understanding lifestyle sports

consumption, identity and difference

edited by
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Understanding Lifestyle Sports

Consumption, identity and difference

Belinda Wheaton

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Understanding Lifestyle Sports

What makes a lifestyle sport distinctive?

Skateboarding is now more popular than many traditional team sports in the USA. Is sport culture, and the identities that emerge from it, being transformed in the twenty-first century?

The past decade has seen a tremendous growth in the popularity of activities like skateboarding and snowboarding; sports that have been labelled as 'extreme' or 'lifestyle' and which embody 'alternative' sporting values such as anti-competitiveness, anti-regulation, high risk and personal freedom. The popularity of these activities goes beyond the teenage male youth that the media typify as their main consumers.

This book examines the popularity, significance and meaning of lifestyle sport, exploring the sociological significance of these activities, particularly as related to their consumption, and the expression of identity and difference. The edited collection includes unique ethnographic research work with skaters, surfers, windsurfers, climbers, adventure racers, and Ultimate frisbee players. The central themes explored in *Understanding Lifestyle Sport* include:

- How might we describe lifestyle sports?
- What influence do commercial forces have on lifestyle sports?
- Do lifestyle sports challenge the hegemonic masculinities characteristic of traditional sport environments?

Belinda Wheaton is a Senior Research Fellow at the University of Brighton's Chelsea School where she lectures in the sociocultural study of sport and leisure, and sport journalism. She is an active windsurfer, surfer and snowboarder and also writes for a range of 'lifestyle sports' magazines.

Routledge Critical Studies in Sport

Series Editors

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The Routledge Critical Studies in Sport series aims to lead the way in developing the multi-disciplinary field of Sport Studies by producing books that are interrogative, interventionist and innovative. By providing theoretically sophisticated and empirically grounded texts, the series will make sense of the changes and challenges facing sport globally. The series aspires to maintain the commitment and promise of the critical paradigm by contributing to a more inclusive and less exploitative culture of sport.

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Series editors' foreword

Dramatic changes and controversial developments are transforming the ways in which sport is experienced and understood. Many of the old ideas about sport embracing 'noble' and 'educational' values, offering disadvantaged peoples 'a way out', bringing nations closer together, or creating healthy bodies seem increasingly to lack credibility. In particular, there are widespread concerns that economic and political forces are becoming too influential and are distorting the role and place of sport in societies across the world. Further, there are anxious and often confused debates about the impact of new technologies and cultures of consumption on the integrity of sport. In short, as we move through the twenty-first century, sport faces serious and important challenges since its emergence in its modern form in the nineteenth century. Can we say with any confidence, for example, that sport as we now know it today, still recognisable from the beginning of the last century, will be equally recognisable at the end of this century?

These observations about sport today and the key questions raised above provide the impetus for this new Routledge Critical Studies in Sport series. Our intention as editors of the series is to tackle some of the big questions facing sport and society, to question assumptions about sport, to critique established ideas, and to explore new ones. Books in the series will investigate the changing features of 'old' sports and the distinguishing characteristics of 'new' ones; they will examine the social, political, environmental and technological dimensions of sport; they will interrogate theoretical procedures and issues which are the focus of controversy; and they will expose uncertainties that pose important questions about present trends and future predictions. They will also be empirically grounded and socially relevant, challenging and innovative, in particular through their engagement with issues concerning relations of power and discriminatory practices. The series as a whole aims to challenge complacency and encourage reflection and should assist students, researchers, policy-makers and professionals to make sense of the changes, challenges and crises facing sport globally. The guiding philosophy for the series can be summarised as:

- Interrogative: challenging common-sense ideas and exposing relations of power in the world of sport

- Interventionist: highlighting the relationship between theory and practice and providing arguments and analyses of topical and polemical issues
- Innovative: seeking to develop new areas of research, and stimulating new ways of thinking about and studying sport.

The Routledge Critical Studies in Sport series is particularly timely as sport studies continue to expand within higher education. As sociological analyses of sport in particular mature and become more sophisticated, the new insights that emerge need to be expressed and debated and it is expected that the series will become a key forum for such debate. As editors of the series, we are concerned to promote a more inclusive and less exploitative culture of sport practice and analysis, thus reviving what we call the 'social criticism of sport'.

