The Evolution of the Social Functions of Sports & the Advent of Extreme Sports

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Background Research Paper

Introduction

Some play sports for exercise, some to make friends. Some seek fame and fortune through sport, while others simply want a break from the pressures of everyday life. Many will always dream to be the next sporting legend, remembered for their athletic abilities, breathtaking moments of glory, or strategy and ingenuity.

Regardless of the motives, sports play a pivotal role in society. Sports' news exposure, presence in pop culture, integration into almost every social institution, high number of participants and spectators, and the vast financial expenditures paid to play and watch, evidence its impact (Leonard, 1993). Odell says, "When the news worldwide is full of human atrocities and tragedies, sports heroes can remind us all of the spark of greatness within each of us" (1994, p239). Professional surfer Shaun Tomson says his father always taught him "that sports could bring people together, that a forum like the Olympics could and should rise above the politics of individual nations" (Tomson & Moser, 2006, p. 30).

Like most aspects of society, sports are not an illogical construct but rather a purposeful social invention to satisfy human needs. The needs satisfied by sport have changed along with the societies where sports have evolved correspondingly to better fulfill their purpose.

Ancient societies developed sport for practical tasks linked to survival, such as military training. Industrial workers engaged in sport to cope with the pains of urbanization and harsh working conditions, while their employers and rulers encouraged sports as a means of social control. Today sports act as a competitive outlet and a form of exercise in an increasingly technological world. In a way, sports appear to act as an aid in survival throughout history, be it physical, religious or psychological survival (e.g., coping or expression).

The recent trend of extreme sports, however, marks a change in sporting ideology and the needs sport fulfills in modern day. Why have extreme sports emerged and what needs do they serve?

This paper serves to follow the evolution of the social functions of sports from their roots to modern day, focusing on the emergence of extreme sports. The paper also identifies the human needs filled by extreme sports and how such needs caused the invention of extreme sports.

A sport is…

To understand the purpose of sports in our society, one must first understand what a sport is. Sports can be games, recreation or both. Games are activities focused on achieving a given objective within a set of rules that limit the permissible ways to achieve this goal (Bale, 1989). Sports can be certain types of games involving physical challenge to accomplish a physical objective (Leonard, 1993). But sports may also be recreational. Recreation is any activity pursued voluntarily during one's leisure time for intrinsic rewards (Bale, 1989). Nearly any sport may be done for recreation.

Sports may be both recreation and games, such as friends meeting in a park to play pickup basketball, in which case the activity is recreational but there is still a goal of winning. However, not all sporting games are recreational, such as professional or collegiate sports, in which a seriousness to win may easily trump the fun. Not all recreational sports need to be games, either. Martial arts, running, and bicycling can be games (e.g., races or tournaments), but these sports are commonly devoid of competition, unless it is against oneself. Yoga and tai chi, on the other hand, reject competition completely (Bale, 1989).

A sport, then, amounts to any voluntarily undertaken physical activity focused on completing a given set of physical objectives, played either as a game or for recreation.

Ancient Sport

Knowing what a sport is, why would humans engage in such frivolous behavior? Ancient sport was far from frivolous, performed not for fun, but as an aid in survival. Hunting and fishing evidence the survival functionality of ancient sport, since their performance had a direct utility in garnering food. Primitive man probably used contests of physical ability in leadership and mate selection, hunting preparation, and training to defend themselves and their territory (Kyle, 2007). Religion also linked sport to survival. Traditional indigenous African and Latin American sports were commonly played for their symbolism in worshiping a higher power in hopes of ensuring fertility and a successful harvest (Crego, 2003).

Warfare was a major component of survival in ancient times, so sports complemented military training, "(a)t a time when the threat of war was omnipresent, and when the essential vehicle of battle was the male body and what it could wield or propel, it is not surprising that sports closely resembled actual war and vice versa" (Sugden and Tomlinson, 2000, p. 309). Primitive Chinese peoples engaged in archery and equestrianism, while the Egyptians ran, wrestled and boxed, and much exercise in Rome such as running, jumping, wrestling and hunting was closely linked to military training (Crowther, 2007). In feudal times, knights used sports to train for war during peacetime while peasants prepared themselves for battle in the lord's army by hunting, wrestling, running, and mastering weapons of war (e.g., swordsmanship and archery) (Carter, 1992).

So important was the military-sport link, Crowther (2007) explains, that the Greeks had a tradition of tearing down part of a city wall for a returning Olympic victor, symbolizing a protector of the city was present. Many professional athletes, such as the famous charioteer Porphyrius, even had their careers interrupted for military service. Accordingly, many Greeks shunned sport not

related to warfare, as did Euripedes, who argued that discus throwers were little use in repelling an enemy invasion (Crowther, 2007).

Beyond basic survival, sport served other utilitarian aims in ancient societies. In China, mailmen and couriers were trained in long-distance running since these jobs were done on foot (Crowther, 2007). Inhabitants of cold climates long used skiing and skating as transportation, just as swimming, diving, boating and canoeing were used in Oceania (Crego, 2003).

Sport for its own sake

Over time, people began to play sport for exercise and its mental benefits rather than purely for utilitarian uses. Since the Greeks sought arête (excellence) in all aspects of life, sport was an integral part of being a well-rounded individual (Crowther, 2007). The Greeks originally built gymnasiums as a place for their middle-class to train for warfare, but Crowther says these gymnasiums were so prevalent by the 8th century B.C.E. that athletics became an end in itself. Similarly, Roman intellectuals exercised the body to aid the mind, while the Chinese combined philosophy, breathing techniques, and imitating animal movements to foster general health and fitness. But it was likely the natives of Oceania who first began engaging in sports just for fun, with sports such as surfing and holua, sledding on dry land (Crego, 2003).

