

Bob and Chris Knight with sons,
James and Andrew



Keeping it in the football family

With the soccer season underway again, **Louise Duffield** looks at the role football plays in the family

MILLIONS OF people in the UK regard themselves as football supporters. Some go to every match, home and away, while others will never attend a game, but are avid armchair followers.

And of course there are many fans who are somewhere in between. Some attend just a few matches each season or go to watch 'their' team whenever they play nearby.

Equally, for many families, football has a key role in the

household. But how do people choose their football team, what does it mean to them and what's it like if different members of the family support different teams?

There are a number of reasons why people choose a football team to support, says Professor Mark Griffiths, a psychologist at Nottingham Trent University. His own family perfectly illustrates some of those different reasons.

"There are two main reasons why kids pick football teams," says Prof Griffiths, who has written

about football fanaticism. "One is because their parents do – it's something that is inbred to them, particularly if the father and/or the mother are passionate about their particular team."

"The second reason is kids tend to pick teams that win things. They

"Which football team you follow can create debate and banter or instil a sense of camaraderie among friends and family" Michael Woodburn of Capital One

Bob and Chris Knight: Leicester v Arsenal

“Football plays an important role in the family”

Football fans Bob and Chris Knight have two sons. One supports the same team as his dad and the other the same as his mum.

Bob hoped both James and Andrew would follow in their father's footsteps, just as he had done, and be Leicester City supporters. It wasn't to be, however, and Andrew is an Arsenal fan like his mum.

“I grew up in Leicestershire and my father was a Leicester City supporter. He used to take me to matches and that's how it started,” remembers Bob, who is in his sixties and lives near Potters Bar.

“James supports Leicester. I got both of them to be Leicester supporters to start with but one decided to follow his mum. Arsenal won more matches.”

Bob and his brother David took James to his first match at Leicester City when he was about seven or eight. Andrew went to a handful of matches at Leicester, but decided he'd rather support the Gunners like his mum, who went to school next to Arsenal's

ground and who lived 15 minutes away when she was growing up.

“He came to one or two matches at Leicester, then Chris took him to Arsenal and he fancied it more so he switched allegiance,” recalls Bob.

There is friendly rivalry in the household whenever the teams meet, which hasn't been very often in recent times.

“At the moment it's a bit dull because they are in different leagues,” adds Bob.

However, James, 23, and Andrew, 20, do wind each other up a bit about their different football teams, he says.

“It's all good fun, though,” adds their father.

However, the football-keen family do have a team they all support - Barnet FC, based not far from their Hertfordshire home.

“We have one common interest and that's Barnet,” says Bob. “We all go to Barnet and we all support Barnet. They are our local team. We go and see them seven or eight times a season. It's one activity we all do together.”

“Football plays an important role in the family,” adds Bob. “We watch quite a lot on television as well. We are all football fans.”

pick teams that are doing well and want to identify with them. I have been a Sunderland fan since 1973 when they won the FA Cup. It was the first football match I remember watching. As a seven-year-old kid, that really stuck with me. I had no idea that Sunderland were a Second Division team. They had won the Cup. What I didn't realise was that they were not a particularly great side, but I have stuck with them ever since!”

Prof Griffiths has three children. His eldest son, aged 17, was born in Cardiff and supports Cardiff City. His youngest son, aged 11, idolises Wayne Rooney, and supports Manchester United, but has now said he will continue to support them regardless of whether Rooney plays for them. Meanwhile, his daughter, who is 13, supports Chelsea - like her mum.

“You have three classic reasons there why children follow football teams,” adds Prof Griffiths.

Research has discovered that daughters tend to be slightly more loyal to their father's team than sons.

A survey by credit card company Capital One showed that 22 per cent of female football fans still supported the same team as their father, compared with 19 per cent of men.

The same research revealed

nearly half of football fans watched their first live game with their dad, but just one in five inherited their team from him.

Capital One's research showed the most popular reason for choosing a team was where it's

POST-RELEGATION STRESS DISORDER?

