

People love winning streaks by individuals—teams, not so much

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People enjoy witnessing extraordinary individuals—from athletes to CEOs—extend long runs of dominance in their fields, a new study suggests. But they aren't as interested in seeing similar streaks of success by teams or groups.

"Everyone wants Usain Bolt to win another gold medal for sprinting. Not so many people want to see the New England Patriots win another Super Bowl," said Jesse Walker, lead author of the study.

The reason? "Extraordinary [success](#) by individuals inspires awe in people in a way that team success does not," said Walker, an assistant professor of marketing at Ohio State University's Fisher College of Business.

"When we see Usain Bolt win three gold medals in a row, it expands what we thought was the limit of human potential. Team winning streaks don't change as much what we think humans can achieve," he said.

"People appear to be more moved by individual

success than group success and so they're more interested in seeing individual success continue."

Walker and Thomas Gilovich, professor of psychology at Cornell University, did nine studies involving 2,625 Americans. Their results appear in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

In one study, they examined people's views on the success of Usain Bolt, the Jamaican sprinter who won the 100-meter dash in the last three Olympics. Bolt was also a member of a team that won the gold medal in the 4x100-meter relay at those same Olympic games.

Many more people reported they would prefer to see Bolt win the gold medal in the individual event in the next Olympics than in the relay event, results showed.

But the preference for seeing individual streaks continue doesn't just apply to famous athletes in familiar sports. In one study, participants were told about an obscure Italian sport called Calcio Fiorentino.

Participants who were told about an individual version of the sport—and read about a fictional superstar who had won the championship six times in a row—were more likely to say they wanted him to win a seventh time, compared to those who read about a team that had won the championship six times in a row.

And it is not just sports superstars that inspire people to want to cheer on winning streaks.

Studies showed people supported individual runs of dominance over team dominance in the British Quizzing Championship and in the best closure rates on homicide cases in U.S. police departments.

This preference has implications in the business

world, as well.

In one study, participants read about the real electronic components manufacturer AVnet, one of the 350 largest companies in America.

Half the participants were told that a (fictional) CEO of the company had guided the company for the last couple of decades, making a series of shrewd and successful decisions that led to AVnet's success. The other half were told a group of executives had guided the company, making the same shrewd decisions.

Participants who read that Avnet's success could be attributed to its CEO thought the company should command a greater share of the market than did the participants who were told the company's success was tied to a group of executives.

"This could be one of the reasons why customers connect personally with companies like Apple that are identified with their founders and CEOs," Walker said.

"Successful companies like IBM or Samsung that are more faceless have a harder time connecting with people on such a personal level and inspiring people to root for their continued success."

Other studies looked at why people feel differently about individual versus team winning streaks.

Results showed that people attributed individual streaks of success to the people themselves, while team success was attributed to situational factors.

"When an individual is on a streak of success, it is a lot easier to pinpoint who is responsible—they own their success. With a group or team, there are so many people involved and so many moving parts that it is less clear. There could be any number of factors that account for a group's success," Walker said.

"We found that people view individual streaks as attributable directly to the talents or efforts of the individuals involved, which inspired feelings of awe that they presumably enjoy and would like to

continue."

More information: Jesse Walker et al. The streaking star effect: Why people want superior performance by individuals to continue more than identical performance by groups., *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (2020). DOI: [10.1037/pspa0000256](https://doi.org/10.1037/pspa0000256)

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