

SPORT

Social Problems and Issues

F r a n k K e w



Sport

In memory of Jenny

Sport

Social problems and issues

Frank Kew

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Foreword

For many years, one of the problems facing anyone interested in how sport fits into British society has been the dearth of a readable text which deals predominantly with sport in Britain rather than sport in North America.

At last, Dr Frank Kew has provided a book which is rooted in British society and culture. No more Green Bay Packers and Vince Lombardi, step forward rugby league and Ellery Hanley. Most of us are touched by the sports world which Frank Kew reveals. Coaches, performers, officials, teachers and families will all be fascinated when they consider the sports world which surrounds them.

This text should serve as core reading for students of sport sociology but it provides more than an academic reference. Combining basic theoretical perspectives with practical examples, the book does not require a vast knowledge of sociology, just an enquiring mind about how society and sport interact in Britain.

This book will encourage you to reflect on where you are in the sports world, what are your views on topical issues such as the influence of satellite television or the effect of racism on sport. Most of all it will enlighten you and make you think.

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Preface

Most readers of this book will have an active interest in sport, will have, or be anticipating, a career related to sports, or be both an accomplished performer and a knowledgeable consumer. We take sport seriously in our society. Individuals invest heavily in sport in terms of time, energy, money and emotional commitment, either as participants or spectators. Because sports are a significant element of popular culture, commercial and political organizations also invest heavily in its practice from recreational to elite levels. In short, a **value** is placed on sport – by individuals, by the state, by business – and anything which threatens to compromise, undermine or restrict its practice excites interest and critical comment.

Consequently, many of the issues discussed here are already in the public domain – in journalistic commentary on sport, in specialist sports magazines, in the policy-making and strategic organization of both the public and voluntary sectors of sports provision and, indeed, in the everyday informal conversation of social and sporting-interest groups.

The purpose of this book is to provide an accessible and balanced account of some of the main developments in modern sport and the problems and issues which confront practitioners, whether as players, organizers, coaches, teachers, providers or administrators of sport. Most of the problems and social issues discussed here, however, are not exclusively the domain of sports, but rather they relate to the kind of society we live in, the broader social, economic and political dynamics from which sports derive their significance.

The book is organized into two parts which have a different focus. Part One focuses primarily but not exclusively upon issues deriving from sports

performance, whereas Part Two is principally concerned with the **accessibility** of sports. After some preliminary observations about the nature and development of modern sports, Part One considers the complex ways in which sports are increasingly being governed by a market rationality, where the interests of commerce and the media are becoming more significant, for players, for sports clubs and for governing bodies. Not only are sports exploited by business, but the increasing seriousness and competitiveness of sports leads to a range of corrupt practices such as cheating, player violence, athlete-abuse and drug-taking.

Part Two draws upon critical perspectives about sport and the reproduction of structural inequality, to examine the continued inequity in opportunities for sports, and the policy responses of the public and voluntary sectors of sports provision. Dimensions of inequity are examined with reference to race and ethnicity, gender, social class and disability.

This is not intended as an apologia, but given the scope of this book, the treatment of social issues in sports can only be at an introductory level and, via the reference material, the reader is guided towards the more specialist literature on the main themes. I have tried to organize and present some of the current critical debates about the nature and practice of modern sports which, I hope, will contribute to enhancing its practice. Sports are undergoing rapid change and development, processes which need to be carefully managed – by readers of this book among others.

Frank Kew
Ilkley

Part One

Sport as Social Practice and Social Institution

Here are some extracts of an article about British sport by Howard Marshall, a former Oxford Rugby Blue, writing in *The Listener*:

Sport should be guided by honour and sanctioned by fair play ... the growth of the competitive element minimises our proper enjoyment of games and sports.

Village cricket is one of the few games which still have the spontaneous vitality, fun, and happiness which I should like to see everywhere.

