

# SPORT IN CONSUMER CULTURE

JOHN HORNE



# **Sport in Consumer Culture**

*Also by John Horne*

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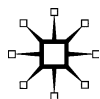
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# Sport in Consumer Culture

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*John Horne*

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This book is dedicated to ‘non-aspirational perfectionists’ everywhere – you know who you are.

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# Preface

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This book is partly the product of teaching several cohorts of undergraduate and postgraduate students in the 1990s and early 2000s. In various modules, including leisure and consumer culture, physical culture, sport, media and society, and social theories of sport and leisure, we explored how and why has sport become so central to the advanced capitalist economies of signs and space. The book aims to help to answer the various questions that stem from this situation. How did it develop? Who is responsible? What mechanisms brought it about? Who is most affected by it? Are the impacts evenly spread and if not how are different social groups affected? When did it begin? It draws together material from several disciplines that inform the field of sports studies, but the main emphasis is on the sociological analysis of sport. If you don't want to know the score, look away now. If you do, then read on.

# Acknowledgements

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It would be remiss to fail to acknowledge the insights and other forms of assistance that I have received from the many people and organisations which indirectly or directly have informed this book. In alphabetical order these people include Alan Bairner, Ian Craib, Jean Harvey, David Jary, John MacInnes, Wolfram Manzenreiter, Atsuo Sugimoto, Yoshio Takahashi, Garry Whannel, Dave Whitson and last, but by no means least, Takayuki Yamashita. I am grateful to the library staff at the University of Edinburgh and **sport**scotland for help with accessing some of the material. There are others and apologies if I have not mentioned you personally.

# Introduction

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## **Introduction: Sport, Consumption and the Cultural Turn**

The rationale of this book is to provide a distinctive introduction to sport in society drawing on recent developments in sociological research and theory, especially with reference to consumer culture, consumer society and consumption. It will also provide a deeper and more critical understanding of contemporary debates in Sociology after the ‘cultural turn’ applied to the Sociology of Sport. The ‘cultural turn’ refers to recognition of the cultural significance and importance of the growth of consumption (Ray and Sayer 1999, Roberts 1999, Ch. 7), the role of ‘consumption as an activity in and through which identity is constructed’ (Smart 2003, p. 74), and the reversal of the ‘production paradigm’ associated with postmodern social theory (Dodd 1999, p. 136). It is connected to debates about modernity, lifestyles and identities (Bauman 1998), concerning the shifting relationship between the state and the market, above and below the national level, the transformation of the meaning of citizenship and the implications of these developments for personal and social identities. The expansion of studies of consumption and consumerism in the last twenty years is also linked to debates about globalisation, postmodernity, identity and new forms of inequality along the lines of taste and distinction. The ‘cultural turn’ raises interesting questions for critical traditions in sociology and the sociology of sport (Blackshaw 2002). Two key issues are: Do the structures and organisation of consumerism exclude, dominate and marginalise other modes of provision of sport and leisure? And does consumer culture heighten the manipulation of consumer agency or are consumers able to exert a degree of control (if not sovereignty)? In short, are consumers dupes, victims, rational actors or heroic communicators in consumer society? (Aldridge 2003, pp. 15–23).

Sport can be seen as central to the ‘economies of signs and space’ (Lash and Urry 1994) in late capitalist modernity. In these economies the body is more than an instrument for producing material goods and getting things done – after all in the UK in May 2004 only 3.38 million people out of a total workforce of 28.3 million were in manufacturing employment (Moore 2004).

The body, including the sporting and physically active body, is now portrayed as an object of contemplation and improvement, in the spectacular discourses of the mass media, the regulatory discourses of the state and in people's everyday practices (sometimes referred to as 'body projects' – Shilling 1993). Moreover sport has become increasingly allied to the consumption of goods and services, which is now the structural basis of the advanced capitalist countries (Lash and Urry 1994, p. 296), through discourses about the model, (post)modern consumer-citizen. This person is an enterprising self who is also a calculating and reflexive self. Someone permanently ready to discipline himself or herself – through crash diets, gymnastics, aerobics, muscle toning, tanning, strip-waxing and cosmetic ('plastic') surgery (including breast enlargement and cellulite reduction) as well as sporting physical activity – in order to fit in with the demands of advanced liberalism (Rose 1992).

