WADSWORTH SOCIOLOGY MODULE

Sociology of Sports

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Introduction

Sport is one of the more complex social institutions in American society. Let's begin with a college game that took place in January of 2008. The Bowl Champion Series (BCS) final game between the Ohio State University (OSU) Buckeyes and the Louisiana State University (LSU) Tigers football teams was played in New Orleans and won by LSU. This Bowl Champion game is the most important one in college football as it crowns the national collegiate football champion. In terms of social institutions, two fine universities represent education: Ohio State and Louisiana State. Most of the fans were not at the game but watched it on television at home, thus connecting sport with two other social institutions—the mass media and family. For example, the game received a television household rating of 21.6 with each point representing over a million households. In the demographic figure coveted by advertisers, 18 to 49 years of age, there was a household rating of 7.6. A month later the same pattern occurred for the Super Bowl in the game between the New York Giants and the New England Patriots. The Giants won in an upset victory of 17–14. The television household rating was 43.2 (Sandomir, 2008) equaling an audience of 98 million people: the largest audience in the history of the Super Bowl.

Sport has engaged the scholarly interests of sociologists for several decades. There are several reasons for this. First, the United States and Canada have a very complex sport system. It might even be called the most pluralistic sport system in the world. Competitions are organized from little leagues to the professional teams. These competitions are organized around both league and non-league events and consume considerable energy and time for organizations, players, officials, and fans.

Second, as a result of this complexity, sport touches all of the major institutions of society, including: the mass media, politics, religion, education, and the family. Just consider the number of sport phrases and analogies sales people use in everyday life. There are many supportive phrases, such as from baseball: "let's have a seventh inning stretch" for taking a break in a meeting; for an anticipated sales success; "playing hard ball" for tough negotiations; a "home run" for something well done; and a related phrase from basketball: "you did a slam dunk"; and from football: "driving towards the goal line" and a "Hail Mary" for a last ditch effort to accomplish an important sale. On the other hand, there are critical statements from baseball as well—"you threw me a curve" for being misled and "you dropped the ball" for not doing something well. And from football there is "you

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blind-sided me" for being fooled or surprised by the action of a client or customer (Lewis, D. M., 2008).

The third reason that sport engages scholarly interests is because of the teaching of important values. Sociologists have noted that sport teaches values that are important to Americans including competition, hard work, and success based on achievement and leadership. A senior insurance company executive once said he would only hire military officers and athletes as executives because they were only ones who understood these values.

Here is list of some subjects that sport sociologists have studied:

- Higher education and sport
- Gender and racial discrimination in sports
- Mass media and sport, including popular culture
- Sport as a functional alternative to religion
- Social mobility on the basis of sport success, including race and gender
- Social problems and sport, including drugs, sports violence, and injuries

Definitions

Before continuing this analysis, it is necessary to separate sport from related social activities. Sport refers to organized competitions. A related topic is *leisure* activities which may include sport but generally refers to formally organized recreation outside the work environment. Lastly, there is *play*, which refers to activities that are not formally organized and that are primarily intended for the gratification of the participants.

The Complexity of Sport

In this section, let's look at the complexity of sport, beginning with attendance data and then examining the social environment that shapes the actions of the sports organizations.

Four sets of data will be examined that can provide us with some understanding of the complexity of sport in American society.

Attendance at Collegiate and Professional Sports Events

The first set of data (● Table 1) show the attendance figures for 2006 for all of the football teams that are members of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). The total attendance for all divisions playing football was almost 48 million, with Division I making up the bulk of the attendance.

The top five teams (BCS universities) were Michigan, Penn State, Tennessee, Ohio State, and Georgia. Combined, these teams drew more than three million fans to seven home games. The first four teams on the list averaged over 100,000 fans for each of the seven games. Remember these attendance averages do not equal 100,000 different individuals, as many fans go to more than one game. Indeed, most college and professional sports teams value and count on season ticket holders as a key part of their fan structure and revenue.

Turning to the other major revenue sport in collegiate athletics, men's basketball, we see in ● Table 2 on page 4 the scope of the attendance for all members of the NCAA. Across the three divisions, the attendance for 2007 totaled almost 33 million with 28 million (74%) coming from Division I. The top five schools in home attendance were Kentucky, Syracuse, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Louisville.

Another way to think about the complexity of sport is to examine some of the major sources of attendance in professional sports. For comparable purposes let's look at data for professional football and basketball. In 2007, over 17 million people attended regular season National Football League (NFL) games, with the highest average attendance per game achieved by the Washington Redskins: 79,000 over 16 home and road games. The next four teams were the New York Giants, the New York Jets, the Kansas City Chiefs, and the Denver Broncos (ESPN, 2007). The lowest attendance average was the Indianapolis Colts with an average of 63,000 fans over 16 home and road games. Ironically, the Colts won the Super Bowl and were the NFL champions for 2007.

Turning to professional basketball, in the 2006–2007 season, the National Basketball Association (NBA) drew over 21 million fans to its regular season games. The Detroit Pistons averaged 22,000 followed by the Chicago Bulls, the Dallas Mavericks, the Miami Heat, and the Cleveland Cavaliers. The team with the lowest average was the Portland Trail Blazers with an average draw of 15,000.

