

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/281102114>

Physical activity through sport and leisure: Traditional versus non-competitive activities

Article · January 2000

CITATIONS

15

READS

435

1 author:



Rex W Thomson

University of Otago

78 PUBLICATIONS 121 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:



Youth culture [View project](#)



Philosophy and physical education [View project](#)

Physical Activity through Sport and Leisure: Traditional versus Non-Competitive Activities

Rex Thomson PhD,

School of Physical Education, University of Otago

Abstract

One of the worldwide trends with regard to youth sport participation is the growth in popularity of noncompetitive games and sports. Such activities are less organised and regulated and have less emphasis on traditional sporting values. Informal sport and leisure activities such as mountain biking, beach volleyball, informal or street basketball, rollerblading, touch rugby, and skateboarding tend to emphasise values such as excitement, spontaneity, rebellion, non-conformity, sociability and creativity, and these are assuming considerable importance within the context of youth culture.

Sport and National Identity

In the contemporary world, sport is regarded as a 'universal language', and it has held a privileged position at the centre of male adolescent culture. In New Zealand, an important tradition in sport which perhaps became its central characteristic was an emphasis on masculinity. Phillips (1987) has traced the transition from the 'pioneer man' to the modern 'Kiwi bloke' (a rugged, practical man, loyal to his mates), and suggests that sport has been a key ingredient in the forging of this national character. The best expression of this stereotype has been found in the national game, rugby football.

By the turn of the last century, rugby could lay claim to being New Zealand's most popular sport. "It came to occupy a special place in New Zealand society because it encouraged toughness, endurance and physical daring... played out in an organised and regular way" (Spoonley, Pearson and Shirley, 1990, p. 109). As Sim has suggested, the ascendancy of rugby as the national game and its importance in New Zealand culture reinforced hegemonic masculinity and provided New Zealand men with a collective identity (1998). Today, however, a strong collective identity is no longer so prominent, and it might even be suggested that young New Zealand males face something of an identity crisis. This change may well have been brought about by changes which have occurred in the national sport, and by changes brought about through the process of globalisation and the development of a global culture.

The Changing Pace of New Zealand Sport

Recent studies in New Zealand suggest that while historical national differences are still readily apparent with regard to the place of competitive sport in the context of adolescent culture, the effects of globalisation are also significant (see e.g. Thomson, 1998). Traditional sporting activities continue to dominate sporting involvement in adolescence, but popularity for some of the other activities suggests that global influences are increasing. One of the clear trends is the growth in popularity of activities which are less organised and regulated and have less emphasis on traditional sporting values, and activities such as these are assuming considerable importance worldwide in adolescent leisure-time activities (Brandl-Bredenbeck, 1994; Eckerstorfer, 1995; Lorei, 1995; Waiser and Passavant, 1997).

Thomson's (1998) study of 1,095 New Zealand secondary school students aged twelve to eighteen (592 males, 503 females), examined the sporting preferences of the students. While traditional preferences remain strong (rugby football for boys, netball for girls), girl's interest in touch rugby and boy's involvement in netball are

Table 1: Adolescent Sporting Preferences

	Total %	Male %	Female %	
Rugby Football	32.3	47.1	11.2	One of the most obvious changes indicated above has been the highly significant growth in the interest in basketball, a sport which ranked considerably lower a decade or so ago (see e.g. <i>Sport on the Move</i> , 1985, p. 185). However, this
Basketball	30.3	32.3	27.7	
Cricket	18.5	26.3	4.2	
Soccer	15.8	20.0	4.2	
Swimming	15.2	-	23.3	
Volleyball	15.2	-	22.6	
Touch Rugby	14.7	13.0	21.9	
Rugby League	9.9	14.3	-	
Netball	9.8	-	36.5	

(from Thomson, 1998, p. 5)

interest has not necessarily been translated into participation in the competitive form of the sport, as the latest evidence suggests that basketball does not rank in the top five club activities of young people (Hillary Commission, 1999). Informal non-competitive basketball, however, is very popular, and the interest in this sport certainly supports the notion of global cultural consumption, the popularity of NBA basketball and global cultural heroes such as Michael Jordan being readily evident (Andrews et al., 1996; Donne and McDonald, 1991).

