Chapter 1: Introduction to the Sociology of Sport

# 1.1 Why should I take a sociology of sport course?

“Sport has the power to change the world. It has the power to inspire. It has the power to unite people in a way that little else does. It speaks to youth in a language they understand. Sport can create hope where once there was only despair. It is more powerful than governments in breaking down racial barriers. It laughs in the face of all types of discrimination.” – Nelson Mandela

This reading may contain more than you want to know when answering this question. However, it’s good to have some background as you think about how this course will fit into your life. So, let’s start from “the beginning.”

People worldwide have always engaged in playful physical activities and incorporated human movement into their rituals and everyday lives. Our lives are embodied in that our experiences are lived through our bodies. In fact, “the physical” is an important part of all cultures. Play and countless physical games have been key components of family and community life from ancient times to the present.

Play and games were initially tied to religious beliefs, but they were gradually secularized between the 17th and 20th centuries. With industrialization, democratization, and the movement of large numbers of people into major cities, play and sports were viewed in more rational terms. That is, how could they be used to make social life more orderly and satisfying? This led them to be linked with socialization and social control. Organized games and sports were created to fit emerging social and cultural conditions, and they began to replace more traditional forms of free play and recreation.

By the beginning of the 20th century, organized sports had emerged in Northern Europe, and European colonizers, missionaries, and global travelers had introduced them to people around the world. The goal of the colonizers was to use sports to teach people they defined as “primitive” how to be more civilized. Sports also served as a means to entertain and control the populations that were being colonized. More recent capitalist expansion and various dimensions of globalization driven by North America and Northwestern Europe have made organized, competitive sports pervasive and highly visible components of the social and cultural landscape of many societies today.

Like other cultural practices, sports are historically produced and socially constructed. This means that there are variations in the meaning, purpose, and organization of sports from place to place and over time. The most prominent forms of sport in any society generally reinforce dominant beliefs, meanings, and practices in society. But as conditions change in societies, people revise or invent sports that are organized around new or oppositional ideas and beliefs (some are literally called “alternative sports”). If these are embraced by large numbers of people, they can become vehicles for facilitating changes in society. This shows that sports are dynamic social and cultural activities that attract attention from sociologists and others who study society.

Studying sports as social phenomena helps us understand the ways that social class, gender, race and ethnicity, sexuality, and physical ability influence our everyday lives. Sports are also linked with the organization and dynamics of family life. Parents and educators see them as tools for teaching values to young people. Politicians often see them as vehicles for developing local and national identities, and corporations sponsor certain types of sports to market both products and ways of thinking about competition and consumption to people worldwide. Corporate executives now realize that sponsoring people’s pleasures (i.e., sporting events) produces support for their products. At the same time, most sports organizations seek corporate support to ensure their survival.



***Observing community-based sports provides a window into a local culture***

As cultural practices, organized sports are increasingly important everyday activities. They are sociologically significant because they’re developed around and reaffirm particular ideas about the body, social relationships, competence and achievement, human abilities and potential, masculinity and femininity, and the meaning of success.

When asked, many students identify the most memorable experience they had during high school as a sport-related experience. Sports participation is a source of joy, excitement, and significance for many individuals today. Added to that, commercial spectator sports provide larger gathering sites and command more attention than any other event. The Olympic Games, soccer’s World Cup (men’s and women’s), the Tour de France, the tennis championships at Wimbledon, American football’s Super Bowl, and championship boxing bouts capture the interest of billions of people who watch them on satellite-fed video screens, televisions, and online livestreams in over two hundred countries around the world.

People of all ages connect with sports through the media. Newspapers devote entire sections of their daily editions to sports, and the coverage of sports frequently surpasses coverage devoted to the economy, politics, or any single topic of interest. Major magazines and hundreds of specialty magazines cater to a wide range of interests among sport participants and fans. Radio covers numerous sporting events and sports talk programming attracts millions of listeners every day.

