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Eldon E. Snyder

*Bowling Green State University*

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TOWARD AN UNDERSTANDING OF SPORTS CONSUMERS:  
A SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

ELDON E. SNYDER, PROFESSOR

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY  
BOWLING GREEN STATE UNIVERSITY  
BOWLING GREEN, OHIO 43403

ABSTRACT

It is apparent from the number of participants and spectators of sport that it is a pervasive institution in our society. The commercial interests associated with sport further attest to its social and financial importance. A number of sociological factors are helpful for understanding the attractiveness of sport to individual consumers as well as its mass appeal to spectators. On a personal level, the attraction to sport often reflects one's previous sport experiences as well as the degree of involvement in other roles. Furthermore, individual participation and spectators are likely to be consumers of sport if their sport involvement serves to reinforce their self-esteem. Sport also appeals to many people in our society because of the assumption that it contributes to the achievement of basic social values. The emphasis on the ritualistic and festive aspects of sport and the excitement they generate also contribute its mass appeal.

TOWARD AN UNDERSTANDING OF SPORTS CONSUMERS:  
A SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Sport represents one of the most pervasive institutions in our society. Its pervasiveness can be documented in terms of news coverage, number of participants and spectators, hours consumed, sales of sports equipment, movies, books, comic strip themes, and time samplings of conversations. In considering the commercial consumption of sport, television is a good test. For example, in 1963, the television networks paid \$13,900,000 for the rights to broadcast collegiate and professional football. In 1976, the cost for putting football on television was \$201,216,000. The rate for a commercial on the Superbowl broadcast is close to \$250,000 for a 30 second spot. These prices soon become dated, and the rapidity with which this happens is not simply a reflection of inflation but also a measure of the public's desire for spectator sports. Attendance at sports events also continues to draw more customers, and the gains and losses of the most frequently watched sports show interesting variations (Table 1). The most dramatic increase is in the attendance at soccer games. While soccer has had widespread popularity through the world, with the advent of community youth programs and recent television efforts it has gained popularity in the United States.

Further evidence of the prevalence of sport in American society is manifested in the idioms and figures of speech that are a part of our everyday conversation, "struck out," "dirty pool," "out in left field," "low blow," "game plan," "ball park figure." However, the social significance of sport is probably most evident in the increased participation in sport by some segments of the population. These changes are particularly evident in the popularity of activities such as tennis, racquetball, and jogging. For example, in 1970 some 228,000 racquetballs were sold; and in 1979 more than 17 million were sold. During the 1970's an estimated 20 million Americans took up jogging -- including President Carter. The books and commercial interests associated with these increased consumers are substantial. In summary, sport represents a segment of society that is pervasive and incorporates a large number of active participants and spectators that are consumers of sport. In the following portions of

this paper we consider a variety of sociological variables that help explain why people are attracted to sport and thus represent consumers of sport.

#### SOME SOCIOLOGICAL FACTORS AND SPORT CONSUMPTION

Historically, the consumption of sport has been associated with the emergence of commercialism in sport (4). In the 1920's, the Golden Era of Sport, sport was marketed nationally by newspapers, radio, and books; by mid-century these media were supplemented by movies and television. However, the marketing of sport to consumers is predicated on several social factors. Discussed in the following sections are (1) the values of society expressed in sport that make sport attractive, (2) the process whereby individuals become socialized into active participants and thus consumers of sport, and (3) the appeal of sport to spectators as consumers of sport.

**Sport and Values.** If sport is viewed as a microcosm mirroring the larger society we should be able to see the way in which the values of a society are expressed in sport. Indeed, sport has emerged in modern society as a major institution that transmits social values. For example, achievement and success represent major values in North America that are reflected in the expectations for hard work and motivation on the job. One means of analyzing the values attributed to sport is to study the statements that are expressed by people involved in sport. One study classified the values expressed in sport by an examination of the slogans posted by coaches in athletic dressing rooms (11). While the slogans define the ideals of athletic behavior with emphasis on the development of personal characteristics that contribute to winning athletic contests, they also are expressions of social values. This study gathered information on the use of athletic slogans from coaches and players in 270 high schools. The following summary categorizes some of the slogans under various value themes:

**Physical and Mental Fitness** It's easier to stay in shape than to get in shape. It takes a cool head to win a hot game. You're as good as you want to be. The guy who complains about the way the ball bounces usually dropped it. The mark of a true champion is the one who can conquer the fear of making mistakes.