Many people invest heavily emotionally in their football team.

Two psychologists from the University of Ulster and Nottingham Trent University discovered that the impact of a team's relegation from the Premier League to the Championship was ‘psychologically significant’.

Some 11 per cent of their football supporting participants in the study suffered severe psychological distress on a par with post-traumatic stress disorder when their team moved down a league.

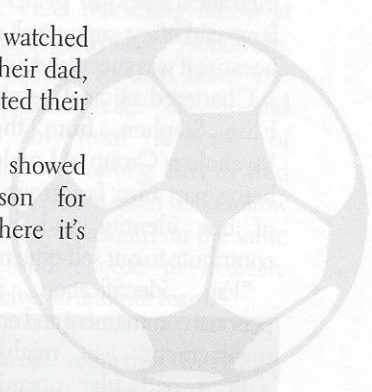
A study by psychologists at the University of Surrey published in 2004 also showed how emotions were linked to football supporting. It stated three typical contexts where men felt it was OK to express grief, joy and anger, and being at a football match was one of them.

“This and other psychological studies all go to show that emotion and football go hand-in-hand - especially for men,” says Professor Mark Griffiths.

The Mental Health Foundation believes football can have a major

impact on mental health. It can provide an escape from the stresses and strains of life, it provides comfort in ritual with an unpredictable outcome, and when your team wins it creates feelings of happiness and wellbeing.

The Mental Health Foundation, a charity committed to helping people lead mentally happier lives, believes it's an important outlet particularly for younger men. It also provides an opportunity for connection and belonging, and helps to create relationships and friendships.





“Identifying with a particular team might help us to have long-term or temporary associations with others”

Chartered clinical psychologist Elise Stephen

based, with 39 per cent backing their local side. Just 14 per cent of fans said they supported a team because it was successful.

Chartered clinical psychologist Elise Stephen, from the City Psychology Group in London, says being part of a fan group is part of our identity and helps to contribute to our self-esteem.

“Fan identification is the personal commitment and emotional involvement we might have with a particular organisation,” she explains.

It also helps us to increase our social connection with others, says Elise.

“Identifying with a particular team might help us to have long-term or temporary associations with others.”

It doesn't necessarily happen that a child will follow in a parent's footsteps as far as choosing a football team is concerned. Various factors might come into

play, such as where the family now lives. “In modern society people move a lot more so dad might support Tottenham Hotspur because that's where he's from but you now live in a different area and all your friends in the local community, which you might also identify with, support a different team. That might become more important in terms of who you identify with.”

However, we usually tend to stick with the team we've picked in our younger days because it's part of who we are.

We can't choose where we are born, or to whom we are born, but we can choose our football team and because we've made the choice ourselves it's an important part of our identity, adds Elise.

“It's about freedom and autonomy. We have picked it. We have controlled it, so it's something we might be less willing to change.”

Sometimes people have a 'second team' they have an interest

“Football is a strand that binds our family”

Some of my most vivid childhood memories feature football matches that I attended with members of my family.

I regularly watched Norwich City with my dad, a great-uncle and his brother, who I also regarded as a great-uncle. The four of us would sit alongside each other and often travelled to away games too during the Seventies and early Eighties. By the time I was about nine or ten, I'd taken my mum's place in the group. She was busy looking after my younger sister at home.

Even today, decades later, football is a strand that binds many of us in the family. It's a talking point, shared interest and something we have in common.

I've not lived in Norfolk for 30 years. I now attend football matches only infrequently, but on a Saturday afternoon I'm very often transported back to those happy days in the Seventies and Eighties... and there's usually text or phone contact between me and my dad whenever there's a goal in a Norwich game. If one of us is away or doesn't have access to TV or radio, we make sure the other provides a running commentary via text messaging on what's happening in the game.

I still watch Norwich City if they play locally at Nottingham Forest, whose ground is just a mile from my home and is the team supported by my husband.

