

Why do we root for the underdog?

January 26 2018

We are often taught that it is better to be on the winning side than the losing side of a game, but sometimes that may not be the case. As it turns out, rooting for the underdog or being the underdog actually may be an advantage, explains one Baylor College of Medicine expert.

"There have been numerous surveys taken about why people often root for the underdog, and most of them show that more than two-thirds of the people vote for the underdog. There could be many reasons for this, but there are a few key theories," said Dr. Asim Shah, professor and executive vice chair in the Menninger Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at Baylor.

By rooting for the underdog, the excitement during the game increases.

"We like to watch and go to games for the excitement and entertainment of it all," Shah said. "If the [game](#) is one-sided then it is not nearly as entertaining. People like when a game is close and the players have fought hard for the win, and so people root for the underdog to make a comeback and fight until the end."

We relate to the underdog so we root for the underdog.

People associate themselves with the underdog because sometimes it is difficult to identify with the winner since people generally don't win all

of the time, Shah said. A lot of [people](#) would classify themselves as the underdogs so it's easy to identify with a team that they see as being the underdog.

People find more joy in unexpected successes.

Shah said that if you are rooting for the underdog team and they end up winning, this unexpected success makes you feel happier. The brain processes this situation as out of the ordinary, but positive, so the rewards center of your brain is stimulated and releases hormones that make you happier.

We root for the underdog because of a phenomenon known as schadenfreude.

Schadenfreude essentially means we unconsciously experience pleasure at the misfortune of others, Shah said. We end up rooting more for the underdogs over the "winning" team because we may be unconsciously envious that they are doing well, which is why if the underdog team pulls out a win, we don't feel badly that the favorite team lost.

Shah added that even athletes can recognize when they are the underdogs going into a big game. However, this can work to the team's advantage if players focus on improving their mental toughness.

There are a few key ways to improve [mental toughness](#), he said.

- Learn how to deal with negative thoughts. Don't go into a game thinking you will lose, or you will.
- Don't linger on a positive or negative outcome. If you lost your previous game, don't linger on the loss. Also, even if you won your last game, don't think too much about it or you might

become overconfident, which could hurt your performance in future games.

- Control your emotions during a game. There may be a time during the game when a player on the opposing team makes you upset, but you can't get angry. If you let your emotions get the better of you, you could end up playing worse.
- Utilize the power of visualization. With today's technology, you can do a lot of research on the team you are playing before you even step on the field. You can watch their performances during different games to find out what their strengths and weaknesses are and from that, you can visualize beforehand what you are going to do. You can decide what play you are going to run or how you are going to defend against a touchdown. Although you may not be able to complete everything you visualized, it is still worth it if it helps even just a little bit.

Shah emphasized that in terms of what makes you successful on the "sports pyramid," emotions sit on the top.

"Negative emotions hinder your performance both physically and mentally," he said.

Provided by Baylor College of Medicine

Citation: Why do we root for the underdog? (2018, January 26) retrieved 23 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2018-01-root-underdog.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.