Games and relaxation have their proper place in the scheme of things; but when one particular game monopolises a man's entire energies, it ceases to be a game and becomes an obsession or a somewhat useless part-time job.

Let us admit right away that a game like rugby is an influence for the good. ... The game spreads good fellowship, hardiness, and courage ... it sweats the vice out of a man.

... our growing love of the spectacular is blinding us to the true purpose of games and sports.

All we can do is to hold fast to what virtues remain in sport, and spread as widely as possible the true principles of games-playing, and hope for ... a gradual return to a rational scale of values.

These extracts contain a number of assumptions and value-judgements about sports participation. First, sports are a good thing if they are played at rather than worked at, and if the player upholds and

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respects the values of fair play and sportsmanship. Secondly, sports are a good thing because they enable people to direct their energies towards socially acceptable and wholesome pursuits, and away from antisocial and even criminal activity. Thirdly, sports are becoming too serious, too competitive, with too much emphasis on spectacle, a development which undermines and endangers the intrinsic qualities of sport.

The more astute reader will have gathered, through the somewhat arcane and sexist language, that these extracts are not a contemporary piece of writing. Marshall wrote his 'inquisition' on British sport in 1931, seven years before the publication of the influential text *Homo Ludens* (Man at Play), in which Huizinga (a Dutchman) bemoaned the bastardization of the 'sacred realm' of play by the 'profane spectacle' of modern sports. Similarly, Stone (1970), in an article entitled 'American sports: play and display', provided a critical commentary on the putative loss of playfulness in contemporary sports and its transformation into 'display' (meaning spectacle) and 'dis-play' (meaning un-playful).

Each of these writers, in different national contexts, were addressing social problems and issues which, at the time, they saw as threatening the integrity of sports, and the experiences and challenges these diverse activities provide for participants. The writings span the decades either side of the Second World War. Marshall was writing before the invention of television, but in an era witnessing a massive growth in sports spectatorship. Huizinga's text was published two years after the first overt and deliberate manipulation of sport for political ends (the Berlin Olympics). Stone was recognizing the growing 'spectacularization' of sports events in the USA in the mid-1950s, consequent upon the increasing influence of television, and the growing realization by commercial entrepreneurs that profit was to be made from sports.

Each of these writers, in their different ways, is critical of these developments and, at least, implicitly adhere to an idealized image of 'true' (i.e. playful, fun) sports being undermined by the changing social, economic and technological contexts within which they are practised. The kernel of these debates remains the subject of much critical social commentary today. The most radical commentators argue that modern sport is so debased that salvage is impossible (e.g. Brohm, 1978; Rigauer, 1981; Eichberg, 1984), and that we need a wholesale revisioning and re-evaluation of the realm of play and recreation.

This text adopts a more lenient view to argue that (a) sports are worth preserving and developing, but (b) rather than resisting change, and celebrating and fostering, in myth rather than fact, an image of a bygone sunlit Arcadia where players played in an unsullied and bucolic state, the task for sports practitioners is to be proactive in both embracing and managing changes to ensure the integrity of sporting challenges for the future.

The opening two chapters of Part One provide a basis for the subsequent analysis of social problems and issues. Chapter 1 locates and examines the source of most contemporary problems and issues in sport as an **inescapable** and irreducible tension or dynamic between sports as conceived as a range of **social practices** and sports as a **social institution**. The second chapter adopts an historical and developmental perspective to examine change both to the social practice of sport and the institutional arrangements of its practice. Together, these provide a framework for considering the burgeoning influence of commerce on sport, and the pressures which lead to cheating, violence and other practices which corrupt sport.

chapter one

Sport: inside out

Look at it this way!

The paradox of sport is that it provides such moments (of self realization) even as it confirms their apparent impossibility elsewhere. It both realizes human identity and denies other kinds of (especially racial and sexual) identity. It is both uncontaminated by the rest of social life and shot through with economic and political influences. It is both timeless and a product of history (Crichter, 1984).