Force to finesse

The largest shift in pre-modern sport was during the transition from medieval times to the Renaissance, in which sport experienced a shift in emphasis from brute force to finesse, in congruence with the civilizing process occurring simultaneously (Guttman, 2000). The Renaissance was a rebirth of art, skill, and human ability in society as a whole, and the shift in sport reflected this ideological shift.

The Industrial Revolution

Despite the benefits of sport for survival, military training, exercise, and physical development, sport was not a common recreational activity for humans until the Industrial Revolution. In fact, the Industrial Revolution was the major catalyst of sporting development (Bale, 1989), heralding the three social processes most influential in building modern sport: urbanization, industrialization and mass-communication (Leonard, 1993).

Coping with urbanization

During the American Revolution (1775-1783), only five percent of Americans lived in urban environments, but this number reached 35 percent by 1890 and 75 percent by 1990 (Leonard, 1993). As a result of the technological improvements of the Agricultural Revolution, many agricultural jobs were mechanized. People began moving to cities seeking work, fueling the Industrial Revolution with a sizable workforce.

Urbanization had a big impact on sports in several ways. First, sports gave urbanites a way to make friends. Since people were migrating to urban environments, Riess (1989) explains:

> Highly individualistic and transient urbanites needed to develop social and cultural ties to root themselves, especially in friendless cities where neighbors did not know, or even want to know, each other—circumstances far different than in close-knit rural villages. Thus, in their search for convivial, like-minded friends, urbanites became inveterate joiners of structured voluntary organizations (p. 14).

Some of these organizations were sporting fraternities focused on playing and watching sports.

Second, sports provided a release from the confines of the city. Playing sports and watching other sports heroes can serve as a temporary escape from an unchallenging or unsatisfying work life (Odell, 1994). An athletic revival occurred in the post-American Civil War period because sedentary "brain work" occupations became more common in cities and physical activity could reverse the negative effects of this lifestyle (Hoffman and Bailey, 1991). Businessmen and workers were encouraged to exercise and play sports to keep physically and mentally fit (Riess, 1989), an ideology

that persists today, with companies reimbursing gym memberships and league play fees as an employee benefit. Social reformers during the Industrial Revolution also saw athletics as socially useful in promoting public health, character and morality, suggesting sports as a positive solution to the developing urban pathology of materialism, artificiality and immorality (Riess, 1989).

Third, the concentrated population allowed athletes to train together and learn from each other's methods. It is more than a coincidence, as Riess (1989) points out, that nearly all contemporary major sports evolved or were invented in the city, and most first-class athletes grew up and trained in the city. The city was where sport became rationalized, specialized, organized, commercialized, and professionalized.

Industrialization's Workforce

Industrialization also caused sports to develop in two key ways: as a tool in mass-producing a mass-production workforce and via technology advancements.

An industrial workforce needs to be several things: it must be physically able to perform strenuous and exhaustive jobs, mentally able to perform tedious and repetitive tasks, and the labor must be consistent enough to ensure work will not be delayed. Guttman (2000, p. 255) illustrates how Marxist theorists explain modern sports as an "inevitable consequence of capitalistic development" meant to perpetuate a capitalistic class structure, pointing to the fact that England was the birthplace of both industrial capitalism and modern sports as evidence. Guttman elaborates:

> (I)ndustrial capitalism requires a labor force that is physically healthy, manually dexterous, submissive to temporal and spatial requirements of assembly-line work, and politically docile. The muscular exertion and the skills associated with sports participation are alleged to contribute to worker's health and manual dexterity; the need to accept the rules of the game socializes factory hands to routinized work; and the entertainment afforded by sports spectacles diverts the exploited workforce from political action. (p. 255).

Guttman questions modern sports' overall health benefits since fierce competition results in more injury, but agrees that modern sports may work as social control to acclimate workers to a rigid rule structure and divert uprising by creating a submissive attitude toward authority.

On the individual level, Eitzen suggests, "sport serves as both a temporary escape from the problems of world politics and as a safety valve for releasing tensions that might otherwise be directed toward disrupting and changing the existing power relationships on society" (2000, p. 372-3).

Advancement of Technology

Industrialization itself was the rise of the machine, the dawn of modern technology. Various domains of technological improvements led to sporting advances, especially in the realms of transportation, the creation of leisure time, scientifically engineering sport, and mass communication.

Though urbanization contributed to sporting growth, Riess (1989) explains that the growing physical size of cities hurt opportunities for sport because the countryside became more distant as wells as time-consuming and expensive to reach. Plus much public open space in the city disappeared with a major influx of people. These factors severely limited local sporting options, especially for the poor. Industrialization somewhat corrected its own problem in this arena with the creation of public mass transportation and an increased availability of automobiles, both of which made the countryside more accessible and as a result many sports more readily available (Bale, 1989)

The technological advances of industrialization are also credited with the creation of leisure time. Technology has automated so many daily tasks that many humans now have spare time to divert their attention away from survival-based activities toward the pursuit of other tasks or hobbies. Some social theorists, such as Ben Franklin, have advocated sport as a constructive use of leisure (Leonard, 1993). Leonard asserts that industrialization has contributed to an upsurge of sport because of this newfound leisure time combined with overall increased affluence.

Technology also invented new sports. Inventions such as the bicycle are an ironic paradox, a technologically produced product that facilitates individual escape from the industrialized world. As

Riess elaborates, "It was the perfect leisure sport, especially for businessmen, who needed a respite from the office that would provide exercise, fresh air, visions of beauty, and peace of mind, in the shortest amount of time" (1989, p. 65).

Alongside technology came science. Many facets of sports were engineered toward better performance, including sports equipment, sporting facilities and even the athletes themselves through exercise physiology (Guttman, 2000). Bale (1989) says modern sports may have emerged as a reaction to the machine but have become increasingly machine-like.

