Chapter 8: Social class

# 8.1. Social class and the future of high school sports

Social class has a dramatic impact on sports. For example, at the same time that the wealthy Texas town of Allen, just outside of Dallas, was opening its new $60 million, 18,000-seat stadium built primarily for the boys’ football team, school district administrators in the financially poor, rural Texas town of Premont (150 miles south of San Antonio) announced that to keep the high school open they had to drop the entire sport program to save $150,000 ([Huffington Post](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/01/23/texas-school-sports-ban-p_n_1224155.html) and [NY Times](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/27/education/premont-tex-schools-suspend-sports-to-save-costs.html)). While this was probably less than Allen spent on the toilet fixtures for their new stadium, it meant the end of sport participation for all the varsity athletes in Premont.

About 100 students played on the high school teams in Premont. This meant that they spent about $1,500 per athlete to maintain their program before dropping it. Allen is a Dallas suburb with about 87,000 residents, and the high school easily sells out 8,300 season tickets for football. Reviewing their budget, it was difficult to separate expenses for athletics from expenses for other things. For example, the cost of the stadium was put into a general line item for Capital Projects and was not listed as an expense for athletics. Additionally, booster support is not apparent in the budget (a common practice for well-funded athletic programs). Included in that amount would also be donations in-kind such as video equipment, the coaches' observation tower, etc. Also, pay-to-play fee money may be in a revenue category unrelated to sports.

As far as could be determined, Allen High School spends about $3 million per year on athletics – about 20 times more than Premont sent. But there were more sports and more athletes at Allen, a school with over 5,300 students. It would have been appropriate to have two high schools for that many students, but that would involve dividing the best athletes between them and taking each school out of contention for state championships. Neither parents nor administrators wanted to do that, so they retained one school with an abundance of skilled athletes and strong athletic teams. In fact, in 2013, Allen’s football team was 16-0 and won its second straight Class 5A Division I state championship.

The Allen school fields 18 varsity teams, including its cheerleading and dance teams, and have recently won state championships in girls’ golf (3 times since 2008), boys’ wrestling (4 times since 2008), boys’ hockey (twice since 2006), and girls’ bowling. The school’s marching band has 750 members.

The contrast between the high schools in Allen and Premont is dramatic, but it typifies the growing gap between the haves and have-nots in school sports in the United States. The gap looks even wider when it is seen that no athletic scholarships go to students from Premont, many of whom come from low-income families, whereas many scholarships are awarded to Allen athletes, many of whom come from relatively well-to-do families. In this way, sports increase the inequality gap that exists in local school districts.

This pattern became especially clear when you compare some of the high profile private high schools in Colorado with their public-school counterparts. When private schools recruit students from relatively wealthy families from an entire metro region, they can field athletic teams that often dominate teams from public schools that have a more socio-economically diverse student body that comes from a single geographical area.

The private schools also attract boosters who help to provide athletic teams with what they need to recruit, train, and win. It has been impossible to access the athletic budgets for these schools (because they are private, they do not have to disclose financial information to the public), but they are likely greater than the budgets for public schools, most of which have experienced serious budget cuts since 2000. In this way, social class differences become embedded in high school sport programs and they carry over into college programs through scholarships that go increasingly to the young people who have access to the resources needed to develop top sport skills.

# 8.2. Home countries of the 100 highest-paid athletes

Global inequalities are manifested in many ways. As you look through the photos of athletes in the Forbes list of the 100 highest-paid athletes in 2019, you’ll notice that most were born in the United States and played sports there. The table below classifies the athletes on the list by their home countries.

As you can see, there is a perfect correlation between per capita gross domestic product (GDP) and the number of athletes on the list. The U.S., where per capita GDP is $65,100, placed 62 athletes on the list. At the same time, the 54 nations of Africa, with a collective per capita GDP of $1,930, placed 4 athletes on the list.

It takes financial resources to support professional sports and supply the athletes that make top salaries in those sports. As financial resources decline so do the number of athletes making large salaries.

The takeaway point here is that sports may offer lucrative opportunities to a few individuals, but opportunities are most available to those in the nations with the most wealth. Athletic skills are important, but where you are born and learn to play sports is crucial when it comes to making sense of the Forbes list of the highest-paid athletes in the world.

By the way, Serena Williams from the United States was the only woman on the list – a clear example of how gender and financial resources intersect.

**Home nations/continents on the Forbes list of 100 highest-paid athletes in 2019.**

| **Nation/**  **continent** | **Total Population** | **Nominal GDP** | **Nominal Per Capita GDP\*** | **# of athletes**  **on the list** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| World | 7.7 billion | $87.3 trillion | $11,600 | 100 |
| USA | 334 million | $19.4 trillion | $65,100 | 62 |
| Europe | 839 million | $21.8 trillion | $29,400 | 20 |
| Latin America & Caribbean | 664 million | $3.6 trillion | $8,400 | 10 |
| Asia | 4.6 billion | $31.6 trillion | $7,400 | 5 |
| Africa (54 nations) | 1.1 billion | $2.5 trillion | $1,930 | 2 |
| New Zealand | 4.8 million | $52 billion | $42,100 | 1 |

\* *This is the market value of a country's goods and services divided by its population*

Source: International Monetary Fund

# 8.3. Year-round sport participation and future career options

The changes that have occurred in high-performance sports over the past generation now serve as a double-edged sword in connection with social mobility and sports. On the one hand, the influx of money into certain sports has created a situation where at least some athletes earn enough money during their active careers to support a decent lifestyle for most of their lives. On the other hand, to become a high-performance athlete today requires such extreme, year-round dedication to training and competition that there is no time to develop other skills or relationships and identities outside of a particular sport culture.

