ABOUT THIS BOOK

Most of you reading this book have experienced sports personally, either as athletes or spectators. You're probably familiar with the physical and emotional experiences of playing sports and the rules and strategies of certain sports. You may even follow the lives of high-profile athletes at your school or on the national sports scene. Most of you have watched and read about sports and discussed them with family and friends.

This book assumes that you're interested in some facet of sports, but it is written to take you beyond scores, statistics, and sports personalities. The goal is to focus on the "deeper game" associated with sports, the game through which sports become part of the social and cultural worlds in which we live.

Fortunately, we can draw on our emotions and experiences as we consider this deeper game. Take high school sports in the United States as an example. When students play on a high school basketball team, we know that it can affect their status in the school and the treatment they receive from both teachers and students. We know it can also have implications for their prestige in the community, self-images and self-esteem, future relationships, opportunities in education and the job market, and their overall enjoyment of life.

Building on this knowledge enables us to move further into the deeper game associated with high school sports. For example, why do so many Americans place such importance on sports and accord such high status to elite athletes? Are there connections between high school sports and widespread beliefs about masculinity and femininity, achievement and competition, pleasure and pain, winning and fair play, and other important aspects of U.S. culture?

Underlying these questions is the assumption that sports are more than games, meets, and matches. They are important parts of social life that have meanings going far beyond scores and performance statistics. Sports are integral parts of the social and cultural contexts in which we live, and they provide stories and images that many of us use to evaluate our experiences and the world around us.

People who study sports in society are concerned with the deeper meanings and stories associated with sports. They do research to increase our understanding of (1) the cultures and societies in which sports exist, (2) the social worlds created around sports, and (3) the experiences of individuals and groups associated with sports.

ABOUT THIS CHAPTER

This chapter is organized to answer the following four questions:

1. What is sociology, and how is it used to study sports in society?
2. What are sports, and how can we identify them in ways that increase our understanding of their place and significance in society?
3. What is the sociology of sport, and how does it differ from other approaches to studying sports?
4. Why do sociologists study sports in society?

The answers to these questions will be our guides for understanding the material in the rest of the book.

USING SOCIOLOGY TO STUDY SPORTS

Sociology provides useful tools for investigating sports as social phenomena. This is because sociology is the study of the social worlds that people create, organize, maintain, and change through their relationships with each other. The term

---

Important concepts used in each chapter are identified in boldface. Unless they are accompanied by a footnote that contains a definition, the definition will be given in the text itself. This puts the definition in context rather than separating it in a glossary. Definitions are also provided in the index (p. xxi).
social world refers to an identifiable sphere of everyday actions and relationships. Social worlds are created by individuals, but they involve much more than individuals doing their own things for their own reasons. Our actions, relationships, and collective activities take the form of identifiable ways of life and social arrangements that we could not predict simply with information about each of us as individuals. These ways of life and social arrangements continue to exist as people collectively reproduce them through their interactions with each other. They change as people question, oppose, and replace them with alternative ways of life and social arrangements.

Social worlds can be as large and impersonal as an entire nation, such as the United States or Brazil, or as personal and intimate as your own family. But regardless of size, they encompass all aspects of social life: the values and beliefs that we use to make sense of our lives; our everyday actions and relationships; and the groups, organizations, communities, and societies that we form as we make choices, develop relationships, and participate in social life.

The goal of sociology is to describe and explain social worlds—how we create, re-create, and change them; how they are organized; and how they influence our lives and our relationships with each other. In the process of doing this, sociologists identify the social factors that enable us to see our lives and the lives of others “in context”—that is, in connection with complex and constantly changing social worlds. When we do this, we become aware of social circumstances that set limits and create possibilities in people’s lives. This awareness is valuable because it helps us to anticipate and sometimes work around the constraints we face at the same time that we look for and take advantage of the possibilities. Ideally, it helps us gain more control over our lives as well as an understanding of other people and the conditions that influence their lives.

Key Sociology Concepts

When sociologists study sports and the social worlds associated with them, they focus on culture, social interaction, and social structure. Culture consists of the shared ways of life and shared understandings that people develop as they live together. Social Interaction consists of people taking each other into account and, in the process, influencing each other’s feelings, thoughts, and action. Social Structure consists of the established patterns of relationships and social arrangements that take shape as people live, work, and play with each other.

