SPORT IN THE GLOBAL SOCIETY | CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES

# Sport and Communities

Edited by David Hassan and Sean Brown

ROUTLEDGE

# Sport and Communities

Over the past three decades there has been widespread commitment to an understanding that sport can play a key role in community development. The role of sport within communities has been promoted with a wide range of goals in mind. These include environmental outcomes, encouragement of civic pride, enhancement of personal confidence and self-esteem, and the promotion of social cohesion, as well as the fostering of a fit and healthy workforce.

To address these issues, a number of programmes have been funded and supported to develop the role of sport in communities worldwide and to increase participation and access to sport and physical activities in disadvantaged areas. In addition we are witnessing the development of new sports communities through social media including Twitter and Facebook.

The belief is that we need to revisit the concept of 'community and sport' and investigate our current understanding of these terms in view of the evolving role of sport in a range of national settings. This book will present a platform upon which this process can begin and offer a fundamental re-evaluation of the relationship that currently exists between sport and communities throughout selected parts of the world.

This book was previously published as a special issue of *Sport in Society*.

**David Hassan** is Professor of Sport Policy and Management at the University of Ulster. He is the current Deputy Executive Academic Editor of *Sport in Society*, an international, peer-reviewed journal published by Taylor & Francis Ltd. (an imprint of Routledge). In December 2006 he was presented with the Award of Distinguished Research Fellowship by the University of Ulster in recognition of his outstanding contribution to research. Dr Hassan's research expertise concerns the relationship between sport and national identity, the politics of sport and sport governance.

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*Edited by*
**David Hassan and Sean F. Brown**

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CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES

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SPORT AND COMMUNITIES

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# Sport and communities: an introduction

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While there has been considerable academic and popular coverage of the perceived importance of community identity in the lives of ordinary citizens, such analysis is problematical due to a conceptual and theoretical deficiency around the very use and understanding of the term. There has been a failure to fully operationalize and thus objectify (for measurement) some of the contributing elements of this term, which is of concern to sports scholars as it is often sport that is used as a proxy measurement of the precise strength of a community's vibrancy and connectedness. The latter part of this introductory piece details common themes and issues of note that emerge throughout the course of the ensuing compendium of published works, which essentially cohere around issues of sport in society, volunteerism and identity.

## Introduction

It seems that there is near-universal agreement regarding the importance of community identity in the lives of everyday citizens. This appears even more pronounced when, amid a growing sense of dislocation on the part of some, traditional forms of connecting individuals with established and real communities – in the geo-political sense – are themselves becoming more difficult to define. Of course, there are many and varied forms of communities and these are established along a diverse set of identity markers, often cohering around common interests or causes, and they can exist in a physical or virtual space. One of the most readily available means of demonstrating a sense of community identity is through involvement in sport. Support for a local sports club, representing it in regional or national competitions, volunteering to ensure its survival or simply recognizing its importance in the lives of others are all examples of how sport can serve to offer a focal point for an otherwise increasingly fragmented society (Collins 2003, Collins 2004). What is remarkable therefore, amid this broad agreement concerning the centrality of community identity, is the failure of most to properly define and capture what they mean through the use of the term. An inability to agree a logical basis for future research in this field does little to assist the arguments of those who suggest that an erosion of community identity is taking place, and while some can perhaps offer anecdotal evidence to support their assertions, they are otherwise unable to present any empirical evidence to substantiate their beliefs.

It should be said that this entire premise – the assumption that any threat to one's participation and engagement in community life is best resisted – is based on the received wisdom that remaining part of a community, either physically or virtually constituted, is inherently desirable. This represents something of a value judgement but equally is a commonly held view often informed by an at-times irrational assumption that the unrelenting advance of modernization automatically equates to the 'loss' of something valuable or constitutes a societal advance 'away from' that which is considered worth

holding dear. There is also a misplaced belief that a concomitant sense of anxiety, again concerning the erosion of community-based identities, somehow represents a recent phenomenon. In fact, this is far from the case. Questions of identity have always been appropriated broadly into two fields – those who argue 'community' can only be understood with reference to a territorially based interrogation of the term and, in contrast, advocates of a broader definition of the concept, which includes members of established, evolving or emerging social networks constituted by like-minded personnel who take little account of national or regional boundaries.

Irrespective of how the term is understood, there nevertheless remains a considerable debate concerning the perceived importance of community identity and, it seems, an equally worthwhile examination of whether the term is best understood as an empirical concept, i.e. one that can be measured and thus tracked, or an analytical concept, regarding the importance of what might otherwise be understood as an 'imagined' sense of identity. Simply put, in the absence of an objective set of measures against which individuals may wish to gauge their sense of identity, it is difficult to establish the rise, fall or even presence of a sense of community identity. Moreover, if we accept the seemingly pre-eminent claims in support of a preservation of community-based identities, where precisely this leaves other forms of identity construction, among them social, gender or national forms, and all of which invoke a strong sense attachment, inclusion and comparative homogeneity, is another issue.