This means that for those athletes who are not among the most highly paid professionals, retirement from a career seldom leads into a secondary career. Local name recognition may lead to some opportunities, but the former athletes seldom have the skills and experiences that enable them to take advantage of those opportunities.

Scholars in the sociology of sport have not studied this issue extensively and we don’t know much about the ways that former elite athletes handle this transition. In some cases, their sports careers have taken them away from their home towns or home countries. This leaves them with little cultural capital if they stay where they retire, and if they return home, they may have little social capital because they have not been able to nurture relationships with people there.

High-performance athletes in most countries other than the United States often must drop out of school or give their education a very low priority if they wish to continue training and competing. There are very few or no athletic scholarships to universities, and it is difficult for former athletes who are in their late-20s or early-30s to find opportunities to return to school and obtain degrees and experiences that would help them to find satisfying post-sport careers.

Being an athlete in certain sports in the United States offers opportunities that few athletes have around the world. This is the reason why so many 17-year-old to 20-year-old athletes from other countries dream of obtaining a scholarship to a university in the United States. Such a scholarship allows them to continue their studies at the same time that they train and compete at a high level. As a result, many U.S. college athletes who competed in the Summer Olympic Games in 2016 and 2020 were members of national teams other than the U.S. team. For example, in 2016 there were 1,018 incoming, current, and former NCAA athletes competing in the Rio Games. They represented the not only the United States but 106 other countries. (see [NCAA](https://www.ncaa.com/news/ncaa/article/2016-07-28/2016-rio-olympics-ncaa-olympic-student-athletes-school)).

At this point, without good research on the life course of athletes, it is difficult to make definitive statements about sports and social mobility.

# 8.4. Professional football players and poverty rates by state

Although these data are from 2017, they raise interesting issues about the future of football in the United States. As shown in the table below, an analysis of the 2017 NFL rosters suggests a relationship between poverty and playing professional football. The top five states for producing NFL players also rank among the top 14 states for poverty rates among children under 18-years old.

The child poverty rate in the United States for 2017 was 16 percent, whereas the rates for the five states producing the most NFL players were 20.7 to 28 percent. These data suggest that certain sports recruit athletes who are willing to put their bodies in harm’s way because they perceive few opportunities in other occupational spheres. The history of boxing in the United States and worldwide indicates that poverty increases the willingness to jeopardize one’s body in the quest for economic success.

**Ratios of NFL players from states with high child poverty rates**

| **State** | **Total NFL**  **players\*** | **Ratio~** | **Child poverty**  **rate, 2017 (%)^** | **Child poverty**  **rate rank^** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Florida | 201 | 1 in 4,095 | 20.7 | 36 |
| Georgia | 114 | 1 in 4,132 | 21 | 39 |
| South Carolina | 51 | 1 in 4,745 | 22.6 | 45 |
| Alabama | 55 | 1 in 4,818 | 24.6 | 46 |
| Louisiana | 60 | 1 in 5,017 | 28 | 50 |

\* Based on opening week NFL rosters

~ This ratio is based on birth estimates from the Census Bureau for April 1990 to July 1994. Children born then would be prime NFL age now, ages 23 to 27. The ratio is used as a ranking tool representative of a typical number of births for each state. <https://www.cleveland.com/datacentral/2017/09/florida_georgia_lead_new_ranki.html>

^ Children’s Defense Fund. 2018. Child poverty in America, 2017.

[*https://www.cleveland.com/datacentral/2017/09/florida\_georgia\_lead\_new\_ranki.html*](https://www.cleveland.com/datacentral/2017/09/florida_georgia_lead_new_ranki.html)

Of course, more research is needed on this issue. But as we learn more about the dangers of playing college and professional football, it may be that players will come increasingly from regions with relatively high child poverty rates. If this is the case, will football in the future consist of players from poverty and ethnic minority backgrounds entertaining relatively wealthy white spectators as they put their bodies on the line in a manner reminiscent of gladiatorial contests in ancient Rome?

# 8.5. The World Cup and the Olympics: Who benefits in Brazil?

Brazil was awarded the 2014 World Cup in 2007. Rio de Janeiro was awarded the 2016 Olympic Games in 2009. In each case, about 80% of the people of Brazil celebrated. This would be their first-ever opportunity to showcase their country and its culture to the rest of the world on the two biggest media stages in existence.

Brazil in 2007 and 2009 was classified as one of the four BRIC countries. Russia, India, and China were the other three. All were developing, recently industrialized, and rapidly growing economies that were pushing global growth.