What do the data show? First, many people are attending sporting events each year and spending money on tickets and travel to participate in the games as fans. Second, being a fan involves

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Table 1

2006 National College Football Attendance (For All NCAA Men's Varsity Teams)

	Total Teams	Games or Sessions	2006 Attendance	Average	Change in Total	Change in Average
Home Attendance, Division I FBS	119	745	34,142,038	45,828	3,571,123	200
FBS Neutral-Site Attendance		19	972,791	51,200	302,815	–4,631
FBS Bowl Game Attendance		32	1,699,639	53,114	298,914	1,235
NCAA DIVISION I FBS TOTALS	***119**	**796**	***36,814,468**	***46,249**	**4,172,942**	**210**
Home Attendance, Division I FCS	116	622	5,000,273	8,039	250,119	340
FCS Neutral-Site Attendance		19	700,795	36,884	35,063	3,597
FCS Championship Game		1	22,808	22,808	2,572	2,572
NCAA DIVISION I FCS TOTALS	**116**	**642**	**5,723,876**	**8,916**	**287,754**	**395**
NCAA DIVISION I TOTALS	**235**	**1,438**	**42,538,344**	**29,582**	**4,460,696**	**1,313**
Home Attendance, NCAA Division II	143	750	2,809,938	3,747	1,237	7
Division II Neutral-Site Attendance		25	187,839	7,514	14,103	832
Division II Championship Game		1	7,437	7,437	600	600
NCAA DIVISION II TOTALS	**143**	**776**	***3,005,214**	**3,873**	**15,940**	**31**
Home Attendance, NCAA Division III	229	1,129	2,083,303	1,845	14,572	0
Division III Neutral-Site Attendance		11	10,392	945	–4,277	–183
Division III Championship Game		1	6,051	6,051	1,432	1,432
NCAA DIVISION III TOTALS	***229**	**1,141**	**2,099,746**	**1,840**	**11,727**	**0**
Home Attendance, Reclassifying Teams	8	37	266,009	7,189	—	—
NATIONAL TOTALS FOR 2006	**615**	**3,392**	***47,909,113**	***14,124**	**4,422,739**	**785**

*Record

NOTE: The total attendance for the Division I FCS Tournament was 202,351 for a 13,490 average over 15 games, the Division II Tournament was 119,341 for a 5,189 average over 23 games and the Division III Tournament was 67,740 for a 2,185 average over 31 games.

SOURCE: National Collegiate Athletic Association

Table 2

2007 National College Basketball Attendance (For All NCAA Men's Varsity Teams)

	Total Teams	Games or Sessions	2006 Attendance	Average	Change in Total	Change in Average
Home Attendance, NCAA Division I	325	*4,735	*25,224,121	5,327	1,757,319	129
NCAA Championship Tournament		35	696,992	19,914	26,738	764
Other Division I Neutral-Site Attendance		224	*1,784,799	7,968	113,509	–145
NCAA DIVISION I TOTALS	**325**	***4,994**	***27,705,912**	**5,548**	**1,897,566**	**122**
Home Attendance, NCAA Division II^	262	3,551	2,892,820	815	–20,693	–10
Home Attendance, NCAA Division III	380	4,533	1,947,730	430	–7,990	0
Reclassifying Teams	*15	*178	*175,921	*988	—	—
Neutral-Site Attendance for Divisions II & III		131	85,315	651	—	—
NCAA Division II Tournament Neutral Sites		14	20,497	1,464	—	—
NCAA Division III Tournament Neutral Sites		5	7,668	1,534	—	—
NATIONAL TOTALS FOR 2007	**982**	***13,406**	***32,835,863**	**2,449**	**1,896,148**	**98**

*Record high

^Division II attendance figures do not include five NCAA Puerto Rican schools.

NOTES: The Neutral-Site Attendance for Divisions II and III does not include the NCAA tournaments. The total attendance for the Division II Tournament was 76,073 for a 2,113 average over 36 sessions and the Division III Tournament was 60,619 for a 1,443 average over 42 sessions.

SOURCE: National Collegiate Athletic Association

a considerable amount of time and energy. For example, follow the experience of one fan who has been a season ticket holder with the Cleveland Browns ever since the team returned to Cleveland in 1999. This fan, a college educated, 40-year-old white male, who is a very successful salesman, leaves home from a southern suburb of Cleveland at about 10:30 AM for a 1:00 PM game. The game typically lasts until a little after 4:00 PM and it takes one to three hours to clear the parking lot. This fan returns home around 7:00 PM. Thus, he has spent eight and one-half hours (a full work day) supporting the Browns. Third, the fan who goes to games generally participates in activities linked to his or her team through fantasy leagues, blogs, radio sports talk shows, and the sports pages.

Organizations and Sport

These attendance data of collegiate and professional football and basketball show that there is considerable interest in sport in America. Of course, this "attendance" interest has to be multiplied by the interest in a sporting event that is reflected by being a "mass media" fan. For many sports fans, watching or listening to a game or match on television or radio is seen as equivalent to being present at the sporting event. Being a "couch spectator" is a legitimate activity.

For every sporting event there is an organization structure that deals with everything from recruiting players to cleaning up after the game. This is true whether it is a little league team in Dubuque, Iowa or the Bears in Chicago, Illinois. These organizations all exist in a social environment and must respond to it. What is this environment?

Amis and Slack (2003) propose several factors that sports organizations face when attempting to present sporting events. Let's focus on two of the factors: political culture and marketing to specific groups. Assume you are on the staff of a sports team organization. Here are some of the problems you and your organization might face as you organize a sporting event.