**Basic Skills and Techniques** Must be Faithfully Learned Valuable things in life don't come free, are you willing to pay the price? The harder I work, the luckier I get. The will to win is the will to work. When you're through improving you're through. No one ever drowned in sweat. If what you did yesterday still looks big today, then you haven't done much today. Good, better, best; never rest until your good is better and your better best. If you can't put out, get out. Anyone can be ordinary, but it takes guts to excel. A gentleman winning is setting up one more time.

**Aggressiveness and Competitive Spirit** A quitter never wins, a winner never quits. When the going gets tough, the tough get going. Winning isn't everything, it's the only thing. It's not the size of the dog in the fight, but the size of the fight in the dog. To explain a triumph, start with the first syllable. They ask not how you played the game but whether you won or lost. When they are drowning, throw them an anchor. If it doesn't matter if you win or lose, why keep score?

**The Player Must Accept Strict Discipline** Live by the code or get out. He who flies with the owls at night cannot keep up with the eagles during the day. The way you live is the way you play.

**Subordination of Self to the Success of the Team** There is no I in team. Who passed the ball

to you when you scored? The best ball players help others to be best players. Talent is God-given, conceit is self-given, be careful. Cooperate--remember the banana, every time it leaves the bunch, it gets skinned. An ounce of loyalty is worth a pound of cleverness.

The underlying value theme of these slogans is that certain behavior patterns must be adopted in order to excel and win in sports. Furthermore, an assumption associated with sport is that by participating in sport and internalizing its values, one will be learning to "Play the larger game of life."

In a similar manner, Edwards (7) collected value statements from journals, magazines, and newspaper articles dealing with expressed beliefs about the world of sport in America. Based on a content analysis of these sources, Edwards identified seven central themes he felt represented the core values associated with sports. It should be noted that while these basic values are often associated with both sport and society, some scholars question whether sport promotes all of these values. Yet, if many people believe sport promotes these values, this will contribute to the acceptance of the athletic perspective in the minds of many people. The seven themes were:

1. Character: general statements pertaining to character development and traits such as clean living, proper grooming, red-bloodedness, loyalty, altruism, brotherhood, unselfishness, or self-sacrifice.
2. Discipline: statements that relate sport to self-control and social order.
3. Competition: statements that relate sport to the development of fortitude and preparation for life in the sense of facilitating subsequent success for the individual.
4. Physical Fitness: statements that relate sport to health and physical conditioning.
5. Mental Fitness: statements that relate sport to mental alertness and educational achievement.
6. Religiosity: statements that relate sport with traditional American Christianity.
7. Nationalism: statements that relate sport to patriotism and love of country.

These value themes are likewise used by sports media personnel to "sell sport" to the consumers. For example, an analysis of football media guides from major universities reveal the following statements from their head coaches:

"The most important traits necessary for a top-notch football player include the willingness to hit, a burning desire to improve each day and the will to prepare and expect to win."

"We must be goal seeking individuals with a hunger to achieve on the field and in the classroom."

"I strongly believe and know that every team wants to win, this is easy but every team won't prepare to win."

"I don't believe in playing without a scoreboard. I don't feel there is any accomplishment with a tie."

"My coaching philosophy is to win and improve each player everyday. I know that football can play a major role in molding a young man's life. If I can teach him how to win on the field, I know he can win in the game of life. I must set our young athletes to learn to expect to win and learn how to work to win, then we will accomplish our goals."

"All our efforts are aimed at making each individual realize his full potential. It takes a great deal of sacrifice and discipline on the part of each player, but it pays dividends not only now, but in later life."

**Socialization Into Sport.** One perspective for analyzing the attraction to sport involves a social learning approach. One study focused on the interpersonal influences within the family that are associated with adult participation in sport (14). In this study a composite measure of sport involvement included active participation as well as spectatorship, knowledge about sport, and the affective meanings of sports in the person's life. Certainly this measure of sport involvement represents an index of sport of a consumption. The research was limited to persons 60 years of age or younger and currently married.

