

Leisure Reflections No 49: Competitive Leisure through Sport and Nature's Challenges

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It appears that the majority of people across the globe engage only in non-competitive leisure, in that most casual leisure is of this nature and such leisure is more popular than the serious and project-based types. The universal appeal of, for example, relaxation, entertainment television, sociable conversation, and pleasurable sensory stimulation of the eyes and taste buds supports this observation. Yet, if going in for competitive leisure appeals only to a minority, this interest is nonetheless also widely pursued and substantially varied. The several types of competitive leisure reviewed next attest this observation. After that section I make a case for keeping sport and nature challenge activities conceptually distinct, even while some analysts are conceiving of the latter as sport.

Types of Competitive Leisure

We start with *sport*, arguably the best known of this kind of free-time activity. By sport I mean inter-human, competitive, physical activity based on a recognized set of rules and possibly related customs (Coakley, 2007). The OED defines sport similarly, or "(3a): an activity involving physical exertion and skill, *esp.* one in which an individual competes against another or others to achieve the best performance (*Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, 5thed., 2002). These definitions include inter-human competition carried out using animals, machines, and the like (eg, racing with dogs or snowmobiles), as long as it requires physical exertion and skill. Finally, chance is not an inherent element in a sport, even though chance conditions may influence the outcome of a match. Examples include a sudden gust of wind in a baseball game, wet grass in a football game, and damaged ice in a hockey game.

In *mind sport* the physical component is absent. The first Mind Sports Olympiad was held in London's Royal Festival Hall in 1997, with its central concept often traced to co-founder Anthony Peter (Tony) Buzan, an English author and educational consultant. A mind sport is a game of skill where the competition is based on a particular type of intellectual ability as opposed to physical effort. This ability is the essential part of such activity. Any game that requires significant intellectual ability even if there is also a chance element in it is considered

a mind sport. Chess, Scrabble, Bridge, Poker, and Backgammon number among the better known of these sports. This said, philosopher David Papineau (2018) makes a fine case for considering mind sports as not sport, but rather non-sport games.

So consider both mind sport and (physical) sport as two classes of *games*. Single-player games – a third class – involve only one player, as exemplified in the solitaires, single-player video games, Pachinko machines, and single-player Sudoku puzzles. These games are not essentially competitive, even though Pachinko and Sudoku especially are also sometimes played in competitions. Finally, *puzzles* (they are not games) are inherently single-player activities that draw mainly on intellectual skills (eg, brain teasers, logical problems, crosswords, anagrams) and spatial skills (eg, connect-the-dots, Rubik's cube, mazes, and jigsaw puzzles). As with single-player games puzzle play is sometimes organized as a competitive event.

Where does the *nature challenge activity* (NCA) fit in this set of concepts? The NCA is a leisure pursuit whose core activity or activities centre on meeting a natural test posed by one or more of the six elements: land, water, air, plants, animals (including birds and fish), and ice and snow (Davidson & Stebbins, 2011). A main reason for engaging in a particular NCA is to experience participation in its core activities pursued in a natural setting. In other words, while executing this activity, the special (aesthetic) appeal of the natural environment in which this process occurs simultaneously sets the challenge the participant seeks. Nature challenge activity as a concept is a newcomer to the literature on leisure studies. Stebbins (2005) coined and defined the term to help capture how his sample of kayakers, snowboarders, and mountain climbers viewed the core activities of their hobbies.

Because the principal challenge in the NCAs is non-human – there is no inherent interpersonal competition – they cannot therefore be essentially sports as defined earlier. This distinction is often overlooked or considered unimportant. Higham, Thompson, and Musa (2015) exemplify the latter:

Sport as a competitive, contest-based, ludic activity is defined in manifold ways (Coakley, 2007). The competitive element of sport may pit participants against standards of performance (eg, time), degrees of difficulty (eg technical challenge) and/or competition against the forces of nature (e.g. challenges of terrain, climate or other more or less natural phenomena). The context-based nature of sport arises from the challenge of uncertain outcomes. Engagement in sporting competition tests the mettle of the participant in terms of the combination of physical prowess, strategy, skill, composure under pressure, critical decision-making and, to a greater or lesser degree, chance (eg, arising from the vagaries of the weather) (Higham & Hinch 2009). While any sport may present one or more of these aspects of contest, mountaineering, arguably, presents all of them in one form or another. The contest-based nature of mountaineering tests the physical, mental and technical prowess of participants, in terms that may include physical ability, concentration, endurance, stamina, strength and skill (Gibson, 1998).