Science and technology gained the ability to measure distances and times with increased precision (e.g., the tape measure and stop watch), facilitating a movement towards quantification in sports that would have previously been impossible. The quantification trend also spawned a movement to gauge success using points systems (Guttman, 2000). Other scientifically produced technology indirectly benefited sports; for example the invention of the incandescent light bulb facilitated sports to be played indoors and at night (Leonard, 1993).

Technology also enhanced mass communication. The radio permitted the expeditious transfer of information across vast distances to many demographics, exposing listeners to new sports and keeping fans up to date. The invention of the photographic camera, which in turn led to television and motion picture camera, even allowed sports to be seen. The radio and television are sometimes seen today as the lifeblood of sport (Leonard, 1993).

Mass communication advances have also caused a globalization of sport. Globalization is evidenced by sports symbols such as Michael Jordan's image being understood worldwide (Wertheim, 2004) and the spread of soccer to the United States, while American football has spread to England (Whannel, 2000). The National Basketball Association is the sports league with the largest international television spectatorship, broadcasting the 2004 NBA finals to 205 countries in 42 languages (Wertheim, 2004.).

Sports typically move from advanced to advancing countries and commonly indicate a neighborhood effect in which a sport is more likely to spread to places nearby (Bale, 1989). Since the Internet has reduced the world to one giant neighborhood differentiated by technological access and acuity rather than physical proximity, possibly future sports will spread through hyperspace proximity instead of physical adjacency.

Current Sportscape

Technology has allowed increasingly precise quantification of sports, enhanced mass communication and created countless new sports. As Guttman explains, "(t)hroughout the 20th century, modern sports have experienced an acceleration of change without a fundamental shift in direction" (2000, p. 253).

Has technology made life too easy?

Technology has surely made life easier, but has it made life too easy? Georges Hebert, a French sports theorist, believed modern technological conveniences such as elevators are debilitating and that people have grown weak and unhealthy in the modern day due to technology's conveniences. Hebert's motto, "be strong to be useful," suggested humans need to better their physical conditions to be better citizens (Wilkinson, 2007). Hebert's ideologies led him to advocate the "Natural Method of Physical Culture", a cross-training methodology favoring exercise replicating the survival activities of primitive and less civilized man over modern, "artificialized" exercise (Urban Freeflow, 2007).

Hebert's ideology may seem radical, but compared to the rugged American farmers and pioneers of years past, modern Americans are physically inadequate (Riess, 1989). The United States Surgeon General's Report on Physical Activity and Health in 1996 heralds that until the 20th century

physical activity was a large part of Americans' jobs or subsistence, but now few jobs require physical labor. The report identifies the age in which we live as the major barrier to physical activity, since modern technology has reduced energy expenditure via motorized transport, desk jobs, and cities and towns being built with the assumption of motorized transport rather than walking (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1996). Other factors, such as emphasis on test scores, parents fearful of their children's abduction or safety in high-traffic areas, and busy parents sticking their kids into after-school programs, may also deter American youth from physical activity (Layden, 2004).

Humans are meant to be active, not sedentary animals. Exercise can be extremely beneficial to humans, slowing down the aging process (Bale, 1989), and is advocated as an adjunct to both psychological and medical therapy (Leonard, 1993). The U.S. Surgeon General's Report arrives at several conclusions regarding exercise: all people can benefit from regular exercise; most Americans can improve their physical and mental health through a moderate increase in daily activity; greater increases generally lead to increased health benefits; and regular physical activity reduces the risks of many health conditions – an estimated 200,000-300,000 Americans die annually from inactivity. At the time of the report, the Surgeon General deemed physical exercise so important in America's public health that promoting exercise became one of the department's chief health objectives, alongside advocating proper nutrition, wearing seat belts and deterring tobacco use (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1996).

Beyond the physical benefits, being fit can be an instrument to social acceptance in a culture obsessed with appearance, weight and being slim. One's physical appearance may consciously or unconsciously influence business, romantic, and other social relationships in terms of both the confidence and security level of the individual and their impression upon others.

Sports are an excellent method of exercise, offering many physical and mental benefits. Amongst all the differences in sports over time, the cross-cultural consensus is that "sport is good for you" (Waddington, 2000, p. 408).

The new hobbies

Since technology created leisure time, in theory, people should have more time to exercise. However, leisure time is not always used for sport or physical activity. Sedentary hobbies such as watching television, video games, and surfing the Internet have emerged as popular activities. Second only to sleeping, kids spent the greatest amount of any free time watching television in 1996 – by high school graduation, the average child had spent 15,000-18,000 hours watching television while only 12,000 in school (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1996).

Many may find no need to actually *do* sports because they can feel a part of the sporting experience as spectators, watching sports media and telecasts, or playing fantasy sports and video games. Barmack and Handelman describe the intensity in managing fantasy football teams: "They take time and require deep spiritual commitment. A fantasy football fanatic must be completely dedicated to the season. There's no half-stepping or wavering. You're either all-in or you're out" (2006, p. 1). Point-of-view (first-person perspective) videography even places viewers in the athlete's shoes so the audience may feel they have experienced a sport without actually doing it. Television is commonly cast into the role of villain of sports for turning people into passive spectators instead of active participants (Leonard, 1993). But a lazy, apathetic American culture is just as likely the culprit in causing television media to evolve into what it has become.

When people do engage in sports, various annoyances may make the sporting experience not worth it. Take skiing, for instance, often including a lengthy – and potentially snowy and dangerous – travel to access ski resorts; expensive lift tickets/gear/food/lodging; long lift lines; and cold,

snowy weather. Many may find the skiing experience to be incredible, but remembering the aggravations may deter the skier from even attempting a day on the mountain.

