

Sport and recreation in the United Kingdom: flow with the flow or buck the trends?

Fred Coalter

*Centre for Leisure Research, Dept of PE, Sport & Leisure Studies, University of Edinburgh,
Cramond Rd North, Edinburgh, EH4 6JD, UK*

The paper uses sports participation data from the General Household Survey to examine shifts towards more individualized, flexibly timed, fitness-oriented activities. It examines various (often critical) theoretical explanations for these changes in the nature of sports participation – post-modernism, post-Fordism, feminism, time squeeze, increased access to further education – and suggests that policies aimed at sports development need to take account of wider social, economic and cultural influences. It seeks to explore the hypothesis that policy makers, depending on their objectives, might be better to ‘flow with the flow’ than try to ‘buck the trends’ of patterns of sports participation.

INTRODUCTION

In the early 1990s, under the last Conservative Government, two broad issues served to raise the political importance of sport in the UK – the supposed decline in school and school-aged sport and the lack of international sporting success. A range of factors have been blamed for a supposed decline in extra-curricular and school-aged sport – a major industrial dispute and subsequent changes in teaching contracts, the Thatcherite-inspired sale of school playing fields and an increasingly crowded National Curriculum. Paralleling this is a more general concern with the decline in the health and fitness of school-aged children – between 1972 and 1994 ten-year-old English boys became 17% fatter and in 1993 the Department of Health declared 43% of men and 30% of women to be overweight.

The growing concern with youth sport resulted in a series of initiatives aimed at young people. First, it has produced the first formal government policy statement on sport since 1975, *Raising the Game* (Department of National Heritage, 1995). Although

this concentrates on school sport it also sets out principles for the development of sports clubs to ensure the continuation of sport after school and establish the basis for lifelong participation. In addition, a series of development programmes aimed specifically at school-aged children have been launched – Champion Coaching, TOP Play, TOP Sport, the establishment of a Young People and Sport Task Force, Team Sport Scotland and Youth Sport Northern Ireland.

However, Roberts (1996) has suggested that the perception of a decline in sports participation levels may be misconceived. Aggregate levels of participation have risen, but they have dispersed across a wider range of (non-traditional; non-team) recreational activities. For example, a 1971 study (Emmett, 1971 quoted in Roberts, 1996, p. 52) found that 57% of girls in the final year of secondary school played no out-of-school sport. However, a recent large-scale study of English school children (Mason, 1995) found that, in 1994, this figure was 26%. The same study found that, on average, young people were participating in 3.6 sports per year at school and that in the final year of secondary

school two-thirds played at least one competitive team sport at least ten times per year (Mason, 1995). Although the measures in this study could be regarded as somewhat conservative and there is little evidence about the intensity and quality of the activity, the data suggest that although levels of participation in traditional sports may have declined, participation in physical recreations has expanded and diversified.

FLOW WITH THE FLOW?

This expansion and diversification leads Roberts (1996) to express scepticism about the possible efficacy of the new promotional policies, especially the concentration on traditional team games. He argues that,

Sport and leisure policies are always most likely to succeed when they flow with, and harness broader tides (Roberts, 1996, p. 56).

This paper uses data from the General Household Survey (GHS) (Note 1) to examine recent trends in participation in physical recreation activities and suggests that they may reflect broader social, economic, cultural and educational factors which are largely beyond the direct influence of sports policy makers, i.e. their ability to 'buck the trends' may be more limited than is recognized. Further, if the purpose of a renewed emphasis on youth sport is to promote healthy life-styles and life-long participation, policy-makers need to consider current social and cultural constraints and influences on adult participation, which either constrain or promote life-long participation.

1980s: GROWTH AND DIVERSIFICATION

Between 1977 and 1986 the rate of growth in general sports participation (excluding walking, darts, billiards/snooker) was 34% (from 22% to 29.5% of the adult population). If walking is included the total activity figure was 40.7% (Gratton and Tice, 1994).

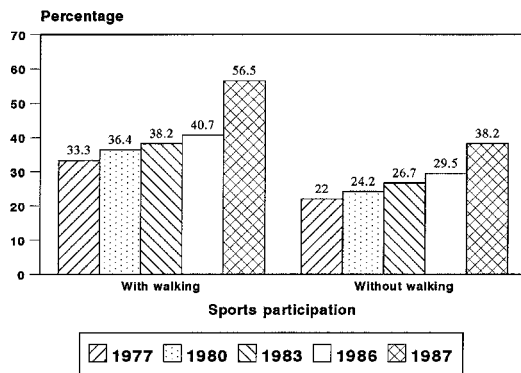


Fig. 1. Sports participation rates 1977–1987 (excluding darts, snooker/billiards). Source: Gratton and Tice (1994)

The broad increases in sports participation rates were accompanied by changes in the nature of participation, reflecting both increases in the supply of largely public sector facilities and changes in social attitudes to sport and physical recreation (e.g., increased concern with fitness and physical appearance, a shift towards individualized activities). Between 1977 and 1986 (Fig. 2) the greatest increases were for those taking part in at least one indoor sport – a 57.6% rate of growth, compared to 20.1% for outdoor sports.

However, because of the nature of the

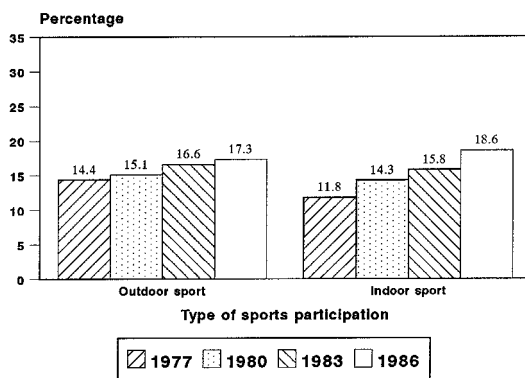


Fig. 2. Sports participation rates 1977–1986 (excluding walking, darts, snooker/billiards). Source: Gratton and Tice (1994)

questions asked in the General Household Survey, these data disguised a much higher level of participation. This illustrates both methodological problems of measuring participation and cultural variations in definitions of 'sport' and 'physical recreation'. Prior to 1987 respondents were asked an open-ended question about 'leisure' activities in the four weeks before interview. In 1987 they were presented with a pre-coded list of 32 sports and physical recreations in which they might have participated for any reason. This resulted in an 'increase' in the general participation rate, from 40.7% to 56.5% of the adult population (and from 29.5% to 38.2% if walking is excluded). Such data indicate that there had been a substantial under-estimation of overall activity levels, especially for non-competitive recreational activities such as cycling, walking and keep-fit.