Figure one presents a path diagram depicting the hypothesized causal relations among a set of variables focusing on the interpersonal influence of the family on sport involvement as a measure of sport consumption. In this study, attraction to sport among adults implicates several important interpersonal variables--namely, the encouragement of children by their parents to participate in sport, youth participation, how participation affects one's perception of his/her athletic ability, and the spouse's involvement in sports.

The attraction to sport goes beyond the socialization influences in the family. The socialization perspective also needs to take into account the influence school, peers, and community have in introducing youngsters to sport. This socialization process can be further explicated by an examination of demographic and social variables that are associated with an opportunity to engage in athletics. For example, in the past, females have generally had less exposure to sports than males. Additionally, such factors as social class and race determine the type of sports that are available to a youngster. It is evident that members of the lower class are less likely to afford the financial expense required to participate in a club and lessons usually associated with the sports of tennis, ice skating, golf, swimming, and gymnastics; furthermore, in some cases the differential opportunities in sports have been affected by overt or covert discrimination against members of a class, race, religious, ethnic group or age category. If the opportunities for a person to participate in sport are not available, the consumption of sport is more likely to be as a spectator rather than as an active participant. A study conducted by Anderson and Stone substantiates this point (1). Members of the upper class who identified a favorite sport were more likely to be participants in their sport--57 percent while 42 percent of the middle class and 35 percent of the lower class were participants in their favorite sport. Conversely, the majority of the middle (58 percent) and lower classes (65 percent) were spectators, rather than participants, in their favorite sport. Favorite sports identified most frequently by members of the upper class were golf, tennis, and skiing. On the other hand, sports especially attractive to lower class consumers generally have several characteristics that make them "grand spectacles": (1) speed and power rather than agility, grace, or finesse, (2) artifacts that are derived from the lower class culture, such as the use of machines, and (3) a strong identification of the spectators with the participants. Sports often attractive to the lower class include demolition derbies, stock car racing, motocrossing, roller derbies, and professional wrestling.

Thus far the discussion has moved in two directions, (1) how the widespread appeal and pervasiveness of sport may be partially explained by the way sport reinforces the social order and reaffirms the established values, and (2) the manner in which differential sport socialization experiences contributes to individual variations in attraction and commitment to sport. Three related reasons for sport consumption are suggested in the following sections; (1) the quest for excitement, (2) the ritual of sport, and (3) sport and enhancement of identity.

**The Quest for Excitement.** One of the primary attributes of sport is that the outcome is uncertain. This problematic characteristic lends tension and excitement to sporting events for participants as well as for spectators who can identify with the performers. Indeed, this attribute of uncertainty contributes to the intrinsic appeal and fun element of sports (10). In a similar vein, Elias and Dunning argue that sport in contemporary life represents a quest for excitement in unexciting societies. Their reasoning is that in urban industrial societies the range of approved emotional expression is severely constrained and people seek new experiences and sensations to compensate for the monotony of their lives. The Elias and Dunning argument is summarized in the following quotation:

For many people it is not only in their occupational but also in their private lives that one day is the same as another. For many of them, nothing new, nothing stirring ever happens. Their tension, their tonus, their vitality, or whatever one might call it is thus lowered. In a simple or a complex form, on a low or high level, leisure time activities provide, for a short while, the upsurge of strong pleasurable feelings which is often lacking in ordinary routines of life. Their function is not simply as is often believed, a liberation from tensions, but the restoration of that measure of tension which is an essential ingredient of mental health. The essential character of their cathartic effect is the restoration of a normal mental "tonus" through a temporary and transient upsurge of a pleasurable excitement (8, p. 50).

Thus, while some people might argue that one attraction of sport to its consumers is that it serves as a catharsis for reducing people's anxieties, the Elias and Dunning thesis posits that an appeal of sport is that it serves to increase tension, maintain arousal, and provide stimulation. This idea emphasizes the need of people for stimulation and arousing interactions with their environment, and to the extent to which these are not met in their work they may be met through leisure--including sport.

