7JFhfpWy9rYcTBMw44twXBBoKsid0?loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=562.53)):

But here's the thing, everybody has to stop playing at some point. We all have to retire. And what we see is that the benefits of participation subside when we stopped playing. So to prove this out, we pulled a group of 20 somethings, talked about 3000 adults who were in their twenties. And we separated the groups in a few different ways. First, we looked at adults in their twenties who participated in sports as kids and adults in their twenties who did not participate in sports as kids. And then we looked at their rates of mental health. And you know what? They were basically the same because when the kids who played stopped playing, the benefits of playing went away, they weren't on the team anymore. But we resorted that same data and we looked at their level of fandom. And as we've seen now, the higher the level of fan engagement, the better the mental health.

([10:16](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/shared/XWE4Po9m3jVGQxz44SzEWMm2fYWzUUo2MCbiPKDfIq4_qfu6HVa82RYlCMhZCbrjrXhYCQd4X6wHVn9nFoBFsN6WyqM?loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=616.08)):

And so I would encourage everyone in this room to think about the lessons that we're instilling. And I think everyone in this room is very familiar with that idea. We're talking about improving the lives of kids today in the present tense, but we're also talking about using sport to instill lessons that will serve them better in their life as adults. How can we help these kids lead prosperous lives as adults? And I would argue that fandom is one of the keys. It's one of the keys to social success. You're basically handing over the social skill of fandom to the kids. And so I would encourage everyone in this room to encourage the kids that you encounter and the programs that you support to focus on fandom. Focus on helping kids learn the skill of how to use sports to socialize. That's exactly the thing that will benefit them in their later years. And what we're really talking about here is sports. As a social structure, fandom is the language we use to navigate that structure and reap its benefits. And so I want everyone in this room to remember that when they talk about getting the kids together to watch the game, not just for practice, but help them learn the skills of fandom, because that's the thing that will benefit them in the future. Thank you very much.