1987-1996: THE INDIVIDUALIZATION OF ACTIVITY: WINNERS AND LOSERS

In the late 1980s and early 1990s the picture is one of continued, if less dramatic, growth, with a levelling off between 1990 and 1996.

However, care needs to be taken in the interpretation of Fig. 3. Although there has been an apparent 'levelling off' in aggregate

participation this disguises significant changes in the underlying pattern of participation. Further, between 1987 and 1996 there were substantial declines in the participation rates for snooker/billiards (15.1% to 11.3%) and darts (8.8% to 5.6%), implying that aggregate levels of participation have been sustained by increases in other activities.

Within this context there have been clear winners and losers, with the 'hidden trends' of the 1980s becoming even more pronounced. Overall there has been a shift from team and 'partner' sports to non-competitive, individual, flexible, fitness and lifestyle-oriented activities.

The losers

Figure 4 illustrates the major sports whose participation rates have declined since 1987. The steep decline in snooker and darts is obvious (and is partly explained by declining media coverage and associated falling sponsorship).

However, there was also a decline in participation in two indoor racquet sports – badminton and squash. Both of these 'partner' sports experienced a decline in female participants and an increase in the median age of participants, which also reflects a failure to attract a new generation of male

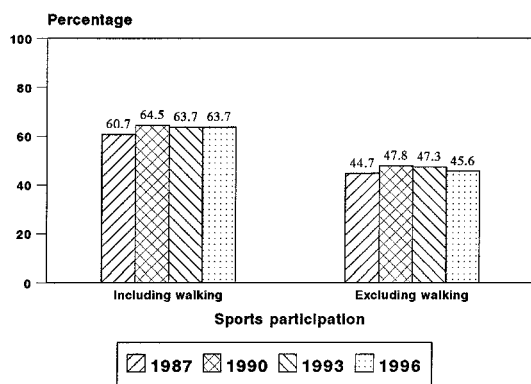


Fig. 3. Sports participation 1987–1996 (including darts, snooker/billiards). Source: General Household Survey

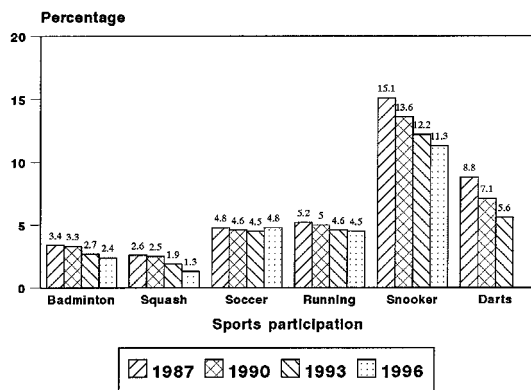


Fig. 4. The 'losers'. Source: General Household Survey. Note: 1996 figures not available for darts for participation in 4 weeks prior to interview

participants. Reflecting this, a major feature of public leisure provision has been the conversion of under-used squash courts into hi-tech fitness centres and provision for squash increasingly confined to private clubs.

The relatively static percentage of the adult population playing team games continued in the 1987 to 1996 period. For example, the participation rate for soccer remained static at 4.8% and cricket declined from 1.2% to 1%.

The winners

Figure 5 illustrates those major physical recreations which have increased their participation rates since 1987.

The 'winners' share a number of common features:

- They can be undertaken individually.
- The timing of participation is flexible (although the regularity of cycling suggests that it relates to journeys to and from work).
- They are non-competitive.
- They are related to a more general concern with fitness and health (although as we will see, the extent to which these goals are achieved is in dispute).

- They reflect a particular 'lifestyle', being among the activities with the most regular participants. Cycling, keep-fit and weights are the only activities (other than walking) which are done at least twice a week on average.

This growing emphasis on individualized fitness-oriented activity is not confined to the adult population. A recent study of school children (Mason, 1995) found that 27% of young women in the 15–16 age group participated regularly in out-of-school aerobics, compared to 14% of those in the 12–14 age group. Similarly, 26% of young men in the 15–16 age group participated regularly in multigym/weight training, compared to 11% of those in the 12–14 age group.

POST-MODERNITY, POST-FORDISM OR 'TIME SQUEEZE'?

There are a number of theoretical frameworks within which this 'individualization' of activity might be understood. For example, the structural properties of the physical recreations which have experienced the highest growth rates reflect some of the analyses of the 'post-modern condition' – the decline of collective identities and common interests, increased emphasis on individualism, a concern with body maintenance and its surface representation (Featherstone, 1991), the focus on appearance, fashion and physique and the 'look' (Hargreaves, 1993).