## Sport and community identity

Building on this theme, it is too often claimed, in the absence of any serious supporting evidence, that sport exercises a role in maintaining a sense of community identity. Moreover, in the opinions of some, sport may even promote and enhance this imagined sense of identity (Commission on the European Communities 2007). This is an often universally held view, again in spite of the lack of an agreed conceptual or theoretical understanding of what is meant by community identity. In a similar vein, there exists a variously and largely untested thesis suggesting that involvement in sports or the mere presence of sporting opportunities that accentuate the presence of a community is again inherently desirable. On this basis, large amounts of financial support from sovereign governments have been deployed to underwrite policy decisions of an occasionally questionable form, often aimed at using sport to address isolation, division or marginalization 'away from' such imagined communities. In fact, it is only comparatively recently that a more critical body of academic literature has emerged and persuaded those engaged in this practice to pause, reflect and seek a more empirically considered way forward (Coalter 2007a, 2007b). This is important not only for sport's role in society but also for the substance of society itself as the ready conflation of desirable outcomes thought to emerge from involvement in sport are readily overwritten onto society as a whole. It is as if the mere provision of sport creates, through a process of extension, a 'better' society, defined by a more socially responsible population, a reduction in anti-social behaviour and a more enlightened approach, for example to the plight of ethnic minorities.

As a result, it could be argued that sport's role in the production and reproduction of community identities has in fact been somewhat overstated. There are a range of other similarly sized bodies existing in most communities that present opportunities for groups to cohere around, which do not retain some of the exclusionary practices often witnessed around sport. Then again, few elicit the emotion of sporting attachment, especially those

designed to promote partisanship. Much of this may prove to be ephemeral, jingoistic or even exclusionary but, in fairness, there is perhaps something surrounding this process that merits the recognition of sport's capacity to encourage a common cause, to reflect on one's attachment to a broader aspiration or simply to experience a sense of meaningful association in their lives. This in turn gives rise to a range of other desirable outcomes, including volunteerism, the production of social capital (both bonding and bridging) and enhanced levels of integration more generally (Nicholson and Hoye 2008). Indeed, volunteers are widely regarded as being a core component of locally based, national and international sporting delivery. A widely held view, evidenced within some current literature, suggests that the majority of sporting organizations worldwide would simply fail to operate in an efficient and effective manner were it not for the work of volunteers. Thus, it could be argued, the focus should be less on the elusive attachment to community identity per se and more on the maintenance or creation of a better society for all through the role sport plays in encouraging willing volunteerism (with all its commensurate benefits) within the population at large.

## The collection

It is of little surprise therefore that a collection examining sport's contribution to society would contain a number of articles dealing specifically with the place of volunteers. It begins with the work of Matt Nicholson, who considers the relationship between sport and non-sporting community-based activities and their respective levels of perceived social support. In so doing, he draws upon a vast empirical data-set and thus confidently concludes that the role played by sport in the production of social capital, relative to other community-based activities, has perhaps been overstated. Using a multidimensional scale of perceived support as a means of measuring social capital, Nicholson argues that sport occupies something of the middle ground in relation to community-based social capital production and is certainly not the sole platform upon which this may emerge as a by-product of volunteer activity.

This issue of sport's role in the production of social capital is further unpacked by Brown who, through a discrete but no less insightful, examination of a Little League baseball club in New Mexico demonstrates the often overlooked capacity of young children to generate social capital for their parents. The former's participation in sport, in this case Little League baseball, creates a context in which parents, with broadly similar aspirations for their children, come together, socialize and establish bonds. While these bonds may be of varying strengths, Brown's work nonetheless makes an extremely valuable contribution because it highlights mechanisms and strategies employed by parents, vicariously deployed through their children's sporting lives, to expand their own social networks and generate enhanced levels of social capital.

The strong empirical nature to this collection continues through the work of Jamie Clelland and his critical analysis of the role played by local government authorities in the UK when advancing strategies designed to increase participation rates in sport among ethnic minority groupings. There has been a long-held view that local borough councils in Britain could do more to respond to the challenges of multiculturalism, which remains a common concern among advocacy groups operating across a range of European countries. Yet Cleland notes that despite their best efforts, barriers to participation still remain and leaders of organizations representing minority groups are becoming increasingly exasperated at the failure (or reluctance) to make proper sporting provision for members of societies as a whole.