Any formal organization must deal with the political culture. Professional and collegiate sports organizations must work with several layers of political structures including city, county, and state regulations. For example, organizing traffic control before and after a sporting event might mean working with three levels of policing—city, county, and state.

At a more macro level, an interesting and stressful relationship between sports organizations and their political environments comes to the forefront when efforts develop to build a sports stadium using a variety of tax options that involve many political units. This situation can generate considerable controversy. Owners of major sports teams put pressure on governments of home team cities as well as suburban governments to pay for building the stadium. Sometimes the source of revenue is called the "sin tax" because tobacco and liquor are taxed to pay for the new facilities. The basic argument of the team owners is that over the long haul the stadium will pay for itself through increased revenues. However, there is some evidence that this is not correct (Leonard, 1998; Marreddy, 2006; Eitzen, 2006).

Professional sports are businesses. They must compete for customers. Earlier the pluralism and complexity of America's sports system was noted. This means that the fan has many ways to spend his or her energy and money on sport, whether as a fan in the stadium or via the mass media. One of the ways that sports organizations attempt to compete for customers is to have sports promotions. These promotions are designed to get fans into the seats and to build team loyalty. Promotions require a considerable amount of effort by the sports organization. The promotions are wide-ranging. For example, in past seasons, the Cleveland Indians baseball club has had promotions based on fireworks and rock concerts, and has given away at games bobble head dolls of popular players, towels, baseball helmets and caps, and kitchen magnets. Some of the promotions were specifically aimed at youngsters. The Cleveland Indians also gave away a savings bank with a logo during one promotion and lunch boxes during another to children fourteen and under.

One the most interesting promotions by the Cleveland Indians was a pair of Rick Vaughn glasses. Vaughn (played by actor Charlie Sheen) was the relief pitcher known as "Wild Thing" in the classic 1989 baseball comedy *Major League.* When he pitched, "Wild Thing" wore black glasses with a piece of adhesive tape on the nosepiece. This was one of the Indians' early 2007 promotions but, ironically, it was snowed out and the glasses were handed out later in the season.

Sports bobble heads.

Major League movie poster.

However, the promotions do not always involve items. They could be such things as cheaper seats. Some baseball clubs provide lower cost seats for college students with proper identification. One of the more famous promotions was "Ladies' Day," where women were admitted to the games at lower ticket rates. But this was discontinued after protests from men who said they were being discriminated against by this promotion.

Collegiate sports teams also have promotions to get fans into the seats. Some colleges have offered scholarships of a semester's tuition to a lucky student ticker holder at football or basketball games. Or, at the start of a basketball game as players are introduced, towels or T-shirts featuring the team's logo are thrown into the crowd. An increasingly popular promotion that one sees at collegiate basketball games is what might be called a "skill promotion." This promotion has many formats, but two of the most interesting are ones that typically take place at halftime of a game. One promotion is for a fan to attempt to make a shot from the half court line. If the shot is made, then the fan wins a prize ranging from a pizza to an iPod. Another promotion, somewhat related, is where two basketball fans at each end of the court attempt to make shots from different positions during a designated period of time. The student with the most baskets wins a prize.

Mass Media and Sport

The central theme of this module is that the complexity and pervasive nature of sport in American society causes sport to interact with other social institutions. The mass media are no exception. In this section, let's examine two aspects of the mass media and sport: television, and popular culture as represented by theater films.

Television and sports go hand in hand. Television, as it moved from a limited number of broadcast hours when introduced in the late 1940s to a 24-hour schedule, continually increased its demand for content. Organized sports provided much of the content. Team sports that were visually interesting such as football, basketball, and baseball became obvious candidates for the television networks. Individual sports such as golf, figure skating, tennis, and the Olympics also provided attractive content. Of course, television had been preceded as a sports venue by radio, which dominated sports broadcasting in the 1920s and 1930s. Sports teams benefited from television in several ways. First, the teams gained revenue from the advertising. Second, television helped build fan loyalty because "couch spectators" saw themselves as truly committed fans. Third, sports journalism became an important part of the sports experience.

Pockets of Sport Broadcasting

Let's examine the calendar to look at the primary pockets of sport broadcasting. On Saturday and Sunday afternoons, certain team sports are dominant, although there is some overlap. We find football and baseball in the fall, basketball in winter, baseball, basketball, and golf in the spring, and baseball in the summer. Both professional and collegiate sports contribute to this television content.

There are other pockets of sport television broadcasting that should be noted. First, there is

the bowl season. Through the 1980s, the major bowl competitions were the Rose Bowl, the Orange Bowl, and the Sugar Bowl. In 1990 there began an increase in bowl games featuring college teams drawn primarily from Division I. Large corporations sponsor these bowls. In 2007 it was reported that there were 33 bowl games scheduled for television from December 20, 2007 to January 7, 2008 (ESPN, 2007). Of course, the most important game was the Bowl Championship Series (BCS) championship game between Ohio State University and Louisiana State University discussed earlier.

