CHAPTER 1: The Sociology of Sport

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?

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 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.
virtual sports as well as fitness and exercise activities (Atkinson, 2007b; Eichberg, 2008; Honea, 2007; Martin and Miller, 1999; Mindegaard, 2007; Peterson, 2008; Rinchart, 2000; Rinchart and Syndor, 2003).

Research in the sociology of sport generally seeks to answer the following questions:
1. Why are some activities, and not others, selected and designated as sports in particular groups and societies?
2. Why are sports created and organized in different ways at different times and in different places?
3. How do people include sports and sport participation in their lives, and does participation affect individual development and social relationships?
4. How do sports and sport participation affect our ideas about bodies, human movement, masculinity and femininity, social class, race and ethnicity, work, fun, ability and disability, achievement and competition, pleasure and pain, deviance and conformity, and aggression and violence?
5. How do various sports compare with other physical activities in producing positive health and fitness outcomes?
6. How is the meaning, purpose, and organization of sports related to the culture, social structure, and resources of a society?
7. How are sports related to important spheres of social life such as family, education, politics, the economy, media, and religion?
8. How do people use their sport experiences and knowledge about sports as they interact with others and explain what occurs in their lives and the world around them?
9. How can people use sociological knowledge about sports to understand and participate more actively and effectively in society, especially as agents of progressive change?

Understanding the sociology of sport is easier if you learn to think of sports as social constructions—that is, as parts of the social world that are created by people as they interact with one another under particular social, political, and economic conditions. To stress this point, I generally use the term "sports" rather than "sport." This emphasizes that the forms and meanings of sports vary from place to place and time to time. I want to avoid the inference that "sport" has an essential and timeless quality that exists separate from the contexts in which people create, play, and change sports in society.

The idea that sports are social constructions makes some people uncomfortable because they benefit from sports as they are currently defined, organized, and played. They don't want people to see sports as socially constructed activities that people can change if they wish to define, organize, and play them differently.

Differences Between Sociology and Psychology of Sport

For those new to sociology, a good way to understand the sociology of sport is to compare it to the psychology of sport. Psychologists study behavior in terms of attributes and processes that exist inside individuals. They focus on motivation, perception, cognition, self-esteem, self-confidence, attitudes, and personality. They also deal with interpersonal dynamics, including communication, leadership, and social influence, but they usually discuss these things in terms of how they affect attributes and processes that exist inside individuals. Therefore, they ask research questions such as, "How is the motivation of athletes related to their personality traits and self-perception of physical abilities?"

Sociologists, on the other hand, study actions and relationships in terms of the social contexts in which people live their lives. They focus on the reality inside and around individuals and deal with how people form relationships with one another and create social arrangements that enable them to control and give meaning
to their lives. Sociologists ask questions about the ways that actions, relationships, and social life are related to characteristics that people define as socially relevant in their group or society. Therefore, sociological research focuses on the social meanings and dynamics associated with age, social class, gender, race, ethnicity, (dis)ability, sexuality, and nationality. It seeks to answer questions such as, “How do prevailing cultural beliefs about masculinity and femininity affect the organization of sport programs and the experiences of those who play sports?”

When psychologists apply their knowledge, they focus on the experiences and problems of particular individuals, whereas sociologists focus on group experiences and social issues that affect entire categories of people, such as Latinos, white men, lesbians, young people, high school students, and so on. For example, when studying burnout among adolescent athletes, psychologists look at factors that exist inside the athletes themselves, such as the stress experienced by individual athletes and its impact on their motivation and performance (Cresswell and Eklund, 2006, 2007; Hodge, Lonesdale, and Ng, 2008; Smith, 1986). When applying their knowledge to prevent burnout, they help athletes manage stress through goal setting, personal skill development, and the use of relaxation and concentration techniques.

Sociologists, on the other hand, study burnout in connection with the social reality that surrounds adolescent athletes (Coakley, 1992; Ingham et al., 1999, 2002; Maslach and Leiter, 1997). They focus on the organization of sport programs and the relationships between athletes and other people, including family members, peers, and coaches. Because athletes are influenced by the social context in which they play.
Sports, sociologists emphasize that reducing burnout requires changing the way youth sports are organized and altering athletes’ relationships with parents and coaches so that the young people have more control over their lives and more opportunities to be involved in experiences and relationships outside sports.