Sports events, together with news and commentary about sports, make up the most prevalent category of television programming in most nations today. As broadband internet access has expanded, media-facilitated connections to sports have grown exponentially. High-profile teams and athletes are now globally recognized, and this recognition fuels everything from product consumption to tourism. Sports images pervade many cultures, and in regions where there is an assumed connection between sport participation and character development, people expect athletes to be models of dominant values and lifestyles, especially for impressionable young people. This creates a paradoxical situation in which athletes often are held to a higher degree of moral accountability than other celebrities, while at the same time, being excused for transgressing traditional normative boundaries. Think of the professional athlete who has broken the law but then is embraced by teammates and fans with open arms.

People worldwide increasingly talk about sports. Many relationships revolve around sports, especially among males but also among a growing number of females as well. Some people identify so closely with teams and athletes that their moods and overall sense of well-being are impacted by game outcomes and athlete performances. People’s identities as athletes and fans may be more important to them than their identities related to education, religion, work, and family.

Sports and sports images are part of personal and community lives as well as activities that are used for political and economic purposes. When we don’t understand this, we are less able to participate as informed citizens in our social worlds. As parents, workers, and citizens you will make decisions about sports in the lives of your families, schools, communities, and societies. Understanding the sociological aspects of sport will help you make informed decisions about how to allocate money in your family budgets, in your communities and schools, and even in the organizations in which you work. Commercial and tax-supported facilities and programs now provide a wide range of job opportunities connected with sports. The success of those facilities and programs depends on knowledge about the place and possibilities associated with sports in society – and this is what you receive in a sociology of sport course.

# 1.2 Differences between sociology & 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. ***Psychology*** is the study of behavior in terms of the attributes and processes that exist *inside* individuals. Psychologists 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?”

***Sociology***, on the other hand, is the study of actions and relationships in terms of the social contexts in which people live their lives. Sociologists focus on reality *outside* 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 sports 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 their impact on their motivation and performance. 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.

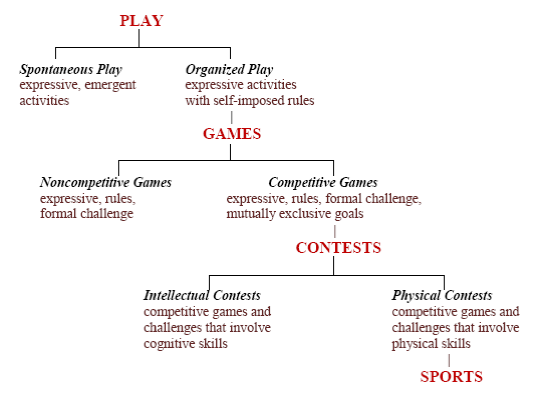
Sociologists, on the other hand, study burnout in connection with the social reality that surrounds adolescent athletes. They focus on the organization of sports programs and the relationships between athletes and other people, including family members, peers, and coaches. Because athletes are influenced 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 can be useful, 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 sports 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.