These three concepts—culture, social interaction, and social structure—represent the central interconnected aspects of all social worlds. For example, a professional sport team is a social world formed by players, coaches, and team administrators. Over time every team creates and maintains a particular culture or way of life. Everyone involved with the team engages in social interaction as they take each other into account during their everyday activities on and off the playing field. Additionally, the recurring actions, relationships, and social arrangements that emerge as people interact with each other make up the social structure of the team. This combination of culture, social interaction, and social structure comprises the team as a social world.

Peer groups, cliques, and athletic teams are social worlds in which participants are known to one another. Communities, societies, concert crowds, and online chat rooms are social worlds in which participants are generally unknown to each other. This means that the boundaries of social worlds may be clear, fuzzy, or overlapping, but we generally know when we enter or leave a social world because each has identifying features related to culture, social interaction, and social structure.

We move back and forth between familiar social worlds without thinking. We make nearly automatic shifts in how we talk and act as we accommodate changing cultural, interactional,
and structural features in each social world. However, when we enter or participate in a new or unfamiliar social world, we usually take the time to get a sense of what is happening. We watch what people are doing, how they interact with each other, and the recurring patterns that exist in their actions and relationships. If you’ve done this, you’re ready to use sociology to study sports in society.

Sociological Knowledge Is Based on Research and Theory

Each time that I rewrite this book, my goal is to accurately represent research in the sociology of sport and discuss issues of interest to students. As I consider those issues, I seek information from research that is published in journal articles and books. I use newspaper articles and other media as sources for examples, but I depend on research findings when making substantive points and drawing conclusions. This means that my statements about sports and sport experiences are based, as much as possible, on studies that use surveys, questionnaires, interviews, observations, content analyses, and other accepted research methods in sociology.

The material in this book is different than material in blogs, talk radio, television news shows, game and event commentaries, and everyday conversations about sports. It is organized to help you critically examine sports as they exist in people’s lives and the social contexts where people live, play, and work. I use research findings to describe and explain as accurately as possible the important connections between sports, society, and culture. I try to be fair when using research to make sense of the social aspects of sports and sport experiences. This is why there are over 1,400 books and articles listed as references for this book. Of course, I want to hold your attention as you read, but I don’t exaggerate, purposely withhold, or present information out of context to impress you and boost my “ratings.” In the process, I hope that you will develop or extend your critical thinking abilities so that you can assess the merits of what people say about sports in society.

DEFINING SPORTS

Most of us know enough about the meaning of sports to talk about them with others. However, when we study sports, it helps to precisely define our topic. For example, is it a sport when young people choose teams and play a baseball game in the street or when thirty people of various ages spend an afternoon performing and learning tricks at a skateboard park? These activities are sociologically different from what occurs at major league baseball games and the X Games skateboard competitions. These differences become significant when parents ask if playing sports builds the character of their children, when community leaders ask if they should use tax money to fund sports, and when school principals ask if sports are valid educational activities.

When I say that I study sports, people ask if that includes jogging, double-dutch (jump rope—as pictured on the cover of this book), weight lifting, hunting, scuba diving, darts, auto racing, chess, poker, ultimate fighting, paintball, piano competitions, ballroom dancing, and so on. To respond is not easy, because there is no single definition that precisely identifies sports in all cultures at all times. Some people use a precise definition for practical reasons, whereas many others use a flexible approach and define sports in a way that fits the customs and traditions in particular societies at particular points in time.

A Precise Definition of Sports

Although definitions vary, many scholars identify sports as well-established, officially governed competitive physical activities in which participants are motivated by internal and external rewards.
This definition enables people to generally distinguish sports from other activities. For example, it is sociologically useful to distinguish a women's World Cup soccer match from what occurs when three girls kick a soccer ball around a backyard. Each of these activities involves different social dynamics, organization, and implications. The soccer played during the World Cup has official rules that standardize matches and make them comparable, regardless of who plays. Additionally, World Cup matches are controlled by FIFA (Fédération Internationale de Football Association), the official governing organization that develops and enforces rules for international soccer. The backyard soccer has no rules unless the three girls create them, and the girls answer to no governing organization. Both official soccer matches and informal games are important social phenomena, but sociologists know that it's important to distinguish between them because they have few sociological similarities (Mindegaard, 2007; Peterson, 2008).

In more general terms, a precise definition helps us distinguish sports from play and dramatic spectacle. The idea that people participate in sports for a combination of internal and external rewards means that sports involve the internal satisfaction associated with spontaneous play as well as the external satisfaction associated with displaying physical skills to gain public approval and other rewards. This is illustrated in Figure 1.1, where play is an expressive activity done for its own sake, and dramatic spectacle is a performance meant to entertain an audience. An example of play is four children spontaneously running around a kindergarten playground, yelling joyfully while throwing playground balls in random directions. These five-year-olds are motivated almost exclusively by the personal enjoyment and expression that is intrinsic to their actions. On the other hand, an example of dramatic spectacle is four professional wrestlers paid to entertain spectators by staging a skilled and cleverly choreographed tag-team match in which outcomes are prearranged to excite an audience.