Both approaches have value, although many people see a sociological approach as disruptive and difficult to apply. They feel that it’s easier to change individual athletes and use stress management strategies than it is to change the relationships that influence athletes’ lives and the social conditions in which athletes play their sports. Therefore, people who control sport programs often prefer psychological over sociological approaches. They don’t want to change the organization and structure of their programs because it may jeopardize their status or power. Similarly, many parents and coaches prefer a psychological approach that focuses on stress management rather than a sociological approach that focuses on changing their relationships with athletes and the control they have over athletes’ lives.

Using the Sociology of Sport

Sociology of sport knowledge is used in many ways. For example, it informs parents and coaches about the conditions under which youth sport participation is most likely to produce positive developmental effects. It explains why some sports have higher rates of violence than others and the ways to most effectively control sports violence. However, unless sociology of sport knowledge is combined with concerns for fairness and social justice, it can sometimes be used in negative ways. For example, it can show a football coach that one way to effectively control young men in U.S. culture is to threaten their masculinity and make them dependent on coaches for approval of their worth as human beings. And it also shows that this strategy increases the willingness of young men to play aggressively and put their bodies in jeopardy “for the good of the team”—an outcome that some coaches want to achieve.

This football coach example shows that the sociology of sport, like other scientific disciplines, is neither a pure nor objective enterprise. Like others who produce and distribute knowledge, those of us who study sports in society must consider why we ask certain research questions and how our research findings might affect people’s lives. We can’t escape the fact that social life is complex and characterized by inequalities, power differences, and conflicts of interests between different categories of people. Therefore, using knowledge in the sociology of sport is not a simple process that automatically brings about equal and positive benefits for everyone. In fact, it must also involve critical thinking about the potential consequences of what we know about sports in society. Hopefully, after reading this book you will be prepared and willing to do the following:

1. Think critically about sports so that you can identify and understand issues and controversies associated with sports in society.
2. Look beyond performance statistics and win–loss records to see sports as social constructions that can have both positive and negative effects on people’s lives.
3. Learn things about sports that enable you to make informed choices about your sport participation and the place of sports in your community and society.
4. See sports as social constructions and be able to change them so they don’t systematically disadvantage some categories of people as they privilege others.

The rituals of sport engage more people in a shared experience than any other institution or cultural activity today.

—Yarda Beza, author, The Rites of Man (1969)
CHAPTER 1: The Sociology of Sport

CONTROVERSIES CREATED BY THE SOCIOLOGY OF SPORT

Research in the sociology of sport is usually controversial when it provides evidence that there should be changes in the organization of sports and the structure of social relations in society. Such evidence threatens some people, especially those who control sport organizations, benefit from the current organization of sports, or think that the current organization of sports is “right and natural.” People in positions of power know that social and cultural changes can jeopardize their control over others and the privileges that come with it. Therefore, they prefer approaches to sports that blame problems on the weaknesses and failures of individuals. When individuals are identified as the problem, solutions emphasize the need to control individuals more effectively and teach them how to adjust to society as it is.

The potential for controversy created by a sociological analysis of sports is illustrated by reviewing research findings on sport participation among women around the world. Research shows that women, especially women in poor and working-class households, have lower rates of sport participation than do other categories of people (Donnelly and Harvey, 2007; Hargreaves, 1994, 2000; Tamlinson, 2007). Research also shows that there are many reasons for this, including the following:

1. Women are less likely than men to have the time, freedom, and money needed to play sports regularly.
2. Women have little or no control of the facilities where sports are played or the programs in those facilities.
3. Women have less access to transportation and less overall freedom to move around at will and without fear.
4. Women often are expected to take full-time responsibility for the social and emotional needs of family members—a job that seldom allows them time to play sports.
5. Most sport programs around the world are organized around the values, interests, and experiences of men.

These reasons all contribute to the fact that many women worldwide don’t see sports as appropriate activities for them to take seriously.