Another major pocket of sports broadcasting occurs on one day, although the buildup for the event takes several weeks. This, as noted earlier, is the Super Bowl, which crowns the National Football League champion. There are several fascinating social factors that should be examined about this broadcast. First, many people watch the game who would not normally watch a football game on television. It becomes a set of family rituals involving several generations of relatives and friends, special meals, rearranging furniture in the home to create a theater setting for the television set and, lastly, special entertainment for young children so adults can watch the game. For example, in late January 2008, the Sunday news magazines *USA Weekend* and *Parade* featured articles with recipes for special family-oriented meals on Super Bowl day. Some churches even change schedules to accommodate members who want to watch the Super Bowl. A few years ago during a lecture to an Introduction to Sociology class on the sociological significance of the Super Bowl, a young woman began to cry. When asked, "What's wrong?" She said, sadly, "Grandpa won't be here this year." For her family, the Super Bowl was an important family ritual gathering.

But people watch the Super Bowl for other reasons than the game itself. Two points should be noted. First, they watch because of the ads. Often the ads are only shown one time and some generate considerable discussion following the game. It was estimated that some of the ads cost up to 2.7 million dollars for a 30-second spot (Sutel, 2008). A few of the ads have become quite famous. The best known is probably the Disneyland ad. It is generally shown immediately after the game is finished with a star player featured, often the winning team's quarterback, responding to the question, "You have just won the Super Bowl, what are you going to do?" The star responds, "I am going to Disneyland!" After the 2008 Super Bowl, the player in the ad was Eli Manning, the Giants' quarterback who was voted the most valuable player of the game.

Another widely recognized ad, first presented in 1980, features a Pittsburgh Steeler football player, "mean" Joe Greene, injured, limping to the locker room when he is offered a "comforting" Coca-Cola drink by a young fan. He reciprocates by giving the lad his game shirt. In 2008 this ad was named the most popular Super Bowl ad for the seventh straight year (CBS, 2008).

The second reason people watch the Super Bowl is the halftime show which features well-known entertainers, usually a rock star or band. In 2007 it was the musician Prince. The halftime shows are not without controversy. Some critics have suggested that the shows are aimed at too narrow an audience by having entertainers that do not have a broad appeal, such as the rock stars. However, the most controversial show occurred during the 2004 Super Bowl halftime. At the end of a set, Justin Timberlake grabbed Janet Jackson's costume very briefly, revealing her breast. Jackson apologized for the incident. Timberlake said it was a wardrobe malfunction. Other commentators said it was on purpose, as Timberlake was singing suggestive lyrics at the time of the "malfunction."

All of this Super Bowl activity helps to generate very large audiences for the broadcast. Coakley (2007) reports that through 2005, 19 of the top

Eli Manning of the New York Giants.

25 watched television programs were Super Bowl broadcasts. As noted earlier, the 2008 Super Bowl drew the largest audience in the history of the game with 98 million viewers.

Popular Culture—Sports and Theater Films

Many sports have found a place in the movies. In some cases the films have been very successful. Let's examine some of these films and how they are linked to the major team sports in American society. Baseball has had a long history of being presented in films. An early film was *Pride of the Yankees* (1942) with Gary Cooper as the legendary Lou Gehrig. More recent films include *Major League* (1989) with Tom Berenger and Charlie Sheen; *Bull Durham* (1988) with Kevin Costner and Susan Sarandon; and the most important one, *Field of Dreams* (1989) with Costner and Amy Madigan, which has a subtext of religion and baseball.

In football there is the classic *Knute Rockne All American* (1940) with Pat O'Brien in the title role and former President Ronald Reagan as George Gipp. Two more releases include *North Dallas Forty* (1979) starring Nick Nolte, dealing with the issue of injuries, and in 2000, *Remember the Titans* with Denzel Washington, featuring racial conflict. Another football movie situated in a Texas high school, *Friday Night Lights*, will be discussed later in this section.

In basketball there was the major film *Hoosiers* (1986), featuring Gene Hackman and Dennis Hopper. There is no particularly important film in hockey, but one did capture the culture of minor league hockey—*Slapshot* (1977) starring Paul Newman. Lastly, in track and field there was *Chariots of Fire*. These films, while based on different sports, seem to have one thing that ties them together—overcoming serious adversity, whether it may be personal or team adversity. Some of these challenges might be characterized by the biblical David versus Goliath conflict. Or, to link it more directly to sport, a "Rocky" message. Let's look at this in more detail.

The *Rocky* Message. There are several Rocky films, but the first is by far the most important one. *Rocky* (1976) stars Sylvester Stallone as Rocky Balboa, a down and out gym fighter who is a borderline criminal doing strong arm work for Philadelphia loan sharks. Circumstances create a situation where Rocky gets to fight the heavyweight champion Apollo Creed (Carl Weathers). After a very demanding training schedule, including punching cow carcasses in a meat locker and running up the steps of the Philadelphia City Hall to the musical *Rocky* theme, Balboa unexpectedly wins the championship. *Rocky* received considerable recognition including an Academy Award for best picture.

Many of the films mentioned above have this "Rocky" notion. For example, *Major League*, while a comedy about a very poor team, has the Cleveland Indians beating the New York Yankees for the American League championship. *Hoosiers* has a small team winning the Indiana State championship in the final moments of the game, over a team from Indianapolis. In *Remember the Titans*, racial conflict among high school teammates is overcome, leading to a perfect season for the team.

Friday Night Lights. An important film has used this Rocky theme to explain Texas high school football.

