



Extending the field of play: Revealing the dynamics between sports, health and place



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ABSTRACT

Although the sub-discipline of sports geography has a long fifty-year history it has been, at best, a sporadic endeavor. Whilst clearly indicating the fundamental geographical qualities of sports, it has never really taking off to the extent that arguably it should have given sport's social profile and importance. In way of a solution this paper presents triple tracks, or ways forward, that might circumvent this academic shortfall and cover some of the missed ground. First, pursuing the health component of sport far more thoroughly and in its very broadest sense, including its public health adoption and specific wellbeing, fitness and aesthetic features. Second, defining sport broadly beyond elite forms to include a wide-range of physical and lifestyle activities that possess elements of personal or interpersonal competition. Third, complementing sports geography by developing 'spatial sports studies' as a more expansive interdisciplinary field of inquiry spanning the health and social sciences. Indeed, these tracks potentially unearth substantial new research capacity by together considering the dynamics between sports, health and place.

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1. Introduction

The statistics vary between places, and are complicated by different definitions, yet it is clear that public participation in sport is vast. Although rates are gradually declining, reports suggest that about one-third of the general populations of many western countries undertake direct physical involvement (CFLRI, 2013; PAC, 2015; Sport England, 2013), whilst figures for the number of people supporting sports run into the billions globally, it being a mainstay of peoples' interests, allegiances and entertainment the world over. Mirroring the importance of sport for health, and more broadly in social, cultural and economic life, has been the proliferation of 'sports studies' as a multi-disciplinary academic field involving substantive contributions from sciences (such as kinesiology - often physiology and biomechanics), professional disciplines (such as sports medicine, sports management, physical education and sports physiotherapy), traditional perspective-based social sciences (including sports sociology, sports anthropology and sports psychology), and more thematically-orientated lines of inquiry (including sports and media studies and cultural studies of sport) (Maguire, 2014). These disciplines are, of course, represented by

teaching and research units in hundreds of academic institutions internationally.

Being a member of the aforementioned social science group, sports geography has contributed to sports studies by clearly articulating how sport is fundamentally geographical through its spread and outreach, basis in local, regional and national identities, and the policies, money, meanings and energies that surround the sites and settings within which it occurs (Bale, 2003; Gaffney, 2014). Indeed over the years, seven theoretical categories of research have made it abundantly clear that space and place matter to sport. These are somewhat chronological in their adoption yet also involve periods of overlap and mixing. *First*, there are studies that describe the regional origins, penetration and spread of sports, and regional differentiation in sports actors, practices and performances (Pillsbury, 1974; Rooney and Pillsbury, 1992; Ross, 1973). Bale (1982) for example, breaks down the various sports regions of England, Scotland and Wales and the different opportunities they historically provide for participation in different forms of sport. *Second*, there are spatial scientific studies concerned with the distributive features of sports participants and performances, often in relation to population characteristics or other local attributes (Adams and Rooney, 1985, 1989; Bale, 1981; Gavin, 1979; Geddert and Semple, 1987; McConnell, 1983; Rooney, 1974; Yetman and Eitzen, 1973). Bale (1978), for example, considers the

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geographical diffusion of professionalism in football in England and Wales. *Third*, there are political economy studies that consider how political and economic relations create spatial dimensions to sport (Chase and Healey, 1995; Cornelissen, 2007; Gaffney, 2010; Henry and Pinch, 2000; Rosentraub et al., 1994). Chapin (1999), for example, traces sports facility location and the policy, finance and other agendas involved in their negotiation. *Fourth*, there are humanistic studies that articulate the importance of place in the conduct and experience of sport (Bale, 1993a, 1994, 2002, 2003; Bale and Moen, 1995; Bale and Maguire, 1994; Bale and Sang, 1996; Penny and Redhead, 2009; Raitz, 1995; Vertinsky and Bale, 2004; Warn and Witherick, 2003). Bale (2004), for example, draws on the work of Yi-Fu Tuan to articulate how sense of place is integral to the experience, meaning, identity and representation of running. *Fifth*, there are social constructivist studies that describe how place meanings, group and self-identities are formed, imagined and contested through sport (Edensor and Millington, 2008; McGuirk and Rowe, 2001; Saville, 2008; Spinney, 2006; Waitt, 2003, 2008; Hague and Mercer, 1998; Porter, 2008; Shobe, 2008a, b; Ramshaw and Hinch, 2006; Vaczi, 2015; Wise and Harris, 2010). Andrews and Andrews (2003), for example, articulate how sport is used centrally in the rehabilitation of young offenders whilst, rightly or wrongly, characterizing their 'missing' moral fortitude as well the secure units where many reside. *Sixth*, there are poststructuralist studies that describe how power and place work together in sport (see Bale, 1993b; Frew and McGillivray, 2005; Fusco, 2007; Spielvogel, 2002), including in the context of gender relations (Muller, 2007; Rosso, 2010; Tervo, 2001; Vertinsky, 1992, 2004; Johnston, 1996; Evans, 2006) and ethnicity (Bale, 1999; Bale and Sang, 1996). Drawing on Foucaultian thinking, Heiskanen (2013), for example, unpacks the roles of race, class and gender in boxing and how these are reproduced in a range of urban settings. *Seventh*, as Andrews (2017) describes, there are emerging more-than-representational/post-humanistic studies that animate the material, transhuman, performed, sensory, affective and atmospheric nature of sports (Anderson, 2013, 2014; Barnfield, 2015; Barratt, 2011, 2012; Bissell, 2013; Cook et al., 2015; Cook and Edensor, 2015; Edensor, 2015; Evers, 2009; Foley, 2015; Green, 2011; Humberstone, 2011; Lorimer, 2012; Saville, 2008; Spinney, 2006; Thorpe and Rinehart, 2010; Waitt and Cook, 2007). Lorimer (2012), for example, describes how encounters with different textures and topographies of landscape intermingle with other conscious and less-than-fully conscious efforts, feelings and thoughts in the movement of running.

