SPORT AND SOCIETY IN THE GLOBAL AGE
TIMOTHY MARJORIBANKS & KAREN FARQUHARSON

Sport and Society in the Global Age

Timothy Marjoribanks
and
Karen Farquharson

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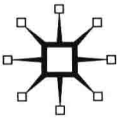

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TIM MARJORIBANKS
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Contents

List of Tables and Figures xii
Acknowledgements xiii
About the Authors xv

1 Introduction: Sport and Society in the Global Age **1**

Introduction 1
Defining sport 4
Sport as defined in this book 6
Overview of *Sport and Society in the Global Age* 7
Conclusion 8
Chapter summary 8
Discussion questions 8
Further reading 9

PART I UNDERSTANDING SPORT AND SOCIETY

2 Theorizing Sport and Society **13**

Introduction: why theory? 13
Sociological theory and sport 15
Analytic framework of this book 23
Conclusion 25
Chapter summary 25
Discussion questions 25
Further reading 26

3 **Researching Sport and Society** 27

Introduction 27
Approaches to knowledge 28
Studying sport from a sociological perspective 35
Conclusion 39
Chapter summary 39
Discussion questions 39
Further reading 40

PART II SPORT AND SOCIETAL PROCESSES

4 **Sport, Race and Racism** 43

Introduction 43
Naturally talented? 44
Media discourses of race and sport 47
Racial patterns of sports participation 49
Positional segregation 51
Racial disparities in pay 53
Racial abuse 54
Whiteness 57
Conclusion 58
Chapter summary 58
Discussion questions 59
Further reading 59

5 **Sport, Gender and Sexuality** 60

Introduction 60
Patriarchy and the social construction of gender 61
Sport and gender socialization 63
Gender and equity 64
Sport and sexuality 67
Bodily sex versus gender: policing gender boundaries in women's sport 71
Intersections: race, gender, sexual orientation 74
Conclusion 74
Chapter summary 74

Discussion questions 75
Further reading 75

6 **Sport, National Identity and Nation-Building** 76

Introduction 76
Nations, states and nation-states 77
Globalization, sport and nation 80
Mega-sporting events, nations and nation-building 88
Conclusion 91
Chapter summary 91
Discussion questions 92
Further reading 92

7 **Sporting Bodies** 93

Introduction 93
Sociology of the body 93
Drug use in sport 97
Management of pain and injuries 101
Cyborg athlete 104
Conclusion 106
Chapter summary 107
Discussion questions 107
Further reading 108

PART III REGULATING SPORT

8 **Governing Sport: The Club, League and Global** 111

Introduction 111
Governing sport 112
Governance in clubs 113
Governance of sport at the league level 119
Governance of sport at the global level 122
Conclusion 125
Chapter summary 126
Discussion questions 126
Further reading 127

9 **The Politics of Sport Regulation** 128

Introduction 128
Conceptualizing the state and sport policy 128
Manchester United, BSkyB and the British state 130
Regulating tobacco advertising 139
Regulating mega-events 141
Conclusion 142
Chapter summary 143
Discussion questions 143
Further reading 143

10 **Sport and Social Justice** 145

Introduction 145
Sport, social policy and social inclusion 146
Human rights and sport 151
Sport and corporate social responsibility 154
Ethical sport governance 158
Conclusion 159
Chapter summary 159
Discussion questions 160
Further reading 160

PART IV THE GLOBAL CULTURES OF SPORT

11 **The Global Athlete** 163

Introduction 163
The sports star as celebrity 163
Athletes as role models 168
Financial rewards 169
Managing the career 171
Migration 172
Conclusion 176
Chapter summary 177
Discussion questions 178
Further reading 178

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12 The Transformation of Fandom 179

Introduction 179
Sporting supporters: identity and belonging 180
Club organization and the supporter experience 184
Violent behaviour at sporting events 187
Gambling and fans 188
The future of fandom 191
Conclusion 192
Chapter summary 192
Discussion questions 193
Further reading 193

13 The Media and Consumption of Sport 195

Introduction 195
Media in society 196
Owning the media-sport industry 197
Two case studies of media-sport 198
Production processes 201
Media representations of sport 203
Audiences, fans and consumers 206
E-gaming 208
Conclusion 209
Chapter summary 210
Discussion questions 211
Further reading 211

PART V CONCLUSION

14 Conclusion: Sport, Society and Sociology 215

Revisiting the central argument 215
Future developments in the sociology of sport 217

Glossary 220
References 225
Index 247

List of Tables and Figures

TABLE

5.1 Reasons for non-participation by gender (per cent), South Africa and Australia 66

FIGURE

8.1 Typical organizational structure of a sport club 116

Chapter 1

Introduction: Sport and Society in the Global Age

INTRODUCTION

In 1995 the Rugby World Cup was held in South Africa. The first major international sporting competition held in South Africa since the end of its racially separatist apartheid policies, the World Cup symbolized South Africa's re-entry to the global sporting community from which it had long been ostracized due to its apartheid practices. Rugby union, particularly as represented by the national Springbok Rugby team, was at that time a contentious sport in South Africa, associated with the Afrikaner community and widely hated by African groups who had been excluded from playing. Through hosting the World Cup, and under the political leadership of then President Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu, rugby union was reframed in South Africa as a South African sport that was for all South Africans (see *Invictus*, 2009; Farquharson and Marjoribanks, 2006). This historically racially exclusive sport came to symbolize hope for a racially united South Africa, and for all South Africans.

As this example shows, contemporary sport is an important site of social, political, cultural and economic engagement, action and struggle in the global age. As such, sport is an important topic for sociologists, social scientists who are concerned with understanding how society is structured and operates. Millions of people around the world participate in sport in a range of ways on a daily basis. People of all ages and from all walks of life play, coach, participate in and support all types of sport. They discuss it with family, friends and co-workers. It is an important, perhaps integral, part of

the lives of many, who invest many resources into sport, both personally and at broader societal levels.