The emergence and rapidly growing popularity of 'lifestyle sports' has been one of the most significant developments in recent years, to which the sport sociology community has given little attention so far. This has served to reinforce the marginal status of lifestyle sports and reveals one way in which scholars can be implicated in reproducing dominant relations of power in sport. We are delighted therefore that one of the first books in the series is *Understanding Lifestyle Sports*. This collection will certainly provide students with an invaluable resource about a burgeoning culture of sport that many of them will already be familiar with. What are known variously as 'action sports', 'extreme sports', 'postmodern sports', or what Belinda Wheaton has called 'lifestyle sports', represent a phenomenon that poses many questions that this series is designed to address. For example: 'To what extent do lifestyle sports offer an alternative culture to dominant sporting practices?' 'Do they offer more egalitarian and empowering gender identities than other sports?' 'Do lifestyle sports offer a counter to the commercially exploitative world of mainstream sport? 'In what ways has the media industry specifically, and the culture industries in general, sought to embrace lifestyles sports?'

One of the hidden features of Belinda Wheaton's book about lifestyle sports is that through this study of alternatives, of subcultures or the subaltern comes knowledge also about how the dominant is reproduced. Importantly, *Understanding Lifestyle Sports* is not merely an exploration of a range of alternative, emergent, subcultural practices, but is also a critique of mainstream sport and an insight into relations of power between the two. We would argue, therefore, that this collection makes relevant and important reading that has implications far beyond the insular world of one or other of the lifestyle sports featured in the book. The flamboyant world of these new 'other' sports are understood only in relation to 'established' ones embodying quite different social relations, meanings and values. This book should therefore be a key reading not only for all devotees of lifestyle sports, but for everyone else concerned with the culture of modern sport in general.

Jennifer Hargreaves (Brunel University, London)
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Personally I'd like to thank Stuart, who probably wishes he'd never introduced me to lifestyle sport, yet throughout my research and writing he has continued to support me, as well as 'taking part' as a 'critical friend.' Special thanks also to my parents; to my dad who even 30 years ago steadfastly refused to believe that 'girl's toys' were interesting, and who instead initiated me into the thrill of 'adventurous leisure'; and to my mum who refuses to slow down, and continues to provide immeasurable emotional support. Lastly to Poppy (now 18 months) who has contributed to this book's tardiness, and to whom it is dedicated.

While most of the material here is published for the first time, Chapter 7 appeared in an earlier incarnation in *Men and Masculinities*.

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Contents

1 Introduction

Mapping the lifestyle sport-scape

Belinda Wheaton

Prologue: alternative sport comes of age

> Pro skateboarder Tony Hawk is standing aboard a corporate jet on his way to a charity event in Houston. In his hand is a Heineken and on the table in front of him is a platter overflowing with lobster, stone crab, and jumbo shrimp. Doing his best imitation of former Talking Heads singer David Byrne, he stiffens his frame, taps his arm, and says, "And you may ask yourself, Well, how did I get here"?
>
> (Borden 2002: 1)

In May 2002 in a poll conducted by a 'teen' marketing firm in the USA, skateboarding star Tony Hawk was voted the 'coolest big time athlete' ahead of 'mainstream' mega-sport celebrities such as Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods (Layden 2002). If Jordan's status comes even close to Nike's claims (in 1999) that he is 'the most recognized person in the world' (cited in Mcdonald and Andrews 2001: 21), then alternative sport it seems, has come of age. Further evidence of the tremendous growth in alternative and extreme sports comes from participation figures; as Beal and Wilson (this volume) outline, in the USA the growth of skating, based on sales of skateboards, has outpaced the growth of a number of 'big league' traditional sports including baseball. Moreover, it is not just the US market that is seeing such a growth, nor is it just among young teenage men. For example, the snowboarding industry (in 1996) predicted that by 2005, half of all ski-hill patrons will be snowboarders (Humphreys 2003: 407); and in the UK, surfing became one of the fastest growth sports at the turn of the twenty-first century, particularly among women, and men in their thirties and forties (Tyler 2003; Walters 2002; Asthana 2003).

