

CHAPTER 13



Sports and Recreation

Legend has it that Adolf Hitler got the idea for his mass rallies from observing the behavior of spectators at American college football games. Orchestrated by uniformed cheerleaders and roused by martial music, those spectators engaged in exuberant and emotional displays of support for their teams. Hitler used similar devices to rouse support for the country he came to dominate.

Sports and recreation absorb a huge amount of Americans' emotion, time, and, in many cases, money. *Sports* here refers to spectator sports, in which people watch others—mainly high school, college, and professional athletes—engage in competitive games. *Recreation* refers to leisure-time participation in athletics or other avocational activities.

SPORTS

Americans' interest in spectator sports seems excessive and even obsessive to many international visitors. Not all Americans are interested in sports, of course, but very many are. Some seem interested in little else. Television networks spend millions of dollars arranging telecasts of sports events

and constantly search for new ways (such as using ever-evolving computer graphics and hiring famous or glamorous announcers and commentators) to make their coverage more appealing. Three television networks broadcast sports news and commentary twenty-four hours. Some channels are devoted entirely to specific sports, such as golf and professional football. Superbowl Sunday, the day of the National Football League's championship game, has become almost a national holiday. Talk shows focused on sports are prominent on many radio stations.

Americans bet millions of dollars on the outcome of sports contests. Publications about sports sell widely. Fans may display not just ardent support for their favored teams, but ardent dislike of their teams' rivals. Professional athletes often become national heroes. Sports stars such as Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods became more widely recognized than any national leader other than the president. Many professional athletes—and their coaches—receive yearly salaries in the millions of dollars.

The Internet has made it possible for uncounted sports fans—usually males—to live vicariously through *fantasy sports leagues*. Participants in these leagues select groups of professional athletes to form imaginary teams and then compete against each other based on the statistics each (real) athlete generates in live competitions. These leagues can be recreational, or they can involve gambling with significant amounts of money.

What seems distinctive about the American interest in sports is that it is not confined to particular social classes. People in all walks of life are represented among devoted sports fans, and the collective audience for sports events is enormous.

In the United States sports are associated with educational institutions in a way that is unique. High school faculties include coaches, and school athletic teams compete with each other in an array of sports. Each team's entourage may have a marching band (especially associated with football, as Americans and Canadians call the game played with the oblong-shaped ball) and a group of cheerleaders. In some American communities, high school athletics are a focal point of the townspeople's activities and conversations. *Friday Night Lights*, a bestselling book about a high school football team in a Texas community, became the basis for a major motion picture and then a long-running television series.

College sports, especially football and basketball, are conducted in an atmosphere of intense excitement and pageantry. Games between teams classified as “major football powers” attract nationwide television audiences numbering in the millions. An entire industry has been built on the manufacture and sale of badges, pennants, T-shirts, blankets, hats, underwear, and countless other items bearing the mascots and colors of various university athletic teams. Football and basketball coaches at major universities are paid higher salaries than the presidents of their institutions, and athletic department budgets are in the millions of dollars.

Said a recently arrived foreign student in Iowa City, after seeing legions of black-and-gold-clad fans swarming the town on a game-day morning, “It looks like the most important part of the University [of Iowa] is the football team. Maybe the team *is* the most important thing in the whole town.”

Sports are a very frequent topic of conversation, especially (as noted earlier) among males. Small talk about sports is safe—interesting but not too personal. Participants can display their knowledge of athletes and statistics without revealing anything considered private.

In some social circles, associating with athletes is a way to achieve social recognition. A person who knows a local sports hero personally or who attends events where famous athletes are present is considered by some people to have accomplished something worthwhile.

Expressions from sports are extraordinarily common in everyday U.S. American speech. Baseball is probably the source of more idiomatic expressions (examples: *get to first base*, *touch base with*, *cover all the bases*, *throw a curve*, *strike out*) than any other sport. That fact can disadvantage international visitors trying to communicate with Americans, because most of them come from countries where baseball is not played, and even if baseball is a national sport in their country, they still may not understand these American idioms.

For reasons too complex to examine here, African Americans are heavily overrepresented in football, basketball, and track. While African Americans constitute about 12 percent of the country’s total population, they make up well over half of most college and professional football and basketball teams. It is not unusual to see a basketball game in which all the players on the floor are black. (Arguably reflecting continuing racial discrimination,

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blacks make up only a small minority of coaches, managers, and executives, even in the sports where black players are so prominent.)