It is easy to see the potential for controversy associated with these findings. They suggest that opportunities and resources to play sports should be increased for women, that women and men should share control of sports, and that new sports organized around the values, interests, and resources of women should be developed. They also suggest that there should be changes in ideas about masculinity and femininity, gender relations, family structures, the allocation of child-care responsibilities, the organization of work, and the distribution of resources in society.

People who benefit from sports and social life as they are currently organized are likely to oppose and reject the need for these changes. They might even argue that the sociology of sport is too critical and idealistic and that the “natural” order would be turned upside down if sociological knowledge were used to organize social worlds. However, good research always inspires critical approaches to the social conditions that affect our lives. This is why studying sports with a critical eye usually occurs when researchers have informed visions of what sports and society could and should be in the future. Without these visions, often born of idealism,
Cultural Barriers: Aren’t We Athletes?

Randy Snow won his first international track medal in 1984. He is a ten-time U.S. Open Wheelchair Tennis Champion, an International Tennis Federation Champion, U.S. Tennis Association Player of the Year, and winner of many athletic awards. Today he’s a film producer and social activist who has received national citizenship awards. Asked about the Paralympics for elite athletes with physical disabilities, he says this:

Paralympians are lower athletes than our able-bodied counterparts. We work just as hard, do it for a lot less money, carry education to our venue as well as competition, and have overcome physical challenges to do our sport. Our success displays true resiliency... therefore being marching us with the way life really is (in Jokowsky and Roshstein, 2002a, p. 39).

Snow’s comment plus the relative invisibility of sports for athletes with a disability raises a series of sociological questions:

1. Whose ideas and beliefs about sports come to be accepted as the correct ideas and beliefs in society?
2. Who is included and excluded from the processes through which ideas and beliefs are promoted and legitimized?
3. Who is advantaged and disadvantaged by decisions based on prevailing ideas and beliefs?
4. How can decision-making processes be revised so that decisions about sports are more representative of all people in society?

Most readers of this book don’t have friends whose physical or intellectual impairments make them “disabled” nor have they ever met athletes from the Paralympic Games or the Special Olympics. This means that if I asked you to close your eyes and imagine five different sport scenes, few of you would picture a scene involving athletes with an amputated limb, in wheelchairs, blind, with cerebral palsy, or with intellectual disabilities.

This imagination exercise is not meant to evoke guilt. Our views of the world are based on personal experiences, and our experiences are influenced by the meanings given to age, gender, race, ethnicity, social class, sexuality, (dis)ability, and other characteristics that are defined as socially significant in our culture. Neither culture nor society forces us to think or do certain things, but the only way to make cultural and social influence is to critically examine social worlds and understand that cultural meanings and social organization create constraints and opportunities in people’s lives, including people with disabilities.

In each of the following chapters, a “Breaking Barriers” box presents the voices and experiences of people with disabilities. If you are currently able-bodied, each box alerts you to social and cultural barriers that constrain the lives of people with disabilities. If you have a disability, each box acknowledges the barriers that you, Randy Snow, and millions of others face in the pursuit of sport participation.

These barriers, according to many currently able-bodied people, are “just the way things are.” Eliminating them is impossible or idealistic, they say, because they require changes in physical environments as well as in the organization of relationships, schools, communities, and societies. However, this approach turns all of us into victims of culture and society. The alternative is to have informed and idealistic visions of what sports could and should be, making it possible to identify and eliminate barriers that prevent some people from playing sports.

Fung Ying Kit, a triple gold medal winner in the 2000 Sydney Paralympics, knew that it was possible to break barriers when she said, “I hope that, in the future, there will no longer be ‘disabled athletes’ in this world, only ‘athletes’” (in Jokowksy and Roshstein, 2002a, p. 115). Working to achieve this future will make all of us more human and humane.

what would motivate and guide us as we participate in our communities, societies, and world? People who make a difference and change the world for the better have always been idealistic and unafraid of promoting structural changes in societies. This is illustrated in the “Breaking Barriers” box above.
CHAPTER 1: The Sociology of Sport

Are these athletes? Their times in the 100- and 200-meter sprints are better than all but a handful of sprinters worldwide. Why are some sports defined as more real or more important than others? Who determines this? These three sprinters run on Osuer’s Cheetah Flex-Feet. Does this matter in terms of a definition of sport? (Source: David Fliege; photo courtesy of Osuer)

Regardless of controversies, research and interest in the sociology of sport has increased significantly in recent years. This growth will continue as long as scholars in the field do research and produce knowledge that people find useful and they seek to understand social life and participate effectively as citizens in their communities as societies.
WHY STUDY SPORTS IN SOCIETY?