Friday Night Lights is a movie based on the book by H. G. Bissinger (1991) of the same name. It is also a critically acclaimed television program with a different cast. The film describes the reality of the culture of one season of Texas high school football. We learn not only about the town of Odessa, Texas, the Odessa Permian Panthers team, and the importance of football to Odessa's residents, but also the pressures put on players and their families to succeed and "to win State," a refrain repeated often in the film.

Sylvester Stallone as Rocky.

There are numerous social patterns running throughout this movie, both manifest and latent. Some central values to Americans are also the source of some of the tension and the plot. At the start, the importance of wearing the "right" shoes is the subject of a scene. The best player on the Odessa team, an African American named Boobie Miles (a fine new young actor named Derek Luke), is telling another African American player in a good spirit that his white non-Nike shoes should be black Nikes, in order to have the best footwear. A bit later, the young man uses a permanent marker to paint his shoes black. We are aware of the implication that this young man cannot afford another pair of shoes (economic status) and that to fit in (social status) with a team star, he is at least trying to copy Boobie. We also learn that Boobie lives in a small home with an uncle who cares deeply about him. Various town leaders are seen implying that material goods (perhaps Nike shoes) or other forms of aid flow to the best players.

Early in the season schedule, Boobie receives a season-ending injury, but fights it for a while. The coach questions him and his uncle about the injury, but does not push for detail or question the upbeat responses. It is as if he is showing concern but is also in denial about the potential, or real, serious damage that they could be facing and the effect it would have on the team.

We see Boobie icing his knee at his Uncle's house and observing African American garbage collectors working through the window. Is this a reality of racism in Texas and other places? It is as if he is seeing his possible future. He does play one more time and receives a more permanent knee injury. After he leaves the stadium, we see him break down and his uncle hugging him. We know the dream is over in terms of football, scholarships, and big dreams of endorsement, and so does he.

There is more than one scene of note where we see the head coach, Gary Gaines, played by Billy Bob Thornton, the only well known star in this movie, listening to the advice and near threats of town leaders about how the team has to win the regional and state championship. There is usually no response from the coach at all. He does not argue. He listens or nods trying to placate everyone.

From the start, we know that winning, the important value of success and achievement in the U.S., is the central theme. The cost of this success,

Friday Night Lights.

the cost of attempting to reach it, and the long-term and short-term gains, or lack thereof, are implied. There is a scene of a dinner in the home of a town leader to which Coach Gaines and his wife have been invited. There is a white tablecloth, candles, and wine glasses, illustrating middle to upper class practices, but there is also a Coke bottle on the table—more working class. The coach is told how to play his game and he politely listens. The conversation makes it clear that he could lose his job if the team does not do well or does not win a championship. The character of the coach and what he is really thinking is barely revealed.

After the next game that is lost, the coach returns to his home with his wife and daughter and finds numerous "For Sale" signs on his lawn. His house is not for sale. The signs were quickly put there once the final score was known. Obviously this is a nonverbal threat from certain townspeople. Again, we see little reaction and Coach Gaines hides his real feelings and thoughts. We can surmise the thoughts of job insecurity and the possibility of having to move again. We were informed that there had been several moves in the past in earlier scenes. We also see the family of three as a solid unit that has faced problems together and made the best of the moves together.

Family values are shown when we learn that one of the two leading players lives with his mom who is not well. Serious illness, plus the possibility of some alcohol overuse, is implied. A drive-in restaurant

hangout owner brings a bag of food for the player to take home to his mom and also asks how she is doing. Later, there is a scene where that player is using a pay phone and asks someone to come home and help with his mom—perhaps it is an older brother who left and moved away or the father who has also moved on. The young man is trying to be the head of the house, trying to honor family, and is torn by anxiety over it and the need for football success. We are not told, but clearly this player, Mike Winchell, cares for his mom and provides her with care as best he can.

She is overly eager to have him receive the offer of a football scholarship and jumps the gun with a recruiter when he visits. The son seems uncomfortable, and the recruiter lets her know it is too early for offers of making a commitment.

Another leading player, Don Billingsley (a new actor, Garrett Hedlund), has an alcoholic father (Tim McGraw) with a mean streak. More than once, the father publicly humiliates Don, making fun of a fumble. The son stays quiet. After running out onto the field, he pushes him around during practice and berates him for the fumble. The son stays quiet and takes his shoves and insults. The coach just looks on. Finally, two other players intervene and help protect the son by getting between him and his father. Why did Coach Gaines only look on and not do or say something? We learn that the father must have played on a championship team in his high school days. He calls it the high point of his life and he wears the championship ring. For him, life after 17 has nothing to offer ever again, and he sees his son as a failure if he makes any error in football. His narrow definition of *success* for his son is a main theme.

His need to gain status at his son's expense is seen when, drunk, he barges into a room where the son is making out with a girl and will not leave. He grabs duct tape and forces it around his son's wrist after he shoves a football in his hands to cruelly show him how to hang on to the ball. His son takes it. In another scene, the drunken dad kicks out car windows while the son drives, and tosses his special championship high school ring out. Don finds it later in the grass by the road and gives it back to him the next morning after his father says he did not mean everything he said the night before. He said, "The only thing you'll ever have . . . that carries you forever . . . one stinking year to make some memories." Still, he does not redeem himself until near the end of the movie. His father comes out at the end of the final game and hugs Don who had made a catch that almost won the game—if he had been a few inches into the end zone. He puts the ring on Don's finger. Don's team lost, but had played a terrific game despite many injuries and the fact that they played against a much bigger team for the state championship. The coach talks of being "perfect." Making a powerful sociological observation, he says it took him a long time to realize that there is not "much difference between winning and losing except how the outside world treats you." One wonders just what is meant by that and could debate the opposite depending on the specifics of any given situation.