The women's movement can be credited with bringing increasing attention to women's athletics in the United States. Female athletes and their teams get more attention in the States than in many other countries. The attention given to women's sports in the United States is no doubt due in large part to a 1972 law that outlawed gender discrimination in schools. The law mandated equal opportunity and treatment for men and women in athletic as well as in academic programs. Although female professional athletes and coaches are still paid less than their male counterparts, American women's participation in sports has grown significantly over the past few decades. Beginning in the late 1990s, women's professional basketball was regularly televised on national networks, and female professional basketball players began to appear in television advertisements—the ultimate sign of social acceptance and respect.

The most popular sport in much of the world—soccer—is becoming increasingly popular in the United States as well. Nevertheless, the most popular sports here are still American football, baseball, basketball, and in some states, hockey—games that are not played in large numbers of countries.

Sports play such an important role in American life that the sociology of sports, sports medicine, sports psychology, and even sports marketing have become respectable academic specializations.

RECREATION

The word *recreation* brings to mind relaxing and enjoyable activities. An evening walk around the neighborhood, a Sunday picnic with the family, and playing ball in the yard with the children all seem relatively spontaneous and relaxing pastimes.

Much American recreational activity, however, seems to international visitors to be approached with a high degree of seriousness, planning, organization, and expense. Spontaneity and fun are often absent, as far as the visitor can tell. “These crazy Americans!” a South American exclaimed after seeing yet another jogger go past her house in subzero winter weather. Many

Americans jog every day, or play tennis, handball, racquetball, or bridge two or three times a week; some do aerobic exercises three times weekly, work out in gyms up to six days a week, or engage in other regularly scheduled recreation, whether alone, with a partner or small group of acquaintances, or as members of some team or league. They go on vacations, ski or canoe, or go on hiking trips, and hunting or fishing expeditions that require weeks of planning and organizing. In the American's view, all these activities are generally fun and relaxing, or are worth the discomfort they may cause because they contribute to health and physical fitness and may also offer opportunities to socialize.

Much American recreation is highly organized. Classes, clubs, leagues, newsletters, contests, exhibitions, and conventions are centered on hundreds of different recreational activities. People interested in astronomy, bird watching, cooking, dancing, ecology, fencing, gardening, hiking—and on and on—can find a group of like-minded people with whom to meet, learn, and practice or perform. Even if the level of participation in group recreational activities is declining, as political scientist Robert Putnam argues in his often-quoted and somewhat controversial book called *Bowling Alone* (2000), foreign visitors are frequently struck by the extent of Americans' involvement in recreational and avocational associations.

Recreation is big business in America. Many common recreational activities require clothing, supplies, and equipment that can be quite costly. Recreational vehicles (RVs) that are used for traveling usually include provisions for sleeping, cooking, and showering and can cost more than half a million dollars. Running shoes, hiking boots, fishing and camping supplies, skiing equipment, cameras, telescopes, gourmet cookware, and bowling balls are not inexpensive items. Beyond equipment, there is clothing. The fashion industry has successfully persuaded many Americans that they must be properly dressed for jogging, playing tennis, skiing, swimming, yoga, biking, and so on. Fashionable outfits for these and other recreational activities can be surprisingly expensive.

A final point that astute international observers notice is the relationship between social class and certain recreational activities. This relationship is by no means invariable, and the element of geography complicates it. (For example, a relatively poor person who happens to live in the Colorado mountains may be able to afford skiing, while an equally poor resident of

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a Plains state could not afford to get to the mountains and pay for lodging there.) In general, though, golf and yachting are associated with wealthier people, tennis with better-educated people, and outdoor sports such as camping, hiking, fishing, hunting, and boating with middle-class people. Those who bowl or square dance regularly are likely to be members of the middle or lower-middle class, as are the legion of fans attracted to automobile racing. Foreign observers will be able to find other examples of these relationships between social class and recreational activities in whatever part of the United States they come to know. (Wherever they are in the country, though, Americans themselves are likely to deny the existence of social classes.)

SUGGESTIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL VISITORS

International visitors—especially males—who plan to be in the United States for an extended period will enhance their ability to interact constructively with Americans if they take the trouble to learn about local sports teams. Knowing something about the games and players and about their importance in the natives' minds improves a foreign visitor's chance of getting to know "average" Americans.

Realize that it is fruitless to interest most Americans in soccer or, particularly, cricket.

Long-term visitors who are interested in getting to know Americans are also encouraged to take a class, join a club, or participate on a recreational sports team. Most Americans enjoy meeting new people with whom they share a common interest.

Physical fitness can be a good thing, unless it is taken to the obsessive extremes shown by some Americans. Take advantage of your time in the United States to make use of the walking trails, running tracks, bicycle paths, swimming pools, and gymnasiums that are relatively accessible in many localities.