Touch rugby, too, has grown rapidly in the past decade, and this form of the national

Rer Thomson

game has been characterised by less organisation and bureaucracy, informality, greater participant control, and the active participation (often in mixed teams) of both males and females. It currently rates as the fourth most popular participatory sport for New Zealand men (behind golf, cricket and tennis, and just ahead of its parent rugby football). What is of major significance, however, is that it holds a similar position for New Zealand women (behind netball, tennis and golf). Amongst 18-24 year-olds, touch rugby is New Zealand's most popular sport, and it ranks second behind golf for the 25-34 year-old age group (Hillary Commission, 1999).

The Growth of Professional Sport - Participation versus Consumption

There has been a significant growth in professional sport in New Zealand since the professionalisation of rugby football in 1995. The advent of a competition involving teams from the three major southern hemisphere rugby-playing countries, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand (the Super 12 competition), has had quite extraordinary spectator appeal, and has filled stadia in all three countries. As these three are the only countries to have won the World Cup in rugby football, sponsors have not been difficult to find, with television mogul Rupert Murdoch and sportswear giant *Adidas* being the major sponsors of the game in New Zealand.

One of the features of professional sport is that for such activity to succeed, the emphasis on participation must be replaced, or at least matched, by an emphasis on the consumption of the professional sport 'package'. While it may be acceptable in amateur sport for there to be hardly enough fans to make their presence noted, for professional sport to succeed fans must be attracted in huge numbers, and recent changes in the laws of the game indicate rugby's attention to its consumers.

Professional sport has its focus on performance, and emphasises such things as selection, training, thresholds, work loads, etc. (Ingham and Chase, 1999), but it places little emphasis on participation, inclusion, equality, involvement, or cooperation (Timming, 1997). If the orientation is on an elite production model of sport, then we assume that what is good for the elite is good for all, but such an orientation is unlikely to foster or promote an ethic of inclusiveness that allows all individuals to develop their full potential. Such an approach does not encourage mass participation in physical activity, and for this reason the use of competitive sport as a means of encouraging a healthy, active lifestyle may well be of limited value.

Active Physical Leisure and Youth Inactivity

While active participation in New Zealand's major sport, rugby football, has not kept pace with the recent surge in spectator interest, there has been considerable growth in the popularity of active but less organised and regulated physical activities which have much less emphasis on traditional sporting values. Informal sport and active physical leisure activities such as surfing, mountain biking, beach volleyball,

snowboarding, rollerblading, and skateboarding, in particular, tend to emphasise values such as excitement, spontaneity, sociability, and creativity. Many of these activities, however, "have been frowned upon by both the 'mainstream' sporting world and the general public" (Humphries, 1997, p. 147), although some of them have been subsumed and taken over by the traditional world of competitive sport (i.e. the creation of Olympic sports in beach volleyball and snowboarding, and world championships in mountain biking).

Latest figures on the physical activity of youth make for disturbing reading, as levels of inactivity continue to increase. Thomson's (1998) study found hours per week spent on sport and active physical activity averaged 7.4 hours for boys and 5.4 hours for girls, but figures such as these mask quite low levels of activity for a significant percentage of young people. The Hillary Commission (1999) found that 26% of boys and 36% of girls could be classified as sedentary (no sport or active leisure in the two-week period prior to the interview) or relatively inactive (less than 2.5 hours of sport and active leisure in a 7-day period).

Table 2: Levels of Physical Activity among New Zealand Youth

Activity Level	Girls		Boys		5-8 years		9-12 years		13-15 years		16-17 years	
	%	%	%	%	years	years	years	years	years	years	years	
Sedentary	10	6	6	5	5	7	22					
Relatively Inactive	26	20	26	22	22	19	25					
Inactive	36	26	32	27	27	26	47					
Relatively Active	28	21	27	25	25	25	18					
Highly Active	36	53	40	48	48	49	35					
Active	64	74	67	73	73	74	53					
Hours active per week (average)	5.4	6.9	5.8	6.4	6.5	5.9						

(Hillary Commission, 1999, p. 5)

Programming for the Future

In 1987, the government established the Hillary Commission to take responsibility for the promotion of sport, fitness and leisure in New Zealand. One of the first programmes introduced by the Commission in 1988 was KiwiSport. This programme of modified sports for 7-13 year olds, with boys and girls participating together, has grown to such an extent that almost every young New Zealander has now been exposed to these modified activities which are currently available in twenty-six

different sports (Thomson, 1996).

With growing numbers of young people opting out of adult controlled, structured sport activities, however, it may well be that the KiwiSport programme no longer adequately fulfils one of its major aims, to 'establish a sound foundation for activity throughout life'. For this reason, the KiwiDex programme, which aims 'to make enjoyable physical activity available to all children and encourage a commitment to an active lifestyle' may well come to play a more significant role in the health and lifestyle of New Zealanders. The KiwiDex programme actively promotes exciting, high intensity, noncompetitive activities, and it would seem appropriate that such a programme can exploit the growing preference of many young people for activities such as surfing, skateboarding and rollerblading.

