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## The tribes of March

Examining the primal urges behind sports fanaticism.

By David G. Myers

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On the face of it, college basketball is a bit ridiculous. Fans scream encouragement to five people trying to get a ball through a steel ring suspended 10 feet in the air while trying to prevent opponents from doing the same. I'm a professor at Hope College in Michigan, and just before we took on our top basketball rival, Calvin College, I had a philosophical moment. Turning to a friend, I asked, "Why does this matter?"

The same question has crossed the minds of fans (or their bemused spouses) during USC-UCLA games, Cubs-White Sox games and now during March Madness. Why do we fans sulk in defeat and exult in victory?

There's something primal at work when the crowd erupts as two rival teams take the floor. Our ancestors, living in a world in which neighboring tribes raided and pillaged one another's camps, knew there was safety in solidarity. Dividing the world into "us" and "them" entails significant costs -- racism and war not least among them. But there are also benefits: Whether hunting, attacking or defending against the fast break, 10 hands are better than two. To identify us and them, our ancestors -- not so far removed from today's rabid fans -- dressed or painted themselves in group-specific costumes and colors.

As social animals, we live in groups, cheer on our groups, kill for our groups. Our groups help define who we are and who we are not. Groups -- even completely arbitrary groups -- promote what social psychologists term "ingroup bias." Ask children, "Who are better, the children in your school or the children at another school nearby?" Virtually all will say that their school has the better children. Cluster people into groups defined by the last digit on their driver's license and they'll feel a kinship with their number mates.

Group solidarity soars further when people face a common enemy (think of the United States immediately after 9/11). When facing an external threat during wartime, we-feeling rises. Membership in civic organizations increases, and citizens rally behind their leader and their troops. But there doesn't have to be a true threat; creating a rival generates a near-automatic response.

Psychology researcher Muzafer Sherif experimented with the unifying effect of a rival group in the 1950s. He brought 22 Oklahoma City boys to a Boy Scout camp and randomly split them into two groups for a series of competitive activities, giving prizes to

the victors. In less than two weeks, each group became intensely proud of itself and hostile to the other group. Food wars and fistfights broke out. Cabins were ransacked. When brought together, the two groups avoided one another, except to taunt and threaten. Sheriff would surely find familiar the antics of Hope and Calvin basketball fans. One Hope colleague's 10-year-old son, arriving at the Calvin fieldhouse, begged his father to "carry me to the gym so my feet won't have to touch Calvin soil."

Winning amplifies group identification. Queried after a big football victory, university students commonly reply that *we* won. They bask in reflected glory, notes Arizona State University researcher Robert Cialdini. Queried after a defeat, students separate from the team, reporting *they* lost.

In studying rabid fans after Indiana University basketball games, psychologist Edward Hirt found that fans' self-concepts also rise with victory and fall with defeat. After a Hoosier loss, fans offered bleaker assessments of their own likely performance at throwing darts, solving anagrams, even getting a date. When our team is suffering, it may seem that nothing will go our way.

Ironically, we often reserve our most intense hatred for rivals most similar to us, or those closest at hand. Sigmund Freud long ago recognized that great animosities form around small differences: "Of two neighboring towns, each is the other's most jealous rival; every little canton looks down upon the others with contempt. Closely related races keep one another at arm's length; the South German cannot endure the North German, the Englishman casts every kind of aspersion upon the Scot, the Spaniard despises the Portuguese." USC and UCLA fans nod knowingly.

As an occasional resident of Scotland, I've witnessed many examples of an observation recorded in the humorous "The Xenophobe's Guide to the Scots" -- that is, Scots divide non-Scots "into two main groups: 1. The English; 2. The Rest." Just as rabid UCLA fans are happy if either the Bruins win or the Trojans lose, so rabid fans of Scottish soccer revel in either a Scotland victory or an England defeat. "Phew! They Lost," rejoiced one Scottish tabloid front-page headline after England's 1996 Euro Cup defeat -- to Germany, no less.

"A village's mortal enemy is the group from which it has recently split," anthropologist Napoleon Chagnon observed. That's the case here in western Michigan. When Hope plays Calvin, it's the Dutch-heritage Reformed Church in America college facing off against the Dutch-heritage Christian Reformed Church college -- a denominational split from 1857. When the two basketball teams clash, it's like a mini religious war. There's no fundamental hate, but plenty of passion. In these parts, we joke that an atheist is "someone who goes to the Hope-Calvin game and doesn't care who wins."

David G. Myers is a social psychology professor at Hope College and the author of "Intuition: Its Powers and Perils."