**Sport as Ritual.** The social significance of athletic events is also apparent when one observes the attraction of the pregame, half-time and post-game ceremonies for many people who are not primarily interested in the technical aspects of the game. The writings of the theologian Harvey Cox have some interesting implications in this respect. Cox argues that the technology of modern society has produced more sober people, less playful and imaginative. Cox suggests that the social and economic practices associated with industrialism have substituted thrift, ambition, and diligence for play, mirth, festivity, and fantasy (3). From Cox's point of view, sport provides an opportunity for the fan to satisfy the need for celebration and ritual. To this extent, sport events are not mere games, diversions, and pastimes; rather, they provide special occasions when ordinary lives are suspended in order to engage in a form of dramatization, and to provide a sense of the exhilaration and are often associated with athletic events.

It can also be noted that athletic events as rituals may be viewed as Durkheim analyzed religious rituals. Sport and religious ceremonies pay homage to, and reaffirm sacred values which unite the community (5). Particularly important in the linkage of these unifying values to sport are the performances of athletes. Star athletes become heroes because they are "exemplary," "set apart," and "exceptional" in their display of the characteristics highly prized in the athletic realm. Many of these characteristics outlined earlier in this paper--discipline, courage, competitiveness, composure--are abstract values that are often subsumed under the label "good character." Furthermore, as Birrell has noted, "Sporting incidents singled out and applauded by the media as examples of heroic action are used to support the idea that athletes are significant social figures because they are capable of representing important societal values, i.e., courage, sameness, integrity, and poise. (5, p. 354). In short, the ritual associated with sport provides a partial explanation for the

gratification individuals receive as well as the power to provide social integration by emphasizing basic values of the society.

**Commitment to Other Roles.** One's involvement with sport as a spectator in sport festivities or as an active participant is also influenced by the individual's overall role commitments such as in the family, work, community, and other leisure spheres. These configurations vary not only from individual to individual but also by stages of the life cycle. The degree of commitment to each role is a function of investment (time, energy, money, and other resources) within each role, and the overall negotiation that takes place within the individual regarding the satisfactions that flow from each of the role segments. In short, the commitment to a role, such as leisure sport participation and other forms of sport consumption, are affected by one's investment in other interests besides sport; traditionally, for many people the work role has been a powerful influence on their identity. For example, introductions are usually made by giving a person's name and "what they do" (i.e., their occupation). Thus, work is a "master role" in the sense that it demands a heavy investment in time, energy and training, and most other roles are subordinate. Yet, this work-leisure dichotomy may be artificial; it is sometimes difficult to separate work from play. Furthermore, for many people their work may be guided primarily by their leisure activities. Indeed, as Kelly has noted, "The ball player or gambler as well as the cellist or archeologist may find the risk, measurement, feedback, associations, and creative and expressive potential of leisure are greater than other roles" (9, p. 316). In the following section the significance of leisure sports for one's identity is outlined in greater detail.

**Identity Enhancement.** There is considerable support for the perspective that for many people sport is a means of maintaining and enhancing their self-identity. In fact, for some people their participation in sport is so salient to their identity that sport is their "master role." Likewise, some evidence also suggests that the desire for self-esteem also attracts spectators to sport because they can "bask in the reflected glory" of others who are successful in sport (6). Consequently, the spectator receives a measure of enhanced self-esteem by identifying with a successful player or team.

The social scientist, Ernest Becker, has theorized that human beings seek to enhance their feelings of self-worth by selecting from their environment those activities that serve this purpose (2). Thus, Becker states that, "...the person's entire life becomes animated by the artificial symbolism of self-worth; almost all his time is devoted to the protection, maintenance, and aggrandizement of the symbolic edifice of his self-esteem" (2, pp.67-68). Using this theoretical perspective, one primary explanation of sport consumerism is based upon people's attempt to fulfill the needs of enhancing their self-identity. For people with athletic ability this self-esteem can come from active participation in sport that provides a measure of success. For others, sport spectatorship and identification with athletic performers, if only as fans, may promote one's self-esteem. This latter point might be illustrated by the way people are elated and joyous when their "Yankees" or "Buckeyes" win, but conversely they are depressed when their team loses. This can be further illustrated by the tendency to disengage one's self from a team that has a long losing string. The process of disengagement may be noted by the differential use of personal pronouns, thus, if a team one identifies with is successful it is "our team" and "we won." Conversely, if the team is in a losing streak fans may begin referring to the team as "they lost" and "their performance." People do not like to be associated with an unsuccessful program and this has importance when examined within the framework of Becker's theoretical perspective.