We study sports because they are socially significant activities for many people, they reinforce important ideas and beliefs in many societies, and they’ve been integrated into major spheres of social life such as the family, religion, education, the economy, politics, and the media.

Sports Are Socially Significant Activities for Many People

As we look around us, we see that the Olympic Games, soccer’s World Cup, American football’s Super Bowl, the Rugby World Cup, the Tour de France, the tennis championships at Wimbledon, and other sport megaevents attract global attention and media coverage. The biggest of these events are watched by billions of people in over two hundred countries. The media coverage of sport megaevents provides vivid images and stories that entertain, inspire, and provide for people the words and ideas they use to make sense of their experiences and the world around them. Even people with little or no interest in sports are forced to make them a part of their lives when family and friends insist on taking them to games and talking about sports.

Sports Reaffirm Important Ideas and Beliefs in Many Societies

We also study sports because many people use them to reaffirm ideas and beliefs that are important to them and widely accepted by others. In fact, a key research topic in the sociology of sport is the relationship between sports and cultural ideologies. Ideologies are webs of ideas and beliefs that people use to give meaning to the world and make sense of their experiences. They are important aspects of culture because they embody the principles, perspectives, and viewpoints that underlie our feelings, thoughts, and actions. However, ideologies seldom come in neat packages, especially in highly diverse and rapidly changing...
societies. Various groups of people often develop their own ideas and beliefs for giving meaning to the world and making sense of their experiences, and they don’t always agree with others. This can lead to struggles over whose ideologies provide the most accurate, useful, or moral ways of giving meaning to and explaining the world and the everyday events that affect people’s lives.

As various people use and promote their ideologies in society, sports become socially relevant. As social constructions, sports can be organized to reinforce or challenge prevailing ideologies. People create and organize sports around their ideas and beliefs about bodies, relationships, abilities, character, gender, race, social class, and other attributes and characteristics that they define as important. Usually, the most popular forms of sports in a society reinforce and reproduce the ideologies favored by people with the most power and influence.

This helps these ideologies become dominant because so many people in a society learn to use them as interpretive guides for making sense of the world and their experiences. When this occurs, sports help to produce forms of social organization that benefit powerful and wealthy people.

**Gender Ideology** We can use gender ideology to illustrate the social significance of sports. Gender ideology consists of a web of ideas and beliefs about masculinity, femininity, and male-female relationships in the organization of social worlds. People use it to guide their definitions of what it means to be a man or a woman, their evaluations of people and relationships, and their sense of what is “natural” and “moral” when it comes to performing gender in their lives.

Dominant gender ideology in most societies emphasizes that men are naturally superior to women in activities that involve strength, physical skills, and emotional control. This belief has fostered in many cultures a form of “common sense” and a vocabulary that defines female inferiority in sports as “natural.” Therefore, when a person throws a ball correctly, people learned to say that he or she “throws like a man.” Throwing incorrectly means that a person “throws like a girl.” The same has been true when running abilities and general sports abilities are evaluated. If sports are played correctly, they are played as a man would play them. If they are played incorrectly, they are played as a girl would play them.

The belief that playing sports, especially contact sports, would make boys into men has also been fostered by dominant gender ideology in many cultures. Consequently, when girls and women played these sports, many people described them as “unfeminine” or as “unnatural” or “immoral.” Many people could not make sense of strong, competent women athletes, so they assumed that such women must be “male-like” or lesbians (Griffin, 1998, 2008). When this assumption was combined with related ideas and beliefs about nature and the body many people, including physicians and political and religious leaders, discouraged sport participation for girls and women and restricted their opportunities to play sports (Hargreaves, 1994; Lenskyj, 1986; Vertinsky, 1990, 1994).