The relationship of sport (and active bodies) with consumer culture has been noted by several social commentators. For example McPherson et al. (1993, p. 81) suggest that 'in conjunction with the emergence of consumer culture was the progressive commercialisation and commodification of sport and sporting bodies'. John Hargreaves (1986, p. 134) argued that 'What links up consumer culture with sports culture so economically is their common concern with, and capacity to accommodate, the body as a means of expression.' Contemporary advertisements for commercial sport and leisure clubs in the UK (such as Next Generation and Fitness First) combine the discourses of both medical science and popular culture in such phrases as 'fitness regime', 'problem areas like the bottom or the stomach', 'consultation' and 'fix'. By exhorting potential consumers/members to 'Flatten your tum and perk up your bum' and reassuring us that 'Gym'll fix it', 'The regulatory control of the body is now experienced through consumerism and the fashion industry rather than through religion' (Turner 1996, p. 23).

Other recent attempts to discuss aspects of sport in consumer culture have focussed on: fandom and fans (Crawford 2004), advertising (Jackson and Andrews 2005), individual athletes (Andrews 2001, Andrews and Jackson 2001, Cashmore 2002), teams (Andrews 2004) or mega sports events (Jennings and Sambrook 2000, Sugden and Tomlinson 1998a, 2003, Dauncey and Hare 1999, Horne and Manzenreiter 2002a). This book not only incorporates this research but also attempts to bring together a much broader range of studies and interpretations of consumer culture. It also considers a wider dimension of sport by focussing on it as an active practice as well as a commercial spectacle. The main focus of this book is on sport in developed English-speaking countries, especially the UK and North America, although some references are included to experience in other societies. This book thus offers a partial focus, but one which is alert to the need to learn from experience elsewhere. When discussing sport in consumer culture it is necessary to think about the terms being used, even what is meant by 'in', and therefore we shall start with some definitions.

## Sport: A Contested Concept

In 1984 the then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's statement that there were great industries in other people's pleasures was dismissed by critics as a reference to 'Mickey Mouse' jobs (she was thinking of places like Disney World, see Clarke and Critcher 1985, pp. 100–103). Since then, however, many more leisure activities have become job generators. 'Travel and tourism' has become the world's largest industry, responsible for '11.7 per cent of world GDP, 8 per cent of world exports and 8 per cent of all employment' (Urry 2002, p. 5). The number of jobs in 'sport and recreation' has likewise continued to grow, if not on such a great scale, leading to continuing high demand for courses in sport-related subjects in further and higher education throughout the advanced world. There is no longer much reticence about discussing the economics or marketing of sport as a business or an industry.

If sport is an industry, it is clearly a rather unorthodox one. As Whannel (2004, pp. 481–482) observes, where else would consumers (football fans) maintain high levels of consumption even if quality (success) declines and prices rise? Indeed continuing consumption (support) in the face of lack of success is seen as a sign of true commitment. Likewise otherwise rational entrepreneurs will invest vast sums of money into commercial teams in pursuit of sports success without serious expectation of financial return. Ego, vanity and self-aggrandisement appear to over-rule the rationality of the balance sheet. Sport is clearly much more than simply another industry. Miller et al. (2001, p. 132) define sport as 'recreational and professional competitive, rule-governed physical activity'. They also note that 'sport of a regular and organized kind is the product of a social institution with its origins in Victorian England'. Modern sport is just that – a *modernist* creation of the late 19th century, as opposed to the considerable number of physical game contests and play forms that have existed throughout the world over several centuries. Sport has its own cultural origins, but these are mixed up with the development of industrialism and capitalism, the spread of liberal democracy and the growth of mass communications.