The irony of the situation, however, as both Booth (1994) and Humphries (1997) have suggested, is that the general public often sees such activities as wasteful, selfish and irresponsible and has a poor opinion of the devotees of these activities. Humphries sums up the appeal of the unregulated, free nature of such activities: "skateboarding was an ideologically pure physical activity, far removed from that tainted institution - sport" (1997, p. 150). Despite their appeal to many young people, activities such as skateboarding and street skating or rollerblading remain illegal or highly regulated on the city streets where such activity has its major appeal. "The open plazas and squares of many inner cities [are] ready-made playgrounds for skaters who [take] full advantage of steps, handrails, smooth surfaced 'obstacles' and wide open spaces" (Humphries, 1997, p. 151), and the conflict between young people and the general public and local authorities over such usage of city space has in most cases yet to be resolved.

Unless we recognise that for many young people, organised, regulated competitive sport holds little appeal, and work towards resolving the obvious conflicts between these youngsters and school, community and city authorities, a commitment to encourage the adoption of a 'variety of noncompetitive but exciting, high intensity activities' in the lifestyle of young people is unlikely to succeed.

References

- Andrews, D.L., Carrington, B., Jackson, S., & Matzur, Z. (1996). *Jordanscapes: A preliminary analysis of the global popular. Sociology of Sport Journal* 13, (4), pp. 428-457.
- Booth, D. (1994). *Surfing '60s: A case study in the history of pleasure and discipline. Australian Historical Studies* 103, pp. 262-279.
- Brandl-Bredenbeck, H.P. (1994). *Breaking boundaries and barriers: Future directions in cross-cultural research. Leisure Sciences* 10, pp. 247-259.
- Donne, A.M. & McDonald, K.A. (1991). *Sports hero worship in New Zealand. Unpublished Special Topic, School of Physical Education, University of Otago.*

Dunedin, New Zealand.

- Eckertorfer, K. (1995). Alternative forms of movement as an expression of a new youth culture. In Komadel, L. (Ed.), *Physical education and sports of children and youth*. Bratislava, Slovakia: Comenius University, pp. 25-26.
- Hillary Commission (1999). *Push play facts*. Wellington: Hillary Commission for Sport Fitness and Leisure.
- Humphries, D. (1997). 'Shredheads go mainstream'? Snowboarding and alternative youth. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 32 (2), 147-160.
- Ingham, A.G. & Chase, M.A. (1999). From the performance principle to the developmental principle: Alternatives to polympic sport. Unpublished paper, Department of Physical Education, Health & Sports Studies, Miami University, Oxford, Ohio, United States of America.
- Loiret, A. (1995). *Generation glisse. Dans l'air, l'air, la neige... la révolution du sport des 'annees fun'*. Paris: Autrement.
- Phillips, J. (1996). *A man's country: The image of the pakeha mate - a history* (Revised ed.). Auckland: Penguin.
- Sim, J. (1998). *The demise of a Dargg: The remodeling of the 'Korui bloke'*. Honours dissertation, School of Physical Education, University of Otago, New Zealand.
- Spoonley, P., Pearson, D., and Shirley, I. (1990). *New Zealand society*. Upper Hutt, New Zealand: Wright and Carran.
- Sports Development Inquiry Committee (1985). *Sport on the move*. Report of the Sports Development Inquiry, presented to The Hon. Mike Moore, Minister of Recreation and Sport, Wellington, New Zealand: Ministry of Recreation and Sport.
- Thomson, R.W. (1996). Youth sport involvement in New Zealand: Issues, images and initiatives. *Journal of the Federation Internationale d'Education Physique*, 66, (1), pp. 22-27.
- Thomson, R.W. (1998). *Youth culture in New Zealand: The changing face of sport*. Paper presented at the International Comparative Sport and Physical Education Conference, Leuven, Belgium, 8-12 July.
- Timming, R. (1997). Performance and participation discourses in human movement: Toward a socially critical physical education. In J.-M. Fernandez-Balboa (ed.), *Critical postmodernism in human movement, physical education, and sport*. New York: SUNY Press, pp. 99-119.
- Wasser, A.-M., and Passavant, F. (1997). Sport as a leisure time pursuit among the youth of Caen, France. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 32, (1), pp. 7-17.