This gender ideology was so widely accepted through most of the twentieth century that being female meant being a failure in sports (Lenskyj, 1986). Coaches of men’s teams even used this idea to motivate players by “accusing” them of “playing like a bunch of girls” when they made mistakes or did not play aggressively enough. Most important, this ideology led people to exclude girls and women from sports and to give nearly all funding to programs for boys and men. Although many people have challenged and discredited this ideology in recent years, its legacy continues to privilege many boys and men and disadvantage many girls and women.
Fortunately, ideology can be and sometimes is changed. History shows that people regularly resist ideologies that they define as unfair, and sometimes organize social movements to change them. For example, many girls and women have used sports as sites or “social places” for challenging dominant ideas and beliefs about what is “natural and feminine.” This has led others to question the validity of traditional ideology, form new ideas and beliefs about gender, and support structural changes in the gendered organization of sports and society as a whole.

Issues related to gender ideology are discussed in all of the following chapters, and especially Chapter 8. The box “The Body Is More Than Physical” deals with a related ideological issue in our lives: What do we consider “natural” when it comes to the body?

Racial Ideology

Sports often are sites for either reaffirming or challenging racial ideology, that is, the web of ideas and beliefs that people use to give meaning to skin color and evaluate people and forms of social organization in terms of racial classifications. Racial ideologies vary around the world, but they are powerful forces in many societies. They’re used to place people into racial categories that are tied to assumptions about character traits and abilities, both intellectual and physical. These assumptions then serve as the foundation for important social practices and policies that affect people’s lives.

The connections between sports and racial ideologies are complex. However, many people in the United States have long used widely shared ideas and beliefs about skin color to evaluate athletic potential and explain athletic success and failure. The beliefs that light-skinned people lack certain running and jumping abilities, whereas dark-skinned people excel in certain sports due to “natural” abilities, are expressions of what has been dominant racial ideology for at least a century in the U.S. This ideology has been challenged and discredited, but its legacy has shaped many aspects of existing social organization and cultural practices. This and related issues are discussed in Chapter 9.

Class Ideology

Class ideology consists of a web of ideas and beliefs that people use to understand economic inequalities and make sense of their own positions and the positions of others in an economic hierarchy in society. In the United States, for example, class ideology is organized around the beliefs that all people have opportunities to achieve economic success and that American society is a meritocracy where deserving people become successful and where success is achieved by those who deserve it. Sports provide many stories and slogans emphasizing that people can achieve anything through discipline and hard work, and that failure awaits the lazy and undisciplined. By extension, this ideology supports the assumption that wealth and power are earned by qualified and hardworking people of good character, whereas poverty and dead-end jobs signal a lack of character, qualifications, and a willingness to work.

This way of thinking legitimizes class inequality. It connects sports positively with capitalism and the belief that economic rewards identify deserving winners in a competitive world. This and related issues are discussed in Chapters 8 to 10.

Sports and Ideologies: Complex Connections

When we think about sports and ideologies, it is important to know that ideology is complex and sometimes inconsistent and that sports come in many forms and have many meanings associated with them. Therefore, sports are connected with ideologies in various and sometimes contradictory ways. We saw this in the example showing that sports are sites for simultaneously reproducing and challenging dominant gender ideology in society.

Additionally, sports can have many different social meanings associated with them. For example, baseball is played by similar rules in Japan and the United States, but the meanings associated with baseball and with athletes'
performances are different because of ideologi-
cal differences between the two cultures. Team
loyalty is highly prized in Japan, and emotional
displays by players or coaches are frowned upon,
whereas individualism is high prized in the
United States, and emotional displays are seen
as entertaining. Japanese baseball games can
end in ties, but games in the United States must
have winners and losers, even if it
means playing extra innings.

The complex connections
between sports and ideologies
make it difficult to generalize
about the role and consequences
of sports in society. Sports have
the potential to influence social
worlds in many ways. This is
another reason for studying them
as contested activities and social
constructions.