As we will consider in Chapter 3, sport is one of those forms of culture that has increasingly been subject to 'mediatization' or 'mediatization' (Thompson 1990, pp. 12–20, 163–271) through which it has become part of media culture. As Blain (2002, p. 229) notes, 'Forms of culture that do not depend on the media for their reception and transmission are becoming more and more to resemble curiosities.' Sports that are not routinely covered by the media – and there are still many of those – are treated as discoveries when they do, however fleetingly, become part of a newsworthy story. Blain provides the example of the Great Britain (GB) Women's curling team's unexpected gold medal at the Salt Lake City Winter Olympics in 2002. In addition, however, he suggests that even the most commercialised or televised sports retain a

degree of autonomy from both the media and capitalist consumer culture. Sport 'is best seen as exhibiting *both* modern and postmodern characteristics' (Blain 2002, p. 237). Athletes may lead (postmodern) celebrity lives as product sponsors, media commentators and even movie stars, but are also required to undergo the (modernist) discipline of specific dietary and training regimes in order to perform in their sport. Sports therefore have both post-modern (media saturated) and modern (sport practice) lives.

Twenty years ago, John Hargreaves (1986, pp. 10–14) observed that 'the realm of sport encompasses a bewildering diversity of radically different kinds of activity, which defies a watertight definition'. He identified six characteristics of sport that remain relevant to understanding its distinctive (or autonomous) culture. First, he noted that sports, in comparison with other types of social activity, consisted of *play*. Secondly, sports have been formalised and were 'governed by very elaborate codes and statutes'. Thirdly, the uncertainty of sports' contested outcomes, and the attendant tension it creates, lends a unique excitement to them. Fourthly, sports provide *drama* and 'regular public occasions for discourse on some of the basic themes of social life'. Fifthly, sport's rule-governed behaviour of a symbolic character 'draws the attention of its participants to objects of thought and feeling which are held to be of special significance', and provides much of its *ritual* quality (Hargreaves 1986). Sixthly, Hargreaves noted that *the body* constituted 'the most striking symbol as well as the material core of sporting activity'. He argued that in the second half of the 20th century, sporting activity of all kinds was increasingly linked with a particular pattern of consumption:

The body is clearly an object of crucial importance in consumer culture and its supply industries; and sports, together with fashion, eating and drinking outside the home, cooking, dieting, keep fit therapy, other physically active leisure, advertising imagery, and a battery of aids to sexual attractiveness, are deployed in a constantly elaborating programme whose objective is the production of the new 'normalized' individual. (p. 14)

The 'normalized' body of the 21st century was clearly not the same as that of 100 years earlier.

Other academics and governmental agencies have also defined sport as more than just competitive team games. For example, both Gratton and Taylor (2000) and the UK Government have adopted the Council of Europe definition of sport as 'all forms of physical activity which, through casual or organised participation, aim at expressing or improving physical fitness and mental well-being, forming social relationships or obtaining results in competition at all levels' (Council of Europe 1993, *European Sports Charter*, Article 2). Sport can be understood not only as competitive physical activity, but also as other forms of physical activity, including recreational sport and physical exercise. Hence sport may conjure up images of spectacular forms of entertainment,

but it can also refer to personal exercise routines. That physical health features as an important source of life satisfaction in surveys suggests that a broader definition of sport could see it as part of the solution to some of the problems generated by consumer culture rather than its servant.

We take the view that sport in all its forms needs to be considered in relationship to consumer culture. Whilst the search for growth in revenue streams in addition to gate money on the part of professional sports (such as television rights agreements, hospitality and merchandise) is important, we also need to understand the growth of sports services (private health clubs and gyms such as Next Generation and Fitness First) as enterprises. Moreover much sport still takes place because of its organisation through volunteer-run clubs, which have sometimes been considered to offer a degree of autonomy from commercial consumer culture. Sport may be both a commercial spectacle and used as a means of resisting commercial values. This is one of the reasons why it makes for such an interesting topic in connection with discussions of consumer culture. It is useful to recognise competing tendencies – the dominant, residual, oppositional and emergent (Williams 1977, pp. 121–127, 1981, pp. 203–205) – that have affected the development of cultural forms such as sport. Its history is a product of the interplay between these different influences and power relationships.