# 1.3 Play, games, and sports: They’re all related to each other

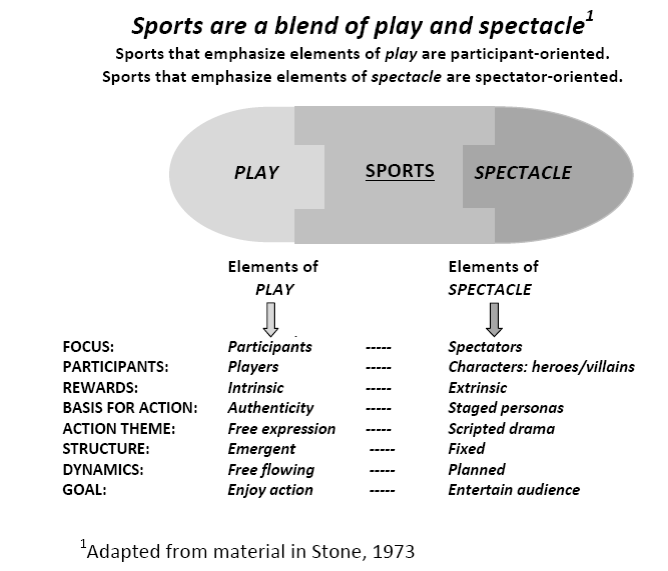
Although often used interchangeably, the terms play, games, and sports are not the same thing, although they are all related to one another. The term ***play*** refers to any unstructured activity. A sporting example of play would be shooting baskets on goal set up in your driveway. The activity has no organizational structure and does not follow any set of rules. ***Games*** are a more organized form of play with a set of rules (usually minimal and self-imposed), and minimal equipment and coaching. Games can be either competitive or non-competitive and often require intellectual skill, physical skill, or both. Imagine you are shooting baskets in your driveway (play) and your friend comes over the play 1-on-1 (game). The two of you likely decide the rules of the game that best fit the circumstances. You may keep score (e.g., first person to 21) but you very likely do not keep records or standings. Finally, ***sports*** are a highly-structured form of competitive games that involve *physical skill*. A universal set of rules is usually followed, scores, records, and standings are often kept, and coaches and officials play a big role. If you and your friend decide you’re tired of just playing 1-on-1 and decide to join a basketball league at the local recreation center, this is a sport. Therefore, all sports are games and all games are a form of play, but not all forms of play are games and not all games are sports.

The relationships between play, games, and sports are fluid and changing. However, some researchers have tried to create illustrations that capture at least part of those relationships. For example, Allen Guttmann (1978) has used research in history and anthropology to create the following diagram to illustrate relationships between play, games, contests, and sports:



As you can see from the diagram, there are two major forms of PLAY—spontaneous and organized. *Organized play* takes the form of GAMES, which can be noncompetitive or competitive. When *games* are competitive, they take the form of intellectual or physical CONTESTS. And *physical contests* are SPORTS according to this approach. This approach shows that the roots of sports are grounded in contests, games, and play, which makes for a nice, clear concept.

An alternative approach (below) depicts SPORTS as a combination of the elements of PLAY and SPECTACLE. However, as sports are commercialized, they tend to emphasize the elements of spectacle more than the elements of play. In extreme cases, the elements of play all but disappear, as in the case of professional wrestling which is so much a spectacle that many people would not identify it as a sport. When this occurs, the emphasis is solely on entertainment and there is little of the unscripted, authentic action that exists in sports.



One of the challenges facing commercial spectator sport today is to preserve enough of the elements of play to avoid becoming a choreographed spectacle that alters the experiences of participants and spectators.

# 1.4. Professional associations in the sociology of sport

Before 1980, very few people studied sports in society. Scholars were not concerned with physical activities and thought that sports were unrelated to important issues in society. However, some sociologists and physical educators in North America and Europe began to think outside the box of their disciplines. They decided that sports should be studied because they were becoming increasingly important activities in many societies. During the last two decades of the twentieth century, the sociology of sport gradually came to be recognized as a legitimate subfield in sociology and physical education/ kinesiology/sport science.

Research and interest in the sociology of sport have increased significantly in recent years. Part of this growth is due to the efforts of scholars in the following professional associations:

1. *The International Sociology of Sport Association (*[*ISSA*](http://issa1965.org/about-issa/welcome-message/)*)* This organization, formed in 1965, meets annually and attracts international scholars. Since 1965 it has sponsored the publication of the *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*. ISSA sponsors annual conferences that attract scholars from many countries worldwide.
2. *The North American Society for the Sociology of Sport (*[*NASSS*](https://nasss.org/)*).* This organization, formed in 1978, has held annual conferences every year since 1980, and it has sponsored the publication of the *Sociology of Sport Journal* since 1984.
3. *European Association for the Sociology of Sport (*[*EASS*](http://www.eass-sportsociology.eu/)*).* This organization was formed in 2001, and holds annual conferences in various cities around Europe.
4. *Asociación Latinoamericana de Estudios Socioculturales del Deporte* (ALESDE). The Latin American Association of Socio-cultural Studies of Sports was formed by Latin American sociologists in 2007 in Guadalajara (Mexico). Its first conference was in 2008, hosted by the Federal University of Paraná in Curitiba, Brazil. Conferences are held every other year.

