



Fan force

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EDITOR-IN-CHIEF & EDITORS

On unfamiliar ice, sophomore Julia McLellan focuses on the game while opposing fans chant discouragingly behind her. Their cheers are amplified by the fact that she is a girl goalie on a boys hockey team. However, she uses their energy to her advantage.

"I personally like playing away games more. The crowd is rooting against me, and they don't know me," McLellan said. "It's fun to surprise people be it from my play or the ponytail sticking out of the back of my helmet."

Across the seasons, all athletes are affected by the presence of fans both positively and negatively. In some sports, it has a more noticeable effect than others. Varsity basketball attracts a crowd reaching up to hundreds of people during home games. Themed matches, organized cheers, flashing cameras and taunts from the opposing team work their way into players' minds.

Varsity basketball coach Ron Kochan sees the benefits of having a student section.

"Having a large student section is a great thing," Kochan said. "Our players love having the support of their peers and it's a great feeling to know that people care about all the time and effort that we commit to representing North."

Junior John Lizza doesn't find the fans distracting. Like McLellan, even taunts from opposing fans give him motivation.

"Before the game, when the other team's fans

are disrespectful it gets you real fired up," Lizza said. "There's nothing more fun in football than showing up on another team's turf in a hostile environment where the hometown crowd is rowdy and shutting them up the rest of the night."

In most cases, fans work to an athlete's advantage, which is why having a homecourt advantage is preferable for many players. Psychology teacher Jennifer Weisbrodt explains this with an effect known as social facilitation, which is when one's peers encourage them to perform better because they are comfortable playing in their typical environment and have numerous supporters cheering in the stands.

"What we often call the homecourt advantage or the homefield advantage is actually a

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John Lizza
JUNIOR

well-researched psych term called social facilitation," Weisbrodt said via email. "The idea is that performance is enhanced, for well-learned tasks, when others are watching. Assuming the activity or sport is part of your muscle memory, the cheering crowd actually enhances your performance."

Conversely, when trying to perform a task that one considers more difficult or is less skilled in, the presence of an audience tends to hinder their performance. Over the years, many psychologists

have studied and tried to explain this effect. They have developed several different hypotheses to try to analyze what happens in the human mind when this occurs.

For difficult tasks, the fear of embarrassment can either improve performance or impede it. Some propose that an unfamiliar audience influences athletes to be more alert, because they are uncertain how the observers will react. Others say that performance only improves when athletes feel that the audience is evaluating them, not just when in the presence of others.

The size and proximity of a crowd also factors into the effects of social facilitation.

By far the most popular games for any sport are the rivalry games against South High School. Fans go all out with body paint and costumes, posters, horns and a myriad of other distracting spirit wear. Their motive may be to amp up their home team, encourage victory or interfere with the visiting team, but those efforts can backfire and hurt the team they are rooting for.

"While playing the championship basketball game at home may increase your speed down the court, it may also hinder your performance on a more difficult task, like shooting a free throw,"

Weisbrodt said. "This is why the opposing team makes a lot of noise when a player from the opposite team is at the line."

In a study published by the North American Journal of Psychology in 2011, researchers found that the impact fans have on players depends on the sport. They tested basketball players, baseball pitchers and golfers to compare the impact of cheering, jeering and silent audiences on their performance. They found that basketball players were unaffected in all three situations, baseball pitchers were significantly hurt by jeers and golfers' accuracy decreased when in any noisy conditions.

Senior Steven Levick is captain of the boys varsity basketball and his experiences align with the study's conclusions.

"We've had some negative cheering fans but it's never affected me or my team," Levick said. "I think that when the crowd is into it, it can be motivating."

From a coach's perspective, both Kochan and varsity soccer coach Eric Vanston agree that the players' mentality controls their performance. Because of this, Kochan stresses that his players focus on three factors that they have power over: attitude, effort and assignment.

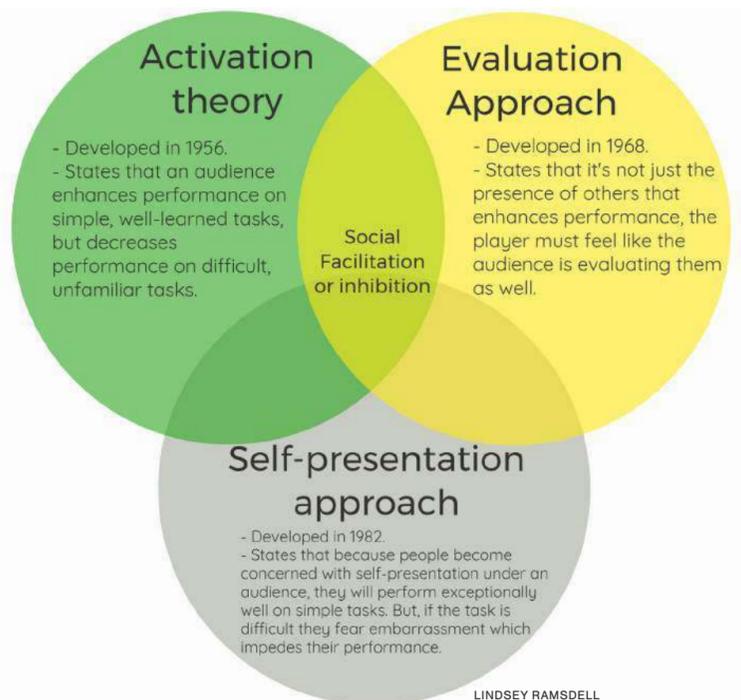
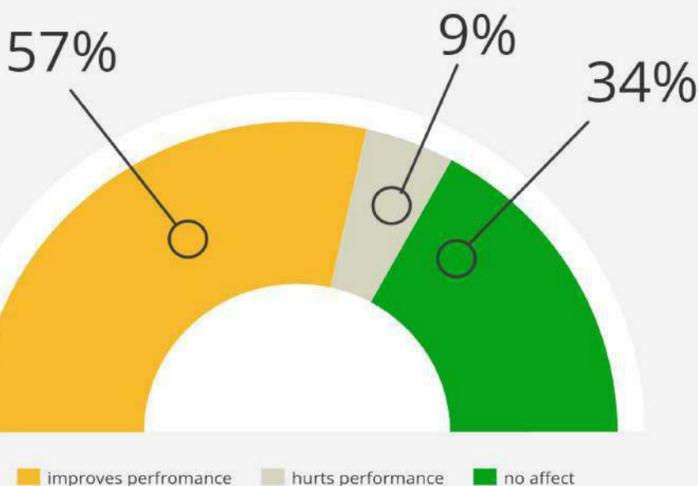
"You can't stop the fans from screaming. You can't," Vanston said. "What you can do is control your own emotions, so we just try to talk about staying focused and don't let the fans take you out of your game."