Others suggest that the growth in such activities reflects a shift from standardized, mass production Fordist economies to the flexible production and niche markets of the 'post-Fordist' economies. For example, Seaton (1990) argues that traditional team sports – predominantly male and often working class – belong to the Fordist era of mass production. Such sports were largely school-based and experienced as compulsory, regimented, hierarchical, authoritarian and gendered (Seaton, 1990). The new individualized, freely chosen and flexible forms of

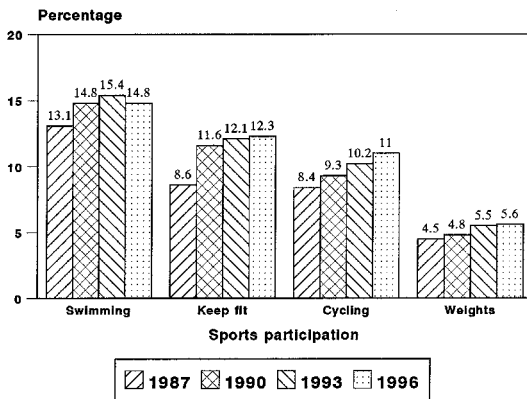


Fig. 5. The 'winners'. Source: General Household Survey

activity can be viewed as reflecting the new ideologies of post-Fordist societies – the mass spectacle of Fordism has been partially displaced by a 'flexible specialisation' in people's experience of sport (Seaton, 1990).

However, there are other, more prosaic, explanations for such shifts in activities – what has variously been called time pressure, time squeeze, time congestion or time crunch. For example, a 1990 UK survey (Consumer and Economic Trends, quoted in Tucker, 1990 p. 25) found that 'free time continues to be a scarce commodity for two thirds of the population'. These pressures are most felt by those currently most likely to be active in sport, 16 to 34 year olds and those in social classes AB. The study estimated that about 16 million adults were either 'time poor' or 'time demanders' and that between 36% of the 16-24 year olds and 28% of the 25-34 year olds wanted more time for sport or exercise.

Therefore, for many social groups affluence has not been accompanied by reduced work time (Gratton, 1996). There is much dispute about the extent of the phenomenon of 'work overload' – a combination of increased paid work and domestic labour. Zuzanek et al. (1996) suggest that in both Holland and Canada employed people's free time has declined in the 1980s and Gratton (1996, p. 101) states that 'the increasing scarcity of time, does seem to be a global phenomenon'.

Gershuny (1992) disputes some of the more gloomy time squeeze theories, arguing that, although increases/decreases in work time are affected by the business cycle, the long-term secular trend is for a slow, regular, step-by-step reduction in both working hours and domestic labour. However, he accepts that the late 1980s UK was an exception to this, with a significant increase in hours worked between 1980 and 1990. Holliday (1996) illustrates that the average work week in Britain increased from 40.2 hours in 1985 to 44.4 hours in 1995. A recent British study

concluded that in the past 10 years the numbers of workers working more than their contract hours has doubled – now more than 50% of workers (Casey et al., 1997).

However, these increases have not been spread evenly, with evidence of a 'social status polarisation' (Zuzanek et al. 1995). For example, the greatest increases were among the professional and managerial groups (i.e. those most likely to participate), where the average work week in 1995 was 46.8 hours; 45.1 for women and 47.8 for men. Holliday (1996, p. 73) quotes the results of a 1994 Observer readership survey which indicates that among respondents (mostly ABC₁), 'the vast majority of those working over 40 hours in June 1994 had found that their working time had increased over the past five years'. This parallels Zuzanek et al.'s (1995, p. 8) analysis for Holland and Canada, where 'paid work and combined paid and domestic loads have increased for university graduates and respondents with higher vocational education, while they declined for lower educated groups'. Using broader categories Gershuny (1993) illustrates that in the 1980s working class men had more leisure time than middle class men.

Some commentators (Linder, 1970; Featherstone, 1991) suggest that where working time has been reduced it has been filled by increased choices, more commitments and unpaid (domestic) labour. In parallel with any decline in time spent in paid labour there has been the creation of an ever-expanding range of consumer choices and new 'essential' tasks. In such circumstances sport is simply one of an increasing number of activities competing for that most precious of resources – time. As Roberts and Brodie (1992, p. 39) argue:

Individuals are likely to remain in sport only if their experience of this kind of leisure gives better value for their time and money than the alternatives.

This increase in working hours among particular occupational groups (or increased choices and commitments) is paralleled by the shift to more individualized activity and a decline in the frequency of some of the most popular activities. For example, between 1987 and 1996 although overall participation rates increased, the frequency of participation in keep-fit and jogging declined and swimming, walking and weight-training remained static. Further, although those in the professional and managerial groups have the highest participation rates, once the decision to participate is taken the influence of social class on frequency of participation changes. As Table 1 illustrates, social class IV (skilled manual) has the highest frequency of participation in both hall and pitch sports and V/VI (semi- and unskilled) have the second highest frequencies for pitch sports (predominantly football).

Table 1 Social class and frequency of participation in last 28 days

	I/II	III	IV	V/VI
	Average number of participation occasions			
Pitch sports	3.79	2.65	4.91	4.45
Hall sports	7.36	7.33	8.20	7.30

Source: Coalter et al. (1994); GHS (1990)

OCCUPATIONAL CLASS AND GENDER

During the period under review there have been substantial changes in the occupational structure in most industrial societies – in the UK between 1986 and 1996 manufacturing jobs declined from about 5.25 million to under 4.75 million and jobs in the retail, distribution and services sector increased from less than 4 million to 4.5 million. Allied to this has been a substantial increase in the number of women undertaking higher education (a 268% increase between 1975 and 1995) (Department for Education and Employment,

1995) and entering the labour force. These changes in the occupational structure and the allocation of individuals to social class categories based on occupation, raise interesting questions about the traditional class analysis of participation patterns. Although broad class-related differences in participation rates remain, between 1987 and 1993 (omitting declining participation in snooker/billiards) all occupational groups experienced increases in ‘sports participation’. However, the greatest increases were among the intermediate and junior non-manual (C1) (45–49%) and the unskilled occupations (E) (26–31%) (although between 1993 and 1996 these rates declined to 47% for social class C1 and, more dramatically, to 24% for social class E).

However, the GHS data suggest that such patterns do not simply indicate the influence of social class – gender and age factors are also strongly influential in explaining such patterns. For example, in the 1990 GHS the social class C1 sample was 76% female. In the 1996 GHS the social class E sample was 73% female and 63% were over 45 years of age. Further, the skilled manual occupational category (C2), which has a high rate of participation in a number of sports, was 79% male. Consequently, although some ‘social class factors’ may be operating, it is probable that these differences also reflect gender, with much of the rise among social classes C1 and E being accounted for by swimming, cycling and keep-fit.