How do we make sense of this popularity in what I have termed lifestyle sport, particularly when one of the central characteristics of these so-called *alternative* sports is that they are *different* to the western traditional activities that constitute 'mainstream' sport?[1] As Rinehart (2000: 506) suggests, alternative sports are activities that 'either ideologically or practically provide alternatives to mainstream sports and to mainstream sport values'. This popularity trend, or process of mainstreaming particularly as manifest in the increased media and market appropriation

of alternative sport, has now received a great deal of attention from both academic and non-academic commentators on these activities. As Gliddon (2002: 1) notes:

> Surfing has appeal far beyond the surfers who provide the marketing cool. There's a surf shop in Singapore but the roughest water is the condensation on its windows. A boutique surf store competes with Chanel and Prada for the consumer waves of downtown New York.
>
> (Gliddon cited in Arthur 2003: 162)

This commercial co-option, particularly visible in the burgeoning 'sports style,' is a central debate in the wider literature on lifestyle sports, and a theme running through many of the chapters that make up this collection. However I will start my discussion by explaining what lifestyle sports are, and then outlining a theoretical framework for how we can make sense of their emergence and significance in contemporary Western culture. Lastly I outline the distinctive contribution made by this collection of essays to the emerging literature on these sports and their cultures.

What are lifestyle sports?

There is now a body of academic literature examining the phenomena of what has been variously termed 'extreme', 'alternative', 'lifestyle', 'whiz', 'action-sports'[2], 'panic sport', 'postmodern', 'post-industrial' and 'new' sports. Such labels encompass a wide range of mostly individualised sporting activities, from established practices like surfing and skateboarding, to new emergent activities like B.A.S.E. jumping and kite-surfing. While these labels are used synonymously by some commentators, there are differences which signal distinct emphases or expressions of the activities, characteristics that will become evident in the ensuing discussion.

The academic literature and thus 'labelling' of these sporting activities emerged in the early to mid 1980s with Nancy Midol's analysis of 'new sports', based on what she terms the 'whiz' sports movement in France (Midol 1993). Midol and Broyer (1995) developing Midol's (1993) earlier work, argue that a sporting movement developed around the 'whiz sports' which constitute new sport forms, and new communities based on them:

> This culture is extremely different from the official one promoted by sporting institutions. The whiz sport culture is championed by avant-garde groups that challenge the unconscious defences of the existing order through which French society has defined itself for the last two centuries. These groups have dared to practice transgressive behaviours and create new values.
>
> (Midol and Broyer 1995: 210)

In North America the idea of 'alternative sport' was adopted (Rinehart 1996, 1998a; Humphreys 1997; Beal 1995), although the 'extreme' moniker quickly became prevalent, as an all-embracing label, particularly in popular media discourse, and

most significantly in the emergence of ESPN's eXtreme Games, later renamed the X Games (see Kusz this volume).

The meaning of alternative sport has been most systematically considered by Rinehart (Rinehart and Sydor 2003; Rinehart 2000, 1998a, b). It includes an extremely wide range of activities – in fact pretty much anything that doesn't fit under the Western 'achievement sport' (Eichberg 1998) rubric. Rinehart (2000: 505) lists activities ranging from indigenous folk games and ultimate fighting to jet skiing, Scuba diving, beach volleyball, and ultra marathoning, also embracing various media spectacles such as the X Games. A number of commentators have also debated whether these activities are more appropriately (or usefully) conceptualised as forms of play rather than sports (see Stranger 1999; Howe 2003), and have highlighted the importance of their artistic sensibility (Rinehart 1998b; Wheaton 2003; Howe 2003; Humphreys 2003; Booth 2003). However, to understand their *meaning* we need to move beyond simplistic and constraining dichotomies such as traditional versus new,[3] mainstream versus emergent, or other related binaries such as sport versus art. Alternative sport, and so called 'mainstream' sport, can have elements of – to use Raymond Williams's (1977) categorisation – residual, emergent and 'dominant' sport culture[4] (Rinehart 2000: 506). As Rinehart suggests, the difference between, and within, these sport forms is best highlighted by a range of debates, concerning their meanings, values, statuses, identities and forms.

