

FURTHER READING

CHAPTER 14

This file contains additional readings from earlier editions of *Sports in Society: Issues and Controversies*, and some extra materials provided by Jay Coakley. These have not been included within the book as much of the content is explicitly focused on the USA, but users of the book may find these readings useful and interesting. Please feel free to send your feedback and/or suggest additional readings to us at jcoakley@uccs.edu or e.pike@chi.ac.uk.

Topic 1. Challenges and conflicts when more people play sports

Topic 2. The consequences of new technologies in sports

Topic 3. Using sports to create progressive changes

Topic 4. Using specific theories when changing sports

Topic 1. Challenges and conflicts when more people play sports

Research shows that less than 20 percent of the population in the United States accounts for over 80 percent of the sports participation. So what would happen if “inactive” adults began to play sports regularly? Would this lead to changes in how sports are organized and defined by most people? Would pleasure and participation sports become more popular than power and performance sports? We can begin to answer these questions by thinking about the environmental and political implications of increased sports participation. Here’s what we might expect:

1. Higher participation rates would increase demands on existing spaces and facilities where people play sports. Demands would be especially high on specialized physical settings that are expensive to construct and maintain, such as those used for tennis, racquetball, bowling, softball, soccer, golf, volleyball, ice and roller hockey, and many other sports.
2. When existing spaces and facilities cannot handle increased demands for usage, conflict among participants is likely. Overt conflict already occurs on softball and soccer/football fields, in gyms, and on tennis courts. Walkers, joggers, runners, bicyclists, skateboarders, and in-line skaters argue over who should have access to sidewalk and street space. Conflicts between surfers and swimmers, water-skiers and fishing enthusiasts, jet skiers and everybody, snowmobile riders and cross-country skiers have created management crises in urban and wilderness areas in North America.
3. When scarcity leads to conflicts, most people call for more spaces and facilities, along with closer regulation of existing spaces and facilities. However, financial crises in most communities prevent new construction and often interfere with the maintenance of existing spaces. Therefore, regulation of existing spaces and facilities increases.
4. Regulation by public and private organizations brings a combination of planned schedules, permits, memberships, user fees, reservations, and political negotiation. Officials who control access to spaces and facilities usually give priority to organized groups of participants, especially those from organized sport programs. Officials also tend to give access priority to elite athletes and teams in power and performance sports. Interscholastic teams, especially in football and basketball receive priority in school facilities. The best teams in community leagues receive priority for public fields and gyms. All-star teams and other elite sport groups receive priority so that they can become “respectable representatives” of their sponsors. Finally, officials to give priority to people with money for membership dues and user fees, especially in the private sector where the cost of access is often very high.

The outcome of this 4-stage process is that athletes and teams playing organized power and performance sports will continue to receive priority. Because these sports are grounded in the values and experiences of men, sport participation will continue to celebrate traditional gender logic. It will also emphasize competition, rationalization, bureaucratization, specialization, quantification, and record setting. Girls and women will continue to be defined as “naturally” inferior because they are not as big, strong, and fast as men. Of course, many people will oppose such outcomes, but changing them will not be easy.

Another outcome will be that playing sports will cost more money in the future. User fees guarantee that class relations will become more central in the social organization of North

American sports. Lower income people will continue to be underrepresented in most sports, even if more people play sports.

In summary, more people may play sports in the future, but they will play in much the same way as today. Pleasure and participation sports may grow in the future, but finding spaces and facilities for these sports will not be easy, nor will it be cheap. Of course, this is not what will happen if we intervene and advocate other outcomes than the ones I have outlined. The challenge is finding effective strategies for accommodating more sport participation without reproducing elitist and exclusive forms of sports. Is this possible?

Topic 2: The consequences of new technologies in sports

There are many cases in mainstream sports in which people use technology to push limits for the purpose of competitive success:

- Parents give synthetic human growth hormone to their children in the hope of “creating” world-class athletes.
- Athletes are in a constant quest to find substances and technological aids to help them become bigger, stronger, and faster.
- People of all ages seek sports equipment made with new, lightweight, strong materials, such as kevlar, titanium, and carbon fibre, so that they can develop new challenges and experiences.
- Some people dream of the day when the Human Genome Project provides information that permits the creation of genetically engineered “designer athletes.”
- Those people also dream of the day when the brain and central nervous system can be regulated to facilitate training and enhance performance.

