Give the Gift of Fandom This Holiday Season

Tis the season of “Top 10 gifts for Sports Fans” lists. Before you invest in that City Edition NBA jersey, the heated stadium seat, or the keen tailgater’s dream, the self-lighting hibachi, consider this: the best gift you can give—to your friends, your family, your community—is fandom itself.

What do we mean by “the gift of fandom”? We’ll get to that in a minute. But first we need to tell you what we don’t mean.

When the uninitiated think about sports fandom, a slideshow of obnoxious images come to mind: fatuous face-painters in the stands, boorish hooligans in the bar, post-victory mobs wreaking havoc on city streets. We definitely do not mean that.

While these behaviors do exist, they represent only a tiny sliver of the fan pie. Yet they get more than their fair share of media attention. The unfortunate result: for the outsider looking in, fandom is defined by adversarial tribalism.

That’s not a gift the average person necessarily wants to receive.

So, what good does fandom offer?

On the surface level, it offers entertainment—peak human performance, flawless team execution, unpredictable human drama. Cue up a highlight reel and you’ll be awed by game-winning Hail Mary passes, gravity-defying slam dunks, history-making homeruns, and breath-stopping shoot outs.

What’s not to love about that?

Add in players’ inspirational backstories, the Cinderella championship runs, the soul-crushing defeats, and the impossible come backs, and you have all the makings of a blockbuster drama—one that churns out sequels several times a week.

Like movies, sports offer an escape to a place where high stakes wins and losses can mean so much, while also meaning very little. Unlike the real world, in the universe of fandom, we can tour the full spectrum of human emotion, without consequence. Better yet: we get to share that ride with others.

Therein lies the real gift of sports fandom: we share it with others.

Fandom offers countless opportunities for connection within families, among friends, and with strangers. In fact, we would posit that this is the primary reason fans engage – not the entertainment on the field, between the lines, but the connection in the stands, among the fans.

How does this work? Let’s look at families first.

Families pass fandom down like an heirloom. Generations bond as the elders share the lore of their teams, and youngsters learn the rules of the game. As fandom grows, children and adults enjoy a common passion on an equal footing. A Lakers game can spark a spirited conversation between a seventh grader and a seventy-nine-year-old over the team’s prospects this season.

While fun in the moment, that conversation does deeper work over the long haul: it nourishes the connection between grandchild and grandparent, well after the final buzzer sounds.

Whether they’re cheering together in the stands, gathering in front of the TV, or blowing up each other’s phones with play-by-play commentary from across the country, fandom keeps families connected.

What’s the impact of all this connection?

According to our research, engaged sports fans are more likely to “greatly value” their relationships with their mothers, fathers, and siblings. While 50% of fans say they are “very satisfied” with their family life, only 34% of non-fans make the same claim. When asked to rank the strength of their relationships with their children who live at home, 85% of non-fans ranked their connections at a 5 or 6 on a 6-point scale, versus 93% of the most active sports fans. When asked to rank the strength of their relationships with their children who do not live at home, 67% of non-fans marked 5 or 6, while 80% of active fans chose the same.

In other words: fandom provides fertile ground to grow cherished memories and meaningful family bonds.

The numbers indicate that sports fandom helps us establish and sustain friendships too. The average non-fan has 21.1 friends, while dedicated sports fans average 35.6 friends. Fans also report that they “greatly value” these friendships more than non-fans do. Sports give fans more opportunities to engage with theses friends, as well: non-fans average 204 social interactions per month, while the most active fans average 454 interactions.

What’s up with these numbers? Think of it this way: When are we most likely to send a spontaneous text to a friend? When we see something that reminds us of them. Friends who share fandom are reminded of each other thousands of times a year, kicking up a flurry of texts:

“Did you see that pass last night?”

“Mahomes-Kelce?”

“LeBron or MJ?”

“I can’t believe they won.”

These seemingly trivial exchanges have an underlying power. They galvanize relationships. Small connections, built up over time, amount to lifelong histories of wins and losses, questionable calls, heartbreaking trades, playful rivalries, and legendary plays.

More importantly, these simple missives open the door to deeper connections, like this:

“Dude! That dunk! Are you watching this game?”

“Oh yeah. Wouldn’t miss it. Watching with the kids.”  
“That’s great. How the little ones doing?”

Sharing fandom keeps our relationships current, so when life takes an unexpected turn, fans don’t need to reach far for help. Their friends are already there.

That is a gift worth giving.

Fandom enables us to build bridges beyond our families and immediate circle of friends as well. How? Sports are ubiquitous in our culture, and fandom is easily signaled. An emblem on a baseball cap, a sticker on a laptop, a team name on a license plate rim—these are opportunities to start a conversation.

Sports fans understand this. Fandom operates as a social superconductor, enabling people to make meaningful connections not only across entrenched team loyalties but across social categories such as age, race, class, religion, gender, and yes, even politics. Set a sports fan down in any bar, restaurant, party, or hotel lobby with a game on a screen, in any city, state, or country, and we will find community.

What many fans—and the people who love them—don’t understand is how important these casual interactions can be. In a time when loneliness is ranked among the top public health threats, fandom brings people together. Among high-value sports fans, 61% strongly agree that they “feel close to people,” as opposed to 37% of non-fans. In fact, across five wellness markers—happiness, satisfaction, optimism, gratitude, and confidence—people’s overall wellness scores rise as their involvement in sports fandom increases.

Time and again, through tens of thousands of questionnaires, focus groups, and interviews, no matter how we cut the data, the results are undeniably clear: in a fragmented, divided world, giving the gift of fandom means giving the gift of connection. The wellness benefits cascade from there.

How, exactly, do we share this gift?

If you’re already a fan, lean into your sports connections: send the “Did you see that?” text, join the Fantasy Football league, say yes to the next invite to a watch party. Better yet, host a watch party for fans and non-fans alike, be they friends, family, coworkers, or people you just met at the sidelines of your kid’s soccer game. Set out the snacks, turn on the TV, then sit back and watch the social connections grow.

Especially during the holidays, when the acuity of loneliness runs high, the smallest gesture makes a difference. Fandom serves as a conduit for kindness. Ask the guy in the Knicks beanie how his team’s doing this year. Commiserate over a recent loss with the person wearing your team’s gear. Invite a newcomer to this country into the world of American Football. If you’re a newcomer here yourself, find the spot in your town where people gather to watch your game.

Not a fan? That’s okay. Get curious. Ask neighbors about the Packers flag flying in their front yard. Dig deeper than surface-level fan chat. Find out how they became fans, what it means to them, if they’d mind if you join them for a game.

There are countless ways to share the gift of fandom. Of course, you can also buy those season tickets, bid on that autographed photo, or give your kid a team jersey emblazoned with her own name. But no matter how you wrap it up, know this: long after the season ends, the ink on that photo fades, or your six-year-old grows out of that jersey, what remains is the real gift of fandom: the relationships it generates.