A final reason why consideration of sport in consumer culture is overdue is because there has been significant growth in the social, cultural and historical analysis of sport in society and consumer culture in the past twenty years, but little attempt to bring this material together. Early inspirations for considering sport in this way were writers such as Gruneau (1999/1983), Whannel (1983) and Hargreaves (1986, 1987). Recently both sports sociologists and historians (Dunning and Malcolm 2003, p. 5, Holt and Mason 2000, p. 94) have provided several measures of the growing importance of sport in contemporary society. In the second half of the 20th century in Britain, for example, the media has acted as a most important transforming force, turning sport into a ‘male soap opera’ (Holt and Mason 2000, p. 94). Not far behind were commercialisation, sponsors and celebrity following the ‘drift towards the American TV model’ (Holt and Mason 2000, p. 109). Whereas in the 1950s sport ‘occupied a niche’, by the end of the 1990s satellite television had ‘democratised spectating and linked it to a globalising of consumption’ (Holt and Mason 2000, p. 176). Sport has become an ‘industry’ and its goods widely worn as fashion items. Holt and Mason (2000, p. 177) note that divisions between ‘the best and the rest’ in sport have become greater, with rewards to the former reaching amounts only previously paid to film and other entertainment celebrities. Sport has been promoted like other commodities – as a consistent and quality product (Holt and Mason 2000, p. 177). To understand these developments in sport better, it is essential that we also know about consumer society and culture. It is to this subject we will now turn.

## Consumer Society and Culture

In the past three decades, debates about consumption, consumer society and consumer culture have developed from a minority academic issue to a public concern (Featherstone 1991). Part of the debate about postmodernity was the suggestion that social scientists, especially sociologists, had focussed too much on the experience and effect of paid work and production and not enough on consumption (Dodd 1999, Edwards 2000). Are people increasingly addicted to spending and shopping? Does affluence create happiness? Is shopping the ultimate freedom? One suggestion is that affluence – like poverty – is relative, and hence as opportunities to spend increase so too do the comparisons with others. People may compare their position in society with celebrity lifestyles – of David and Victoria Beckham, for example. The fact that a professional football player (and his pop star wife) has become for some a central indicator of the good life is a development that will be considered in more detail in Chapter 4.

Other writers suggest that whilst shopping represents itself as the ultimate freedom, it may in fact destroy freedom. In the 1950s the so-called ‘affluent society’ was hailed as bringing about more free time. Some described it as the beginning of the leisure age. Today life is considered to be speeding up and lack of time is a core condition. According to research into life satisfaction, more durable sources of satisfaction are to be found in social connection, marital status and physical health rather than consumption (Lodziak 2002).

The ‘buy now pay later’ belief is one of several developments that are conceived of as peculiar to consumer culture. Others include a concentration on form or style over function and product disposability or planned obsolescence, which appears to have become embraced by consumers in the past fifty years. Is this the result of indoctrination or brainwashing, or more to do with changes in the availability of credit? In the 1970s designer labels or brands were introduced and these were met with apparent approval. People were prepared to pay more for a product just because it carried a label (even though as in the case of Calvin Klein’s ‘CK One’ perfume, for example, the product was mass-produced by the multinational corporation Unilever). Branding was created by extensive marketing. Certain brands became ‘cool’ and helped to placate anxious consumers by providing them with reassurance that they had obtained goods of a certain quality, reliability or fashionable chic. In addition, as Frank (1997, p. 31) has shown, ‘cool’ itself has been harnessed since the 1970s to propel the ‘cultural perpetual motion machine in which disgust with the falseness, shoddiness, and everyday oppressions of consumer society... (are)... enlisted to drive the ever-accelerating wheels of consumption’.