As you can see, the sociology of sport is now a global discipline. There are well established professional associations in Japan and South Korea, with new associations forming in China and India. The field continues to grow as scholars conduct and publish research that people can use to better understand social life and participate effectively as citizens in their communities and societies.

# 1.5. Basketball: How an idea becomes a sport

As localized forms of physical activities and games become sports, they go through a process of ***institutionalization***, that is, *they become formally organized with official rules and rule enforcement procedures*. Over time, the sport looks much the same from one situation to another, and it remains much the same over time.

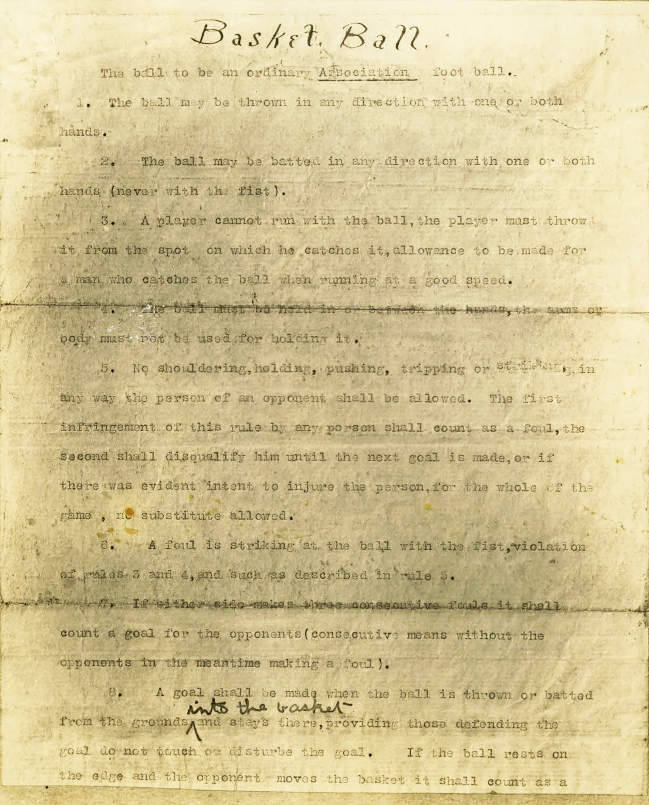
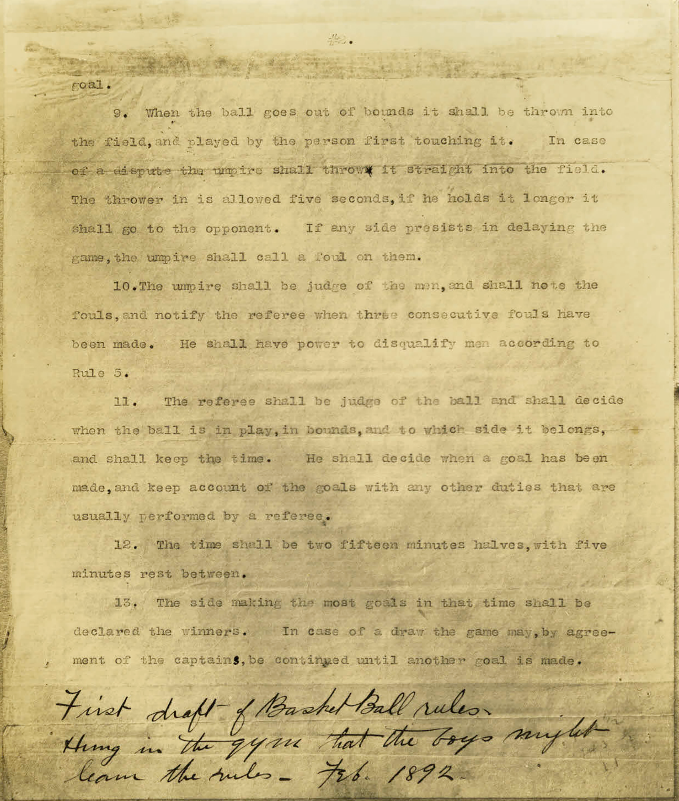
To understand the process of institutionalization, it’s best to look at the histories of particular sports. In this case, we’ll look at the history of basketball to see how institutionalization occurs.