During the late 20th and early 21st centuries, sport has been characterized by a number of trends. First, sport at all levels is becoming increasingly professionalized. This means that where sporting clubs and organizations have typically been run by volunteers, they are increasingly relying on paid professionals to coach and to manage day-to-day operations. Related to this, sports are becoming increasingly commercialized, with corporate sponsorship present at all levels, from community-based children's sport through to professional sport. In addition, globalization has led to sports spreading to new countries, and markets. And there are increasing connections between sports and media companies, with the sale of media rights, for example, a key source of revenue for professional sporting leagues, and media and sport companies often sharing the same owner. Sport is also promoted as a source of social inclusion, a vehicle for the disadvantaged and excluded to enter the middle classes. All of these trends have brought sport increasingly to the attention of political and policy regulators and other state, corporate and non-government organizations. These processes of transformation are significant not only for sport, but also for broader social relations locally, nationally and globally. In particular, these trends raise questions around current sporting practices and future directions for the relationship between sport and society in the global age (Rowe, 2003).

This book explores the interactions between sport and society, focusing on the social, political, policy and organizational dimensions of these relationships. It critically analyses three dimensions of the relationship between sport and society, as reflected in Parts II, III and IV of the book:

- Sport and Societal Processes
- Regulating Sport
- The Global Cultures of Sport

It also discusses theoretical debates, methodological issues and up-to-date research, showing the importance of undertaking theoretically informed and empirically grounded research as a means to describe and understand sport in society.

The central argument of *Sport and Society in the Global Age* is that sport and society are in a constant and ongoing process of interaction. Sport does not exist independently of society, but is fundamentally influenced by its social context. At the same time, the practice and organization of sport has

an influence on the societal context in which it operates. That is, sport does not merely reflect its societal context. It is a site of social action in its own right, providing insights into the interactions and relations between organizations central to the contemporary world, including the state, corporations, non-government organizations and social movements. The 1995 South African Rugby World Cup exemplifies this. South Africa had been largely excluded from the global sporting community due to its racist policies. Global pressures, including from sports organizations which prevented South Africa from competing in sporting competitions, contributed to the social changes that brought about the end of apartheid. The end of apartheid by itself did not change local feelings about rugby. Work needed to be, and was, done at the local level to change the Springbok Rugby team from symbolizing division to symbolizing unity.

In the current global age, the interactions, practices and organizations around sport are undergoing profound changes at the local, national and global levels, which themselves require analysis. Analysing sport from a sociological perspective reveals the ways that these transformations involve the exercise of various forms of power, ranging from overt (as in the case of one organization buying another) through to hegemonic (as in the everyday acceptance of sport as a symbol of nationhood). A central goal of this book will be to uncover the power dynamics of the interactions between sport and society, in particular analysing the societal relations that both sustain power dynamics in sporting contexts, and challenge them. The engagement with questions of power, while central to sociology as a discipline, also means that our discussion will engage with debates and issues in a range of other disciplines that have considered power in sport, including political science and policy studies, organizational and management studies, cultural and media studies, anthropology and history.

What holds these various ideas together in the context of the sociology of sport is that they provide a means for thinking about the sociological imagination, a concept developed by the American sociologist C. Wright Mills (1959) as a means of capturing a central contribution of sociology. Thinking sociologically, or mobilizing the sociological imagination, involves a process through which we aim to problematize the familiar by critically examining it, and to not take for granted the social arrangements we encounter. Perhaps most importantly, the sociological imagination requires that we consider people in their social contexts. This means considering how historical, cultural and structural factors relate to and connect with each other (Bauman and May, 2001; Germov, 2005; Germov and Poole, 2011b; Willis, 2004).

Although it is important to explore sport at a global, national or organizational level, sport gains much of its significance because of its important place in the lives of individual people. Sport is a set of social practices that is experienced by the individual who plays a particular sport, or who supports or works for a club or an athlete, or who consumes sport in a variety of ways, including through media. In this regard, it is important not to forget that participation in sport, and consumption of sport, are crucial forms of enjoyment and passion for people in their everyday lives. As such, analysis of sport from a sociological perspective recognizes that the actors in the world of sport are individuals. At the same time, individuals do not live in isolation, but exist as members of a range of groups or collectives, and much of the meaning of our lives comes from our membership of, or exclusion from, particular groups. Individuals also operate within social structures or patterns of relationships such as the economy, family, ethnicity and gender, which are influenced by power relations. So, sociological analysis of sport looks at individuals, groups and social structures, and their interactions (Giulianotti, 2004, 2005).

DEFINING SPORT

Defining sport is more difficult than it might seem at first glance, as sport has multiple meanings – some of which try to capture the activities that are understood to constitute sport and others that refer to the processes of sport.

Sport as an activity

Sport can be thought of as an activity that involves exerting your body and is competitive. This very broad definition would include very informal sports, such as a social game of beach volleyball, and more formal ones that require special equipment, such as ice or field hockey or rowing, also known as crew in the US. A more precise definition limits sports to activities that occur in formal structures (Nixon and Frey, 1996). This definition would include officially organized running races, but not casually racing a friend. An even more precise definition introduces an element of skill, saying that sports are not only 'institutionalised competitive activities', they also 'involve rigorous physical exertion or the use of relatively complex physical skills' (Coakley and Pike, 2009, p. 5; see also Nixon and Frey, 1996). While these definitions of sport as an activity vary somewhat, combined they emphasize that sport: (1) is institutionalized or organized; (2) involves competition and reward; (3) and involves physical exertion and skill. These definitions

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