Sports Are Integrated into
Major Spheres of Social Life

A reason for using sociology to study sports is
that they are clearly connected to major spheres
of social life, including family, economy, media,
politics, education, and religion. These connec-
tions are discussed through this book, but it is
useful to highlight them here.

Sports and the Family Family life in North
America is often influenced by sports. Millions
of children play organized sports and parents
often administer programs, coach
teams, attend games, and serve as
chauffeur for child athletes. Family
schedules are altered to accom-
modate practices and games, and
watching sports can disrupt family
life or bring family members
together. In some cases, rela-
tionships between family members
are nurtured and played out
during sport activities or in con-
versations about sports. Family
issues are discussed in Chapters
4 and 5.

Sports and the Economy People in wealthy
postindustrial societies spend billions of dollars
each year on game tickets, sports equipment,
The Body Is More than Physical

Sports Influence Meanings Given to the Body

Until recently, most people viewed the body as a fixed fact of nature; it was biological only. But many scholars and scientists now recognize that a full understanding of the body requires that we view it in social and cultural terms (Blake, 1996; Brownell, 1995; Butler, 2004; Cole, 2000a; Hargreaves and Vertinsky, 2006; Peterson, 2007; Shilling, 1993, 2007; Turner, 1997).

For example, medical historians explain that the body and body parts have been identified and defined differently through history and from one culture to another. This is important because it affects medical practice, government policies, social theories, sport participation, and our everyday experiences (Faust-Steinberg, 2008; Lapuente, 1990; Lupiron, 2003; Preve, 2005; Wel, 2006).

The meanings given to the body and body parts in any culture are the foundation for people’s ideas and beliefs about sex, sex differences, sexuality, beauty, self-image, body image, fashion, hygiene, health, nutrition, eating, fitness, age, and aging, racial classification systems, disease, drugs and drug testing, violence and power, and other factors that affect our lives. Cultural definitions of the body influence deep personal feelings such as desire, pleasure, pain, and other sensations that we use to assess personal well-being, relationships, and quality of life. For example, people in Europe and North America during the nineteenth century identified sensitivity to physical pain as a sign that a person had serious character defects, and they saw a muscular body as an indicator of a criminal disposition, immorality, and lower-class status (Hoben, 1992).

Cultural definitions of the body have changed so that today we see a person’s ability to ignore pain, especially in sports, as an indicator of strong moral character, and we see a muscular body as proof of self-control and discipline rather than immorality and criminal tendencies. But in either case, our identities and experiences are inherently embodied, and our bodies are identified in connection with social and cultural definitions of age, sex, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and disability, among other factors.

Definitions of the body are strongly related to sports in many societies. For example, our conception of the “ideal body,” especially the ideal male body, is strongly influenced by the athletic body. In fact, the bodies of athletes are used widely as models of health and fitness, strength and power, control and discipline, and overall ability. In today’s competitive sports, the body is measured, classified, conditioned, trained, regulated, and assessed in terms of its performance under various conditions. Instead of being experienced as a source of pleasure and joy, the body is more often viewed as a machine that achieves instrumental goals. As a machine, its parts must be developed, coordinated, maintained, and fixed when broken. Additionally, when the athletic body fails due to injuries, impairments, and age, it is reclassified in ways that dramatically alter identity, relationships, and status.

Socially constructing the body in this way emphasizes control and rationality. It leads people to accept and even seek forms of body assessment and regulation such as weight-loss, measuring body-fat percentage, testing for aerobic and anaerobic capacity, observing physiological responses to stressors, doing blood analysis, dieting, using drugs and other substances, drug testing, and on and on.

