

THIRD EDITION

SOCIAL ASPECTS OF SPORT



ELDON E.
SNYDER

ELMER A.
SPREITZER

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third edition

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Preface

One objective in writing the first edition of this book was to put under one cover the material we had been using while teaching and researching the sociology of sport. In the intervening years we have continued our teaching and research in this academic area. This edition reflects these ongoing experiences as well as recent developments in the field. We have tried to include material that is of interest to current and future practitioners in the world of sport—coaches, athletic directors, physical education instructors, recreation specialists, sportswriters, sport administrators and managers, as well as educated laypeople. Thus, the content of the book spills over the boundaries of several disciplines—sociology, American studies, popular culture, leisure and recreation, physical education, and child development.

Since the term *sport* is a global concept, we frequently have found it helpful to divide the concept into three subtypes: informal, semiformal, and formal sport. Goals and levels of organization differ within these three spheres; thus, the material presented in this volume spans the topics of play, leisure, recreation, physical education, and formally organized sport.

The present work represents a rewriting of topics included in the earlier editions as well as the inclusion of material on sociological theories that are helpful in the analysis of sport. Additionally, we present new material in a chapter on sport management. Since we have an ongoing interest in lifelong participation in sport, this topic is given attention again in the third edition. In this context, we deal with sport as a means of symbolizing a life style, as a leisure-time pursuit, and as a reflection of social patterns inherent in the larger society.

Our book differs from many other scholarly writings in the sense that we do not attempt to maintain a scientific detachment from the material in order to avoid value judgments. On the contrary, we feel free in our analysis implicitly and explicitly to express values, sentiments, opinions, and recommendations. For example, attention is devoted to both the positive

and negative aspects of sport within schools and society. In this context, we offer suggestions—gratuitous though they may be—to coaches, athletic directors, teachers, and parents. Finally, in the preparation of this third edition we want to express our appreciation of our wives and families for their understanding and support.

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Introduction

Sport represents one of the most pervasive social institutions in our society. Sport permeates social reality from the societal level down to the individual. Modern sport has its roots deeply embedded in the history of Western society. In classical Greek society the body, developed through vigorous and graceful physical movement, was the epitome of beauty. The importance of physical excellence is readily evident in the sculpture of this period. As Lowe (1977) has noted, the body was perceived "... as the source of all good and happiness was the key to spiritual salvation. The more beautiful the body, the better the man or woman in pantheistic terms. The Olympian gods were accorded characteristics that were values of their society—strength, beauty, courage, wisdom, and athletic ability" (p. 4). Although sport in the Greek and Roman eras eventually became predominantly ritualized spectacles (for example, Roman circuses), such spectacles nevertheless attest to the prominence of sport and its reflection in the social and cultural milieu in which it existed. Throughout the Roman Empire, the government erected stadia for entertainment of the citizens. Even to this day, the wide geographical dispersion and the grandeur of these stadia, particularly the Colosseum, are evidence of the breadth and organizational sophistication of the Roman Empire. Game days, festivals, and holidays ("holy days") throughout the Middle Ages continued the practice of competitive games and sport into the modern era.

The prevalence of sport in modern society can be documented in terms of news coverage, financial expenditures, number of participants and spectators, movies, books, themes in comic strips, hours consumed, sales of sports equipment, and time samplings of conversations. In considering the commercial use of sport, television is a good reference. For example, in 1960 the broadcast rights for the Olympics was \$50,000. In 1984 American Broadcasting Company paid \$225 million for the Summer Games in Los Angeles and the NBC paid \$450 million for the television rights for the

1988 Summer Olympics in Seoul, Korea. These price tags soon become dated, but the rapidity with which this happens is itself a measure of the public's interest in spectator sports.