Many of the current debates about social problems in sport articulate around the two different perspectives on sport encapsulated in the above observation. The artistic term 'perspective' suggests that one gets a different view of an object relative to one's position or distance from that object. The same applies to sport – writers adopt different theoretical positions and/or write from positions of involvement in, or detachment from, sporting practice. Consider the following two statements:

Play is essentially a free activity quite consciously outside 'ordinary' life as being 'not serious', but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. Play has no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their differences from the common world by disguise or other means (Huizinga, 1972).

In Huizinga's eyes, his comments about the intrinsic qualities of play should apply equally well to sport; a sacred realm of activity set apart from other activities. In contrast, another perspective is as follows:

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... sport is not a 'privileged space' into which we can retreat from real life – rather it is systematically and intimately connected with society. Sport as an activity, or an object of interest, is socially constructed; it is defined and given meaning. It is these meanings which give us the value of being involved in sport – they provide us with identities and identifications (Clarke and Clarke, 1982).

Two wholly different perspectives on sport. The first is that, through their specific rule structures, sports are distinctive social practices, self-contained, and separated out from the rest of social life. All sports (including those which take place in natural environments like climbing or canoeing) provide a set of psychomotor challenges, conditioned by rules, regulations and the necessary equipment, and for which participants have developed skills and strategies in order to meet that sporting challenge. This perspective brings into sharp relief the difference of sport to other activities, the nature and structures of a diverse range of sporting challenges which have been, and continue to be, developed. We can call this the 'time-out' perspective – the suspension of the ordinary, the entering into a separate sphere of social life.

The second perspective on sport is to consider the broader social context within and through which sports have changed and developed over time. Sports do not take place in a vacuum but rather are subsumed under the paramount reality of the social world, their meaning and significance deriving from the values which are placed on their practice by powerful interest groups outside sport, i.e. those groupings who are able to impose on others their evaluations of what counts as acceptable, useful and successful sporting practice.

Huizinga's perspective is dismissed by some as being both idealist and ahistorical. It is 'idealist' because, in stressing that 'the impulse to play' transcends historical epochs, he neglects or minimizes the social and economic conditions within which modern sports developed. It is 'ahistorical' because he

fails to recognize that sports (unlike play forms) are a product of industrial society and the particular social and economic relationships brought about by capitalism. Others would argue that the second perspective is incomplete because there is little acknowledgement of the particularity of sporting practices, of the experiences they provide, or of their sustained appeal for generations of participants. Many sociologists of sport, with the notable exception of Elias and Dunning (1986) and Morgan (1984), neglect the constitutive features of sports to focus exclusively upon environing influences; the social context of their practice.

The analytical framework adopted here is to incorporate both perspectives and to consider sport as a 'duality' – as having a double nature, as having both an inside and outside, as being simultaneously set apart from, yet part of, the rest of social life. This framework is similar to that adopted by Haywood *et al.* (1995) in their account of the duality of play, its intrinsic and extrinsic dimensions. They write:

One of the primary qualities of the experience of play is that it is 'disinterested'; it is activity for its own sake, for no ulterior interest.... On the other hand, play is often valued precisely because of the purposes it might fulfil, purposes which have little to do with the playing itself. This enables us to examine the ways in which the functional or purposeful meanings and goals ascribed to play are intimately related to, and dependent upon, play's intrinsic qualities.

Sport, however, is different from play in so far as it involves sedimented and standardized widespread practices. Therefore, and borrowing from both MacIntyre (1981) and Lasch (1979), the duality of sport will be analysed by conceiving sport as **both** a 'social practice' **and** as a 'social institution'. Understanding the distinction between social practice and social institution is important in making sense of, and coming to an informed assessment of, the social problems and issues in sports (Figure 1.1).

