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Vikings fans, suffering gladly

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For many Vikings fans, this dismal season, with just two victories in 12 games, is the pits. Heidi Breen of Minneapolis said she has been praying so much during games "that my knees have sores on them."

For others, stellar campaigns torpedoed by wrenching postseason losses are far worse. "Bad years like this one, they happen," said Paul "Hoss" Thielman of Minnetonka. "The close ones at the end, where one or two plays ruin you, are the toughest."

Either way, during a half-century that has yet to bring an NFL title to the Twin Cities, fans have learned not only to hand disappointment but perhaps even to revel in it.

"For people who are committed to being fans of a sports team, that creates a moral value, the commitment of sticking w team through thick and thin," said Doug Hartmann, a University of Minnesota sociology professor. "The diehard fans, w the team is losing, there really is a badge of honor in not jumping off the bandwagon."

That's why Breen wears out her knees, and Thielman turns his converted laundry truck into a tailgating mecca before e home game, and Rolf Moe of Mahtomedi speaks for all Purple faithful when he says, "You [complain] a lot, but you're absolutely going to stick with your team."

Even if it means resorting to gallows humor. An e-mail making the rounds shows a sign reading: "When I die, I want the Minnesota Vikings to be my pallbearers so they can let me down for the last time."

Yet they keep the faith, choosing -- or do they? -- to partake in a Sunday ritual of vicariously living and dying with the te fortunes.

"There have been studies that show it's easier to change a religion than a football team," Hartmann said. "The fans' ide so tied up in this that it doesn't seem like they could choose to be otherwise. It's like you don't choose to be a fan; it's w are."

It's a lifelong passion play

Years of indoctrination are at play here. Boomer and senior fans watched the Vikings lose four Super Bowls in eight ye: during the late 1960s and '70s; they and younger rooters saw glorious 1998 and 2009 seasons come to excruciating er one play short of the big game. While some locals abandon ship in down years, hundreds of thousands of devotees sta onboard.

"They've invested *a lot*. The more you put into something, the more you're invested in it," said John Tauer, a University Thomas associate professor of psychology. "And there's some fear of 'if they ever do win it, I don't want to miss out.' "

But why do sports teams in general and this one in particular engender such loyalty?



Paul Thielman (left) shared a toast with friends as they tailgated before the Vikings-Broncos game.

"Sports has this emotional component to it that really amplifies the reactions people have," said Tauer, who also coaches Thomas' men's basketball team. "You might be invested in another part of the community, but it doesn't have the same emotional consideration. If a local grocery shuts down, people move on with their daily lives."

Vikings fans, meanwhile, find ways to cope. Breen, for example, applies her sunny disposition to her beloved team.

"You just hang in there with the Vikings," she said. "You kind of feel like they're us, part of the family and you want the f to do well."

Joe Juranitch, aka Ragnar, takes the familial scenario one step further. "Sometimes your child will do stuff that makes y want to slap 'em, throw 'em out of the house," the unofficial Vikings mascot said, "and a couple of days later you go, 'Bc really love that kid.'"

Thielman glances eastward for inspiration and hope. "The Packers had so many lean years," he said, "and look at them -- undefeated and reigning league champions.

Misery loves empathy

And then there's this: "We say that misery loves company," Tauer said, "but mostly it loves miserable company. You w be around people in dire straits."

Toward that end, Thielman typically ends up commiserating with an even longer-suffering lot, Cubs fans, on annual trip Chicago for the Vikings-Bears game. "They'll hang with us," Thielman said. "You basically sulk together."

Cubs fans could give their Vikings counterparts lessons in dealing with perpetual disappointment: Their team hasn't wo title since Roosevelt -- Teddy Roosevelt -- was president in 1908.

"The Vikings were dominant one generation ago. Why don't you take it back five generations and come talk to me?" sai Brehmer, a Chicago DJ who spent two years as Cities 97's program director in the early '90s. "I think Cubs fans more tl fans of most teams really are compelled to live in the moment. There's no past. There's no future. There's just a commi to the excitement of this afternoon's game at Wrigley Field."

That mirrors Thielman's basic approach. "I have friends who think I'm crazy," he said, "and I tell them, 'Come on down t tailgate and see how much fun that is.'"

Bridesmaids 'R' Us

Tauer and Hartmann differed a bit on whether our basic nature, that Scandinavian stoicism and Upper Midwest reserve into this passion.

"If you buy into the Scandinavian lineage, that certainly can allow people to let things roll off their shoulders," Tauer saic

On the other hand, Hartmann noted, "sports provides an outlet in a world that is very routine-ized, where we can expres things that in the rest of life we keep inside. We've created an entire personality type that's reserved, so there are emoti looking for ways to get out, and sports really provides that opportunity.

"It's not only OK, but that's what you're supposed to do."

Still, Hartmann added, the Vikings' devoted rooters really are different from their counterparts with other local pro sports teams.

"They're the most popular team in the market by a lot," he said. "Also the history is 'always the bridesmaid, never the br So I do think a part of being a Vikings fan is that you have to accept that and kind of embrace it.

"Timberwolves fans are kind of apathetic. The Wild and Twins fans have high expectations every year, but they'll drop c those teams are losing. Those Vikings fans are really committed."

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