These changes will raise many bioethical issues, but the people who use power and performance sports to form standards for judging what sports should be in the future may find it easy to ignore those issues. For example, many young people today are growing up with rapidly changing media images that blur the boundaries between human and nonhuman, and they expect that science will provide artificial organs as well as synthetic bones, tendons, and ligaments to those who need them in the future. Therefore, it won't be shocking when superstrong synthetic ligaments, bones, and joints are used to repair bodies injured in power and performance sports. It may not even be shocking when mechanical body parts are used to replace injured limbs and improve performance in sports. In fact, those who watch athletes in power and performance sports will increasingly accept the injuries and the abuse of athletes' bodies as the medical and physical costs of pushing limits, and they will expect science to repair the damage.

However, this acceptance will *not* come without resistance. Questions *will* be raised about using technology and pushing limits in sports. Dominant sports in the future will not simply be the result of what is technologically possible. Using technology could eliminate the human element in contests and games, so that athletes reach their potential only when they become machinelike.

This approach to sports ultimately subverts creativity, freedom, spontaneity, and expression among athletes, and it turns sports into programmed spectacles involving dramatically presented physical actions—such as professional wrestling. As this occurs, some athletes and spectators will resist it. There will be athletes who will not accept becoming pawns in such spectacles, and there will be spectators who will not watch them regularly, because it will be difficult to identify with programmed athletes playing prepackaged games lacking human spontaneity and expression.

Unless athletes *feel pressure, emotionally respond* to victory and defeat, *make mistakes, work hard* for success, and *have their good and bad days*, spectators may have trouble identifying with them. If this happens, the prevailing power and performance sports will lose much of their commercial value. The success of these sports depends on fan identification with athletes, and, if technology makes athletes too unlike the spectators who pay to watch them, fan identification could fade. After all, why watch cyborg athletes when you can buy a video game

that enables you to control the images of the same athletes in your media room at home? The video game costs less than buying a ticket to a game, and it gives you more control than watching a game on television and listening to announcers tell you what you're supposed to see and think.

The use of technology in power and performance sports also raises questions about fairness and access to sport participation. When the cost of technology is so high that only wealthy individuals, corporations, and nations can use it to their benefit, many people will question the meaning of athletic success. Will new definitions of *success* emerge? Who will benefit from these definitions? These and many other questions will beg for answers as new forms of pushing limits enter the realm of power and performance sports.

Topic 3. Using sports to create progressive changes

Dave Meggysey, a former NFL linebacker and regional director of the NFL Players Association, describes Dave Zirin as “an avowed progressive, a lover of sport, and a talented and committed journalist.” In addition to using a critical approach to cover sports, he uses it to look closely at sports through history. His focus often is on athletes who have resisted injustices and challenged barriers to participation and inclusion. In the process, he highlights cases when sports have been sites for progressive changes.

My goal is to summarize the most significant cases of progressive change that have been instigated or furthered through sports, but time ran out on me when these readings were posted online. Therefore, I’m referring you to two of Dave Zirin’s books that discuss these cases in depth and in their historical contexts.

One book is *What’s my name, fool? Sports and resistance in the United States* (Haymarket Books, 2005), and the other is *A People’s History of Sports in the United States: From bull-baiting to Barry Bonds . . . 250 years of politics, protest, people, and play* (New Press, 2008).

In *What’s my name, fool?*, Zirin describes the influence of people such as sportswriter Lester Rodney, a tireless critic of racial segregation in sports; Jackie Robinson, the first black man to play Major League Baseball in the modern era; Muhammad Ali, a critic of the Vietnam war who resisted the military draft on moral grounds; the black athletes and sociologist Harry Edwards who were part of the Olympic Project for Human Rights (OPHR) in the late-1960s; and those athletes who sacrificed part of their professional sport careers as they worked to establish players unions in their quest for workers rights in sports.

In *A People’s History of Sports in the United States*, Zirin chronicles the sport experiences of Native People, African slaves in the southern colonies, and working class people struggling to be treated humanely on the job and in their neighborhoods. He analyzes the role of sports in the struggles that revolved around race, class, and gender relations through U.S. history, and he highlights individuals who participated in those struggles. In the process, he describes the courage of athletes like Martina Navratilova, Paul Robeson, Curt Flood, Jim Brown, Billy Jean King, the Rutgers Women’s basketball team, Curt Flood, Craig Hodges and the dozens of athletes who participated in the Olympic Project for Human Rights (OPHR).