The extended credit facility associated today with credit cards was first introduced in the USA in the 1950s. In the UK it faced challenges from both social values with respect to indebtedness and government controls over the availability of credit. Today consumer credit drives and responds to ups and

downs in national economies. In the UK, in the 1980s interest rates boomed, half a million houses were repossessed and unemployment reached 3 million. During the 1990s portable cell (USA) or mobile (UK) telephones have helped to stimulate another consumer boom. Now there is speeded-up obsolescence by which products rarely stay in the shops for longer than six weeks. Schor (1998, p. 40) cites research from the USA that suggests that ‘the street life of a trendy athletic shoe has fallen in some cases to a month and even fifteen days’. It is suggested that 1 million people in the UK and 5 million people in the USA suffer from a shopping addiction. Reports of riots at the opening of a new IKEA store in north London and outside a New York store selling a limited edition Pigeon Dunk skateboarding trainer in February 2005 may just be the most visible aspects of these conditions (*The Guardian* 24 February 2005).

## Theoretical Approaches to Consumption and Consumer Culture

How are we to make sense of these developments? There have been three main approaches to understanding consumption and consumer culture: the production of consumption approach, the modes of consumption approach and the pleasures of consumption approach. We will briefly consider the arguments of exemplars of each approach.

For critical theorists, as the 20th century developed, more aspects of culture became increasingly commodified – made into items for sale on the capitalist market place – and thus came to be just like any other ‘industry’ rather than offering an escape from (repressive and exploitative) capitalist relationships. As Adorno and Horkheimer (1977, p. 361) wrote, ‘Amusement under late capitalism is the prolongation of work. It is sought after as an escape from the mechanised work process, and to recruit strength in order to be able to cope with it again.’ Adorno and Horkheimer felt that, despite appearances to the contrary, leisure time activities were massively shaped by what happened at work, in the factory, or in the office. This had the consequences that most modern amusements were predictable, inevitably short-lived, lacking in challenge and therefore ultimately disappointing. Much of the critical theorists’ argument revolved around the distinction between ‘true’ and ‘false’ needs.

They argued that in developed consumer capitalism ‘wants’ (desires) were turned into ‘needs’ (essentials), thus suggesting a shift from the ‘authentic’ to the ‘inauthentic’. Moreover because of the impact of cultural intermediaries – market researchers and consumer analysts, for example – the ‘triumph of advertising’ in the culture industry is secured since ‘consumers feel compelled to buy and use its products even though they see through them’ (Adorno and Horkheimer 1977, p. 383). The choice of consumer goods is all that is left of freedom. ‘What the philosophers once knew as life has become the sphere of

private existence and now of mere consumption, dragged along as an appendage of the process of material production, without autonomy or substance of its own' (Adorno 1996/1951, p. 15). There is no need, or inclination, to rebel or overthrow capitalism since 'consumer culture is basically a lot of false compensations for the fundamental loss of human authenticity' (Slater 1997). At this point some students have been known to contemplate leaving my lecture room. But let us be clear, as Alan How (2003) remarks, 'Adorno may have been an old sourpuss but that does not mean he was wrong!' The important thing is to consider this as a perspective with which to think about sport in consumer culture. What are the implications if Theodor was correct in his assessment?

Despite its power and illuminating insights, the production of consumption perspective has been criticised for three main reasons. First, in its general form it appears to ignore the particularity and the specificity of different social contexts and sites of consumption and consumption practices. Secondly, it also appears too deterministic, negative and pessimistic about the ways that people respond to and use consumer goods and services. Thirdly, and related to the first two points, it underplays human agency and fails to see how active consumers are involved in personal resistance, subversiveness and the transgression of messages delivered by market-driven advertising agencies. The power of the media/market to make meaning in relation to the power of the audience (reader/viewer) or consumer to deal with it has become a fundamental question in studies of consumer culture, as we will see. These critical responses to productionist theories of consumption developed into perspectives focussing more on 'modes of consumption' and 'consuming dreams, images and pleasures' (Featherstone 1991). Reference to alienation and exploitation gave way to ethnographic accounts, on the one hand, and celebrations of consumer culture, on the other. We will briefly outline these two alternative perspectives on consumption.

