The Underdog Concept in Sport

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The tension and excitement of competitive sport is created by the indeterminacy of the contest that is based on an approximate equity between the contestants. Yet players and teams vary in competence and prestige, and those with less competence are frequently labeled as the underdog. While winning is valued, cross-cutting values often create sentiments for the underdog, that is, the desire for the underdog to overcome the inferior status and upset the favored opponent. Social support for the underdog reflects a utilitarian perspective that helps maintain an emotional interest in a contest; additionally, underdogs receive support from the social value of equity. At a micro-level, the underdog status is often used to increase the level of motivation and performance. Data gathered from university students are used to support the positions taken in the paper.

One of the fundamental characteristics of sport in western society is that it is a competitive activity, that is, the contestants are competing for a scarce goal—the prize, the victory, the win (the exception would be ties). This characteristic creates an uncertainty in game situations regarding the outcome, and this unpredictability is important in creating the tension and excitement for the participants and spectators. Cailliois (1961) notes that to maintain the uncertainty in games, the contestants must be equated so each may have a chance to win. Indeed, “the game is no longer pleasing to one who, because he is too well trained or skillful, wins effortlessly and infallibly” (Cailliois, 1961, p. 7). Similarly, Loy (1968) argues that the uncertain outcome is the primary factor in creating tension and excitement in any sports contest, and Goffman (1967), in his essay “Where the Action Is,” notes the importance of chance-taking in producing thrills.

Additionally, Elias and Dunning (1986) argue that the uncertainty of sport creates the tension and excitement that is necessary for the survival of games and sports. Even the rules of games and sports are designed to maintain that tension and excitement by reducing the likelihood of unfair tactics and undue advantages by one contestant over the other. In Eliasonian terminology, this process is described as maintaining the tone or the “tension-balance” of the game (see also Kew, 1990). In short, if one contestant is clearly superior to the other, there is no contest and no excitement, and boredom soon sets in.

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Thus in sports we have handicaps, and competitive classifications based on experience, skill level, gender, age, height, weight, and size of school or competing units. And the rules of athletic contests may specify fewer sets in tennis, shorter distances for par in golf, and adjustments in equipment (e.g., size of the ball in basketball, different weights for the field events in track) for different ages and either sex in order to adapt to the assumed variations among contestants. Yet, despite these adjustments some individuals or teams compete against opponents of unequal ability or skill level. In other words, while some contestants will be approximately equal in their performance level, others will be more or less likely to achieve victory. It is in this context that we consider the concept of the underdog in sport and society.

In a competitive situation, the underdog is expected to lose the contest. The concept of the underdog is applied not only in sports but also in political campaigns as well as to the victims of political and social injustice. The term underdog appears to have originated in a popular 19th century song titled, “The Under-Dog in the Fight”; two stanzas of the song are,

*I know that the world, that the great big world
Will never a moment stop
To see which dog may be in the fault,
But will shout for the dog on top.
But for me, I shall never pause to ask
Which dog may be in the right
For my heart will beat, while it beats at all,
For the underdog in the fight.* (Hendrickson, 1987, p. 540)

As suggested by the original use of the term underdog, spectators and fans, at least in American society, are thought to be predisposed to root for the underdog. Yet this assumption has remained unchallenged and unexamined by sociologists of sport. Nor has there been any attempt to incorporate this assumption into a general theory of spectatorship or motivation. In an exploratory way we address some of these concerns. In this paper we first introduce a macrotheoretical perspective of spectating; second, we present some relevant (though exploratory) data gathered from university students; third, a microperspective of motivation is introduced; and finally, some concluding thoughts on the underdog phenomenon are presented.

A Utilitarian Perspective: An Emotional Marketplace

We might proffer a utilitarian based model to explain the underdog effect. But assuming that spectators are hedonistic, that they seek the most rewarding situations, we might initially assume that unattached spectators would root only for athletes and teams most likely to win—for favorites. (We assume that many spectators will have long-term attachments to teams or athletes and will be relatively faithful to these sentimental attachments.) However, when favorites do lose, the situation is most unrewarding for the favorite’s supporters. Perhaps spectators even lose face when they stake their reputation and judgment with a favored team that loses.

Therefore, rooting for the favorite is, on the whole, a poor emotional investment. For the unattached spectator, little excitement is gained when the
favorite wins because this outcome was expected. And a loss by the favorite must
certainly be felt that much more, coming when it was not expected. It would
seem, then, that a true hedonist would root only for underdogs. If the underdog
should win, the emotional investment is repaid with a good deal of excitement
and emotional reward. If on the other hand the underdog loses, the spectator
probably will not be particularly surprised and should not especially feel the loss.
After all, the spectator knew he or she was rooting for an underdog.