The prominence of sport on commercial television is also evident in the frequent use of sports personalities in commercials as well as play-by-play and color analysis of the athletic events. Former athletes Jim Palmer and Bubba Smith readily come to mind for their appearances in television commercials. Moreover, many other athletes have left the playing fields to enter show business or television. The list includes such personalities as Alex Karras, Frank Gifford, Pat Summerall, Tom Brookshier, Tony Trabert, Don Drysdale, Tony Kubek, Julie Heldman, Peggy Fleming, Carey Middlecoff, Johnny Unitas, Billie Jean King, Cathy Rigby, Arthur Ashe, Bill Russell, and Dick Button. Again, the demand for ex-athletes is due primarily to television's increased emphasis on sports and its expansion of sports coverage. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s professional leagues expanded, new leagues formed, athletic stadia were expanded and refurbished, and new sport palaces were built in such places as Houston (Astrodome), New Orleans (Superdome), Arlington (Dallas-Ft. Worth), Seattle, Hackensack Meadows (New Jersey), Kansas City (Harry S. Truman Sports Complex), Pontiac, Mich. (Silverdome), and Indianapolis (Hoosier Dome). Indeed, one could suggest that the athletic stadium is the prototypical architectural form of the modern era similar to the pyramids, temples, cathedrals, railroad stations, and skyscrapers of earlier eras. We hasten to point out that this trend is not only found in commercial sport. On many college and university campuses, new recreation buildings are being built, primarily designed for informal and recreational sport participation.

The pervasiveness of sport is also evident in the spectator interest in watching sporting events. For example, over 50 percent of Americans express a strong interest in watching a sporting event. Additionally, almost three out of every four (73 percent) watch sports on television at least once a week, while 60 percent talk about sports with their friends at least once a week and 58 percent read the sport pages of their newspapers that often (Miller Lite Report, 1983, p. 17). Fan interest in sport is also reflected in active sports involvement. The Miller Lite Report (1983, p. 29) shows that 42 percent of the general public indicated their interest in participation in sports is high, while only 25 percent of the population say they have little or no interest in participating in sports activities. As one would expect, a great percentage of young people between the ages of 14 and 17 were interested in participation (62 percent) as compared with those 65 and older (21 percent). Also, a larger proportion of men (55 percent) expressed an interest in sports participation as compared to women (32 percent).

Further evidence of the prevalence of sport in our society is manifested in the sport idioms and figures of speech that are a part of our everyday communication—for instance, "struck out," "scored," "out in left

field," "ball park figure," "not in the same ball park," "foul play," "out of bounds," "cheap shot," "dirty pool," "toss up," "fumbled the ball," and so on. Metaphors from the world of sport provide ready-made descriptions, images, and impressions that are used to facilitate communication in nonsport contexts. For example, Balbus (1975) has noted the frequent use of sport terminology in the political sphere.

State activity is increasingly being cloaked in the rhetoric of the sports world; at times it even appears as if the language of politics is being completely absorbed by the language of sports. Thus the president becomes the "quarterback" who, along with his Cabinet and White House staff "team," pursues "game plan" policies designed to reach the "goal line" and to "win" the political "ballgame." This corruption of the discourse of politics by the discourse of sports alerts us to a possibly profound transformation in the way in which governmental activity in America is defined and understood: to develop politics with the symbolism of sports is to transfer the meaning which we attribute to the latter to the former. Thus the political ascendancy of the sports metaphor may well signal the increasing importance of sports as a legitimating mechanism of the American state. (pp. 26-27)

Considering how familiar most people are with sport, the use of such metaphors may indeed promote clarity and precision of communication. However, they may also transfer a sport imagery that distorts other areas of social life. In any event, the proliferation of sport metaphors and figures of speech in nonathletic contexts does document the influence of sport in our society.

Communicating in the language of sport has become so common that it often serves the function of "small talk." Sportstalk of this type is similar to talking about the weather. It opens conversation, regardless of how well people know each other, and allows pleasantries to be exchanged that would otherwise be difficult or impossible. Much of our daily conversation is of this "small talk" variety; in fact sport is the contemporary *lingua franca* of social discourse for a large segment of the population. It might be preferable for communication to be exchanged at a less superficial level, but in a society filled with impersonal relationships, "small talk" may be the best we can hope for in many settings. At least we feel somewhat less lonely and more comfortable when we exchange trite expressions about the Yankees, Lakers, Flyers, or the success of the local football team. Indeed, we may not have the time or the inclination to discuss more ponderous matters.