The 'modes of consumption' approach has studied different social groups in which consumers become active as producers of undesigned or unanticipated uses and meanings of goods and services. Consumption becomes a means of personal empowerment, subversion or resistance, that is, it is mediated by active consumers/audiences. De Certeau (1984) and Fiske (1989, 1993), for example, focussed on the practices of everyday life to maintain, strengthen and challenge social and cultural boundaries associated with class, gender, race and age. For them people use consumption to create identities, social bonds and distinctions or social distance; to display and sustain differences; and to open or close off opportunities for selves and others. This form of social closure is conducted in the pursuit of different sports practices as well as elsewhere according to Pierre Bourdieu (1984/1979). After extensive sociological research in Paris and its neighbouring regions, Bourdieu (1984/1979) showed how taste in cultural goods acts as a marker of class and class fractions (Featherstone 1987, pp. 121ff.). Related to taste is style – foregrounding the importance of

the aesthetic or 'the stylisation of life' – as life becomes a project (Featherstone 1991, p. 86). There is a tension between the market dynamic and the agency of consumers that can be seen particularly in research into gender, 'race' and consumption (Gilroy 1987, Lury 1996, pp. 159–182).

The first 'mode of consumption' studies considered that people possessed and displayed goods as a means of demonstrating superiority in a system of social status, and concepts such as 'positional goods', 'emulation' and 'distinction' were widely deployed (Hirsch 1977, Bourdieu 1984/1979). Although this focus on conspicuous consumption was sociology's main contribution to consumption studies, it began to be treated as more complex. The relationship between hierarchical social inequalities – especially class – and consumption behaviour began to be seen as less clear-cut for a number of reasons. *Horizontal* differentiation – within social classes and groups – began to be seen as more significant than *vertical* social divisions – between social classes and groups. It was argued that there was less clear-cut classification of consumption practices. A democratisation of taste was occurring that permitted wider access for most of the population to previously exclusive consumption activities. The proliferation of cultural items in consumer culture made it difficult for most people to recognise and rank all of them, and 'a growth of cultural omnivorous-ness which collapses the separation between high and popular culture' developed (Warde 2002, p. 12). Class was seen as a less important social division. Consumption behaviour was considered to be becoming more *individualised* so that lifestyles could no longer be associated with specific social groups. Except for those on the lowest incomes, most people could participate in a similar way in consumer culture, pursuing their own preferences in a self-conscious and self-regarding way.

The third approach concerning the consumption of 'dreams, images and pleasures' was derived from media and cultural studies in which the utopian/positive moments of consumption had been identified and often celebrated. Some of the inspiration for this approach to consumption was derived from the fragmentary writings of Walter Benjamin on the so-called 'Arcades Project' (Buck-Morss 1991, Benjamin 1999). His writings on the shopping arcades in 19th-century Paris are contemplations on mass culture and commodification (Rojek 1997). Benjamin drew attention to the places and people who occupied them – especially the *flaneur* (literally 'male stroller'), the gambler, the rag picker and the prostitute – and indicated that whilst consumer culture involved manipulation it equally contained the germs of a popular creativity and a new democratic aesthetic. Hence in consumer culture there may be a dialectical relationship – between false consciousness and the sources of collective energy and inspiration to overcome that same false consciousness (Buck-Morss 1991, p. 253). Unlike his contemporary and sometime colleague Adorno, Benjamin resisted a totalising critique of mass culture, looking for the utopian moments locked into commodity relations. He argued instead for a re-enchantment of the world that offered both loss and redemption (Buck-Morss 1991, pp. 253–256). For Benjamin the child rather than the adult can negate the various myths of