Sport and Religion

Sport and religion have a long history. According to Higgs and Braswell (2004) the Olympics originated in Greece in 776 BC as a way to honor the weather and sky god, Zeus. Zeus, in the pantheon of Greek gods, was the same as Jupiter in Roman society and was seen as the most important god.

Religion is often defined by sport sociologists using the well-known definition developed by Émile Durkheim (Leonard, 1998), who wrote that religion was ". . . a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, uniting into a single moral community all those who adhere to those beliefs and practices."

There are two approaches that sociologists have used to study the issues associated with sport and religion. The first sees sport as reinforcing religious beliefs and practices and vice versa. This is based on the sociological strategy for analyzing religion and capitalism used by the famous sociologist Max Weber in his classic book, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904/1958). In this book, Weber argues that religion, particularly the Protestant tradition of Calvinism, helped capitalism to develop and encourage and support Calvinism. These two social institutions converged. In the convergence model one did not cause the other, but these two institutional idea systems (Calvinism and capitalism), at least in the minds of the believers, came together in support of each other.

The second approach sees sport as a functional alternative to religion. That is, in many situations, sport "replaces" religion in the attitudes

and behaviors of believers. W. M. Leonard (1998) argues that religion and sport can be compared on several dimensions. Three of the most important ones are beliefs, symbols. and rituals.

Let's look at each of these in turn and distinguish between primary and secondary aspects of these dimensions. *Beliefs* in religion can be divided into primary and secondary beliefs. Primary beliefs are essential to the core of the faith. For example, in Christianity, salvation through belief in the passion of Christ is a primary belief, while in Islam honoring the sacredness of the teachings of the Koran is central to Muslims. A secondary belief in Christianity would be the practice of tithing.

Is it possible to divide beliefs about organized sport into primary and secondary beliefs? Sport sociologists think it is. A core belief in sport is the importance of one's team winning a championship. The celebration and joy that is associated, for some, with winning can be seen to approach the euphoric feelings of religious fervor about the belief that one is saved. A secondary belief would be one that is important, but less so than a primary belief. In baseball, some fans believe that keeping score on his or her personal score card during the game enhances the game experience. The score card becomes a memento of the game.

Symbols are important to all religions. Typically symbols represent the primary or core beliefs of a faith. For example, the cross reminds believers of the passion of Christ. The believers in the faith treat symbols with great respect. A secondary symbol in Christianity might be greeting other members at the religious service with a symbolic handshake of friendship.

Sport has certain symbols that generate respect. Often these symbols take on the form of clothing such as hats, shirts, or scarves, where the fans wear the colors of their team or numbers of their favorite players. Disrespecting these symbols can cause conflict and lead to fighting. These symbols can also be important to players as well. For example, in American football, the home team will often have its logo on the fifty-yard line. Occasionally opposing players disrespect this logo, leading to a fight even before the game begins.

Rituals drive religion. For Americans, the primary ritual events may occur at the church, synagogue, or mosque, and are generally group oriented. For example, the mass in the Roman Catholic Church is conducted for the entire membership in attendance. In Islam, praying is a group event. A secondary dimension of ritual is introducing new members to fellow religionists before, during, or after services.

Certainly rituals occur in sport, but for the most part, in contrast to religion, they are carried out individually rather than as a team effort. For example, a primary ritual in baseball would be keeping a hitting streak (batters) or winning streak (pitchers) going in order to achieve success for the players and their teams. Players will attempt to maintain the streaks with ritual behavior by carrying out a variety of superstitious acts such as driving to the ballpark in the same direction, eating the same breakfast, listening to the same rock station, and so forth. These acts may seem trivial, but if the streak ends after the ritual is not followed, this is deemed a serious error. In *Bull Durham,* (2008) the Academy Award–winning actress, Susan Sarandon, as Annie Savoy, a passionate Bull Durham baseball fan, says this about a winning streak: "Y'see a ballplayer on a streak considers himself touched with magic and he'll do anything to keep from breaking the spell." In *Bull Durham* this "anything" ranged from wearing women's clothing to not having sexual relations as long as the streak was intact.

There are many secondary rituals in baseball. One of the more interesting ones is not stepping on the baseball path lines when going on or coming off the field. This behavior becomes almost automatic and players may not even realize they're doing it.

There is some opposition to treating sport as a functional alternative to religion. Probably the most important one is that religious beliefs and rituals focus on the sacred while sport deals with everyday events (Coakley, 2007).

Sport and Social Problems

Because sport touches the other institutions in society, the inevitable consequence is that sport will become linked to the social problems of society. A social problem is defined, in the constructionist tradition (Coakley, 2007), as a set of efforts by individuals or groups to bring change on the basis of beliefs about certain undesirable conditions associated with sport. Among some of the social problems that sociologists have studied include drug use by athletes, violence by athletes and fans, sports injuries, gender and racial discrimination

including salary differentials, unwarranted medical treatment, and sexism. To illustrate how sport sociologists approach social problems, let's discuss the first two in this list.