**FIGURE 1.1** Sport involves elements of play and spectacle. (Adapted from material in Stone, 1973)
On the OLC:
See the OLC—Additional Readings for Chapter 1—for the author's article on the differences between play, games, and sports.

Sports differ from play and spectacle in that participation is motivated by intrinsic enjoyment and extrinsic rewards. Sports, therefore, contain elements of play and spectacle. This way of identifying sports is useful today when some spectator sports focus so much on entertaining an audience that events lose the element of play and become dominated by the element of dramatic spectacle.

Using a precise definition of sports has practical advantages, but it also has potentially serious problems. For example, when we focus attention only on official competitive events, we overlook the existence of physical activities among people who have neither the resources to formally organize their physical activities nor the desire to make them competitive. In the process, we unintentionally fail to understand the full range of social and cultural factors that influence how and when particular forms of physical activities are created and made an important part of people's lives.

Most people in the sociology of sport are aware of this possibility, so they use precise definitions of sport cautiously. At the same time, many scholars reject the idea that a single definition can be used to study sports in all cultures at all points in history. They prefer an alternative definitional approach based on the assumption that sports and the meanings given to them change over time and from one culture to another.

An Alternative Approach to Defining Sports

Those who reject the validity of a single definition identify sports by asking three questions:

1. What activities are defined as sports in a particular group or society?
2. Whose sports are most strongly supported and funded, especially with public facilities and resources?
3. Who is advantaged and disadvantaged by the accepted definition of sports and the priorities used to allocate resources to sports?

Asking these questions opens the sociology of sport to a greater range of issues than is possible when using a static, precise definition. Seeking answers to these questions forces researchers to learn about the social, cultural, and historical contexts in which people create and organize physical activities and integrate them into their lives. We need this knowledge to accurately explain why sports exist and how they affect people's lives.

Those using this alternative approach assume that there are many ways to define sports, and that definitions vary over time and from one place to another. For example, people in England who played cricket and hunted foxes during the 1870s would be astonished that Americans define NFL football as a sport when the oversized players spend nearly 45 minutes of every 60-minute game walking to and from and standing in huddles, where they receive directions from a coach who does not play the game. Similarly, Americans today looking back at nineteenth-century British sports might say that they weren't "real" sports because the participants did not strive to set records or win championships. Looking ahead one hundred years, people might be playing virtual sports in challenging virtual environments and say that NFL football was not "real" sport because it lacked continuous action and damaged the health and well-being of participants.

An alternative definitional approach based on the three questions listed earlier takes into account that there are social, cultural, and historical differences in the ways that people define sports and include them in their lives. For instance, in cultures where cooperative relationships are highly valued and necessary for group survival, competing with others for rewards is likely to be seen as disruptive and even immoral (Kohn, 1986; Rosenau, 2003); therefore, their sports would be organized around the challenge of achieving a tie to end a game. At the same time, sending the world's best athletes to compete in international competitions might be both acceptable and beneficial.
is highly valued would describe cooperative

games with no winners and losers as pointless
and boring; therefore, their sports would be or-

organized around the challenge of outperforming or

eliminating other participants. In the face of such
differences, using a single definition of sports
would clearly limit research and our understand-
ing of sports and society.

Is this a sport? Rather than debating this question, most
sociologists explain why certain ideas and beliefs about
sports come to be widely accepted in a social world.
According to many sport fans in the United States, “real”

sports involve conquest, power, and physical domination
of others—as in American football. In cultures where sports
are defined in terms of the values and experiences of men,
rhythmic gymnastics is not taken seriously as a sport, despite
fitting most definitions. (Source: Efrem Lukatsky; AP/Wide
Sports as Contested Activities

As scholars move away from a single definition of sports, they see sports as contested activities—that is, activities for which there are no timeless and universal agreements about meaning, purpose, and organization. This means that people disagree and sometimes struggle over whose ideas about sports will become generally accepted by others in a group or society. The most significant struggles are created by disagreements on one or more of three issues:

1. The meaning, purpose, and organization of sports
2. The people allowed to play sports, and the conditions under which they will play
3. The people and organizations that sponsor and provide the resources needed to play sports

Heated debates can occur when people disagree on these issues. History shows that some of these debates have caused bitter feelings and led to lawsuits, government intervention, and the passage of laws. For example, people in many states disagree about the meaning, purpose, and organization of cheerleading in U.S. high schools. Most school officials say that cheerleading is not a sport because its primary purpose is to support high school teams. But others argue that the cheerleaders at many schools are now organized as teams that compete in championships and bring recognition and rewards to their schools. This debate over the purpose of cheerleading will continue because the stakes are high: being designated an official high school sport brings funding and other support that affects the organization of cheerleading and the meaning it has in schools, communities, and American society.