The prevalence of sport is also reflected in the play of children, which serves as an early means of socialization into sport activities. These early socialization experiences typically begin in the family and continue throughout the life cycle in the form of family leisure and recreation. Participation in sport extends into the school setting, with progressive levels of

formalization and emphasis on performance continuing through the higher levels of education. In many high schools, colleges, and universities, sport is a major component in resource allocation as well as in status attainment. However, a discordant note in the athletic programs of some major universities gives further evidence of the influence of sport in our society. Alleged academic improprieties among athletes and questionable (not to mention illegal) recruiting practices by coaches and alumni suggest that athletic success has become, in some cases, incompatible with the academic goals of higher education. In the spring of 1986 Americans were shocked by the apparent drug-related death of the basketball star Len Bias and by reports of the use of steroids by athletes from the high school to professional levels. Indeed, sport is front-page news.

The impact of sport is also illustrated by the 1980 Winter Olympic Games at Lake Placid. Eric Heiden's feat of winning five gold medals together with the historic victory of the U.S. hockey team's 4-3 victory over the Soviet Union enthralled the nation, and the entire team became *Sports Illustrated's* "Sportsmen of the Year." Yet shortly after the exhilaration of these events, on April 12, 1980, the political implications of sport were vividly illustrated when the United States Olympic Committee voted to boycott the Summer Olympics in Moscow. Officially, the decision was in compliance with President Carter's assessment that participation in the games, in light of the Russian invasion of Afghanistan, would present a threat to the national security of our country. Then, in 1984 the Soviet Union boycotted the Los Angeles Summer Olympic Games. In summary, we can see that sport is intertwined within the institutional structure of our society at both the macro and micro levels. The prominence of sport in society suggests the value of further research on this interrelationship.

PARADOXICAL ASPECTS OF SPORT

In Chapter 2, "The Nature of Sport," we focus on some essential characteristics of sport, devoting particular attention to the indeterminacy, duality, intrinsic and extrinsic dimensions. In some respects these dimensions of sport revolve around a series of paradoxes within sport. Elias and Dunning (1986) have discussed a similar notion within the context of sporting events. For example, they note that within an athletic contest there must be a balance of tension maintained between the competing teams. This balance is a kind of fluctuating equilibrium between too much and too little tension. There must be some tension to add excitement and "tone" to the contest, yet this tension must be delicately controlled by the rules to achieve the objectives and continuation of the contest.

It is apparent that the paradoxes can also be considered within a dialectical framework in the sense of a continuous confrontation between

opposing qualities. For example, the element of competition in sport provides a healthy tension to the contest. It brings out the motivation to excel and extend oneself physically, emotionally, and mentally. This is self-enhancing, exciting, and exhilarating. Yet, excessive competition contains the potential to destroy sport, since it may lead to violence and to a win-at-any-cost philosophy. Additionally, the motivation to achieve high performances, victories, prestige, national rankings, league championships, and monetary success (extrinsic rewards) demands a very high input of physical, emotional, and material resources. As a consequence, there is likely to be a corresponding loss of the intrinsic fun and joy of participation. Competition, too heavily stressed, turns play into work. Furthermore, the importance of commercial success associated with formal sport is itself a potential threat to sport, since the primary goal of financial solvency may lead to excesses that become a travesty of sport. In this situation, the spectators no longer appreciate the skill, strategy, and excitement of gifted athletes striving for an unpredictable outcome. Rather, they attend to see the blood flow, cheap thrills, and "flash." The essence of sport has been subordinated to entertainment. Even the desire for victory is no longer primary. This characteristic of sport is clearly illustrated in the commercial focus of pseudo-sports such as professional wrestling and roller derby. Here, the patent pecuniary interest of the promoters, the induced violence, and distorted humor preclude the appellation of sport. When the audience openly laughs at physical events such as these, it is clear that we have crossed the threshold from sport into parody.