All in all, an investment in an underdog is more rewarding in the emotional
marketplace than an investment in a favorite. In summary, because it is unex-
pected, an underdog’s victory is more satisfying than a favorite’s and an under-
dog’s loss is much less traumatic. Thus a utilitarian model would indeed predict
the underdog effect.

It may well be that this type of reasoning has its value counterpart in the
American notions of equity. If fans are guided by this value in their spectating,
rooting for the underdog would be the logical product. In this view, the sympa-
thies of unattached fans would lie with the team with the least prestige, the
underdog. If the favored team were to win, the inequality in prestige between
the teams would remain. But if the underdog wins, the underdog’s prestige deficit
will be mitigated, if not corrected completely. Interestingly, an underdog does
not have to win, but just come close to winning, for its prestige to increase (in
the form of a moral victory). To sum up, rooting for the underdog may be an
expression in sport of the western ideal of equality. Perhaps fans want little more
than to “even up the sides.”

Too, one might even conceive of the underdog orientation as one of two
opposing worldviews. In one worldview, inequality is seen as a necessity, while
in the underdog worldview, inequalities are seen as unjust and needing correc-
tion. Some historians have asserted that history consists of the struggle between
these two worldviews, with the two alternately and cyclically ascendant (see
Schlesinger, 1986). One might even hypothesize that expressions of the underdog
in sport (and other fields) would be relatively more common in those cycles when
the underdog worldview was predominant. In any event, the underdog worldview
can be discerned throughout history.

The history, literature, and mythology of American society and perhaps
other western societies are, accordingly, replete with underdogs. David versus
Goliath, the dragon slayers, Cinderella, the tortoise and the hare, the “Little
Train That Could,” the Horatio Alger novels, the “Log Cabin Presidents,” the
“Impossible Dream,” and even the American Revolution all have elements of
the underdog effect within them. These and many other examples certainly give
dramatic credence to the idea that our cultural values might yield underdog effects
within the institution of sport.

Of course, despite the cultural value of equity that seems to have existed
for some time in American society, much of American history is in fact the story
of inequality (and attempts to overcome such obstacles). Slavery, indentured
servitude, the exclusively male franchise, poll taxes, the continuing oppression
of minorities, women, gays and lesbians and the poor—all of these, and other
shameful aspects of American history, illustrate that the value of equity has often
been subverted by appeals to other beliefs (such as Americans’ regard for group
conformity and their appreciation of material wealth). Within sport, the win-at-
any-cost mentality of some coaches, participants, and spectators indicates that
equity can easily be disregarded in the pursuit of success. Similarly, recent military ventures in Vietnam, Grenada, Panama, and Iraq demonstrate that equity can easily be manipulated in ways that "justify" a superpower's intervention into the affairs of smaller, poorer nations.

In spite of these transgressions, though, an American value of equity certainly does exist. Indeed, many American movement ideologies—from abolitionism and populism to contemporary feminism and gay liberation—confront oppression and exploitation with calls for equity. Here, it is suggested that equity is the one value from a spectrum of available choices that American spectators use to legitimize their utilitarian based preferences for underdogs.

Findings

In order to test some of these theoretical suggestions, a short questionnaire (see Figure 1) was administered to a convenience sample of 122 university students from a medium-sized university in the Midwest. Eighty-seven of these students were from introductory sociology courses while 35 were from an upper level sociology of sport class. Each student was presented with a scenario in which a highly favored Team A was meeting Team B, the underdog, in a best-of-seven series. Students were asked which team they would prefer to win (in the absence of any prior sentimental attachments); in addition, students were asked to explain their choice. In the second question, students were told that Team B has unexpectedly won the first three games of the series. Students were asked which team they preferred to win the next game only. In a final question, the students were told that the series was even at three games apiece. Again, students were asked whom they preferred to win the final and deciding game.

Of the 122 students, 99 (or 81.1%) originally said they preferred Team B,
given no more knowledge than the fact that Team B was not favored. Yet in the second question, approximately half (49) of those 99 said they would switch their allegiance to Team A if Team B (the original underdog) were to win the first three games of the series. Of this group that did change their allegiance, 37 of 44 (5 of the 49 did not make a third choice) said they would change their preference again—back to Team B—if the series were to wind up tied at three games apiece.