Exercise as a whole has lost its fun factor for many people. It has become just another task to fit into a busy day; one more chore, complete with responsibilities such as bringing extra workout clothes and maintaining a fitness routine. Since exercise has shifted from being a by-product of work and survival into a leisure-time activity, it comes at the cost of other leisure activities, meaning less time spent with family and friends or pursuing other interests. Further, the mechanization of exercise (e.g., treadmills and weight-training machines) can easily make exercise a boring and monotonous activity, not to mention the financial costs to join gyms/sports leagues or buy equipment. These costs may be too great, and people may sour on exercise completely – especially for those who are only interested in exercise for its extrinsic rewards of thinness or "getting buff," quitting if they do not see immediate results.

Sports are supposed to be fun?

Guttman (2000) says capitalism and modern sport are linked in their competitive nature, weighing success by achievement. This competitive trend termed "Olympism" emphasizes "quicker, higher, stronger" and may be a reflection of modern Western society (Maguire, 2000, p. 359). Leonard (1993) suggests that some people compete in sports simply because so many structures in our society (e.g., the business world, academics, and dating) are set up competitively. Scott and Edwards (as cited in Sugden & Tomlinson, 2000, p. 314) consider the whole American system of sports to be "a microcosm of modern capitalist society," in which sports illustrate an ongoing struggle for power, success and notoriety.

Though some want to compete in sport, the ultra-competitive nature of modern sports also acts as another deterrent of sport because the play becomes about achievement rather than fun. "The goal of competition is enhancement of the position of one competitor at the expense of

others," suggests Simon (1985, p. 19), where "competitors are seen as mere obstacles to be overcome, rather than as fellow participants and persons" (p. 27). Simon asserts that competition entails a quest to meet a challenge without necessarily having any concern for self-improvement. The ideals of the amateur (one who loves what one does) or the dilettante (one who enjoys an activity), which were previously admirable traits, have become derogatory terms because achievement and quality of performance have come to be valued over the quality of the experience itself (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

But can competitiveness be avoided? Kyle (2007) reminds us that competitiveness is an instinctual human trait in survival and propagation. Crego (2003) contends that the undercurrent of competitiveness in modern sport derived from Britain's competitive capitalistic culture during the Industrial Revolution. England's world influence during the 18th and 19th centuries led to the spread of its economic and political systems, as well as its lifestyles, including sport methodologies. The British were the first to emphasize the concept of victory or defeat in sports over the aspect of play, and exported this sporting ideology along with their sports (Crego, 2003).

Competition brings pressure to achieve, which can cause people, especially children, severe emotional stress due to fear and anxiety about game outcomes and critiques of their performance (Leonard, 1993). Wolff and Menez (2003) identify a disturbing trend in American youth: many kids at age 10 are pressured – primarily by parents and coaches – to specialize in one sport in order to excel at it. Age 10 is when kids "move from the romantic 'having fun' stage to the technical 'getting better' stage," (para. 10) but premature specialization can quash the possibility of discovering a true natural expertise or turn kids off to sports altogether. Wolff and Menez assert that having fun is the top reason most 10-years olds play sports but pressure is so high that almost one-third of those active in sports at age 10 quit by age 13.

Specialization is not limited to 10-year-olds. The high-school three-sport star, a common practice in post-World War II America, has also become a rarity in today's high school sports (Wolff, 2004b). Kids spend a greater proportion of time practicing than actually playing, and many high school athletes often pursue sports that may result in a college scholarship rather than pursue their true passions (Wolff, 2004a).

Competition in youth sports is so fierce that academies have sprung up, such as the IMG academies in Bradenton, FL. In such schools, King (2002) reports, schooling is fit in around sports training to give young people the optimal chance of being nurtured into professional athletes. Not only do these academies cost between $25,000 and $75,000 a year, but:

> "The surprising truth about IMG academies is that the vast majority of students, while athletic and motivated, lack the extraordinary natural ability that stamps them as potential pros. When you get down to it, the primary requirement for admission is financial ability, not athletic ability" (para. 22).

King asserts that for many parents, delusions about their children's ability levels justify paying the high tuition costs.

Parental delusions may be a result of parents living vicariously through their children. Many parents want to know if their 10-year-old has a future in a sport or if she is *wasting* her time (Wolff and Menez, 2003). But this is not a new concept; a popular proverb of feudal times was, "He who cannot achieve knighthood at puberty will never do it, or only with great difficulty at a more advanced age" (Carter, 1992, p. 30).

The advent of extreme sports

Two major trends in sport indicate that a change lies on the horizon. A green tendency, moving sports from special sporting environments back into the open air (e.g., skiing and running) and a neutralization movement, rejecting competition (e.g., yoga and backpacking) have emerged (Bale, 1989). Members of the new sporting revolution participate in these activities for the

experience itself, seeking to enjoy physical activity, making friends, enjoying fresh air and an outlet from work (Simon, 1985).

A sizeable category of emerging sports partially exhibiting some neutralization and green tendencies is extreme sports. Extreme athletes play these sports at their own pace, typically outdoors in an atypical modern sporting environment. While extreme sports commonly feature the Olympic ideals of going faster, jumping higher, and generally pushing the limits of human physical ability, these goals are likely linked to an individual's thrill-seeking rather than competitive nature. Guttman (2000) asks, "Have we entered a 'postmodern' era whose sports are characterized less by instrumental rationality and more by spontaneity and playfulness?" (p. 256).

Exactly when and where extreme sports began is open for debate. Their roots could be traced to the recognized birth of mountaineering in 1786 with the first of ascent of Europe's highest peak, Mount Blanc (15,771 ft.). Mountaineering is a sport involving long treks up high and remote mountains over rugged terrain, often involving rock or ice climbing. Mountaineering is split into two styles: exploration, in which one explores uncharted terrain by making a first attempt up a mountain; and sport climbing, which involves conquering more technically challenging and dangerous routes. What made both mountaineering styles *extreme* was that the climbers recognized the need for some risk in performing the sport and willingly adopted such risk for recreational purposes (Crego, 2003).