Thus the dialectic within sport needs to be maintained in a delicate balance of tension. Throughout this book, we focus on aspects of play, informal, semiformal, and formal sport. These activities form a continuum with varying mixtures of related paradoxes of sport. Our analysis attempts to delineate these characteristics of sport and their consequences to the participants and interrelated social institutions. We provide our own critiques and analyses of these sport phenomena. Our personal values favor the increased opportunity for people of all ages and sexes to be actively involved in sport. We emphasize the importance of the intrinsic rewards that are associated with autotelic physical activities, yet we recognize the entertainment value of sport for spectators. We admit that the pageantry of sport spectacles is likely to be functional in providing social integration, and we would not deny to talented athletes the opportunity to seek the extrinsic prestige and financial rewards that go with big-time sport. But we urge the need for balance, lest social resources be diverted to formal and commercialized sport rather than participatory and lifetime sport for the majority of the society. Similarly, we decry the imbalance that goes with the tendency toward passive rather than active participation in sport. We challenge the reader to be aware of these complexities as we deal with the social ramifications of sport in the following chapters.

SOCIAL SCIENTIFIC STUDY OF SPORT

Because sport is a major phenomenon in modern society, one might speculate as to why it has only recently been approached as a legitimate area to study by social scientists.¹ Perhaps one answer to this question lies in the assumption that sport was primarily meant to be physical rather than social interaction and was thus devoid of interest to social scientists. In an insightful essay entitled "The Interdependency of Sport and Culture," Gunther Lüschen (1967) points out that even the most simple physical activities, such as walking, are social in nature. In a like manner, the more complex physical activities that are classified as sport involve greater suffusion from the social and cultural milieus. Another explanation for the late entry of social scientists into the analysis of sport may be that the world of sport is often perceived in terms of illusion and fantasy, as a sphere apart from the "real world" (Huizinga, 1938).

The philosopher Paul Weiss (1969) suggests that the relative neglect of sport by scholars is largely due to the dominant tradition in Western philosophical analysis as originally formulated by the Greeks and Aristotle in particular. Sport has been traditionally viewed as a lower form of culture and as not being reflective of the highest levels of human nature.

Aristotle wrote brilliantly and extensively on logic, physics, biology, psychology, economics, politics, ethics, art, metaphysics, and rhetoric, but he says hardly a word about either history or religion, and nothing at all about sport. Since he was taken to be "the master of those who know" his position became paradigmatic for most of the thinkers who followed, even when they explicitly repudiated his particular claims. . . . The fact that these subjects are studied today by economists, psychologists, and sociologists has not yet sufficed to free them from many a philosopher's suspicion that they are low-grade subjects, not worthy of being pursued by men of large vision. (p. 5)²

¹For a more technical review of this topic, see Eldon E. Snyder and Elmer Spreitzer, "The Sociology of Sport: An Overview," *The Sociological Quarterly*, 15 (Autumn 1974): 467-87. We also suggest the readers consult the following sources: Jay J. Coakley, *Sport in Society*, Saint Louis: C. V. Mosby, 1982; D. Stanley Eitzen and George H. Sage, *Sociology of American Sport*, Dubuque: Wm. C. Brown, 1986; John W. Loy, Barry D. McPherson, and Gerald Kenyon, *Sport and Social Systems*, Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1978; Gunther Lüschen and George H. Sage (eds.), *Handbook of Social Science of Sport*, Champaign, Ill.: Stipes, 1981; Wilbert H. Leonard II, *A Sociological Perspective of Sport*, Minneapolis: Burgess, 1984; Timothy Curry and Robert Jobu, *Sports a Social Perspective*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1984; C. Roger Rees and Roger Miracle, *Sport and Social Theory*, Champaign, Ill.: Human Kinetics, Inc., 1986; Andrew Yiannakis, Thomas McIntyre, Merrill Melnick, and Dale Hart (eds.), *Sport Sociology*, Dubuque, Ia.: Kendall/Hunt, 1987.

²From *Sport: A Philosophic Inquiry* by Paul Weiss. Copyright © 1969 by Southern Illinois University Press. Reprinted by permission of Southern Illinois University Press.

Dunning (1967) has argued that sociologists who define play and sport in terms of fantasy, and who are thus ambivalent about seriously studying the topic, may be reflecting a Protestant Ethic orientation that considers the study of play, games, sport, and leisure as frivolous and unbecoming of a "serious scientist." In response to these sentiments, Dunning (1971) emphasizes that "sports and games are 'real' in the sense they are observable, whether directly through overt behavior of people or indirectly through the reports which players and spectators give of what they think and feel while playing and 'spectating' " (p. 37).