WOMEN, SPORT AND KEEP-FIT

Between 1977 and 1986 there was a 19.2% rate of growth in women's sports participation and in 1986 women accounted for 42.2% of adults who participated in at least one sport in the four weeks prior to interview (excluding walking, darts, snooker/billiards). The increase in participation in indoor sports meant that, in 1986, women outnumbered men among those who participated in at least

one indoor sport, although they accounted for less than one in three of those who participated in at least one outdoor sport (Gratton and Tice, 1994).

Further, the changed definitions in 1987 indicate the extent to which female participation in certain activities had previously been under-estimated. For example, the 1986 GHS recorded only 5% of female respondents as having participated in keep fit/yoga/aerobics/dance exercise, this 'rose' to 12% in 1987. The other categories experiencing such an 'increase' were the essentially recreational activities of walking (18% to 35%) and cycling (1% to 7%).

Towards greater gender equality?

Figure 6 illustrates the relative changes in male and female aggregate participation rates (including darts; snooker/billiards) between 1987 and 1996.

Excluding walking, the female participation rate has increased by 12% during this period, whereas the, already high, male rate remained relatively static, but declined between 1993 and 1996. However, if we take account of the decline in male-dominated darts and snooker/billiards, participation rates among males in other sports have also increased. For example, male participation rates have increased in five non-team sports

– four individual activities (walking, cycling, weight lifting/training) and one 'partner' sport (golf).

Among women, increases in participation rates occurred among all age groups (Fig. 7) in the late 1980s and early 1990s (although this growth has not been sustained in the mid-1990s). Combined with a decline in male participation rates among certain age groups the effect of these changes has been to reduce the gap between male and female participation rates. However, three aspects of women's participation need to be emphasized:

- Despite a steady growth during the past 20 years, women's aggregate participation rate (excluding walking) is still only 70% that of men.
- Nevertheless, a generational change may be occurring among 16–19 women. While still not equitable, the rate among 16–19 year-old women has increased to 79% (partly accounted for by a slight decline in male participation).
- Women's participation is concentrated in a much narrower band of activities than men's. As Table 2 illustrates, in the 1996 GHS only four activities had more than a 7% participation rate (eight activities for men), walking (41%), keep-fit/

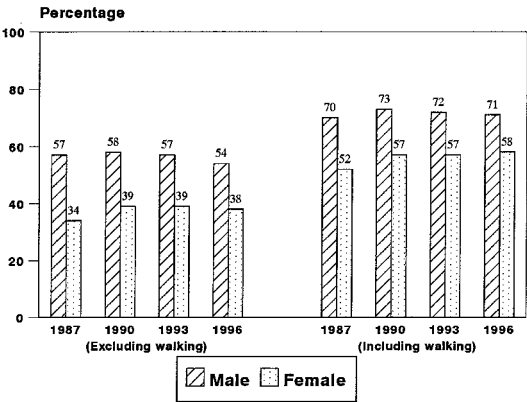


Fig. 6. Sports participation by sex 1987–1996. Source: General Household Survey

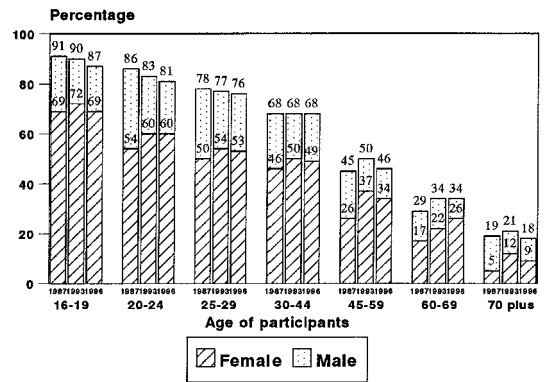


Fig. 7. Participation rates by age/sex (excluding walking). Source: General Household Survey

yoga/aerobics/dance exercise (17%), swimming (17%) and cycling (8%). All activities which are cheap, flexible in their timing, have a limited need for partners and can often be combined with childcare.

Table 2 Activities participated in by 7% or more of the adult population: 1996

Women		Men	
Walking	41%	Walking	49%
Keep-fit, etc.	17%	Snooker/billiards	20%
Swimming	17%	Cycling	15%
Cycling	8%	Swimming	13%
		Soccer	10%
		Weights	9%
		Golf	8%
		Running/jogging	7%

Source: GHS (1996)

KEEP FIT: A STEP FORWARD OR A STEP BACK?

The importance of the heterogeneous category of keep-fit/yoga/aerobics/dance exercise for women cannot be over-emphasized and it accounts for a large proportion of the increase in female participation (from 12% of women in 1987 to 17% in 1996). Excluding walking, in 1993 (the last published full data set) it had the highest participation rate for any activity for women between the ages of 16 and 29 and was a close second to swimming for women between the ages of 30 and 44.

The popularity of keep-fit/yoga/aerobics/dance exercise among women of all social classes is illustrated in Fig. 8 (based on the 1990 GHS). Among those aged 16–29, women in all social classes had age-related participation rates which were only surpassed by snooker/billiards/pool among men of the

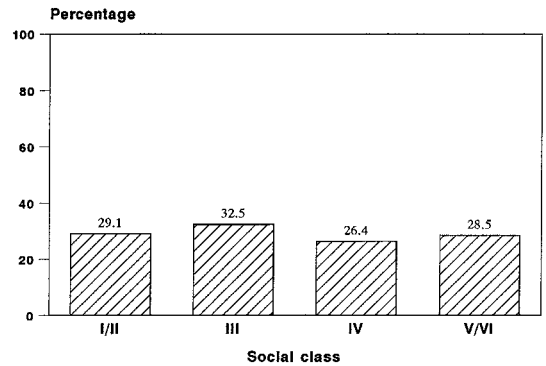


Fig. 8. Keep-fit participation rates: women aged 16–29. Source: Coalter et al. (1994): General Household Survey 1990

same age. Further, in terms of more traditional sports participation, it is likely that the rise of keep-fit/aerobics has involved displacement from other activities. For example, it has been paralleled by a decline in women's participation in jogging, badminton, squash and outdoor sports.