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Eric Vanston
VARSITY SOCCER COACH

Student athletes at North: how do fans affect your performance in games?

SURVEY OF 55 STUDENTS



LINDSEY RAMSDELL



KENNEDY WILLIAMS

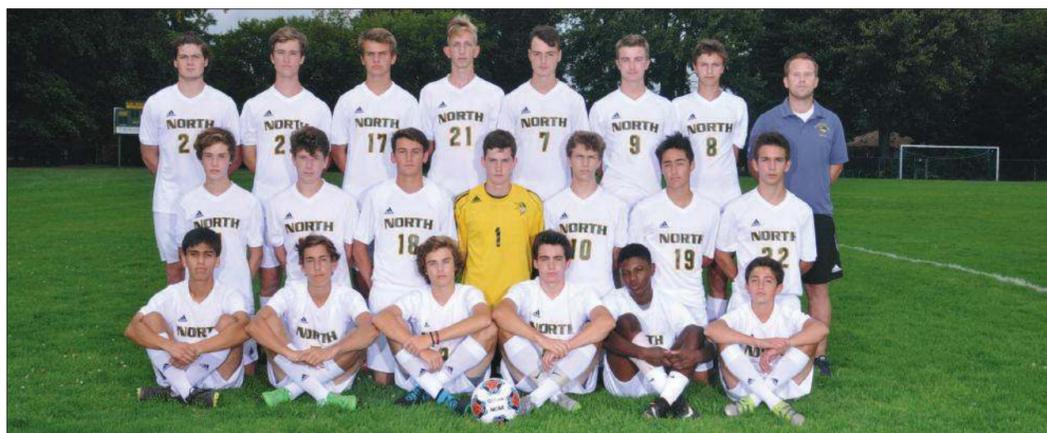
We asked: what experiences with fans have you had as an athlete?

Sophomore Julia McLellan: varsity ice hockey

“I don’t think I played a game with more than 75 people at it during AAA Girls. On the high school boys side, it was a big difference in the number of fans. There were around 200 people at my first high school game, which was a big jump from AAA Girls. The amount of fans at first made me a bit nervous, but it also made me more excited. But, to me it didn’t really matter if we were home or away, I just wanted to be on the ice. During the Michigan Interscholastic Hockey League tournament, I had some fans of Trenton’s hockey team (who we played a few weeks earlier and beat) walk by me and acknowledge that I played great game against them and that they were surprised. Also, during North home games there was always a group of people standing behind the goal at the far end. During the second period they’d yell and root for me and the rest of the team and I could hear them loud and clear. It was fun to have that energy behind me, but it didn’t really affect my play. I always try to ignore what’s happening outside the glass, and focus on what’s happening on the ice.”



JULIA MCLELLAN



Varsity soccer coach Eric Vanston

“I remember from when I was in high school, our rivalry game was Canton (High School) vs. Salem (High School), which was a lot like North vs. South. It was two schools in the same community and the fans were getting a little bit rowdy and the ref had to stop the game. Now I don’t know what was said, but the ref stopped the game and went over and talked to the coach. The coach had to go talk to the fans, so I’m sure something was crossing the line somehow, so there’s times where it gets to be too much when there’s a lot of people. It sort of can snowball into negative but to be honest I don’t think I’ve seen that as a coach here. I remember that as a player, but I don’t think I’ve had a negative experience yet.”

Sophomore Victoria Simmons: varsity track

“This actually happened (Friday, April 7). I was the anchor for a 200-meter relay and my other teammates fell behind to last place so I had to catch us up and my team cheered me on and we ended up in fourth out of eight. I’ve never received negative cheering, but I have experienced negative sportsmanship and it affected our performance because we had an argument and caused friction the rest of the meet.”



KENNEDY WILLIAMS



SARAH SCOTT

Senior Sarah Scott: varsity field hockey

“Our fans usually consist of parents and a few boyfriends and best friends so we have 15 to 25 fans per game. Our fans are usually pretty calm and supportive of us, which is to be expected of fans, but the part that really encourages us is when they call us out by name. Because our fans are usually parents or friends, they know our names so they are able to tell us what we are doing well and what we need to improve on in the heat of the game.”