

### A LOOK AT THE AVID SPORTS FAN

By Seymour Lieberman

Who are the avid sports fans? The behavioral characteristics of this dedicated breed are well recognized—they watch sports events hour after hour on television, read about the games after they have watched them, rehash the games with their friends, and argue endlessly about the relative merits of different players and different teams. But while their behavior is readily apparent, the characteristics that differentiate the avid sports fan from the rest of the population are less well understood.

A survey done in late 1990 of the general adult population for Sports Illustrated magazine by Lieberman Research, Inc. lets us explore these characteristics. The study was based on a mail questionnaire completed by a national sample of 2,320 men and women 18 years and older. To ensure that both fans and non-fans would be properly represented, telephone screenings initially were conducted with a sample of 4,500 people (half men and half women), in which their interest in sports was assessed. Both sports fans and non-fans were urged to express their views about sports by filling out a questionnaire that would be mailed to them. Over two-thirds of those screened agreed to participate in the investigation. And, about three-quarters of those who agreed to participate mailed completed questionnaires back to us. As anticipated, the return rates were greater for men than for women, for fans than for non-fans. The data were statistically weighted so that men and women and sports fans and non-fans were represented in relation to their incidence in the population.

#### Characteristics

Thirty percent said they are “very interested” in sports, 43% “fairly interested,” and 27% are “not too interested” or “not interested at all.” We call the former, very interested group the fans, and the latter not interested group the non-fans. (The characteristics of the middle group—“moderate fans”—generally fall between those of the two extreme segments.)

Men are more than twice as likely as women to be avid fans (42% vs. 19%), while women are more than twice as apt as men to be non-fans (36% vs. 16%). Fans tend to be younger, more affluent and better educated than non-fans. Many of the attitudinal and behavioral differences between fans and non-fans reported below are what one would expect given these age and socioeconomic differences. However, fans still differ from non-fans in the ways reported even when age, education and income are individually controlled. For example, fans report that they are in better physical condition than non-fans: 71% of them, compared with 45% of non-fans, maintain that they are in “excellent” or “good” physical condition. People of higher socioeconomic standing, and fans, participate in sports

or physical fitness activities more often than do the less educated and less affluent. Yet, self-reported differences in physical condition remain after socioeconomic factors are controlled. These patterns also hold up separately for both men and women.

#### Goals and Values

The study found that fans have a stronger competitive drive and are more success-oriented than non-fans. Respondents were presented a list of goals and values and asked to indicate all those *particularly important* to them. As the table indicates, “being competitive” was the expressed value on which fans and non-fans differed most sharply in the proportions picking it. Other terms which distinguished the two groups—being a winner, ...active, ...successful, ...a leader—seem to tap into the same (Just do it!) value cluster. Values which do not differentiate the sports fans from non-fans include being cautious, artistic, and practical.

#### Interests

In contrast to the stereotyped view that they are so involved with sports that they have little interest in anything else, fans have a wider array of expressed interests than non-fans do. They are more apt than non-fans to describe themselves as interested in sex, politics, careers, cars, music, movies, television, etc. Interests which do not differentiate sports fans from non-fans are “family” and “religion.” And sports fans report a little less reading than non-fans.

Fans engage in more sociable activities than do non-fans—more apt to have expensive dinners out and to entertain large groups of people at home. In fact, they do more of most things from renting movie cassettes to attending operas, concerts, and ballets, and working on crossword puzzles. But there are small differences between sports fans and non-fans on things like visiting a museum, buying a paperback book, and attending a live theatre performance.

#### Gender Differences

Although men are more than twice as likely as women to be avid sports fans, the characteristics that set male fans and female fans apart from other people are similar. Both male and female fans are more competitive, success-driven, active, adventurous, and sociable than their non-fan counterparts.

It’s not altogether clear what is at work here. It’s not surprising, of course, that sports fans are more likely than non-fans to express a zest for action and competition. But it’s less clear why they would indicate broader general interests and report a more active lifestyle. The big age and socioeconomic differences between the two groups noted early in this piece provide some of the answer. Sports fans are at once younger and more up-scale than the population at large—characteris-

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tics which give them, perhaps, higher energy levels and which certainly mean that they have greater resources for sustaining a broad array of activities. But there seems to be more at work here since the differences remain when age and socioeconomic

factors are controlled. Perhaps the sports fan is really the quintessential American.

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### Fans and Non-Fans Compared

**Question:** Here is a list of goals or values that people might consider important. Please "x" the goals or values that are particularly important to you.

	<b>Fans (697)</b>	<b>TOTAL Non- Fans (615)</b>	<b>Diff.</b>
Being competitive	56%	16%	+40%
Being a winner	51	26	+25
Being active	72	50	+22
Being successful	72	53	+19
Being a leader	33	14	+19
Being cautious	34	34	0
Being artistic	24	24	0
Being practical	64	67	-3

**Question:** Which of the following subjects or activities are of particular interest to you?

Sex	69	44	+25
Politics	44	20	+24
Music	64	47	+17
Religion	47	46	+1
Reading	56	61	-5

**Question:** Which of the following things did you do in the past 12 months?

Had dinner out, costing \$35 or more/person	33	16	+18
Rented a movie cassette	72	61	+11
Entertained at home for 10 or more guests	45	37	+8
Worked on a crossword puzzle	39	31	+8
Bought a paperback book	56	54	+2

**Note:** The items shown above were selected for presentation here from longer lists in the questionnaire.

**Source:** Survey by Lieberman Research for Sports Illustrated, November 20-December 21, 1990.