The cultural expectations of body as machine and sport as performance make it likely that athletes will use brain manipulations, hormonal regulation, body-part replacements, and genetic engineering as methods of disciplining, controlling, and managing their bodies. Measurable performance outcomes then become more important than subjective experiences of bodily pleasure and joy (Prenger, 2002). As a result, the ability to endure pain and stay in the game is an indicator of the “disciplined body,” and bodies that are starved to reduce body fat to unhealthy levels are viewed as “fit” and “in shape.”
Once we realize that human life is embodied, that bodies are socially constructed in the context of our culture, those who think critically ask the following questions:

1. What are the origins of prevailing ideas about natural, ideal, and deviant bodies in sports and in society?
2. What are the moral and social implications of the ways that the body is protected, probed, monitored, tested, trained, disciplined, evaluated, manipulated, and rehabilitated in sports?
3. How are bodies in sports marked and categorized by gender, skin color, ethnicity, (dis)ability, and age, and what are the social implications of such body marking and categorization?
4. How are athletic bodies represented in the media and popular culture, and how do those representations influence identities, relationships, form of social organization?
5. Who owns the body of an athlete, and what happens when it is sold as a billboard for advertising products and services?

These questions challenge taken-for-granted ideas about nature, beauty, health, and competitive sport. But being able to ask about sports in society requires this faculty of critical inquiry to be done. What do you think?

The steroid-enhanced body of Arnold Schwarzenegger made bodybuilding popular worldwide. A cutout of his pose as Mr. Olympia inspires the workouts of men who come to this gym in Ghazni, Afghanistan (in 2007). Although public displays of bodies are traditionally discouraged in Afghan culture, the notion that bodies can be sculpted to change men’s lives is increasingly accepted. (Source: Musadeq Sadeq, AP Worldwide Photos)
participation fees, athletic club membership dues, and bets placed on teams and athletes. This affects local and regional economies. Throughout much of the world, sports and commerce have joined together so that corporate logos are now linked with sport teams and athletes, and they are displayed prominently in school gyms, arenas, stadiums, and other sports places.

Some athletes now make impressive sums of money from salaries, appearance fees, and endorsements. Corporations paid up to $3 million for thirty seconds of commercial time during the 2009 telecast of the Super Bowl and the International Olympic Committee takes in about $4 billion every four years from corporate sponsors. Sport stadiums, arenas, and teams are named after corporations, and corporate logos are so pervasive that many people associate certain sports, teams, and events with corporations and their products. Overall, sports are integrally tied to material and economic conditions in society. These issues are discussed in Chapters 10 and 11.

**Sports and the Media** Television networks and cable stations pay billions of dollars for the rights to televise sports. NBC paid the International Olympic Committee (IOC) $2.3 billion for the rights to the 2004 and 2006 Summer Games and the 2006 Winter Games. Five media companies pay the NFL over $3.75 billion per year to televise their games. Commercial sports seldom prosper without media coverage and collecting rights fees from media companies.

The images and stories represented in media coverage of sports emphasize particular ideological themes, and they influence what people think and talk about every day. The media have converted sports into a major form of entertainment, athletes are now global celebrities, and corporations that sponsor media sports inscribe their logos in people’s minds and use sports to promote lifestyles based on consumption. These issues are discussed in Chapter 12.

**Sports and Politics** People in many societies link sports to national pride and identity. In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of 9/11/01, many Americans used sport events as sites for reaffirming their collective sense of “we-ness.” There were passionate expressions of unity and patriotism, combined with memorials to commemorate the victims of the attacks. This allowed spectators, even those watching on television, to reaffirm their sense of national identity.

Sports are widely used by nation-states wishing to gain global recognition or present a show of power and wealth to the rest of the world. China spent over $40 billion to host the 2008 Olympics in the hope of achieving these goals. Political leaders at various levels of government promote themselves by demonstrating personal interest in sports, and former athletes have used their name recognition and reputations from sports to be elected to political positions in the United States. Additionally, sports themselves are political in that they involve decisions related to the control and sponsorship of events, eligibility and team selection, rules and rule changes, rule enforcement, and the allocation of rewards and punishments. Sport organizations exercise power over people’s lives—a reason they often are described as governing bodies. These issues are discussed in Chapter 13.

**Sports and Education** Sports are widely included in physical education, and interscholastic sport teams in some nations attract widespread attention. Some U.S. universities use intercollegiate teams as public relations and often make or lose millions of dollars in the process. U.S. schools often sponsor high-profile sport programs and teams, whereas schools in most other nations sponsor low-profile, club-based teams emphasizing participation and student control. These issues are discussed in Chapter 14.

