

Creating Joy and Engagement Through Fandom

By Dan Bulgarelli, PAC Speaker

It seems that no matter where we look these days, there are messages trying to keep us separate from one another. Whether it is politics, socio-economic status, what we drive, what we wear, or a host of other factors, we find differences with one another instead of seeking common ground. Well, that certainly is not always the case, and one way in which we find common ground, is with fandom. We become fans of our teams for different reasons; either it's our hometown team, we have a familial connection, or our favorite player is rocking the uniform. Being a fan transcends all of those lines that would seek to divide us and bring us together. When you get together with fellow fans, or meet someone new who turns out to root for your team, one of the first questions is inevitably "did you see the game?" This question creates a topic both people can relate to, leads into many tangents, and soon a relationship is born. Even fans of rival teams can come together and talk about past games, players, or how the refs/umps are biased against our team and for our rivals... even if both fan bases feel they get the short end of the stick. Being a fan doesn't end when dementia sets in or progresses. As Teepa has said time and time again, when a person is living with dementia "I am who I have always been, I'm just different." I spoke with Peg Chabala, a member of our PAC team and former Director of Activities at an Assisted Living Facility in the Pittsburgh area, about how she would use sports to engage her residents.

Being a Pittsburgh lifer, Peg is a big fan of the Steelers, Penguins, and Pirates in that order. As I mentioned before, even fans of rival teams can have this connection. I was born and raised in metro-Detroit, which means I grew up rooting for the all of the Detroit teams, in particular the Red Wings. I bring this up only because the Red Wings and Penguins met in the Stanley Cup Finals in back to back years nearly a decade ago. Whenever Peg and I chat, that rivalry still comes up. We became instant friends when we met as we talked about the different games and players.

When I was talking to Peg about this article, she mentioned that Penguins and hockey were more of a recent phenomenon, and her residents weren't nearly as interested in it as they were other sports. Many are fans of the Pirates, but with the games generally starting in the evening, it was harder for her residents to stay up for the games. Because of that, we focused on what she would do for Steelers games.

For those of you that aren't fans of American Football, each team plays a game once a week, and for the most part, the games are played on Sunday afternoons. When I was preparing for my conversation with Peg, I was expecting to hear about what they would do on Sundays. I was surprised to hear that Peg would be able to engage the residents for three full days because of a three-hour football game.

“The food was just as important as the game. On Fridays, I would take a group of women (residents) and volunteers to the Strip (section of Pittsburgh known for food markets and spices). We would spend the day shopping for Kielbasa, cabbage, and just the right seasonings. Along the way, we’d talk about the food our families made and other traditions surrounding the game.”

“On Saturday, I would play DVDs of the old Steelers Super Bowls to get the residents excited. We’d talk about favorite players, memorable games, or ‘where were you when this happened?’ type of thing. The women would be busy preparing the food, and the smell would waft through the residence, bringing back old memories and experiences. So many conversations would be created just due to the aromas, not to mention watching the old games, or getting ready for the next one.”

Sports and being a fan has a way of bringing us all together. Even the residents that may have been hesitant to join in other activities or conversations couldn’t help themselves but join in when the Steelers were at the center of it all.

“Sundays started at church. We would bring our Terrible Towels (Steelers tradition) to get blessed. From there we would head back and get the food set up and make sure everyone that was interested was ready for the game. We’d have the room decorated, the TV set up for the game, and serve food. We’d even have near-beer and other traditional football foods to go with what we had prepared the day before. Obviously, food would have to be presented and monitored for those that had lost skill with chewing or swallowing, but we tried to recreate the experiences they had before coming to us as accurately as possible.”

While the Steelers are not even my home team, I would appreciate the three days centered around football and the food, of course. There are many ways to overcome our differences to create engagement for those we care about, especially related to sports. Knowing what people have always enjoyed gives us an idea of what they would still want to do. Peg pulled her own passion and fanatic nature for the Steelers into getting to know her residents so that she could help them continue to find joy in their lives. I would ask you to look into ways to bring fandom into the conversation as life can certainly be lived well with dementia, but we need to be flexible and willing to learn about those we are supporting. Let’s find the common ground, or spirit of good-natured rivalry, to bring us together and create joy.