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College sports fandom shows how a shared goal can bring people together

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Note: President Amy Parsons wrote [this piece](#) for The Conversation in May 2024. Colorado State University is a contributing institution to The Conversation, an independent collaboration between editors and academics that provides informed news analysis and commentary to the general public. See the entire [list](#) of contributing faculty and their articles.

After [Colorado State University beat Virginia](#) in the first round of March Madness, the campus erupted in celebration. A few days later, [when the team lost to Texas](#), Rams groaned in shared disappointment. Between and around these moments of shared joy and agony, CSU – like other universities experiencing the inevitable ups and downs of sports – came closer together as a community.

[Research shows](#) that sports have this unique power, a way of bridging divides and uniting people, [both on teams and among spectators](#), through a collective experience that can remove feelings of [marginalization and exclusion](#).

Now, as the nation deals with a [highly divisive](#) election season, sports – so central to American culture and society – can offer critical lessons that I believe can fortify the pillars of democracy that elections embody. Student athletes are reminders of the value of practice, the strength that comes from focusing on differing roles, and the heights that can be reached when groups embrace the same goal. These are lessons I've absorbed as [president of CSU](#).

Practicing skills for life

Universities are distinctive communities with structures, policies, procedures and outlets all oriented in pursuit of educating students to understand their world. Sometimes these mechanisms function quietly and efficiently, and campuses glide forward in the pursuit of knowledge with the grace of a star player leading a championship run. More often, there are stumbles and setbacks in building a path forward and finding common ground.

On occasion, disagreements escape the confines of campus, informing and becoming part of the national conversation – or the national conversation is brought to campus. The U.S. is experiencing this now in the wave of protests on campuses across the country. The ideal scenario remains a conversation guided by a shared commitment to building understanding and producing new knowledge. Disagreement is a central part of that. Research shows that we learn best by listening to and constructively engaging with those who have different viewpoints. Yet, the reality of diverse viewpoints is that consensus may at times be impossible no matter how long we debate.

That competition of ideas is the engine of progress. Research shows that this is where knowledge and new approaches come from. That is where we can find, if not cooperation or conciliation, at least points of agreement and connection. Today's universities, full of young adults and bright minds, can play that role and offer these opportunities for practice.

Colleges are often where students vote for the first time. They run for office – whether for student body president or to be an officer in the ski club. Students learn to influence institutions of power, perhaps by serving on an advisory panel that makes recommendations to a dean, provost or president, or by participating in a campus demonstration or protest. They are exposed to people from vastly different backgrounds with diverse viewpoints. At the majority of institutions, faculty, staff and student leaders are elected by peers to representative bodies that make decisions, shape policies and take ownership in systems of shared governance.

Coming together as a team

Too often, we may not see those with whom we disagree, even if the disagreement is minor, as compatriots with the same wishes for their team, the country and their own lives. They can be seen as enemies to be defeated.

In political debates, each side can be the victim in its own narrative and the other side an oppressor who must be forced to see the error of their ways. Former President Ronald Reagan said leaders are those who recognize that “the person who agrees with you 80% of the time is a friend and ally – not a 20% traitor.” That cannot happen if future leaders are incapable of seeing those who disagree with them as being members of the same team, or at least fans with the same interest in supporting democracy.

Fandom, like politics, can have an ugly side. Sometimes there is bad behavior from individuals and groups to demonize players, coaches or referees, attacking them personally for something that happens during a game. Competing teams – and their fans – can attack each other.

Still, athletics can serve as a bridge builder. When audiences gather to watch their college teams compete, politics rarely matter. Even class and race lose their potency. A common goal of victory supersedes other considerations. In those moments, people have a shared identity.

Pursuing a vision

There is a carryover effect. The day after a big win, the campus is in a better mood. After a tough loss, the disappointment is shared. In either case, students have a new layer of common experience as fans. I am convinced that this connection can give students extra capacity to

listen to one another. They can see classmates as teammates, even if they're on the opposite side of a political issue. They can see common humanity.

Still, collegiate athletics are a testament that natural talent goes only so far. Student athletes demonstrate that groups are better when they set aside personal differences and join together for a common goal.

This is true in a democracy as well, where civic engagement is critical to success. In both spheres, it takes dedication, commitment, courage and resilience to stay focused on goals and shift strategies and tactics.

Recently, Robert Putnam, the Malkin research professor of public policy at Harvard University, visited CSU to lecture on the state of democracy. When I asked him to advise students on how they can strengthen democracy, he emphasized the value of cooperative activities – including sports – for students to build social capital and develop connections with different kinds of people.

At CSU, when the basketball season did, at last, come to an end, the next thought was how to do better next year. Complacency is not an option – each season, each competition, is about effort and the pursuit of excellence. For spectators, this can make for a glorious ride.

Of course, democracy isn't, and can't be, a spectator sport. As in sports, the truth is that we benefit from having an opponent willing to play hard and within the rules. In this way, rivals are actually partners, and groups interact with each other out of a shared love of the game.

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