The first time I went to watch Norwich there, I joined my husband in a Forest section of the ground. It didn't feel right. The next time, he accompanied me in the away supporters' section... but that wasn't right either. Now we go our separate ways, sit with our own kind and meet after the match. And that's how it should be when it comes to football in the family!

Rachael Muxlow and Paul Simmons: Chelsea v Spurs

“There’s banter in our house, but the friendly kind”

in. For Prof Griffiths it’s Bradford, where he went to university. His son likes Norwich because he enjoys the TV programme *QI*, which is hosted by Stephen Fry, a Norwich City supporter and director.

Elise says this is usually because people want to be associated with different communities. “We are part of different social groups,” she says.

So someone might still support a football team they watched with their parents or grandparents even though they’ve moved to another area, which helps them retain their family identity, but they might also have an interest in a team that’s based in the place where they now live, she says. They want to be part of that community, too.

Some people may feel it’s disloyal to have more than one team but there are others who have more than one sense of identity, adds Elise.

An interest in football can help families to stay close and enjoy time together, regardless of

Rachael Muxlow and Paul Simmons from Hertfordshire have been partners for 15 years. They have brought up two children together and agree on most things... except football teams.

Brought up in a heavily Chelsea-orientated household, Rachael remembers the ongoing family joke that the first outfit her father bought her was a Chelsea football strip.

“Sometimes my mum jokes that I had no other choice than to be a fan, and quite frankly, I didn’t,” she says. “I remember going to games when I was just five years old all dressed in white and blue: it was something that brought me and my dad closer together, a bit of father-daughter bonding time.”

Paul, on the other hand, is a diehard Tottenham Hotspur fan.

“I usually let Rachael think she’s right with most things,” says Paul. “That’s the easiest way to get about daily life in our house, but I

refuse to agree with her on the football front.

“There is football banter in our house, but it’s the friendly kind – I don’t think we’d be as close if we didn’t have it!”

Rachael, 52, adds: “My dad and Paul are always joking with each other about the teams. On match days I still go along with my dad, and Paul sticks to the TV at home. We keep out of each other’s way.”

The couple do occasionally make sacrifices on the football front, however.

“Rachael bought tickets for the Tottenham versus Chelsea match earlier in the year for my birthday and sat in the Tottenham away end with me,” says Paul, 57.

“And never again!” Rachael jokes. “It just felt wrong. I think we have both decided football is just one of those things where we will stick to what we know best... and I know Chelsea best.”

“Soccer is one of those unifying forces for us. Even if we have club rivalries, at the end of the day what we have is a shared passion for football”

Psychologist Prof Mark Griffiths



whether they support the same teams, says Prof Griffiths. Although his own family has a range of teams that different members support, as a family they all enjoy watching England games or women’s football, for example.

“It’s the one activity that brings us all together,” he says. “Soccer is one of those unifying forces for us. Even if we have club rivalries, at the end of the day what we have is a shared passion for football.”

Elise Stephen says: “Being spectators and following the same team can maintain unity in a group or family.”

We’re likely to get more out of watching a particular sport if we’re with ‘our own group’ – that is, fellow supporters.

“It’s about cohesion and feeling a sense of belonging,” she adds.

The survey by Capital One reinforced this view by finding that, whatever the reason for choosing a football team, families felt it was important in helping them to unite. Some 92 per cent said

watching football, both live at the ground and on television, was a time for the family to get together.

The chief marketing officer at Capital One, Michael Woodburn, says: “Which football team you follow can create debate and banter or instil a sense of camaraderie among friends and family. Children often don’t follow their family’s passions for the same teams and choose to dedicate themselves to another team.”

Additional reporting by Emily Oakden

Find out more

- For more information about the City Psychology Group, tel: 0845 0177838, website: (www.citypsychologygroup.com)
- Dr Mark Griffiths’ blog is at: (<http://drmarkgriffiths.wordpress.com/>)
- To find out more about football and mental health, see the Mental Health Foundation website: (www.mentalhealth.org.uk).