Extreme sports could also trace their roots to Polynesia. Crego (2003) says Polynesians were likely the first humans to engage in sports purely for fun. In 1778, the British explorer James Cook made the first known reference to surfing, saying all Polynesians were experts in it. By at least the 18th century, Polynesians participated in the thrill-seeking sports of surfing/bodysurfing, holua (land sledding) and land-diving. Christian missionaries in the 18th and 19th centuries claimed these sports to be idyllic and frivolous, but the sports, especially surfing, were later revived by tourism during the new thrill-seeking culture of America's Roaring '20s (Crego, 2003). Soden (2003) says one

Polynesian sport in particular, land-diving – in which a participant leaps from a 50-80 ft,. tower saved only by the roots tied to his feet and a landing pit of soft dirt – starkly resembles an extreme sport. Land-diving did inspire bungee jumping; however, the Polynesians engaged in the sport as a courting ritual, not for entertainment, as did native Latin American tribes who had similar rituals linked to the right of passage into manhood (Soden, Introduction).

Another logical source of extreme sports was the growing thrill-seeking ideology of the modern industrial world (Soden, 2003). Soden tells of a growing interest in toying with gravity beginning with the creation of circuses, followed by the inventions of various apparatuses of flight (e.g., the hot air balloon, parachute and airplane), and culminating in America's thrill-seeking generations of the 1920s and 1960s. Though many saw the 1920s youth and their dangerous endeavors (e.g., flagpole sitting, riding barrels over waterfalls, or roller-skating on building ledges) as reckless, possibly insane activities, others applauded this need for risk as keeping the old American pioneer spirit alive (Hoffman and Bailey, 1991). As people pushed the boundaries of their physical limits, these activities were channeled into the emerging extreme sports – beginning with surfing and rock-climbing (Soden, 2003).

How does one even define an extreme sport? One definition (Rinehart, 2000) simply calls extreme sports – also called high-risk, whiz or panic sports – any sports involving physically and mentally intense activities not formally recognized as legitimate sports. Another definition (Heyman, 1994) says extreme sports typically involve dangerous actions often transcending the limitations of human existence such as moving at exceptional speed, defying gravity, or breathing underwater. In part, these sports have only become possible with modern science and technology, permitting humans to perform superhuman feats, defying the laws of nature.

Surely extreme sports must satisfy a human need in modern society or they would not be practiced. Perhaps extreme sports provide some adventure in a boring life. Maybe they accept the

outcast or help one feel a part of his or her surroundings? Or possibly they simply permit more individuality and innovation than other sports.

The need for adventure

The needs for safety and security are fundamental to all animals, humans included. Technological advances and policing have eliminated many risks in society, making society safer and more secure, but as a result people may be lacking *enough* risk. Koerner (1997) speculates that people are wondering where the adventure went because they need some adventure in their lives. "Previous generations didn't have to seek out risk; it showed up uninvited and regularly: global wars, childbirth complications, diseases and pandemics from the flu to polio, dangerous products and even the omnipresent cold war threat of mutually assured destruction," Greenfeld et al. (1999, para. 14) reports. They point to day trading, unprotected sex and abuse of hard drugs as illustrative of Americans deliberately seeking risk.

Risk-seeking may be psychological. One researcher, Temple University's Frank Farley, says risk-seeking is a uniquely human trait; no other animal intentionally overcomes its instincts to take unnecessary risks (Greenfeld et al., 1999). Farley has recognized a thrill-seeking (Type-T) personality construct, comprised of extremely extroverted and creative individuals who crave novelty and excitement (Koerner, 1997). Type-T-positive physical individuals seek constructive physical outlets while Type-T-positive mental personalities gravitate towards mental thrills. Conversely, Type-T-negatives veer toward violent crime, drugs and promiscuity. Koerner suggests America is fundamentally a Type-T nation founded by fearless frontiersmen and rooted in revolution and high-risk venture capitalism.

Biology may even be involved in risk-seeking. Koerner (1997) reports that Israeli and American research teams independently found that novelty seekers possess a gene making them particularly responsive to dopamine, the neurotransmitter linked to the "feel-good" sensations

sparked by things such as cocaine and good sex. He says promiscuity, drug abuse and now extreme sports keep the dopamine flowing in such personalities.

Alternatively, some personalities favoring risky behavior, such as extreme sports athletes, entrepreneurs, artists, criminals, and those addicted to drugs or alcohol tend to have decreased levels of monoamine oxidase (MAO). MAO regulates the brain's serotonin levels, which in turn influences feelings of well-being and anxiety (Samson, 2002). Less MAO can dampen the impact of stimuli to the brain, causing people suffering from this condition to seek highly stimulating activities "just to reach the level of satisfaction the ordinary person might obtain from dinner and a movie," says Koerner (1997, para. 18). "Some discover that they can enjoy life only when they are dedicated to the full-time pursuit of thrills" (para. 19).

Many extreme sports participants are teens, and perhaps risk-seeking in this demographic is less associated with the individual, rooted more in social norms. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) suggests the difficulties in being a teen:

> Because our present social arrangements, however, do not provide adequate challenges for the skills teenagers have, they must discover opportunities for action outside those sanctioned by adults. The only outlets they find, all too often, are vandalism, delinquency, drugs, and recreational sex. Under existing conditions, it is very difficult for parents to compensate for the poverty of opportunities in the culture at large… Lacking any meaningful outlet for their skills and creativity, they may turn to redundant partying, joyriding, malicious gossiping, or drugs and narcissistic introspection to prove to themselves that they are alive (p. 182-184).