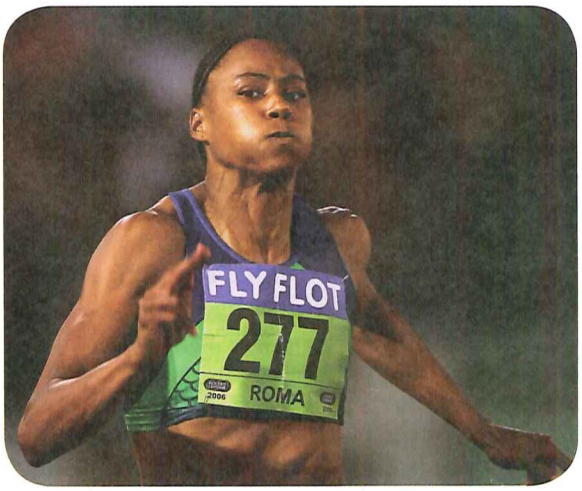
Drugs and Sport

Two events in 2008 received considerable attention from the general pubic as well as the sports public. The first was the conviction and sentencing of Marion Jones, for lying about her drug use. The other was a television interview on *Sixty Minutes* between Mike Wallace and Roger Clemens. These two events are instructive about the problems of drugs and sport.

Let's look at them in more detail. In early January, Jones was sentenced to six months in prison and ordered to do 4,000 hours of community service for her crimes (Newman, 2008). She was convicted of lying to Federal Bureau of Investigation agents about using performance-enhancing drugs, particularly steroids, as well as on fraud charges stemming from a check-writing scheme. In addition to the jail terms and community service, Ms. Jones was required to return the five Olympic medals (three gold, two bronze) that she won in the 2000 Olympic games in Sydney, Australia. To complicate matters further, two of the medals (a gold and bronze) that Ms. Jones won were awarded on the basis of her participation on relay teams, thus placing her teammates in jeopardy of losing their medals.

On January 6, 2008, Roger Clemens, a seven-time Cy Young award winner, with 364 major league wins, did a *Sixty Minutes* television interview with veteran reporter Mike Wallace. Wallace, acknowledging that he was a friend of Clemens, asked about the possibility that Clemens had used performance-enhancing drugs—an accusation made by the Mitchell Report. Clemens replied that he had never used steroids.

The Mitchell Report, written by George Mitchell, a former Senator from Maine and a former majority leader of the Senate, was the product of a wide-ranging probe into the use of drugs in baseball. The investigation that resulted in the Mitchell Report was initiated by the Commissioner of Baseball, Bud Selig, in 2006 and was designed to determine if players in Major League Baseball had used steroids and/or other performance-enhancing substances (Mitchell, 2007). Mitchell and his staff conducted over 700 interviews and reviewed thousands of documents in order to determine the extent of performance-enhancing drug use in Major League Baseball.



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Marion Jones, Olympic track star.

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Roger Clemens of the New York Yankees.

A few of the more important conclusions of the investigation as reported in the executive summary (Mitchell, 2007) are:

1. The use of steroids in Major League Baseball is widespread.
2. Baseball was slow to respond to the problem.
3. Players who used performance-enhancing drugs switched from steroids to human growth hormones after steroid testing began in 2002.
4. The players who used performance-enhancing

substances violated federal law and baseball policy by putting players who did not use substances at a competitive disadvantage.

5. The baseball community should join together in a "well-planned, well-executed, and sustained effort to bring the era of steroids and human growth hormone to an end and prevent its recurrence in another form in the future." (Mitchell, 2007)

The Mitchell report named players from all 30 Major League Baseball teams as having used steroids or human growth hormone or both. The best-known player was Roger Clemens (Wilson & Schmidt, 2007).

Clemens attempted to defend himself with public appearances and statements. The most important was the interview with Mike Wallace on *Sixty Minutes*. One of the issues raised by Wallace, reflecting on previous discussions in the media, was how Clemens, at 45 years old, could still be a successful fast ball pitcher without taking illegal drug supplements? Clemens' response (CBS News, 2008) was "Not impossible. You do it with hard work. Ask any of my teammates. Ask anybody that's come here and done the work with me." Another question posed by Wallace dealt with the issue of an informant, quoted in the Mitchell Report, who said he helped Clemens train and also injected him with performance-enhancing drugs. Clemens answered back, saying to Wallace, "My body never changed. If he's [the informant] putting that stuff up in my body, if what he is saying which is totally false, if he is doing that to me, I should have a third ear coming out of my forehead. I should be pulling tractors with my teeth" (CBS News, 2008).

What can we learn from these two case histories? There are several things. First, there is a powerful pressure on all athletes to win. World-class athletes are not immune from this pressure and in some cases will try and cut corners by using performance-enhancing drugs. Second, when a well-known athlete gets involved in a drug situation the media are going give the case considerable coverage. With television programs such as ESPN's *Sports Center* and the large number of radio sports programs, such as ESPN's *Mike and Mike in the Morning*, the story becomes amplified beyond a brief one-time national network news story. This coverage on performance-enhancing substances creates several types of harm to sport. First, it brings into question whether there is a "level playing field" for the athletes who do not use substances. Second, it likely disillusions those young people who have been using the accused star athlete as a role model. Third, it impacts the athlete's financial and recognition possibilities. For example, Marion Jones lost her Olympic medals and will likely lose future financial possibilities for such things as endorsements and motivational presentations. Roger Clemens certainly has been harmed and even though he claims he was only injected with vitamins (B-12) and painkillers (Troadol), he will likely lose thousands of dollars in endorsements as well as not be elected to baseball's Hall of Fame in the first year of his eligibility. This certainly is the case of the home run hitter Mark McGwire of the St. Louis Cardinals who refused to answer a question about whether he used performance-enhancing drugs (steroids) when he testified before a Congressional committee in 2005. He was not elected to the Hall of Fame in his first year of eligibility and will likely not be elected in the near future.