The strength of the appeal of aerobics among females of all ages is indicated by the fact that, in a recent survey of schoolchildren (Mason, 1995), more than one third (37%) of 14–16 year-old girls named aerobics as one of the three sports they most enjoyed in school lessons. Over a quarter (27%) of girls aged 15–16 participated regularly (at least ten times in the previous year) out-of-school (Mason, 1995), ranking third behind cycling and swimming. This was higher than the 11% participation among those aged 12–14 (Mason, 1995) and aerobics is the only physical recreation which records an increase in participation in the immediate post-school years.

Empowerment or oppression?

It is possible to view the dramatic increase in keep-fit/aerobics as indicating 'empowerment' among women, with personal physical fitness and strength promoting self-confidence and psychological well-being. Further, it could be argued that aerobics is

particularly suited to diverse women's needs as a safe, locally accessible and healthy form of exercise – it can be undertaken in a range of locations, including the home and is usually separate from the masculine gaze (Flintoff et al., 1995). For example, in the 1996 GHS 26% of women participants took part in keep-fit/aerobics/yoga at home (30% of male participants did so).

Others (Willis, 1985; Bloch, 1987) suggest that such activities offer a challenge to traditional sport and provide the possibility of developing forms of sport which promote values and forms of performance and achievement that traditional male sports ignore. Seaton (1990) argues that the new 'flexible specialisation' has been especially significant for women, contributing to the feminist desire for control over the body and physical self-definition. For Seaton (1990, p. 31) 'the new physical culture is about health, fun, pleasure and wider participation – a new horizon of choice and opportunity'.

However, as with any activity, overlapping and contradictory rationales and motivations can be identified (Flintoff et al., 1995) and aerobics has attracted a range of critical responses, which can be viewed as two inter-related groups – postmodernist commentators and feminist critics.

Postmodern commentators

Featherstone (1991) views much of postmodern culture as an extension of Lasch's (1979) 'culture of narcissism' and Reisman's (1950) shift from inner-directedness to other directedness. He argues that the concern with body maintenance and its surface representation – the 'look' – have become obsessions of consumer culture (Featherstone, 1987). In postmodern society the reward for ascetic body work ceases to be spiritual selection – the body as 'God's temple' – or even improved health, but becomes an enhanced appearance and a more marketable self. He continues,

Health, youth, beauty, sex, fitness are the positive attributes which body care can achieve and preserve. With appearance being taken as a reflex of the self, penalties of bodily neglect are a lowering of one's acceptability as a person, as well as an indication of laziness, low self esteem and even moral failure (Featherstone, 1991, p. 186).

Glassner (1989, p. 183) suggests the cultivation of bodily appearance reflects deeper concerns about rapid social and economic changes, a solution to anomie:

By means of vital, rationalised and self-directed action, the practitioner of fitness strives to construct an integral biography during a time when roles and collective morality are inconsistent and rapidly changing.

Rather than a shift to narcissism, the cultivation of bodily appearance is 'symbolic of a deeper underlying concern to construct and control the body as a form of corporeal security' (Glassner, 1989, p. 185) in an increasingly insecure and fragmentary 'late modernity'. Kimmel (1987) quotes work which suggests that this insecurity may be especially strong for men in a world where gender-based employment and lifestyle differences are diminishing. In such circumstances body image emerges as one of the few areas in which men can differentiate themselves from women, resulting in a 'muscular backlash'.

Feminist critics

Several feminist writers have suggested that the growth in aerobics is a direct expression of a hegemonic masculinity, as women strive to achieve a desirable body shape to make them attractive to men and 'the legislators of the cultural industries' (Flintoff et al., 1995, p. 100). For some the increased incidence of anorexia/bulimia are simply the darker side of this phenomenon.

Hargreaves (1993, p. 61) argues that the growth of aerobics is part of a wider set of

influences which 'sexualise the female body' – in much of aerobics the 'look' is much more important than fitness:

Aerobics has been successfully packaged to persuade women to participate in order to lose weight and improve their sex appeal rather than for reasons of fitness. Although aerobics has become a fiercely competitive activity which demands fitness, muscle strength and endurance...the focus of publicity is on appearance, fashion and physique.

Not only can aerobics be interpreted as a concern to conform to male stereotypes, it also has a potentially divisive effect for women. For example, Brackenridge (1990, p. 10) argues that:

Women who fall short of the standards of the exercise culture (with its slender, toned bodies, fashion-wear, smooth-tanned skins and overt displays of female apologetics in the changing room) face ostracism and ridicule from their female peers.

Some of these analyses seem to be supported by a recent study of 7000 25–65 year-old men and women in Finland. Under the headline 'Fat women "the new underclass"' the Guardian (19:6:97) reported findings which indicated that obese women were particularly likely to find difficulty in getting jobs – obesity is often associated in employers' minds with idleness and ill-health.

Both postmodernists and feminists argue that much of the 'aerobics/keep-fit boom' is more to do with appearance than fitness or health. Featherstone (1991) goes further and suggests that the activities are a form of 'calculating hedonism' – doing enough to balance the physical and psychological impacts of consumption. In this regard Flintoff et al. (1995, p. 96) suggest that

the moral and political economy of exercise is that it legitimates other spheres of free time and consumption. Individual lifestyles construct a

balance between healthy and unhealthy activities and 'working' out can be part of a complicated equation within people's lifestyles. Physical exercise is an important ingredient in both accumulating and reducing guilt in people's lifestyles.