Some teens may engage in the risky behavior of extreme sports as a creative outlet, seeking challenges they do not find elsewhere in life. But the teenage years are also a time of experimentation, in which many teens are prone to rebellious and deviant behavior. One must wonder: if extreme sports were suddenly encouraged by parents and other authority figures, would teens find them less thrilling and seek another outlet for challenge?

Kusz (2007) poses an alternative socially-derived suggestion, saying that extreme sports athletes may not be as courageous and magnificent as the media makes them out to be. Kusz addresses a post-1960s white masculinity crisis in which white American males feel slighted socially,

politically and economically and desire to be the minority. Since whites as a whole now have a harder time competing with African-Americans in traditional sports, Kusz proposes that extreme sports are merely a way for white males to reclaim a place in sports.

Kusz also identifies how journalists such as Koerner and Greenfeld idealize extreme sports athletes (a white-dominated genre) as valiant, courageous and confident, heralding the emergence of such sports as a revival of the traditional American values of risk, adventure, danger, individualism and self-reliance. While risky behavior is shown as a reaction to America's current "scaredy-cat" culture, Kusz argues that white males engaging in extreme sports are portrayed as superior to those who choose not to assume such risks, and those who do not rebel from a homogenized culture are labeled as submissive.

Kusz' claims are plausible: that white American males are in a crisis, and that being the minority in traditional sports, they have developed extreme sports to be the star in their own sport. The media may also glorify extreme sports athletes over those in traditional sports as heroic, but this may only be because the sports are new and flashy compared to traditional sports. Journalists also tend to get excited about "scooping" a new story and glamorize it. The stories Kusz criticizes were written in 1997 and 1999, at the very beginning of extreme sports. In 2007, much of the novelty associated with extreme sports has passed as people have become more accustomed to an array of extreme sports.

Further, extreme sports athletes are not always exalted. Heyman (1994) says that society regards extreme sports participants with ambivalence, considering them brave on one hand but crazy on the other. Many business owners and homeowners consider extreme sports athletes as a nuisance they would rather not have around, evidenced by divets anchored into flat ledges so skateboarders cannot grind them and "no skateboarding" signs. It can even be argued that skate parks are not built as much for their patrons as for the taxpayers who want these sports out of the way. Contempt

towards extreme sports athletes, skateboarders in particular, have prompted a backlash of "Skateboarding is not a crime" shirts and bumper stickers.

But the answer may be of another form: perhaps *all* extreme sports athletes are glorified for their courage and flirtations with danger regardless of race, but due to white (economic) privilege, whites have been the originators of these sports and are thus the athletes focused upon in the media. Middle and upper-class whites may have had the luxury of engaging in these costly, gear-driven sports such as snowboarding, downhill biking, wakeboarding or surfing while minorities did not.

Regardless, high-risk sports participants, Heyman (1994) affirms, do tend to be sensation-seekers who are also more likely to engage in drug use, delinquency and sexual activity. Though some enter high-risk sports impulsively and/or self-destructively, Heyman contends that most enter with positive motivations. Schenk (1994) says that danger, risk, chance and rapid movement are fundamental elements of play for all humans. Heyman (1994) warns, however, that a prolonged addiction to risk could turn participation in extreme sports into compulsive but joyless behavior.

Some will always seek to act out their dreams and the myths of humankind by moving at great speeds, flying or living underwater, at least briefly (Heyman, 1994). Others may seek to add excitement to their lives, "if not full time, then at least for a few brief moments on Saturday or Sunday" (Koerner, 1997, para. 20).

The need to belong

Extreme sports are not just about risk, they can also help someone find his or her place in society.

Joining an extreme sport may grant access not only to a new hobby, but also to a whole new lifestyle. Hoffman and Bailey (1991) explain how the film *The Endless Summer* (1966) romanticized surfing into something fun and exciting, giving "the illusion of an endless good time" (pp. 113-114). The film identified – possibly even created – a subculture of surfing with its own language, music,

dress and life outlook, much more than just a fast-action sport but "an evasive shift from conformity" (p. 115). Extreme sports often appear to be just as much about "being alternative" as actually playing the sport.

Similarly, the documentary *Dogtown and Z-boys* (2001) explains how the Z-boys (a nickname derived from the Zephyr skate team), who originated modern skateboarding, found excitement not only in skateboarding itself, but also in breaking into strangers' yards to skate their pools and then running when the police came (Orsi). The Z-boys were all from broken homes and began surfing and skateboarding together because their team acted as a surrogate family, indicating another possibility: many extreme sports enthusiasts, especially kids and teens, may participate in part to make friends and feel included in a group. Menez says, "When coaches and parents take the fun out of traditional sports with misplaced emphasis and boorish behavior, kids increasingly turn to the adult-free world of extreme sports, in which they can make their own rules" (2003, para. 6).

Extreme sports may even be about connecting to one's environment. Bale argues that, fundamentally, sports are struggles over space. Many sports are bound by strict spatial parameters (e.g., the soccer field or basketball court), but in some sports such as golf or bicycling, the landscape elements influence the sporting experience for better or worse. Bale continues that some sports such as skiing even involve fitting bodily movements into the environment as a sense of satisfaction. "The run transfers the skier from the world of prospect to that of refuge, and rapid movement in such environments provides an exhilarating (hazardous) experience" (1989, p. 165). He says sport at speed can be mystical, creating a heightened awareness to the surrounding environment. Heyman says such experiences can be mystifying. "When one gradually descends to Earth after jumping from incredible heights, or ascends from the depths of the ocean, one cannot but feel a part of and awed by nature" (1994, p. 195).

