

A LINE ON LIFE

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"Hurrah for the Home Team!" *

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The home gym at Arizona Western College is called the "*House*." We urge fans to fill the "*House*" and support our basketball team. Does this help our team play better? Is this true of all sporting events?

Several studies in the late 1970s and early 1980s indicated a clear home field advantage in professional sports, whether the sport was basketball, baseball or football. All the teams that were researched won more home games than away games. The difference was greatest in basketball. Overall, professional basketball teams won almost 65% of their home games, but only 35% of their away games. In the 1976-1977 season, even last-place teams in the divisions won almost 60% of their home games.

This supports the conclusion that there is a home advantage. Some people believe that the advantage lies with the greater **familiarity** with the home field. Others suggest that the home team does not have the **fatigue** factor of the traveling team. In addition, it might be due to **territorial dominance**. Visiting teams might be more inhibited and unsure, since they are on another's home turf.



One of the more outstanding factors is the **behavior of the fans**. There are usually more fans present rooting for the home team. Cheering fans are most effective, when they continue cheering for a long time, and when there is **high social density** – there are many fans crowded in a compact, enclosed area. This may explain why the greatest home team advantage is found in basketball. Professional basketball games occur indoors, so fans are crammed into a much smaller space than with football or basketball.

One of the earliest findings in social psychology is that audiences create emotional arousal and motivation in performers (Triplet, 1897). If the task is well-learned, the higher arousal typically improves performance. In this way, highly skilled athletes benefit from mobs of cheering fans. (However, the opposite is true for tasks that are not well learned. In this case, the presence of an audience leads to higher arousal, but the higher arousal interferes with less competent performances.)

If cheering fans help, what about **booing** and **hissing** fans? In the early 1980s, two years were spent observing the responses of home and visiting teams to booing and hissing fans. Researchers observed crowd protests that lasted over 15 seconds and recorded the behavior of both teams over the following 5 minutes. They noted changes in scoring, rule violations and turnovers.

Short protests occurred in essentially every game, but prolonged booing and hissing only occurred 15 times. All of the protests were in support of the home team. Ten booing episodes were to protest calls by referees made against the home team. In four incidents, fans protested the referee's failure to call violations against the opposing team. Only one protest was against the players on the opposing team.

After each booing incident, the home team improved their performance, while the visitors did worse. Researchers think that the protests interfered with the attention of the visiting players and reduced their efficiency. Even so, it is still more positive to reinforce good performance by cheering than berating mistakes by booing.

Both enjoyment and team support are enhanced by cheering for winning plays."

On the other hand, some evidence indicates situations when the home advantage is reversed. In final championship games – like the World Series in baseball or national basketball championships – the added pressure may cause players to "*choke*." For example, look at the data for World Series games. In the first two games of the World Series, home teams won 60% of the games. In contrast, home teams only won 41% of the final games. When the pressure to win is the greatest, it seems that being the home team can become a disadvantage.

Although the football and basketball seasons have passed, softball, baseball and track are in full swing. You can enjoy many of these sporting events at your local college or high school. Typically there is only a minimal charge for most of these events. You can enjoy yourself while cheering for your favorite team – and helping them to do better.

* Adapted from David O. Sears, Letitia Anne Peplau, and Shelley E. Taylor, *Social Psychology*, Prentice Hall Publishers, 1991, pages 466-467.