For anyone who has come to know U.S. sports through the mainstream media, Zirin’s books are eye-openers. They reveal a side of sports and sports history that are seldom acknowledged and certainly not covered in depth in sports media, and they illustrate the ways that sports, athletes, and coaches have been involved in processes of progressive change for well over two centuries in the United States.

When Zirin was interviewed about his latest book, he explained that he wrote it “to reclaim a sports history that is far more dynamic than we were ever led to believe.” He also notes that he was inspired by Howard Zinn’s *People’s History of the United States*, which taught him that “we learn about history not only to understand the past, but lay claim to the future.” And his hope is that “if we can reclaim sports, if we can crash down the palace gates of play, there’s no telling what we can go after next.”

Zirin talks about these issues at <http://www.zmag.org/zvideo/2811>

Topic 4. Using specific theories when changing sports

Each of the specific theories used by scholars in the sociology of sport provides a different perspective for understanding connections between sports and social worlds, identifying problems, and selecting approaches to create sports in terms of their anticipated consequences in people's lives. The following sections provide only brief summaries of how those theories may be used for these purposes.

Functionalist Theory

Functionalist theory continues to be used to envision sports in the future. For example, when corporate leaders talk with each other, they base many of their ideas on a functionalist approach. This appeals to people with power and influence because such an approach takes the existing social system for granted and explains the ways that sports can preserve and improve that system. A functionalist approach to the future emphasizes that existing sport forms should be supported and maintained in connection with *conservative* and *reformist* goals.

Therefore, the focus is on management issues designed to make sports and sport organizations more efficient while maintaining the culture and structure of sports as they are. Conservative goals are very common in sports because few people use a critical approach to view sports and because people who control and influence sports are advocates of growth, not social and cultural transformation. They want more people will have access to sport participation and experience its benefits. They wish to eliminate problems but keep the culture and structure of sports as they are. For example, women, people with disabilities, and those who have lived on the margins of mainstream sports and wish to be included in existing structures, programs, and organizations have reformist goals. Reformers focus mostly on issues such as equality of opportunity and social justice.

The Women's Sports Foundation (WSF) in the United States is an example of an organization with reformist strategies goals based on a functionalist approach. The WSF lobbies for gender equity so that girls and women have equal opportunities to participate in sports, and it calls attention to the need for more women in decision-making positions in existing sport organizations. Because the WSF depends on national fund-raising to survive, it is very careful when it works toward more radical goals based on critical and feminist theories. It does not want to alienate the majority of their donors who favor a functionalist approach and want sports to be maintained much the way they are today.

Conflict Theory

Conflict theory is seldom used when Americans think about sports and society. Although some intellectually oriented people today think that it is fashionable to discuss injustices related to race and gender, they avoid discussing injustices related to social class and class relations. Conflict theory with its explicit focus on social class makes them uncomfortable. It challenges the very ideologies on which their class privilege rests and forces them to think about problems inherent in a capitalist economy that survives on profits made by paying workers as little as possible.

Conflict theory focuses attention on class relations in sports and the ways that sports are used to preserve and disguise basic social-class divisions in society. People using conflict theory to create sports usually have radical goals, such as creating forms of sports in which there are no constraints on freedom, creativity, and enjoyment. The profit motive would be gone, so there would be no reason to exploit or oppress people.

Nearly everyone who uses conflict theory in the United States understands that eliminating capitalism is unrealistic at this point in history. Therefore, they favor specific goals such as enabling citizens, athletes, and spectators to organize themselves and challenge those who have used wealth and economic power to shape sports to maintain their privilege. Over the last half century, people using conflict theory have worked with like-minded reformers and people using other radical strategies to reduce racism, sexism, nationalism, and militarism in sports. Additionally, they have inspired athletes to form players' associations to bargain for their rights with leagues and team owners. In a few cases, people who used conflict theory during the 1960s and 1970s continue to work in and with those associations.

Outside the United States, conflict theory remains popular among many people. In cultures where people are less devoted to consumption as a form of status expression, class-related and economic ideologies are more open and widely discussed. This makes them more sensitive to the social and political implications of extreme gaps between the very wealthy and powerful and everyone else. It also makes them less resistant to using conflict theory to envision possibilities that do not depend on commercialism and the use of large amounts of capital.

