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It's That EFA* Time of Year (*Extreme Fan Addiction)

DONELSON R. FORSYTH TIMES-DISPATCH COLUMNIST | Posted: Thursday, March 19, 2009 6:01 am

What an odd lot our ancestors must have been to let themselves get caught up in crazes like the 10th century dancing mania in Italy, or the alarming outbreak of biting mania in 15th century Germany, Italy, and Holland. Holland's 17th century tulipmania proved only economically painful, when wealthy families spent their savings buying and hoarding tulip bulbs, and were left in financial ruin when prices plummeted.

We are not so different from those long-gone dancers, biters, and tulipophiles, because a modern mania is about to descend upon us: March Madness. Sixty-four colleges and universities send their basketball teams into a competition for the vaunted titled of National Champion. It is no mere playoff series.

Some fans will obsess over the tournament, and we'll see an uptick in all sorts of aberrations -- hangovers, missed work, domestic violence, and even rioting and suicide. It's called March Madness for a reason.

With so many teams representing cities across the nation, the NCAA tournament awakens our national consciousness as we share the collective experience. We feel the excitement of competition between worthy opponents, admiration for a job well done, and pride when our team is victorious.

Isn't it normal to root, root, root for the home team, to take pride in our group's accomplishments and pleasure in honest competition? Yes, but certifiable psychological disorders have their roots in the most ordinary of tendencies. It is fine to be moody, to make sure all your socks are correctly paired, and to keep an eye on others in case they don't have your best interests at heart. It becomes interesting to psychologists only when these behaviors generate extreme outputs or come to dominate other systems. That's when the blues become depression, neatness becomes obsessive-compulsiveness, and watchfulness become paranoia.

WANTING TO bond psychologically with others is normal -- so normal it's part of human nature. When the hunting group came home with a kill, those who stayed behind due to age, injury, child care, or home defense needed to feel they were actually part of the hunting group to minimize conflict about resources that had to be shared. Over eons of adaptation, we handled the conflict by creating a strong tendency to insert ourselves -- psychologically -- into the many groups of warriors, hunters, gatherers, and herders of our tribe.

We don't live in tribes anymore. We live next door to strangers. We buy our food at stores. We communicate by wires and networks rather than face-to-face. But our tendency to identify with groups remains strong. So, as our team moves forward in the tournament, facing new challenges and overcoming them, we aren't just spectators. We are members of the group, and its outcomes become as important to us as our own successes and failures.

Just as the blues gone too far morph into depression, and self-confidence out of control turns into narcissism, so identifying strongly with a sports team can cross the line between fan and fanatic.

Devotion to a sports team is not particularly rational. First, thinking we belong to a group that we don't, really, is delusional. Fans are not actually members of the teams they support. They only watch from the sidelines, bleachers, living rooms, and sports bars. Yet they often become as closely connected psychologically to their teams as they are to their families, their work places, and their communities.

Second, devotion to a group whose performance is beyond one's control is risky. Fans are elated when their team wins, but after a loss they feel anger, depression, sadness, hopelessness, and confusion.

THE "AGONY of defeat" appears to be more psychologically profound than the "thrill of victory." When researchers invited fans to watch a live broadcast of a basketball game, the fans were more depressed after a loss than happy after a win. The loss made them feel bad, stupid, and physically unattractive.

Victories are sweet. Suicide rates drop when the local college team wins -- at least in some college towns known for strong fan allegiance. Fewer people committed suicide Feb. 22, 1980, the day the U.S. Olympic ice hockey team beat the Russians, than on all other Feb. 22s from 1972-89. Depression took that day off.

But 63 teams will lose during March Madness, so relatively few fans will experience the jubilation of collective success. Perhaps a warning label is needed: Becoming a devoted fan may be hazardous to your health.

Why, in 10 years the pharmaceutical companies might come out with a cure for EFA, or Extreme Fan Addiction, so that people who have tried but failed to break their mental bond to some group can get some help.

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