Connecting to the environment through sport is not a new concept and is certainly not limited to extreme sports. For example, native Latin Americans thought running to be a method of celebrating nature (Crego, 2003). Extreme sports usually involve navigating the elements or obstacles of one's environment in the act of transporting oneself through it. The goal is typically the same regardless of the transportation device (e.g., bicycle, wakeboard, skis, or parachute): fitting bodily motions into one's environment. Further, since extreme sports take place in natural environments (e.g., surfing in the ocean; skydiving and hang-gliding in the sky; rock-climbing, skiing and mountain biking in mountains and forests), the connection is between the self and nature.

Granted, many extreme sports such as skateboarding and freestyle BMX, do not take place in natural environments – these are sometimes termed "urban extreme sports." Urban extreme sports still involve integrating oneself into one's environment through bodily motions, as Stecyk explains:

> Skaters by their very nature are urban guerillas: they make everyday use of the useless artifacts of the technological burden, and employ the handiwork of the government/corporate structure in a thousand ways that the original architects could never dream of…Two hundred years of American technology has unwittingly created a massive cement playground of unlimited potential (Orsi, 2001, TC: 32:57, 00:31).

Urban extreme athletes hold the potential to integrate themselves into an urban environment.

Weinstein (2005) says that social researchers are especially concerned with two basic questions: are human populations more or less adapted to their environment than extinct populations; and are some peoples better adapted to their environment than others? Are urban extreme sports athletes better adapted to the modern urban environment that has emerged?

The need for individuality and innovation

Modern sports education promotes the team over the individual, using slogans such as "there's no 'I' in team" (Rees & Miracle, 2000, p. 277). Extreme sports, on the other hand, place substantial weight in individualism, as Koerner explains:

> Extreme sports not only satisfy the need for excitement in an increasingly boring world. They also provide an outlet for creativity and individual expression often squashed in a homogenized culture of chain stores and mini-malls. While baseball and football remain virtually unchanged from generation to generation, extreme athletes are constantly fiddling with the formulas to create new disciplines (1997, para. 15).

Extreme sports are fundamentally individual, with each athlete exhibiting one's own style. There is no one way to play an extreme sport; how one plays the sport and decides what is included or excluded defines the sport for that athlete. Individualism is paramount, and alongside it innovation, as the athlete is only limited by one's imagination.

Though competition is often present in extreme sports, it is typically not the primary focus. The primary focus is the experience itself. On one end of the spectrum, no minimum ability is required to play an extreme sport; one determines what constitutes extreme and risky behavior relative to oneself. But on the other end, no maximum ability is ever possible in extreme sports; once someone is the best at an extreme sport, one forever faces the insurmountable obstacle of outdoing oneself. "Just as with life, the real challenge is always with oneself," echoes Odell (1994, p. 235).

The most fundamental way for extreme sports to evolve is for the participants to push the limits of what is possible in their sport. Freestyle bicycle motocross (BMX) pioneer Bob Haro describes in the documentary *Joe Kid on a Sting-Ray* (2005) how he and his fellow riders did not have a rulebook to follow, so all the tricks were brand new (Swarr & Eaton). Fellow rider Ceppie Maes agrees that all of the stunts they did were about paving the way for the next big thing. The most famous example of pushing an extreme sport's limits is found in the skateboarding revolution initiated by the Z-boys and their low-to-the-ground, "surf-like" style. This style was so innovative for the time that when they entered the 1975 skateboarding competition, the judges were not sure how to evaluate them. Though the Z-boys' had a central style, they recognized the need for finding one's own individual style as pivotal in innovation and personal progression in the sport. Continuing

to evolve their styles by skating empty swimming pools,[1] eventually going airborne and grinding the lips of pools, they created "vert" skateboarding (Orsi, 2001, TC 33:45).

One characteristic of extreme sports is that there is a strong inter-disciplinary crossover between them, with the athletes from one sport influencing other sports. The vert skateboarding revolution influenced BMX, inline skating, snowboarding, skiing and many other sports to take on vert styles. The Z-boys style itself came from emulating the innovative surfing techniques of Larry Bertlemann involving cutbacks and touching the wave (Orsi, 2001).

Not only do extreme sports borrow from each other's styles, but they also spawn derivative sports. The examples are countless, but tracking just one progression: surfing inspired skateboarding, which in turn combined with skiing to spawn snowboarding, and snowboarding then opened the doors for modern freestyle skiing, snowskates, etc. "Amalgams of previously know sports are given new twists, or existing sports are combined with other existing sports," Rinehart explains. "By creating new sport forms, many of the athletes in alternative sports hope to be the next entrepreneur who works at her/his play, and who incidentally makes it big" (2000, p. 509). Since many extreme sports are only in their infancy, adopters may find it fun to be part of something not yet mainstream, in which they are big fish in a small pond.

The constant evolution of extreme sports is to perform the biggest, most innovative tricks, conquer the most difficult/dangerous obstacles or just do something that no one else has done. Take surfing, for instance, in which this ideology is evident in the group of surfers who adapted the sport by surfing the Snake River in Jackson, WY (Anders, 2006). Another surfer rides an actual city street, 36th Street in Boise, ID, when rapid melting in the Boise Mountains culminates in flash flooding and a four-foot wave through the city's downtown (Koeppel, 2006).

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[1] Ironically, it was California's severe drought in the 1970s that was the reason the pools were dry (Orsi, 2001). By facilitating the addition of the vert and aerial component to skateboarding, which inspired the style of many other extreme sports, the drought and the resultant Zephyr team innovation to skate pools could be called the single most pivotal event in extreme sports.

Extreme sports are grounded in innovation, since the athletes typically use new technology to move through their environment in a new way; so sometimes the evolution of an extreme sport is linked to technological changes. Just as adaptive new technology can create a new sport (e.g., skiing morphed into snowboarding), technology advances within a sport can change the limits of what is possible. Urethane skateboard wheels facilitated the skateboarding revolution by being much more forgiving when rolling over rocks and making hard turns (Orsi, 2001). In freestyle BMX, it was the invention of pegs and the gyro detangler that allowed the possibility of an entire spectrum of new tricks (Swarr & Eaton, 2005).