Such arguments are given some support by the fact that, although participants in weights and aerobics are among the most frequent participants, many still do not participate frequently enough to ensure improvements in health and fitness (Roberts and Brodie, 1992; Allied Dunbar, 1992). For example, Roberts and Brodie (1992) found that participation in most activities less than three times per week only led to improvement in self-assessments, with little fitness and no health benefits.

However, the 'look' is not solely a female preoccupation. We have already noted the suggestion that male anxieties about changing gender relations has led to a 'muscular backlash' (Kimmel, 1987). Further, Kimmel (1987) illustrates a high level of dissatisfaction among young men with their bodies (with potential negative psychological impacts). Reflecting some of the Roberts and Brodie (1992) analysis, Blaxter (1990) argues that young men tend to view health in terms of physical strength and fitness and the growing market in fitness and appearance-oriented magazines for men – FHM, GQ Active, Men's Health – illustrates this trend. Such concerns and shifts in attitudes are reflected in participation patterns. For example, 26% of young men in the 15–16 age group participate regularly out of school in multi-gym/weight training, compared to 11% in the 12–14 age group (Mason, 1995). Further, between 1987 and 1993 there was a 41% increase in weight training/lifting among 16–19 year-old men (GHS, 1990 and 1993). In 1993 nearly a third (31%) of 16–19 year old males participated in weight training/lifting in the four weeks prior to interview – a participation rate surpassed only by one sport, soccer (GHS, 1993).

OTHER EXPLANATIONS FOR INCREASED PARTICIPATION

In addition to the postmodernist/feminist analyses of deep-rooted cultural and ideological changes there are other, more prosaic, explanations for the more general increases in participation.

Increased supply

Gratton and Tice (1994, p. 65) suggest that the broad increases reflect the 'massive public investment in new indoor facilities' during the 1970/1980s which led to a dramatic increase in sporting opportunities. This is especially so for swimming, with a 41% increase (912 to 1287) in the number of indoor pools (including leisure pools) in England between 1980 and 1990. Although data on sports centres is much more difficult to obtain, the rise in local government expenditure on leisure services has been dramatic. Between 1986/7 and 1996/7 local government leisure services net expenditure increased by 74% (compared to the 52.7% rise in the Retail Price Index) (Cooper, 1997).

However, Roberts and Brodie (1992, p. 79) are more sceptical about the short-term impact of increased supply on either the overall level of sport activity, or the types of people who take part. They suggest that;

In the short term [emphasis added] the main effects of increased or enhanced sport provisions seem to be to widen the choice and improve the facilities for established players.

Health, fitness and 'sports literacy'

Although increased facility-based opportunities are a contributing factor to the increase in sports participation, much of the increase has been in activities which are not (or only partly) facility-dependent – cycling, keep-fit/aerobics, weight lifting/training and walking. Further, the type of activities showing the greatest increase reflect broader cultural changes in attitudes to health and fitness and

the need for more flexible and individualized lifestyles.

Roberts and Brodie (1992) suggest a more sociological, demand-side, reason for the broad increases. They suggest that very little of the rise in participation over the last generation has been due to formerly inactive 30–50 year olds being persuaded to resume participation. Rather it is the,

... reliable by-product of introducing higher proportions of successive cohorts of young people to a wide range of sports. If provisions continue to increase in the future and if even more young people are introduced to many sports we are confident that the adult participation rate will also continue on its upward course. (Roberts and Brodie, 1992, p. 81).

Likewise the Allied Dunbar National Fitness Survey (1992, p. 50), commenting on the low activity levels among those 55 and over (despite recent increases), states

Those who are elderly today did not have the same opportunities for sport and exercise when they were young as are available to the present generation of young people... it is a reasonable expectation that in say 20 years time elderly people may be more physically active than at present.

The increased average or median age of sport participants (although in some sports this reflects a failure to attract younger participants), the arguments about sports literacy and generational shifts in attitudes towards physical recreation and sport all raise the issue of early sporting experiences and the influence of education. Here there are clear indications that substantial changes in the level and nature of sports participation may be occurring.

HIGHER EDUCATION AND ITS IMPACT ON PARTICIPATION

There is evidence (Roberts and Brodie, 1992) that life-long participation (or at least a later exit from participation) is related directly to the number of sports played when young.

The logic of this seems straightforward. If a wide range of recreational/sporting activities are provided this will increase the number of pupils who will find some sport which they enjoy and in which they can develop a degree of competence – sport for all requires sports for all. Further, there is also evidence that it is those who undertake some form of post-secondary education that are most likely to participate in sport/physical recreation.

THE IMPACT OF EDUCATION ON LIFE-LONG PARTICIPATION

Aggregate participation

The possession of a post-18 educational qualification is a strong predictor of higher levels of life-long participation. This 'education effect' is illustrated in Fig. 9 which presents data for the combined categories of sports halls and pitch sports.

Those with a degree/diploma have higher participation rates in both hall sports and pitch sports than those in the 'no degree/diploma' group. Further, for individual sports there is a consistently higher participation rate among those with higher educational qualifications. For example, in the 1990 GHS, for badminton, weights, jogging and golf the participation rate for those with degree/

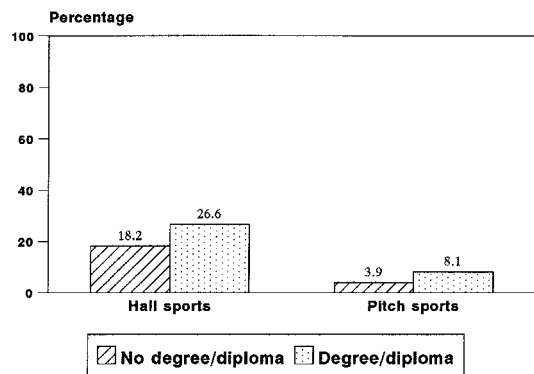


Fig. 9. Hall and pitch sports: participation and educational status. Source: Coalter et al. (1994): General Household Survey 1990

diploma was more than double those without.