Despite the considerable breath of this scholarship, it is unfortunate that the studies noted above constitute a fair proportion of all sports geography produced over the last fifty years. Indeed, in terms of its scope and the scale of its contributions, sports geography is far more modest than many of the other disciplines that make up sports studies, to the extent that it even lacks profile in the parent discipline of human geography. As Bale (2003) suggests, after decades of sporadic study, sports geography still lacks a good quality journal, a regular conference, a national study group or association, and receives only limited coverage in disciplinary dictionaries and encyclopaedias. As a result, sports geography is often thought of as being in an establishing or 'fledgling' state (Andrews, 2017). Arguably however, even these terms are becoming problematic because, not only do they suggest academic beginnings which have long since passed, there is only limited evidence of expansion (Andrews, 2017). In terms of ways forward, to encourage new research and to augment this literature, I suggest triple tracks that, as courses of action, might help address the situation and potentially unearth additional research capacity. Whilst the first and second involve specific definitional and content changes, the third constitutes a fundamental recasting of the field of research.

2. Track 1: pursuing the health component of sport in its very broadest sense

Sports have long been approached by geographers with regard to their economic, social, cultural and urban dimensions and qualities, but not so frequently for their health dimensions and qualities. What is very clear however from numerous studies is that participation in sport, and the physical activity it involves, assists health. Indeed, studies demonstrate how participation reduces the risk and incidence of many chronic conditions such as cardiovascular disease, musculoskeletal disorders, diabetes, certain cancers, hypertension and stress, and certain forms of mental illness (Fox, 1999; Friedenreich, 2001; Nelson et al., 2007; Siscovick et al., 1985), whilst maximising mobility, physical and cognitive functioning (Cotman et al., 2007; Jensen et al., 2004; Nelson et al., 2007), increasing social contact, interaction and capital (Skinner et al., 2008; Wankel and Berger, 1990), self-esteem and resilience (Andrews and Andrews, 2003; Ekeland et al., 2005) and mental alertness and wellbeing (Fox, 1999, 2000; Patel and Chaudhari, 2014). Hence sport is a major focus of public health priorities, policies and initiatives (Haskell et al., 2007; Pate et al., 1995) that take on a multiplicity of guises in a multiplicity of settings including, for example, in the contexts of physical education in schools (Bailey, 2006; Sallis and McKenzie, 1991) and the organised and public use of urban green-spaces (Bedimo-Rung et al., 2005; Maas et al., 2008).

Some alignment with these sports/health knowledges and trends exists in health geography and spatial health research more broadly in their recent turns towards studying the dynamics between physical activity the environment and health, particularly in the context of what is labeled as the current 'obesity epidemic'. For example, although not focused on sports per-se, a substantial recent interest in Journals such as *Social Science & Medicine* and its sister title *Health & Place* has been the walkability of urban environments (well over one hundred papers in these two journals listing walkability as a keyword). Studies here considering, for example, methods used to measure walkability or resulting scores (Bias et al., 2010; Millington et al., 2009; Mitra et al., 2010), potential facilitators of, and barriers to, walkability (Burgoine et al., 2011; Poulidou and Elliott, 2010; Townshend and Lake, 2009), diverse quantifiable outcomes including walking rates and distances and health status (Gebel et al., 2011; Giles-Corti et al., 2011; Kerr et al., 2010), and perceptions of walkability including how they relate to rates, routes and forms of walking (Borst et al., 2008; Dongen, 2008; Loukaitou-Sideris, 2006).

In terms of critique, as Andrews et al. (2012) suggests however, we need to move empirically way beyond relatively narrow topics such as walkability in health research and the associated emphasis on the determining structure of the environment, and consider a full range of physical activities including sport, forms of inclusion and exclusion and related motivations, practices, performances and experiences. With respect to public health, for example, research might mirror the broader geographical disciplinary engagement here, both supporting and offering critique to dominant modes of thinking, discourses and practices. In terms of supporting, studies might provide evidence as to how spatial variations in sports resources and participation, and the physical, social and cultural aspects of sports environments, relate to individual and population health. In terms of critiquing, studies might carefully examine the role and techniques of governments, key institutions and other officialdom in sports initiatives, and perhaps challenge the assumptions that sport's role in health promotion is value neutral and devoid of politics, highlighting the ethics of sporting practice, the role of state soft-paternalism and power, and ultimately the othering of certain bodies and groups (Brown and Duncan, 2000, 2002;

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