There is an increasing realization that sport permeates and articulates with many other social institutions. Furthermore, sport is an important ingredient in people's lives. In the absence of scientific investigation, folk wisdom and assumptions have prevailed as "facts." These include ready-made words, statements, phrases, and slogans that trigger speech and behavior in a kind of stimulus-response fashion and thus bypass cognitive thought and reflection (Zijderveld, 1979, pp. 12–13). Because sport has become so much a part of our everyday life, this segment of social life is especially vulnerable given the clichés and assumptions (see Table 1-1). Furthermore, as we noted previously, these assumptions are easily transferred as metaphors to other spheres of social life. In a sense, a double falsehood may be perpetrated if a falsehood as it applies to the sport world is transferred as "fact" to other spheres of behavior. Zijderveld (1979) argues that modern society is filled with conflicting norms and values, vagueness, and emotional and moral instability. Thus, our society is clichégenic in the sense that it promotes clichés that provide ready-made but artificial clarity, stability, and certainty.

In the world of sport these clichés are readily apparent; for example,

TABLE 1-1 A Sample of Some Clichés from the World of Sport

It's a game of inches and seconds.	We are rebuilding.
He has all the moves.	We'll surprise a few teams.
She's a pure shooter.	We're a team of destiny.
He's a natural hitter.	We stayed too long with our game plan.
He plays without the ball.	They had the killer instinct.
He plays both ends of the court.	This is a class team.
He can really motor.	We lost the momentum with that play.
He's a blue chip athlete.	We'll take them one game at a time.
He hung the clothesline.	Our staff developed a good game plan.
When the bell rings, he's ready.	It was a team effort.
He's an inspirational leader.	We couldn't establish our passing game.
He came to play.	They wanted it more than we did.
She turned the game around.	We didn't put enough points on the board.
He's the most under-rated player	They were willing to pay the price.
in the league.	They put their pants on one leg at a time
He's a clutch player.	like we do.

one of the most frequently cited functions of sport is that it "builds character." This common assumption has been the theme of many speakers at athletic banquets. On closer investigation, we find that this "truth" is probably more accurately described as a half-truth. Another commonly held assumption is that athletic pursuits detract from academic concerns (resulting in the "dumb jock" stereotype). Research findings are also providing important qualifications to this assumption. The belief that sport provides a model of racial equality and a means for many blacks to become professional athletes is another unfounded assumption. Considerable data have been accumulated that, likewise, raise serious questions about this folk belief. Another commonly held stereotype is that female athletes are physical "Amazons" who tend to be more masculine than most females and are thus likely to suffer from a confusion of sex roles and self-concept. Once again, recent research has refuted these assumptions. Additional questions might be raised regarding the validity of other assumptions such as the following: Sport is a preparation for life; sports are a way to get ahead; the will to win is the will to work. Recent research has begun to raise questions about these assumptions. Scientific investigation moves beyond conjecture to test assumptions in a disciplined manner. New observations and findings about the world of sport frequently demonstrate that previously held perspectives of social reality were distorted.

Berger (1963) also argues that the sociological mentality necessarily involves a debunking motif. Regardless of the social scientist's personality, scholarly analysis frequently results in an unmasking of the world that has been taken for granted. This tendency is methodological and not psychological. "The sociological frame of reference, with its built-in procedure of looking for levels of reality other than those given in the official interpretations of society, carries with it a logical imperative to unmask the pretensions and the propaganda by which men cloak their actions with each other" (p. 38). The sociological question is not why something malfunctions from the point of view of officials and authorities. Rather, sociologists are more concerned with how a social system works in the first place—that is, in the norms, roles, and structures that hold something together.

Consequently, social scientists see through the facades of social systems and often discover many unofficial conceptions among the participants. In looking behind official definitions of social events, one discovers other layers of reality and latent levels of meaning that are masked in the course of everyday life. The "sociological perspective can then be understood in terms of such phrases as 'seeing through,' 'looking behind,' very much as such phrases would be employed in common speech—'seeing through his game,' 'looking behind the scenes,'—in other words 'being up on all the tricks' " (Berger, 1963, p. 30).

As professional sociologists, the authors of this book have been trained in the intellectual perspective described by Peter Berger. We hasten