Education, age and participation

These differential participation rates are maintained in all age groups. For example, for badminton (Fig. 10) those with a degree/diploma were more than twice as likely to participate than those without such qualifications (6.5% compared to 2.4%). The 'education effect' is consistent for all age groups – the steep decline in participation among those with a degree/diploma occurs after the age of 59, compared to 39 for the no degree/diploma group.

Why does post-school education affect participation?

The major impact of post-school education may be related to a number of factors:

- Those remaining in full time education are more likely to have the free time and be provided with opportunities to participate in a wide range of sports.
- By 'delaying adulthood', and its associated work and family constraints, they can establish an active/sporting life-style, which they are then more able to protect from later work and family-related demands. The data suggest that

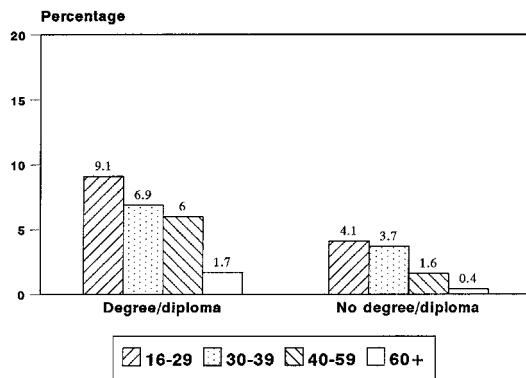


Fig. 10. Education and age-related participation: badminton. Source: Coalter et al. (1994): General Household Survey 1990.

this impact may be greatest for women, who are able to establish an active adult lifestyle. As this often becomes part of their adult self-definition, they are better able to protect it in subsequent relationships.

It is worth noting that the expansion and diversification of sports participation and increases in women's participation have been paralleled by similar shifts in access to higher education. Between 1975 and 1995 there was a 139% increase in entrants to higher education (88% increase for men and 268% increase for women) (Department for Education and Employment, 1995). Between 1975 and 1995 the proportion of people with some higher education qualification rose from 10% to 19% and the proportion of those with 'A' Level or equivalent has risen from 4% in 1975 to 12% in 1993 (GHS, 1993).

Conclusions

The evidence indicates that there has not been a long-term decline in the overall level of participation in sport and physical recreation. Rather, there has been a relative decline in more 'traditional' team and partner sports, accompanied by increased participation in a more diversified range of activities. Reactions to these shifts will depend on strategic policy objectives – equity of opportunity or outcome, improving levels of fitness and health, developing traditional team sports, promoting sporting excellence and so on. For example, despite increased public awareness of issues of fitness and health (Allied Dunbar, 1992; Mason, 1995) the evidence suggests that, either through ignorance or lack of time, the majority of current participants are not participating frequently enough to obtain real fitness or health benefits (Roberts and Brodie, 1992). One conclusion from this might be that the key policy issue is to

encourage current, committed, participants to increase their frequency of participation rather than commit resources in an attempt to expand the base of (possibly reluctant) participants.

Alternatively, although women's aggregate participation rates have increased, they remain at 70% of those for men and are largely concentrated in a narrow range of what might be regarded as 'stereotypical' activities. Further, the evidence is that this pattern is being reproduced in the next generation (Mason, 1995). This clearly raises an issue of equity not simply in terms of absolute participation rates, but in terms of the variety of opportunities available.

It would be foolish to conclude that policy makers and providers have no influence on the volume and direction of participation in sport and physical recreation. For example, the large-scale investments of the 1970s and 1980s, which increased the supply of highly subsidized public leisure facilities, enabled a substantial growth and diversification in sports participation. Further, schools by providing young people with access to a wide choice of sports can increase the possibility of healthy lifestyles and life-long (or at least longer) participation. Providing choice will increase the possibility that young people will find a sport (or sports) suitable for their personal physical, emotional and psychological disposition which will support life-long participation (Roberts and Brodie, 1992; Mason, 1995).

Nevertheless, adult patterns of participation clearly are strongly influenced by a wide range of factors beyond the direct control of sports policy makers and providers. Some of these will contribute to increased levels of participation in physical recreation (if not sport). For example, changing occupational/social class structures; increased numbers of adults undertaking post-secondary school education (especially the greatly increased number of women in higher education),

increased awareness of fitness and health issues, consumerism and the 'look'. Other factors may lead to a continuing reduction in participation in traditional team and partner sports and/or reduce the frequency of participation below that needed for health, fitness or skill development. For example, increased 'flexible specialization', an increased range of consumption choices and newly defined 'essentials' and continuing time squeeze. In this regard research findings illustrate a remarkable consistency in the reasons given by adults for not participating in sport, or not participating more often. Most relate to 'lifestyle' factors beyond the control of planners and providers. For example, in one study 65% of non-participants gave 'time' as the main reason for non-participation (Roberts and Brodie, 1992). In a study in Scotland (Coalter, 1993) 42% of non-participants mentioned time (and related constraints) and 45% of participants named time as the main reason for not participating more often.

A possible paradox of the 'time squeeze' is that increased choices are most likely to affect those most likely to want to participate in sport and physical recreation. There is some evidence of a 'leisure multiplier' where sports participants tend to be 'participants' in a much broader sense, participating in a broad range of social and cultural activities, of which sport is only one. To think in terms of 'sports participants' may be misleading (Gratton and Tice, 1994; Roberts and Brodie, 1992; Coalter, 1993). If this is the case, then Roberts' and Brodie's (1992, p. 39) comment that individuals are only likely to remain if this use of leisure time gives better value than the alternatives is highly significant. In such circumstances serious thought needs to be given to the 'value-added' associated with sport and exercise compared to other uses of time.