Investors predicted that the expansion of the BRIC economies would continue for the foreseeable future. Brazil looked especially attractive because its policies were focused on social as well as economic development. Hosting the World Cup and the Olympics looked like a smart move – one that would produce benefits for everyone.

But economic predictions during good times often are overly optimistic. Brazil’s economy cooled in late-2011. Inflation hit Brazilians hard. Money was tight. But controlling money related to hosting the World Cup and the Olympics was difficult. Commitments had been made, global expectations were high, and there was no alternative.

As estimated expenses for the two events began to rise – from less than $2 billion to about $12 billion for the World Cup, and $ 13.2 billion for the Olympics – people in Brazil took to the streets in protest.



The nation’s public schools operated only for half days, hospitals were so crowded that people were dying on the steps waiting to be admitted, social services were being cut, bus fares were raised, and millions of dollars were being lost to corruption as the projects were being built.

The protesters stated their feelings and declared that “There will be no World Cup.” They fought with police that tried to disperse them. Public support for the World Cup fell from 80 percent to less than 50 percent with the majority of people agreeing that the Cup would damage the economy rather than advance it. The World Cup and the Olympics were initially seen as an opportunity for Brazil to tell the story of itself to the rest of the world. But it lost control of the story’s details as demonstrators told their stories.

One of the stories told by the demonstrators is that people in low-income areas of the city are being relocated and dislocated so that the city could sell their land at a bargain price to developers who would build high rent housing for wealthy people and reap massive profits in the process (see map below). This was part of a gentrification plan that would turn Rio into a “world-class city” where the flow of capital takes priority over people.

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***Each of the house icons in this partial map of Rio represents a low-income housing area or complex that will interfere with plans being made for the Olympics. In many of these areas, people resisted relocation and made their dissatisfaction known during the World Cup and the Olympic and Paralympic Games, although this was not shown in the media coverage of these events.***

When people in a low-income area close to the Maracana, the premier stadium in Rio, refused to leave their homes, a highway and wall were built to visually separate them from the stadium area. Additionally, the heavily used public swimming pool and track next to the stadium were bulldozed to make room for VIP parking during the Olympic events. The stadium was redesigned so the wealthy people attending the events would not see the low-income residential areas.

Measures of “quality of life” in Rio declined after the Olympics due to global economic changes and the massive mega-event debt taken on with the World Cup and the Olympic and Paralympic Games. The lives of thousands of people were disrupted as they were pushed to the outskirts of the city where they wouldn’t be seen by those who could afford the upscale housing built in the place of neighborhoods that housed working-class people.

The rhetoric about legacies for the common good promised new public sports and recreation facilities that would bring Brazilians together and create new forms of social integration. But the pressure to complete venues for the mega-events combined with cost overruns and budget depletions undermined those legacies.

The returns on billions of dollars of public money invested in the events brought payoffs, but they were enjoyed primarily by the people and corporations that had access to the flow of capital generated by the events. Many of those who benefitted were not even from Brazil. This is because the scale of sport mega-events like the World Cup and the Olympic Games requires that projects be managed by outsiders with experiences and resources not possessed by insiders. Therefore, many benefits go to those who will take them elsewhere.

Rio had been down this road before. In 2007 the city hosted the Pan American Games. When the original bid was presented in 2002, the estimated costs for the event were $207 million, but the final cost was reported to be $1.9billion – an increase of 793%. The government justified this cost overrun by arguing that there had been changes in the design of stadiums and sports arenas so that they would meet IOC requirements and better position Rio in the bidding to host the Olympic and Paralympic Games in 2016. Despite this massive investment with public money – the cost of preparing for the mega-event in 2007 was higher than the combined expenditures for housing, health, and education in the Rio city budget – most of the venues from 2007 had to be rebuilt or renovated to meet IOC requirements for the 2016 Games.

Success in a mega-event creates a combination of pride, euphoria, and expectations for the future – a post-event “feel-good factor” that officials for elite sport organizations exploit to increase public and private funding. People in the region of Rio de Janeiro have not had opportunities to participate in the sports they witnessed during the Olympic and Paralympic Games. Many of the venues are no longer being properly maintained due to a lack of funds and the people in the region will be paying for them long after they are no longer usable. This legacy fits with the market-based model of development used in connection with sport mega-events.

One of the cruel ironies associated with this is that the public relations and image control experts who follow FIFA and the IOC from one debt-plagued host city to another create narratives that the media use to praise those organizations as progressive global actors contributing to the development of host cities and their populations.

At the same time, powerful corporations and individuals – mostly from the Northern Hemisphere – expand their capital markets as they present themselves as progressive global actors coming to the rescue of developing nations selected to host the events. As they intervene, they stress a neoliberal ideology that promotes personal responsibility, deregulation, privatization, and a free-market ethic that undermines efforts to eliminate systemic inequities, empower previously marginalized populations, and establish security, peace, and social justice for local populations.

In summary, there were benefits associated with the World Cup and the Olympic and Paralympic Games in Brazil, but they were enjoyed by a select few that understood the way capital flows in connection with mega-events and were positioned to exploit it. For everyone else, there is a big debt to pay.