## CONCLUSIONS

Sport is an institution in modern societies that has considerable mass appeal and pervasiveness. The salience of sport may be attributed to its interdependence with other social institutions and the social values that are exemplified through sport. An equally important point is the power of sport festivals and rituals to function as a means of reinforcing the social order and provide social integration.

On an individual level the degree and type of sport involvement is usually influenced by one's previous sport experiences as well as the type and degree of involvement in other roles in one's life. Certainly one of the reasons sport is widely accepted both for mass consumption as well as on an individual performance level is that it often serves to inflate people's self-esteem. In general, we expect that an important part of one's involvement in sport will reflect the social and personal rewards that accrue from sport involvement.

The factors that have been identified in this paper raise issues that may have applied significance. For example, the use of mass media to "sell" sport has often made use of the values that are associated with sport. It may be that the values are not always achieved by sport; indeed, in some cases, these values may be corrupted by sport, yet this perceived linkage of basic social values to sport remains an important part of the sport media themes. Furthermore, the emphasis on the ritualistic and festive aspects of sport and the excitement they generate contribute to its mass appeal. Attempts to expand the market to incorporate additional spectators often make use of these attractive features of sport.

From an individual level, some of the factors outlined in this paper suggest ways of motivating people to incorporate sport and physical fitness into their personal life style. In general, we can identify some interesting correlates of active participants as compared to nonparticipants. Research shows that most adults who are active in sports have a background of sport participation and have a high perception of their athletic ability. This finding suggests that the nonparticipants have not found participation satisfying in the past or present. To make these nonparticipants consumers of sport will require a different approach. The competitiveness of sport will probably not be a satisfactory motivator for these people. Perhaps the social, cathartic, or aesthetic benefits of sport will be more attractive. In some of our preliminary research efforts with adult samples of runners, racquetball players, and nonparticipants we have been able to profile some of these psychosocial factors that seem to "turn people on" to sport participation (12, 13). The variations between samples suggest different strategies that might be used by physical fitness directors in industry, athletic clubs, and educational settings to encourage individuals to incorporate active sport participation as part of their life style. We have a reasonably sound body of knowledge relating to the psychobiological benefits of fitness programs but we still have not advanced our knowledge very far concerning the reasons for attraction and adherence to active sports and fitness programs. We assume that discretionary time and energy are invested in activities that involve perceived payoffs of one type or another. Additional research on this topic is encouraged with samples of adult consumers and nonconsumers of sport to provide more knowledge about this important aspect of peoples' lives.

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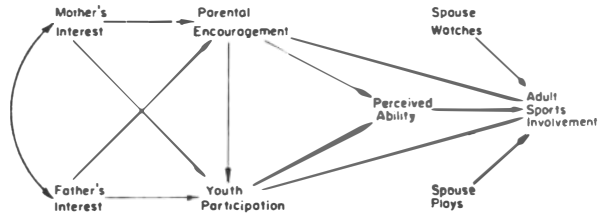


Figure 1. A THEORETICAL MODEL OF SOCIALIZATION INTO SPORT

Table 1. ATTENDANCE AT SELECTED SPECTATOR SPORTS AND THE GAINS OR LOSSES IN THE LAST YEAR

Sport	Attend	Gain/Loss	Attendance Rank
Horseracing	77,679,954	-1,339,054	1
Baseball	65,356,461	+5,725,452	2
Football (Collegiate and Professional)	50,075,529	+1,230,000	3
Autoracing	47,700,000	-3,050,000	4
Basketball	40,690,082	+ 913,000	5
Soccer	23,500,000	+15,000,000	6

Source: Bowling Green Sentinel Tribune, p. 17, April 29, 1980.

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#### SUMMARY

The dimension isolated in the articles suggests that there is a very close relationship between tangible outcomes and emotional responses. The emotions that these activities spark seem to relate to a more basic physical need or appeal. The more basic the need, the greater the appeal to the general audience. This does not suggest that an activity like sport or athletics does not appeal to the higher challenge and emotional needs. It only suggests that the range of most activities begins with some type of extrinsic motivation that move to a more intrinsic experience. The cognitive element in this interaction seems to only enhance and strengthen the experience.

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