Finally, one interpretation of the data could be that the shift to more individualistic, flexible and fitness-oriented activities signals

the 'decline of sport', or at least the redrawing of the traditional boundaries and meanings of sport. This seems to underlie the proposal that we need to 'sell' sport to young women by reinforcing the current obsessions with the 'look' and appearance. For example, former Olympic swimmer Sharron Davies suggests that '... sport is part of the real world and it's normal to want to look nice. If we want to stop talented girls leaving through making sport look sexy, it can only be good in the long run' (Observer, 29:6:97). Clearly, one may question the extent to which sport should be 'sexualized', stereotypes re-enforced and those who can't or won't conform marginalized (Hargreaves, 1993). Nevertheless, in an era characterized by increased choices and an increase in the list of 'essentials', sport is competing for the most scarce resource – time. In such circumstances, and in an age of 'flexible specialization', it may be necessary to move from a product-led to a needs-based or consumer-oriented approach – to find a way of 'flowing with the flow'.

NOTE 1

Although the GHS has included questions on participation in sport and physical recreation at intervals since 1973, methodological changes in 1987 mean that it is only possible to undertake longitudinal analyses from that year.

The GHS is an annual household survey of about 20 000 adults (16 plus) in which questions about sport and physical recreation have been included at three-yearly intervals. It has a number of limitations (small subsamples for individual sports; no published information about ethnicity, unemployed or people with disabilities). Further, information about location of activities (in/out of home) and the nature of activity (casual, club, competitive) was not collected until

1996. The most important limitation for this paper is that the form in which aggregate data is presented raises issues about the definition of 'sport'. The published aggregate participation rates include the high volume activities of darts and snooker/billiards in which the physical recreational component is minimal. Further, since 1987 cycling to work and sport/exercise as part of a job have been included. Consequently, while the data may be regarded as providing information on activity levels, they inflate the levels of what might be traditionally be regarded as sports participation

REFERENCES

- Allied Dunbar (1992) National Fitness Survey, Sports Council, Health Education Authority, Allied Dunbar, London.
- Blaxter, M. (1990) *Health and Lifestyles*, Routledge, London.
- Bloch, C. (1987) Everyday life, sensuality and body culture. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 10(4), 433–442.
- Brackenridge, C. (1990) Response to Seaton. *Marxism Today*, May, 10.
- Casey, B., Metcalf, H. and Millward, N. (1997) *Employers Use of Flexible Labour*, Policy Studies Institute, London.
- Coalter, F. (1993) Sports participation: price or priorities? *Leisure Studies*, 12(3), 171–182.
- Coalter, F., Dower, S. and Baxter, M. (1994) Social class and sports participation, in K. Roberts (ed.): *Leisure and Social Stratification*, Leisure Studies Association Publication No 53, Brighton, pp. 59–73.
- Cooper, C. (1997) Gloom, doom and a glimmer of hope. *Leisure Management*, 17(6), 25.
- Department for Education and Employment (1995) *Education Statistics for the United Kingdom*, 1995 Edition, HMSO, London.
- Department of National Heritage (1995) *Sport Raising the Game*, DNH, London.
- Featherstone, M. (1987) Lifestyle and consumer culture. *Theory, Culture and Society*, 4(1), 55–70.
- Featherstone, M. (1991) The body in consumer culture in M. Featherstone et al. (eds): *The Body*, Sage, London, pp. 170–196.
- Flintoff, A., Scraton, S. and Bramham, P. (1995) Stepping into aerobics? in G. McFee et al (eds): *Leisure Cultures: Values, Genders, Lifestyles*, Leisure Studies Association Publication No 54, Brighton, pp. 93–104.
- Gershuny, J. (1992) Are we running out of time? *Futures*, January/February, 3–22.
- Gershuny, J. (1993) Post-industrial convergence in time allocation. *Futures*, June, 578–586.
- Glassner, B. (1989) Fitness and the postmodern self. *Journal of Health and Social Behaviour*, 30, 180–91.
- Gratton, C. and Tice, A. (1994) Trends in sports participation in Britain: 1977–1987. *Leisure Studies*, 13(1), 49–66.
- Gratton, C. (1996) Conclusion: Implications for leisure and the quality of life, in C. Gratton (ed.): *Work, Leisure and the Quality of Life*, Leisure Industries Research Centre, Sheffield, pp. 100–105.
- Hargreaves, J. (1993) Bodies matter! Images of sport and female sexualisation, in C. Brackenridge (ed.): *Body Matters: Leisure, Images and Lifestyle*, Leisure Studies Association Publication No 47, Brighton, pp. 60–66.
- Holliday, S. (1996) Trends in British work and leisure, in C. Gratton (ed.): *Work, Leisure and the Quality of Life*, Leisure Industries Research Centre, Sheffield, pp. 68–83.
- Horne, J. (1993) Body culture and modernity. Paper presented at the Second Conference of the Japaneses Society for the Sociology of Sport, Kagawa University, Japan, March.
- Kimmel, M. (ed.) (1987) *Changing Men; New Directions in Research on Men and Masculinity*, Sage, Newbury Park, CA.
- Lasch, C. (1978) *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*, Norton, New York.
- Linder, S. (1970) *The Harried Leisure Class*, Columbia University Press, New York.
- Mason, V. (1995) *Young People and Sport in England, 1994*, English Sports Council, London.
- Reisman, D. (1950) *The Lonely Crowd*, Yale University Press.
- Roberts, K. and Brodie, D. (1992) *Inner City Sport:*

- Who plays and what are the benefits? Giordano Bruno, Culemburg.
- Roberts, K. (1996) Young people, schools, sport and government policies. *Sport, Education and Society*, 1(1), 47–57.
- Seaton, M. (1990) Work Your Body! *Marxism Today*, April, 28–31.
- Tucker, D. (1990) Time Limits. *Leisure Management*, December, 24–25.
- Willis, P. (1985) Women in sport and ideology, in J. Hargreaves (ed.): *Sport, Culture and Society*, Routledge, London, pp. 117–135.
- Zuzanek, J., Beckers, T. and Peters, P. (1996) The ‘harried leisure class’ revisited: a cross-national and diachronic perspective. Paper presented at *New Strategies for Everyday Life: Work, Free Time and Consumption*, Tilburg University, December.