Before the invention of basketball, few people used gyms; gyms were not exciting places to visit. This presented a problem to the supervisors of athletic clubs. During the winter months, their members were bored by indoor exercises such as push-ups, sit-ups, and chin-ups (hardly a surprising fact). Without stimulating indoor activities, club memberships began to dwindle. There was a definite need for a competitive game that could be played inside a gym; the game had to be simple, easily learned, and as interesting as the popular outdoor sports of football and baseball. James Naismith, a 29-year-old Canadian student at the International YMCA Training School in Springfield, Massachusetts, was assigned the task of creating such a game.

Naismith was an un-ordained Presbyterian minister who left his religious studies to work in the newly developing field of athletics. In the summer of 1891, he signed up for a seminar on the psychology of play. One of the concerns of his instructor was the absence of any competitive game to fill the winter months between the end of football season and the start of the track & field and baseball seasons. The seminar continued through the fall with each student trying to invent an indoor activity to meet the program needs of the training school and other YMCAs around the country.

One day, young Naismith went to a faculty meeting and offered suggestions on what physical education instructors might do to improve their courses. His seminar instructor responded by giving him the responsibility of teaching a gym class for two weeks. So, in late November, Naismith found himself with the job of developing a set of activities or a game that would hold the interest of a bunch of bored football players concerned with staying in shape through the winter and having fun at the same time.

For nearly the entire two weeks, Naismith tried various adaptations of grade school games and outdoor adult games. All of his attempts failed; the grade school games were boring and the adult games became so rough that his students experienced more injuries than fun. In a desperate, all-night session before his last class meeting, Naismith outlined a description of what was to later be named basketball. The morning of the class he typed up a set of rules and took them to his skeptical students. After a little pep talk, he was able to convince them to choose sides and try the new game. Although there were no out-of-bounds lines, and they only had an old soccer ball and some peach basket goals, the students were intrigued by the game. Information about the game spread rapidly, and what began as an assignment for Naismith's seminar soon developed into an enjoyable competitive activity; out of the competitive activity emerged the sport of basketball.

**James Naismith’s original typed rules of baseball are housed at** [The DeBruce Center at The University of Kansas](https://debrucecenter.ku.edu/rules)

This is how the process of institutionalization occurred:

* The rules became standardized. Through the established communication system of the YMCA, copies of Naismith's original rules were distributed to all parts of the country. YMCA staff members and athletes throughout the country looked to Springfield for new developments and changes in the game rules.
* Clubs and organizations began to sponsor teams. Although basketball was first played by informal groups, the establishment of permanent teams representing various clubs and organizations came quickly. At first, the games between these teams were arranged by local YMCAs. Then some colleges started playing one another on an informal basis. In 1896, Yale organized the first regular college team to play an official schedule. The next year, the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) sponsored the first basketball tournament, followed in 1898 by the first game in the professional National Basketball League headquartered in New Jersey.
* Rule enforcement was taken over by official regulatory agencies. Regulatory functions were first handled by the people at the Springfield YMCA Training School. But they were quickly taken over by the AAU, followed by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) in 1908, and by a combination of the AAU and the NCAA in 1915. These governing organizations formalized the boundaries of the playing area, the size and height of the basket, the size of the backboard, the size and weight of the ball, the role of officials, and many other aspects of the game.
* The organizational and technical aspects of the game became important. Once it became an official game, basketball took on additional characteristics. It became more rationalized. Offensive and defensive strategies were developed, equipment became crucial to performance and the roles of players and coaches became specialized and well-defined.
* The learning of game skills became formalized. After Naismith invented the game of basketball, it took only 13 years for the first book on technique to be published (*How to Play Basketball* by George Hepbron). Instructions on how to play were taught by YMCA athletic clubs and schools around the country. Teaching experts were soon joined by other experts including coaches, trainers, managers, and more recently, team physicians.
* Spectators became commonplace at games. Spectators appeared in the first year of basketball's existence. Soon they became so common that gyms built after the turn of the century contained seating for those interested in watching.

Basketball was quickly transformed from a simple game into a sport through the process of institutionalization. The reasons for this rapid institutionalization were many. At first, basketball was an activity fitting the needs and interests of athletes and the organizations to which they belonged. When the potential for capturing the interests of players and spectators was seen, the agencies sponsoring teams had additional reasons for promoting a formalized version of the game. Some were interested in financial profits; others, such as high schools and colleges, were interested in promoting their prestige and public images. Basketball was also seen as a mechanism through which students or the members of athletic clubs could be brought together and given something to do during the winter months. All of these things contributed to the motivation needed for basketball to be converted from a game to a sport.

Similar processes of institutionalization are have occurred recently with snowboarding, skateboarding, mixed martial arts, disc golf, Ultimate (Frisbee), BMX, and other previously informal physical activities that people want to organize by establishing rules, standards, and governing organizations. Many of these sports have become so institutionalized (i.e., mainstream) that they are now featured in the Olympic Games.

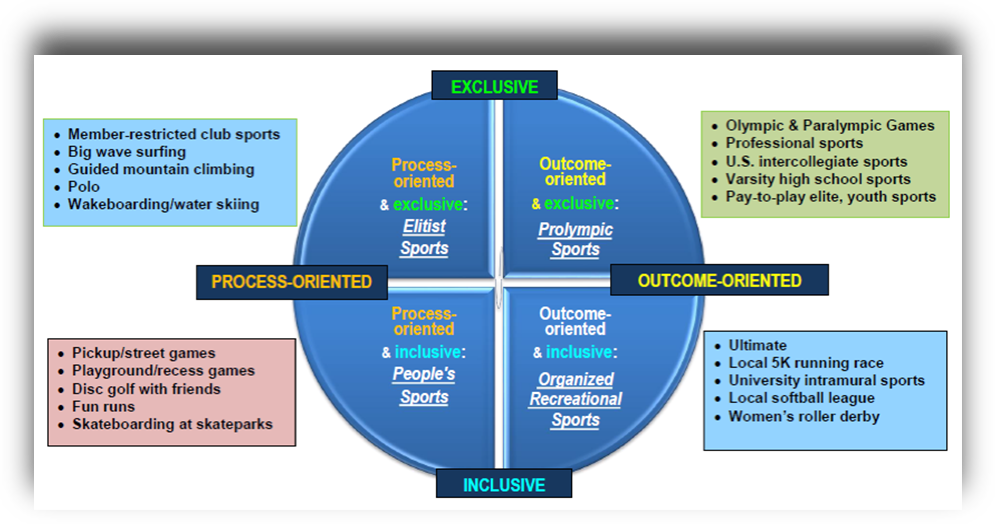
Institutionalization is also a topic of debates about whether it should or should not occur. For example, there were heated debates when the International Olympic Committee designated break-dancing, now named *Breaking*, as a “recognized” Olympic sport that can apply to be on the official summer Olympic program (it will make its debut in the 2024 Games). In many U.S. cities, newspaper editors regularly disagree about the events that should be covered in the sports section and the “lifestyle” sections of the paper. For example, the editors of *USA Today* decided in 2007 to cover the World Series of Poker in the sports section, but it took them years to give coverage in the sports section to synchronized swimming and rhythmic gymnastics, even though they were highly institutionalized sports in many regions of the world.