Violence and Sport

Violence can be defined as unacceptable emotional pain or physical injury inflicted by individuals or groups in the context of an organized sporting event. One key part of this definition is "unacceptable" which refers to non-normative behaviors. For example, in football, a defensive player can tackle a quarterback when he has the ball, but cannot do so after the ball is released (this is roughing the passer). Another key to this definition is the context of sport versus the larger society. For example, a basketball player giving a hard intentional foul using excessive force can be penalized two shots (a flagrant foul) and possibly ejected from the game. However, if you hit a random person on the street in the same way, it would be a felony. In other words, violence in sport is always contextual.

Sociologists study three areas of sport violence: personal violence, player interpersonal violence, and fan violence. *Personal violence* is the willingness of the athlete to harm himself or herself physically in an effort to achieve success. Certainly, my discussion of drugs illustrates this. *Player interpersonal violence* refers to behavior, outside the rules of the sport, committed by one or more players against one or more players on the other team

that attempts to harm them emotionally or physically. For example, a typical situation would be players fighting with each other during the game. This happens, on occasion, in many collegiate and professional sports including football, basketball, hockey, and baseball.

Fan violence refers to violence committed by fans before, during, or after a formally organized sporting event (Lewis, 2007). This violence includes vandalism, throwing missiles, fighting with other fans and the police, and disrupting play on the court or field. The typical violent fan is a young white male, with the violence often associated with championship play. This violence is usually in crowds and often linked to victories in important games, primarily championships. Lewis (2007) has referred to these events as "celebrating riots."

One of the more dramatic and tragic celebrating riots occurred in Boston in 2004.[1] The Boston Red Sox defeated the New York Yankees to make it into the World Series. The victory came after the Red Sox had lost the first three games of the American Champion Series. The celebrating Red Sox fans, many of them college students, got into conflicts with the police near the street side of Fenway Park's Green Monster (a high wall in left field). During the fighting, a young female college student, who was a bystander, was killed by a gas pellet fired by a police officer. The death of a young person, as well as the overall riot, saddened many Red Sox fans that had earlier been joyous about the Red Sox victory and entry into the World Series.

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Police respond to the Red Sox riot.

Sport and Social Theory[2]

The central thesis of this module is that the complexity of sport is caused by sport's articulations with the other institutions of society. Sociologists have attempted to make sense of this complexity with social theory.

There are three basic theories that sociologists use to guide their thinking about sport: structural functionalism, conflict, and interactionism. *Structural functionalism* assumes that societies tend toward equilibrium and balance and that sport contributes to this balance. Sociologists using this approach tend to explain sport in terms of the manifest and latent functions of sport (Loy and Booth, 2004). Generally, functionalists argue that sport contributes to the equilibrium or well being of society. For example, sport can be a socialization mechanism for teaching the basic values of a society. Americans believe that competition is important and sport certainly teaches that value. However, to suggest that functionalists only look at the positive aspects is incorrect. Sociologists studying violence have noted that fan violence associated with championship play can harm the feelings of well being that come from an exciting victory in a major competition (Lewis, 2007).

The *conflict* position seeks to explain the inequalities that occur in sport. A traditional Marxist position argues that the bourgeoisie (owners of teams) profit from the labor of the proletariat (athletes) by not providing a fair share of the rewards to the athlete for his or her work. A leading exponent of the conflict position is the sociologist D. Stanley Eitzen (2006), who expresses this Marxist position well when he writes, "Each major professional league is an unregulated monopoly. Each league regulates itself, unfettered by government oversight. . . ."

Lastly, the *interactionist* theories look at the symbolic aspects of sport. The interactionist theory is sometimes known as symbolic interactionism (SI), which asks the analyst to look at the abstract symbolic dimensions of sport. For example, many youngsters fantasize about winning the World Series in the bottom of the ninth with a walk off home run or, in basketball, making the final three-point shot that wins an important championship game. One social theorist writing in the symbolic tradition is Erving Goffman. Birrell and Donnelly, (2004) argue that Goffmans's early dramaturgical ideas can be applied to the study of sports. For

example, sport is played in the front region where behavior is different than in the back region. One of the things that makes *Bull Durham* so funny and surprising is that we are let in on the actions of the players and managers in the front and back regions. We see a manager in his office talking with Crash Davis in the front region and later throwing bats at players who are in the showers the back region to motivate them to perform better.

This module has shown the sociology student the importance and excitement of studying sport in American society. Although the study of sport requires considerable theoretical and empirical work, such an effort can be very rewarding, for as this module has demonstrated, sport touches Americans in very complex ways. Understanding sport helps us understand ourselves in society.

Notes

1. This section is based on J. M. Lewis (2007).
2. For a more in-depth analysis of the three social theories and how they have been used by sociologists to explain the complexity of sport, the reader is encouraged to consult Coakley (2007) and Giulianotti (2004).

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