As Table 1 indicates, there was little variation in the responses either by gender or by course level. Apparently such variables do not seriously affect the underdog preference. Indeed, none of the gender differences is statistically significant. And only one of the course-level differences approaches significance; there, students in a sociology of sport class were more likely than introductory sociology students to initially favor the underdog. One plausible explanation for this difference might be that students who are strongly involved in sport, presumably those in a sociology of sport class, have been better socialized into the norms for preferring sports underdogs. Of course more research is needed to investigate this suggestion.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Classes</th>
<th>Initially favored the underdog (Team B)</th>
<th>Switched to new underdog (Team A)</th>
<th>Reverted to original underdog (Team B)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Females</td>
<td>55 of 69</td>
<td>25 of 55</td>
<td>21 of 24†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Males</td>
<td>44 of 53</td>
<td>24 of 44</td>
<td>16 of 20†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Intro. soc.</td>
<td>67 of 87*</td>
<td>77.0%</td>
<td>24 of 29†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sport soc.</td>
<td>32 of 35*</td>
<td>91.4%</td>
<td>13 of 15†</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*This difference is significant at the $p = .07$ level.
†Five respondents did not answer this question.

If nothing else, these data show how pervasive and attractive is the notion of rooting for the underdog. Given the absence of attachments to teams or athletes, an overwhelming majority was drawn to the underdog. These data also point to how fluid the underdog label can be. Once underdog Team B had won three games, many respondents opted to root for Team A. Apparently Team A was, at least for some, the new underdog. One respondent wrote, "Team A has suddenly become the underdog. Throw out all of past records because the playoffs are a new season and Team B is on top."

But, as mentioned above, once Team A did catch up in the series, a majority returned to rooting for Team B. Apparently Team B had reclaimed its underdog status. Many of the explanations provided by the respondents spoke directly to the theoretical assertions made above. For example, many respondents emphasized the emotional payoff an investment (the utilitarian model) in the underdog can provide. One wrote, "The unexpected makes it more exciting. If the favored
team always won, it would be far less exciting.’’ Another said, ‘‘Because they are the underdog, it would be a better game, to see if there was a struggle for a win.’’ And several alluded to the surprise value an underdog’s win provides. One simply wrote, ‘‘If Team A was picked to win, then if Team B won, it would be a surprise.’’ And another noted the lack of risk in rooting for the underdog: ‘‘It’s fun to root for the underdog, even if they lose, it’s not a big disappointment.’’ One student mentioned a different pleasure that those who root for underdogs can enjoy: ‘‘I like to see the underdog win. It makes the series more exciting and dramatic. Plus I could ‘ride’ the fans of Team A.’’

Other respondents discussed rooting for the underdog in terms of the equity argument. Many implied they would be more satisfied with the underdog’s victory because it would restore equity. One wrote, ‘‘By Team B winning, it will keep one group from getting too arrogant while lifting the confidence and pride of another group. It will keep the two teams closer to a happy medium.’’ The same respondent explained switching allegiance to Team A after Team B took the first three games by saying, ‘‘It would be too embarrassing for both teams if Team B won in straight games.’’

In regard to the switch in allegiance, another explained, ‘‘The playoffs should be competitive, and the teams should have the same strength. It’s more exciting when the teams are close and the series gets dragged out.’’ And yet another said, ‘‘I would like it to be a close series. I wouldn’t want either team to get blown out and embarrassed.’’ Another wrote, ‘‘There’s not enough drama in a sweep, even if Team B is a big underdog.’’

The common theme in these responses is that the spectators see the underdog as having the potential for pulling the upset and providing pleasure. In short, by creating an underdog, a special kind of tension and pleasurable excitement is evoked in an unexciting game situation. Hence, identification with the underdog is consistent with the tension-balance figuration discussed by Elias and Dunning (1986). And likewise, at least some spectators consciously relate their rooting for the underdog to cultural values of equality.

A Motivational Perspective

Utilizing a microlevel of analysis, if a team or person is an underdog in a competitive situation, this position may promote an increased incentive to overcome the odds. Hochschild (1983) postulates that people manage their feelings to achieve a particular level of performance or behavior. In sports, athletes engage in emotion work through the mental and physical preparation for a contest. For example, Zurcher (1982) reported on the buildup of emotions prior to a football game, and Gallmeier (1987) examined the staging of emotions at professional hockey games. While the Zurcher and Gallmeier studies describe the dramaturgical aspects of staging and scripting of emotions in team sports, Snyder (1990) analyzed the feelings of individual performers, women gymnasts, prior to and during their meets.

