CHARLES HILLMAN PLAYS Freud to the fright-wigged and face-painted: He plumbs the psyches of sports fans. What the psychologist discovers in those dimly lit corridors is often unsettling, never more so than when his 1997 study at the University of Florida proved empirically what many of us had long feared: that die-hard Florida fans find Gators football "better than sex."

Or so summarized a university press release. It is more accurate to say this: For many ardent Florida fans, watching Gators football is sex, or a near approximation. In Hillman's study, dedicated fans—rigged up to heart, brain and palm monitors, among others—exhibited many of the same "indicators of arousal" while viewing pictures of Florida trouncing Florida State as they did while viewing scenes of erotica.

Likewise, photographs of Florida quarterback Danny Wuerffel getting sacked by Seminoles produced nearly the same physiological revulsion in Gators fans as did shots of unspeakable animal attacks and mutilations. "Animal attacks and sex always elicit greater arousal because they reflect biological necessities," says Hillman, now a psychologist and kinesiologist at Illinois.
"But sports are still"—how shall he put this?—"intensely arousing."

Thus, we now know in our heads what our tingling extremities have been trying to tell us: that fanship falls just behind procuring food and procreating as a biological imperative. The root of rooting is indeed primordial.

Fan is short for fanatic, which is itself derived from the Latin fanaticus, “of a temple.” The fanatic, in the phrasing of a team of British researchers, was once “a person possessed by demons, making [him] frenzied and mad, excessively enthusiastic.” Such religious overtones are today more evident than ever. Look at St. Louis Cardinals supporters as a Mark McGwire home run takes flight: They resemble charismatic Christians at a revival meeting—arms raised, heads to the sky, mouths in a rictus, as if commanded to drop their crutches, rise and walk for the first time in a decade.

But baseball is not religion. It is—to echo Bill Shankly, the legendary Liverpool soccer manager—much more important than that. Die-hard Red Sox fan Elizabeth Dooley died last June, at age 87, having attended more than 4,000 consecutive home games from 1944 to 1998. Mercifully, Dooley didn’t die as hard as she might have, expiring hours before the Sox lost 22–1 to the Yankees, their worst-ever home defeat. Still, the roughly
12,000 hours that she spent in box 36-A at Fenway Park equal the time it would take to attend Mass every day for 33 years—or every Sunday for 230 years.

Fanship, like worship, survives through the handing down of ritual. We are the custodians of custom—of Lambeau Leap and Cameron Craziness, of Homer Hanky and Terrible Towel, of the Wave and Y.M.C.A. Imagine the curators of a 22nd-century curiosity shop. They will know not what to make of the archaeological artifacts we’ll
leave behind (indeed, that are already dis-
appearing from our luxury-boxed lives): the
golf-gallery periscope, the oversized foam-
rubber novelty index finger or that most
ingenious of inventions, the hard hat with
can holsters from which beer is siphoned
through twin tubes, relieving the two-fisted
drinker of the need to lift a fist. It was the
bleacher brainchild of an unknown fan, and
we toast this giant of our age, this Edison of
inebriation, in the only way he would appre-
ciate: by not raising a glass to him now.
Such kinship among strangers is, after all, the soul of sports fanship. “Fanship is very healthy,” says Hillman. “It allows a person to affiliate with something pleasant. Even Cubs fans, despite following a perennial loser, are distracted from larger stresses and given a feeling of camaraderie.”

Many years ago a Philadelphia Phillie named Jeff Stone lost a shoe while chasing a fly ball in centerfield at Wrigley. Moments later, as Stone went to retrieve his wayward footwear, a single shoe came arcing toward him, an Offerty from the bleachers. That shoe was followed by another, and another, and soon dozens of sneakers and sandals were raining down around Stone like a Biblical plague. There was great joy in that moment, and solidarity among strangers. Afterward, at bars all around Wrigley, beers were bought for any man or woman wearing but one shoe.

When you think of fanship in those terms, the world could use a lot more of it. The most well-adjusted person on the planet just might be the shirtless man in subzero cold wearing a plexiglass wedge of cheddar cheese on his head.

Or not: That image disturbs even a mental-health professional such as Hillman. “I always look at Green Bay fans,” says the psychologist, “and think, They’re nuts.”