Critical Theory

People who use critical theory are concerned with the processes through which culture is produced, reproduced, and changed. Therefore, they focus their attention on issues related to ideologies, representation, and power in society. They are especially interested in the ways that people use power to maintain cultural practices and social structures that represent their interests and the ways that people resist or oppose those practices and structures.

Critical theory helps people envision possibilities for sports that are free of exploitation and oppression; organized to be inclusive in connection with age, gender, race, ethnicity, religion, and (dis)ability; and used to empower people to participate actively in the social worlds in which they live. Reformist and radical goals are sought by critical theorists because they want to transform sports so that a diverse range of participation opportunities is available to all people. For example, seeking radical goals often involves disrupting and transforming the structure and dynamics of social relations related to gender, race, class, sexuality, and (dis)ability so that previously marginalized or underrepresented categories of people have equal opportunities to create and participate in sports that fit their interests and needs.

The radical goals favored by people using critical theory emphasize eliminating inequities, creating democratic forms of participation, and making ideological and structural changes in sports and society as a whole. Achieving these goals usually involves efforts to redistribute power and give voice to previously disenfranchised segments of the population in social worlds.

People with power and wealth usually strongly oppose radical goals because they call for transforming the ideas, beliefs, and forms of social organization on which their power and wealth depend. Privileged people dislike radicals because privilege depends on preserving the ideologies that legitimize elitist lifestyles and maintain the structures through which power is exercised over others. Their success in opposing people with radical goals depends primarily on convincing other people in society that the current, dominant ways of thinking and doing things are natural, normal, and supportive of everyone's interests in society. This is a primary reason why radical goals are seldom sought in sports; seeking such goals is risky because those who do so become targets of people who have power and influence in society. Furthermore, most people who pursue radical goals dedicate their attention and resources to issues of poverty, homelessness,

universal health care, quality education for children, accessible public transportation, full employment, and guaranteed minimum standards of living. However, a few radicals who are concerned with ideological issues have used sports as sites for the following purposes: challenging dominant definitions of *masculinity* and *femininity*, raising questions about the meaning of race, highlighting the difficulties of preserving democracy in the face of a growing gap between the haves and have-nots in society, destroying long-held stereotypes about (dis)abilities, and encouraging people to think critically about the antidemocratic features of the exclusive and hierarchical structures that characterize most organized sports today.

Critical Feminist Theory

People who use critical feminist theory are concerned with gender, gender relations, and gender ideology. They see sports as sites where dominant forms of masculinity and femininity may be reproduced or transformed. Therefore, much of their attention is focused on struggles over gender equity and issues related to changing sports.

Critical feminist theory focuses on transforming sports and gender ideology so that women are not systematically disadvantaged. It helps people envision what sports could be if there were no sexism, misogyny, heterosexism, or homophobia. People guided by critical feminist theory seek reformist and radical goals—to promote equity, on the one hand while resisting and transforming dominant gender ideology, on the other hand. Seeking these goals also involves pushing the boundaries of gender and expanding accepted ways of “doing gender” in sports and everyday life.

The International Working Group on Women and Sport (IWG) is grounded primarily in critical feminist theory. Its members around the world seek many goals, including those that involve changing ideologies and institutions that systematically exclude women from sports and disadvantage women when they do play sports. Goals vary from nation to nation because the problems faced by women are different in various societies. The IWG focuses on reformist goals as they seek to increase opportunities for girls and women to play sports and to advance women into positions of power in society and in sport organizations. Radical goals are the focus when they strive to transform the gender ideologies on which male privilege is based and female disadvantage is guaranteed in many cultures around the world.

Interactionist Theory

When people use interactionist theory, they focus on social processes through which social worlds are created. They view those worlds, including the ones created around sports, through the eyes of the participants themselves. They assume that socialization occurs in and through sport experiences, that people give meaning to sports and sport participation as they interact, and that people form identities as they integrate their experiences into their sense of who they are and how they are connected with the rest of the world.

Interactionists view the future in terms of the possibilities for social interaction associated with sports. They may seek *conservative*, *reformist*, or *radical* goals as they create sports in which participants control the meaning, purpose, and organization of their activities. For example, interactionists seeking reformist or radical goals have promoted the creation of sports and sport organizations that are democratic and inclusive. As this has been done, ideas have often been borrowed from other theories, especially critical and critical feminist theories.