Using the microframework of emotions, to be labeled as the underdog may be used as a means of emotionally psyching up for the event. That is, knowing that one is not expected to win may motivate the underdog to exert a greater effort to achieve victory. Thus the underdogs may play with abandon because they have nothing to lose. The following statements from our survey of students illustrate the motivational aspects of being an underdog:
The advantage of being an underdog is that the favorites may be overconfident and they will leave themselves open to defeat. If they display this overconfidence, this might motivate the underdog to work harder.

The advantage of being an underdog is that this title gives added incentive to win. The underdog can win by effectively using this mental and emotional advantage to overcome superior athletic ability.

I would like to be an underdog. To overcome odds is the great American dream. This is depicted in movies like the Rocky series. The underdog status gives me the extra lift to win.

The underdog team must usually work harder and more efficiently to win any game. I enjoy seeing the underdog team win especially when the opposing team is heavily favored. It gives me a sense that anything can happen.

Conclusion

Given the prevalence of the underdog effect, further research might reveal social characteristics that influence the decision of spectators to root for the underdog athlete or team. Are there social class, subcultural, or intercultural differences that figure into the spectators' decisions as to which underdogs are most worthy of support? Our exploratory data indicate that the underdog role is evident in the minds of spectators who are not committed to either contestant.

Worth additional consideration is the question of how spectators at some contests are able, notwithstanding the potential emotional payoffs of preferring underdogs, to root for favorites. As noted above, we believe sentimental attachments to contestants may prevent many spectators from considering the utilitarian benefits of rooting for an underdog. But it is not clear how such sentiments are formed. The influence of geography, social stratification, family, and other variables on such attachments must therefore be studied. In like manner, the exact nature of viewing an event may alter the underdog effect, and this fact should be considered in future analysis. It may be that spectators' preferences are affected by paying admission or by joining a crowd of partisans. On the other hand, the experience of watching the game on television or listening to it on the radio may be affected by the preferences and allegiances of announcers.

We suspect that the underdog effect would be most evident in settings without any one-sided narration from fans or the media. Thus we would predict that the underdog effect would be better seen among spectators at a sparsely attended collegiate tennis match held at a neutral site than among spectators at a Notre Dame football game. Likewise, we would expect a purer underdog effect among viewers of a TV network baseball game with "objective" announcers than among viewers of a game called by local announcers.

We are suggesting that supporting the underdog, like sports gambling, provides a form of "action" (a game within the game) that satisfies a quest for excitement regarding the outcome of the contest. Indeed, this similarity between gambling and the underdog phenomenon is worthy of additional analysis. Guttman (1986, p. 179) notes that "there are those who cannot enjoy a sports event if they have not bet on the outcome," and Smith (1990, p. 274) considers one of the appeals of sports gambling to be its ability "to relieve boredom and generate excitement."
Likewise, Goffman (1967) emphasizes the thrill of risk-taking that is inherent in gambling. To root for the underdog is to place one's sentiments on the team with the longest odds of winning. Consequently, as we have argued, this is a sure bet: It serves to enhance the level of excitement in the outcome of the contest while leaving the spectator with everything to gain and nothing to lose. True sports bettors will not necessarily place their bets on the underdog, however, unless the handicapper's odds are sufficient to attract money to the underdog. Apparently the desire to win some prize, however small, accounts for the tendency to bet on the contestant who is the prohibitive favorite (Eadington, 1976, p. 113).

Additionally, to support the underdog seems to have some legitimation from the western value of equity. Thus the mantle of "athletic hero" is often accorded those who overcome the odds of achieving their goal. However, we do not know whether this tendency is evident across many different cultures. Perhaps the support for the underdog is a reflection of the meritocratic ideology that anyone can make it to the top if they try hard enough. Thus the underdog concept may vary with the social structure of the society. At a microlevel, to be an underdog may increase the level of arousal and tension and thus promote an overall motivation to overcome the apparent superior opponent; or perhaps it decreases the motivation of the superior team or player due to their overconfidence.

The media frequently seek to use the underdog role as a way of promoting the level of interest in a contest between unequal opponents. In promoting a contest, the media entice viewers and readers to speculate about whether the upset can be pulled off, and if indeed this happens, the media will focus on the human interest associated with achieving the unlikely goal. In this process the underdog concept is commodified for the marketplace and becomes a part of the overall spectacle and theatrics of modern sport (see Sewart, 1987).

In conclusion, as we have emphasized, the fundamental attraction of a contest is the emotional excitement associated with the uncertainty of its outcome. If the contestants are of unequal caliber, the tension and excitement is reduced, perhaps to the point of boredom. By focusing attention on the underdog, a measure of excitement and action is returned to a potentially uninteresting event. In this respect the underdog role is a way of maintaining the core function of competitive events.

References