Disagreements and struggles over the purpose, meaning, and organization of sports occur most often when they involve the funding priorities of government agencies (Eichberg, 2008). For example, if the primary purpose of sport is to improve health and fitness for everyone, then funding should go to sports that are organized to provide widespread recreational participation that has net positive effects on physical well-being. On the other hand, if people see sports as “wars without weapons” with the purpose of pushing the limits of human capability, then funding should go to sports organized to produce high-performance athletes who can achieve competitive victories. This issue is regularly contested at the national and local levels of government, in universities and public school districts, and even in families, as parents decide how to use household resources.

The idea that sports are contested activities is most vividly demonstrated in disagreements over who is allowed to play sports and the conditions under which certain people can play. The cases that have involved extended struggles are listed in the box titled, “Who Plays and Who Doesn’t.”

The third issue making sports contested activities focuses on who should sponsor and provide the resources needed to play them. When people value the “common good” of a community and see sports contributing to the common good, it is likely that sport facilities and programs will be supported by public/government agencies and public/tax money. When people value individualism and see sports in terms of their contributions to individual development, it is likely that sport facilities and programs will be supported by individuals, families, and private-corporate sponsors. However, in both cases there will be struggles over the extent to which sponsors control sports and the extent to which sports are organized to be consistent with general community values.

Struggles related to these three issues show that using a single definition of sports may lead us to overlook the issue of why many people accept one definition of sports more than others in a particular social world. Many social factors, including who has power and resources,
Who Plays and Who Doesn’t
Contesting a Place in Sports

Being cut from a youth sport team is a disappointing personal experience. But being in a category of people that is wholly excluded from all or some sports is more than disappointing—it is unfair and occasionally illegal. Most cases of categorical exclusion are related to gender and sexuality, skin color and ethnicity, ability and disability, age and weight, nationality and citizenship, and other “eligibility” criteria. Struggles occur in connection with questions such as these:

- Will females be allowed to play sports and, if they are, will they play the same sports at the same time and on the same teams that males play, and will the rewards for achievement be the same for females and males?
- Will sports be open to people regardless of social class and wealth? Will wealthy and poor people play and watch sports together or separately?
- Will people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds play together or in segregated settings? Will the meanings given to skin color or ethnicity influence participation patterns or opportunities to play sports?
- Will age influence eligibility to play sports, and should sports be age integrated or segregated?

Will people of different ages have the same access to participation opportunities?
- Will able-bodied people and people with disabilities have the same opportunities to play sports, and will they play together or separately? What meanings will be given to the accomplishments of athletes with disabilities compared to the accomplishments of able-bodied athletes?
- Will gay men and lesbians play alongside heterosexuals and, if they do, will they be treated fairly?
- Will athletes control the conditions under which they play sports and have the power to change those conditions to meet their needs and interests?
- Will athletes be rewarded for playing, what form will the rewards take, and how will they be determined?

Federal and local laws may mandate particular answers to these questions. However, traditions, local customs, and personal beliefs often support various forms of exclusion. The resulting struggles illustrate that sports can be hotly contested activities. What you think?

influence the forms of sport that exist and the meanings given to them. Being aware of these factors enables us to put sports into context and understand them in the terms used by those who create, play, and support them. It also helps us see that the definition of sports in any particular context usually represents the ideas and interests of some people more than others. In the sociology of sport, this leads to questions and research on whose ideas and interests count the most when it comes to determining (1) the meaning, purpose, and organization of sports; (2) who plays under what conditions; and (3) who sponsors and controls sports. Material in each of the following chapters summarizes the findings of much of this research.

WHAT IS THE SOCIOLOGY OF SPORT?

The sociology of sport is primarily a subdiscipline of sociology that studies sports as social phenomena. Most research and writing in the field focuses on “organized, competitive sports” although people increasingly study other forms of physical activities that are health and fitness oriented and informally organized. The include recreational, extreme, adventure, at