# 1.6. People’s sports versus Prolympic sports

Sports come in multiple forms and they are not easily described in one definition. It can be useful to distinguish 4 basic sport forms based on where they fall on an exclusion-inclusion axis and process-outcome axis. In Figure 1, these sport forms are identified as *Prolympic Sports*, *Elitist Sports*, *Organized Recreational Sports*, and *People’s Sports*.

***Prolympic sports*** are outcome-oriented and exclusive. See the upper right quadrant in Figure 1. They are the most widely recognized of all sport forms due to media coverage and sponsorships. They are called prolympic because they are organized around a merger of professional and elite amateur sports and they exist primarily as rule-governed, competitive, commercial, spectator sports. They emphasize performance, competitive success, championships, and the interests of governing bodies, sponsoring organizations, and media companies. They are usually revenue-producing and sponsored by private individuals and corporations or by government organizations. Examples include the Olympic & Paralympic Games, professional sports such as the English Premier League and the National Football League, national teams, U.S. intercollegiate and varsity high school sports, and sports clubs that train selected young athletes to compete at elite levels.

***Figure 1. Four sports forms distinguished in terms of the combination of an exclusion—inclusion continuum and a process—outcome continuum.***



***People’s sports***, on the other hand, are process-oriented and inclusive. See the lower left quadrant in Figure 1. They are generally local, community-based activities created and controlled by and for participants. For the most part, they are self-sponsored, sustained through social networks and relatively informal even when they are coordinated through loosely organized “clubs.” Examples include the pickup/street games, playground/recess games, disc golf with friends, fun runs, and skateboarding (street & “park”), among many other activities. Although these sports are important in the everyday lives of many people, they are seldom studied in the sociology of sport. This is unfortunate.

In between prolympic and people’s sports are elitist sports and organized recreational sports. ***Elitist sports*** are process-oriented and exclusive due to cost or a required skills-based certification showing that a person meets high-performance standards. See the upper left quadrant in Figure 1. Polo and big wave surfing are examples.

***Organized recreational sports*** are outcome-oriented and generally inclusive. See the lower right quadrant in Figure 1. Fees may be required for participation and competitive schedules are set by a coordinating organization such as a park and recreation department, a church or other nonprofit organizations, or a fitness club. Examples include school-based intramural leagues, a local softball league, and a 5K running race in which times are recorded and awards are given in age categories.

Most of the research done by sports scientists, including scholars in the sociology of sport, focuses on *prolympic sports*. They are seen as sports that matter. They attract widespread attention and media coverage and are played for high stakes. *People’s sports* are generally seen by researchers as informal activities unique to particular groups or populations and played strictly for fun. They may be important to participants, but seldom do they have meaning or social impact beyond the lives of individual participants. Therefore, they don’t attract the attention of researchers.

***Elitist sports*** have attracted some research attention from sports psychologists and ethnographers who study risk-taking or unique lifestyles associated with certain elitist sports. *Organized recreational sports* have also attracted some research attention because they often involve large numbers of participants, but most people in sports studies don’t see them as important as prolympic sports and the celebrity athletes that play them.

When scholars in the sports studies focus nearly all their attention on prolympic sports, they unwittingly marginalize the other sport forms that often play important roles in the lives of individuals and communities. Overall, it is a mistake to ignore sports that are controlled and played by those of us who use them for social and fitness purposes. We may not identify as athletes but that does not mean that these sport forms are unimportant.

# Key Terms

* Sociology
* Psychology
* Play
* Games
* Sports
* Prolympic sports
* Elitist sports
* Organized recreational sports
* People’s sports