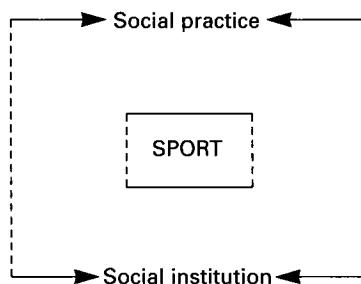


Figure 1.1 The duality of sport

Sport as a social practice

The social practice of sport is a **joint project** in which ‘goods’ or values internal to that project are realized in the course of trying to achieve the standards of excellence in it. These **internal goods** or values can only be achieved by engaging in the practice in question. Let us unpack this statement.

A joint project

A joint project means that people collaborate with each other, submit to the authority of rules, and agree to the contract to compete in order to bring about or actualize the social practice. A failure or refusal to engage in this collaborative enterprise is destructive of the social practice, and therefore of its internal goods or values. Instances of intentional rule-breaking, the use of performance-enhancing drugs, so-called ‘professional’ fouls, using banned technology which bestows an advantage, are all failures or refusals to abide by the contract of sport, i.e. being either a cheat or a spoilsport, either a hypocrite or a heretic (see Chapter 5).

The concept of sports as joint collaborative projects can be further analysed by considering the complex **social dynamics** involved in their practice. In this

context, social dynamics refers to the ways in which the 'practitioners' (i.e. the participants or players) interact with one another. Elaborating on Luschen (1970), three sets of social dynamics are identified which apply to all forms of games and most other sports. These are:

- association (inter-group collaboration)
- cooperation (intra-group collaboration)
- competition

as shown in Figure 1.2.

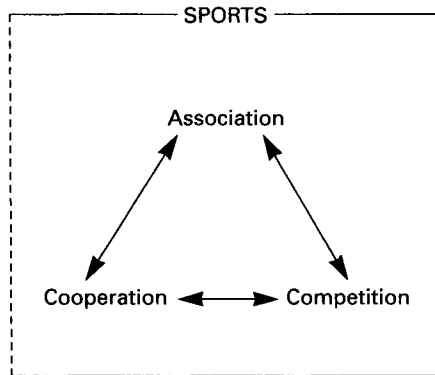


Figure 1.2 Social dynamics of sport

Association indicates collaboration **between** groups. All must collaborate in this way in order to put the activity (sport) into practice. All must enter into a contract to agree to join an internally and externally controlled system governed by rules. The Football 'Association' is a good example of this, where the groups are individual soccer clubs.

Cooperation indicates a form of collaboration where the rewards are shared **within** a group, team or squad. Individual members have to cooperate with one another in order to deploy their collective resources and therefore compete effectively. Most coaching is about mobilizing a group's collective

resources, devising tactics and strategies based upon an assessment of the opposition's resources. Intra-group collaboration applies particularly to team games but also to any sports contests which are organized within group or squad frameworks.

Competition is the third and most commonly understood social dynamic and which clearly underpins most spectators' interest in sport. Sports are meaningless unless the participants attempt to achieve goals and outcomes. Team games are meaningless unless players try to defend their own territory while attacking the opposing team's territory in order to score points, goals, etc. Competition against others, or oneself (e.g. personal bests), is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for all sports.

It is important to remember that these three sets of dynamics are **interdependent**, i.e. each gets its meaning from the other two, and it illustrates the complex social relations inherent in the social practice of sport. A win-at-all costs attitude, instances of cheating and drug-use result in tipping the balance of social dynamics towards the interest in competition and away from an interest in association.

Internal goods

Internal goods or values are realized in the course of engaging in the joint collaborative project (i.e. the sport practice) and cannot, by definition, be achieved in any other way. Internal goods act as their own rewards for sports practitioners and might include:

- the exercise of skills
- the successful deployment of performance resources (e.g. devising successful tactics and strategies)
- testing and developing physical capabilities
- the experiences of exhilaration and of achievement, the rewards for the commitment and dedication that went into building the skills in the first place