A final way extreme sports evolve is through commercialization. In alternative sports, Rinehart (2000) identifies several recurring contentious issues:

1. The philosophy and lifestyle of the sport
2. Grass-roots practitioners becoming mainstream
3. Maintaining the purity and authenticity of the sport
4. Professional/amateur status of athletes
5. Sponsorship
6. Competition
7. Self-regulation versus governance by others.

The philosophy and lifestyle of the sport, grass roots practitioners becoming mainstream, and maintaining the purity and authenticity of the sport all hinge on the prior discussion of the attitude and lifestyle associated with the sport. As many extreme sports pride themselves in a "renegade/anti-mainstream" status, the elements of attitude, lifestyle, authenticity of style and what constitutes mainstream are constantly up for debate. Once commercialization comes into play, issues of the professional/amateur status of athletes, sponsorship, competition and self-regulation versus governance by others emerge. These new elements challenge the athlete's perceptions of the sport's

lifestyle and philosophy, what constitutes mainstream and the sport's authenticity even further as corporations get involved and athletes "sell-out." This discussion is one regarding what an extreme sport *should* be like, but who is one to determine another's individualistic endeavors?

Just as extreme sports enthusiasts have different styles, they play for different reasons. Some play purely for love of the sport and the excitement it offers, but those who compete in events such as the X Games may do it for financial gain (Rinehart, 2000). Crego says, "Despite the lure of professionalism, most surfers engage in the sport for fun and the search for the 'perfect' wave" (2003, p. 255), but some may seek sponsorship, fame and fortune. Returning to the Z-boys, Stacey Peralta became the richest and most famous, while Tony Alva wanted primarily to be a superstar and Jay Adams hated going pro because it took away the fun of skateboarding turning it into a job (Orsi, 2001). Professional freestyle BMX rider Woody Itson details how professional athletes are not even necessarily the best at the sport. "There became a point where the top five or ten amateurs were better than half the pros. And a few of those amateurs were probably better than all the pros" (Swarr & Eaton, 2005, TC: 1:00:11).

The most contentious issue in keeping the individualism in extreme sports is probably self-regulation versus governance by others. Regardless of one's outlook of an extreme sport, if the athletes are in control they at least maintain the right to debate their opinions. However, once a corporation enters, it may dictate how the sport will be, crushing individuality. Rinehart suggests:

> The omnipresence of ESPN, and the very dominance of electronic media, provides a cultural dominance over the mere presentation of extreme, alternative sports in the electronic sportscape. Thus, until other media companies come on to the scene, ESPN will maintain dominant market share and will play a major role in shaping for the [virtual] world what extreme sports will consist of, constitute, and become (2000, p. 507).

Extreme athletes face a double-edged sword. On one hand they need to maintain self-governance to keep individualism alive in their sports. But on the other, some of these athletes want commercialization and do not mind living with any sacrifices commercialization entails.

The future of sports

Sports have evolved from martial, religious and practical activities in ancient times to societal coping instruments and a means of social control during industrialization and urbanization. In modern day, sports have become a competitive outlet and a tool for exercise in a world where technology deliberately aims to reduce human energy expenditure. Extreme sports have also emerged, signifying the needs for adventure, belonging, individualism and innovation in our society.

Where will sports go from here? Bale (1989) identifies a cyclical pattern of artificialization of sport alternating with a green, eco-sports tendency. The shift back outdoors with extreme and other alternative sports may indicate sports are headed in the natural direction for now. Another trend towards neutralization indicates that people may be sick of competition and care more about the sporting experience than winning. Neutralized sports will appeal not only to those rejecting competition but also to those who are not necessarily good at traditional sports but want to be active, especially as exercise is becoming known as a major factor in health.

But achievement will probably not stray too far from sport. The Olympic ideals of "quicker, stronger, faster" will lead many along a quest for record-breaking. Further, many people will continue to want to compete in sport because our society is set up competitively, and competition can be thrilling.

Future technological advances will allow increasingly precise quantification of sports; advanced scientific engineering of equipment/facilities/athletes; and create many new sports. Mass communication advances coupled with an increasingly connected world via the Internet will likely cause further globalization of sport.

Increased urbanization will play a role in sports, as well. Bale (1989) points out two trends in the sporting landscape over time: a gradual artificialization of sporting environments and an

increasing spatial confinement of the space in which sport is played. As the percentages of people living in urban environments rises worldwide,[2] people will struggle to find forums for sport within the city. Unfortunately, many may give up on sport and only exercise in gyms for lack of access to enough space to play sports easily. Urban extreme sports may be able to solve this problem in a way because these sports can be played in the heart of the city and even help one connect to an urban environment. Bale has also noticed that much sports action occurs on the urban fringe and predicts the emergence of a hedonistic peri-urban zone surrounding the cities, housing recreational activities such as sporting facilities, open space and amusements.

In sum, many new sports will emerge and people will probably be more selective in choosing the sports they decide to play rather than being coerced into one by traditional and local tendencies. As a result, sports will take on a broader definition of what is considered as a sport. Sports have always filled basic human needs for the societies they have served and will continue to do so; they will evolve with society's needs.

[2] Latin America, North America and Europe are expected to be 82-84 percent urban by 2030, up from the 73-76 percent range in 2000. Asia and Africa are predicted to be 52-55 percent urban in 2030, up from the 37-38 percent range in 2000. The world average is expected to rise to 60 percent urban by 2030 from 56 percent in 2000 and only 30 percent in 1950 (Weinstein, 2005, p. 224).

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