Despite differences in nomenclature, many commentators are agreed in seeing such activities as having presented an 'alternative', and *potential* challenge to traditional ways of 'seeing', 'doing' and understanding sport (Rinehart 1998b; Wheaton 2000a; Midol and Broyer 1995). Historically as Bourdieu (1984) has observed, many 'new sports' originated in North America, particularly in the late 1960s, and were then imported to Europe by American entrepreneurs (what he calls the 'new' and 'petite bourgeoisie'). With their roots in the counter-cultural social movement of the 1960s and 1970s (Midol and Broyer 1995) many have characteristics that are different from the traditional rule-bound, competitive and masculinised dominant sport cultures. Maguire (1999) for example, suggests that the emergence of these sports (he cites snowboarding, hang-gliding and windsurfing) and their challenge to the achievement sport ideology is evidence of the increase in the range and diversity of sport cultures, a 'creolization of sport cultures' (87, 211). Bale (1994), likewise submits that such activities present a challenge to the 'western sport model'.

Lifestyle sport is less all-embracing than the terms alternative or new sport; and although many lifestyle sports are often called extreme sport, the latter tends to be the way the mainstream media and marketers, rather than the participants themselves see them (Sky 2001).[5] As Rinehart (2000: 508) notes:

> Some practitioners – and writers – have disputed the very term 'extreme' as merely a blatant and cynical attempt to capitalize on a wave of oppositional sports forms, and, by doing so, for corporations such as ESPN to appropriate trendy oppositional forms.

This is not to suggest that the media are not central to understanding the experience or cultural significance of lifestyle sports. Rinehart makes a convincing case for the increasing influence of the electronic media in determining the shape of what he calls the 'alternative sportscape' (Rinehart 2000). Lifestyle sports take many shapes, including at the elite level being part of the landscape of 'traditional' sports (witness snowboarding in the Olympic Games), the X-Games (activities include a range of board sports including skating, snowboarding, and sport climbing – see Rinehart, 2000), and increasingly as a marketing tool for advertisers attracting youth audiences. Nevertheless underpinning these forms are lived cultures that are fundamentally about 'doing it', about taking part. Participation takes place in local subcultural spaces, spaces that are often quite 'liminal' (Shields 1992) lacking regulation and control, and the sports are performed in ways that often denounce – or even resist – institutionalisation, regulation and commercialisation.

Moreover, more important than classification is their *meaning* (Rinehart 2000). I use the term *lifestyle sport* as it is an expression adopted by members of the cultures themselves, and one that encapsulates these cultures and their identities, signalling the importance of the socio-historical context in which these activities emerged, took shape and exist. As I will exemplify, 'lifestyle sport' reflects both the characteristics of these activities, and their wider socio-cultural significance.

'It's a lifestyle thang'

In a radio interview in the USA (2002) Jake Burton, a key individual in snowboarding's history,[6] is asked about whether there was any 'agreed-upon definition of 'extreme sport,' or whether, it was 'somewhat in the eye of the beholder'?

> It doesn't have to be an extreme sport at all. There's a lot of people that, you know, snowboard in a fairly conservative manner. But I think what's a better moniker is maybe that it's a *lifestyle sport*, and a lot of the kids and people that are doing it are just completely living it all the time, and that's what distinguishes snowboarding from a lot of other sports. And skateboarding and surfing are the same way. And I'm not sure why that is unique to board sports, but I think the only thing that you can come back to is that they're so much fun.
>
> (Jake Burton 2002, *emphasis added*)

Similarly in my research on windsurfing, and in a range of other activities (Sky 2001), participants described the activity 'as a lifestyle' rather than a sport. It became evident that a particular *style of life* was central to the meaning and experience of windsurfing. Participants sought out a lifestyle that was distinctive, often alternative, and that gave them a particular and exclusive social *identity*. While this is particularly evident in board sports such as skating, surfing, and snowboarding, authors in this collection, and elsewhere, have charted the