**Sports and Religion** There is an emerging relationship between sports and religion in certain
societies. Local churches and church groups in the United States and Canada sponsor teams and leagues. Parishioners and congregations revise Sunday worship schedules to accommodate members who won’t miss an opening NFL kickoff. Athletes in the United States regularly express their religious beliefs, and non-denominational religious organizations use sports to attract and convert people to Christianity. Other U.S.-based religious organizations commonly use athletes as spokespersons, and some athletes now define their sport participation primarily in religious terms. These issues are discussed in Chapter 15.

Sports and Everyday Life  Data on youth sport participation, attendance at events, media coverage of sports, the number of people who consider themselves fans, the money spent on sports, and other information clearly indicate that the importance and visibility of sports has increased dramatically over the past few decades. This reflects the rapid expansion of research and scholarly discussions of sports in society. As I wrote this edition of *Sports in Society*, I included over 700 new references to books, journal articles, and relevant articles in the popular press that were not cited in the last edition. Keeping track of the literature is now a full-time job. Table 1.1 on page 25 lists most of the journals that I used when seeking the latest research findings on topics discussed in this book.

**summary**

**WHY STUDY THE SOCIOLOGY OF SPORT?**

Sociology is the study of the social worlds that people create, organize, maintain, and change through their relationships with each other. Sociologists use concepts, research, and theories to describe and explain social worlds. In the process, they enable us to put the lives of individuals and groups into context. This makes us aware of the circumstances that set limits and create possibilities in people’s lives. For most sociologists, the ultimate goal is to create the knowledge that enables people to understand, control, and change the conditions of their lives so that needs are met at both individual and group levels.

Sociologists use the concepts of culture, social interaction, and social structure as they systematically investigate social worlds. Sociological knowledge about sports and other social worlds is based on information collected in research. This makes it different from statements about sports that are based only on personal experience and opinions.

Defining sports presents a challenge. Some scholars define sports as well-established, officially governed competitive physical activities in which participants are motivated by internal and external rewards. However, using a single, static definition of sport is problematic if it leads us to ignore or devalue the lives of people who have neither the resources nor the desire to develop formally organized and competitive physical activities. For this reason, many people in the sociology of sport use an alternative definitional approach based on the assumption that popular conceptions of sports vary over time and from one social world to another. These scholars try to explain why certain activities, and not others, are identified as sports in a particular group or society, why some sports are more strongly supported and funded than others, and how various categories of people are affected by the prevailing definition of sports and related funding priorities.

This alternative approach emphasizes that sports are contested activities, meaning that people often disagree about their meaning, purpose, and organization. Furthermore, people often have different ideas about who should play sports and the conditions under which participation should occur. Debates over who plays and who doesn’t often create heated exchanges and bitter
feelings, because they are tied to notions of fairness, inclusion, and the allocation of resources in social worlds. Finally, sports are contested when people disagree over issues of sponsorship: the sports that will be sponsored, who will sponsor them, and how much control the sponsors will have over sports.

Learning to ask critical questions about sports in society is easier when people view sports as social constructions—that is, parts of the social world that are created by people as they interact with one another under the social, political, and economic conditions that exist in their society. This forces us to think about why sports take particular forms and who is advantaged and disadvantaged by prevailing ideas and the current organization of sports in a social world.

When sociologists study sports in society, they often discover problems created by the structure and organization of either sports or the social worlds in which they exist. When this happens, recommendations based on sociological research may threaten those with a vested interest in maintaining the status quo in sports. Although this leads some people to see the sociology of sport as controversial, most people in the field continue to do research and produce knowledge that they and others use to promote fairness and social justice.

People study sports in society because sports are socially significant activities for many people; they provide excitement, memorable experiences, and opportunities to initiate and extend social relationships. Sports also reaffirm important ideas and beliefs, especially those that comprise ideologies related to gender, race and ethnicity, and social class. Finally, people study sports in society because sports are deeply integrated in major spheres of social life such as family, economy, media, politics, education, and religion. Overall, sports have become such an integral part of everyday life that they cannot be ignored by anyone concerned with culture, social interaction, and social structure in societies today.