(Higham, Thompson, & Musa, 2015, pp. 7-8).

The NCAs

Nevertheless, there are several reasons for treating NCAs separately, as non-sport activity. Consider the criteria of interpersonal competition and the nature of that competition. When people compete the possibility exists that, to increase their chances of winning, they may violate certain rules designed to control the unfair enhancement of play. This is evident in for example doping, lying about eligibility, and engaging in forbidden acts during play, all of which bear on the essence of the game in question. In the typical NCA no such rules exist, and consequently no arrangements are established to check on their violation. Even in the NCAs of hunting and fishing, for instance, rules bearing on bag limits, sex of animal as legal game, and seasons and geographic areas when and where these two hobbies are permitted are external to their essence. Instead, the skill and knowledge needed to locate game and hook it or shoot it constitute the core activities here.

Moreover, the rules of a sport are sometimes changed so as to enhance the competitive process, commercial appeal of sports matches, safety of play, and the like. In general, such is neither possible nor desirable for the NCAs and the land, water, air, plants, animals (including birds and fish) ice, and snow with which they are pursued. To be sure, there are natural changes in these features, but as Higham and colleagues noted above, adjusting to them is an essential part of any NCA.

Two, competition leads to the development of a variety of social arrangements that, together, give a special flavor to the social world of each sport, modifications that are absent in the NCAs (unless they have a competitive side, as in racing on skis and landing large fish in great numbers during fishing tournaments). Foreign to the NCAs are the, often quite, complicated arrangements intended to organize competition, including schedules of competition, prizes for winning, analyses of competitors, and the organizational structures that make these functions possible. By contrast, the NCAs are organized to foster the general pursuit of particular activities, such as mountain climbing, bird watching, water skiing, and scuba diving. To this effect, the social world of each hobby typically includes activity clubs; commercial outlets for selling or renting equipment, supplies, and other related resources; instructional programs; and developmental and maintenance services for practicing certain NCAs. Similar formations are also found in sport.

Three, many sports have professional counterparts, whereas others – the hobbyist sports – lack this feature. The pros set the standards most of the time, but not in the hobbyist field of activity participation (Davidson & Stebbins, 2011, pp. 8-9), which is the classificatory home of nearly all NCAs, save the few pursued by amateurs and professionals. Some fine exemplars occasionally emerge in the NCAs (eg, the famous snowboarders, martial artists, mountain climbers, hang-gliders). But full-time paid pursuit of such activities would most probably bring about still higher standards of excellence.

Four, the identity basis of the NCAs and that of the sports also differ significantly. Most obvious in sport is one's place in an individual sport on a formal or informal list or one's team's place in the league standings, both being related to the local, national, or international rankings

of wins and other markers of excellence. In the NCAs identity is differently established, for it hinges on successfully meeting natural challenges, especially the famously difficult ones, number of them met, and environmental conditions under which the accomplishment occurred. Put otherwise, in sport a main part of a participant's identity is calculated on a scale of excellence in the core activity, whereas in nature challenges it is based on a scale of difficulty of the core (eg, see these scales for kayaking, mountaineering, and snowboarding in Stebbins, 2005). Difficulty also emerges when trying to spot a rare bird, hook and land a large fish, photograph a wild animal in an aesthetically appropriate wilderness setting.

Finally, in general terms, "augmentative play" varies considerably between the two types (Stebbins, 2014). Such play is the playful activity engaged in while following the recipe for it during an actual occasion of leisure (e.g., in a tennis match, a session of quilting, an afternoon of reading stories to children). The "recipe for augmentative play" is challenging circumstances → inventive solution → continued activity. That is, augmentative play is *both* an immediate end-in-itself and a means to the more distant goals of the unfolding leisure activity. In those sports in which there is direct human interaction, among them basketball, boxing, tennis, and wrestling, augmentative play consists of one or more spontaneous inventive moves meant to best the participant's opponent. By contrast, sports conducted serially against opponents (eg, bowling, darts, croquet, long-distance running) offer a vivid sense of human competition, though without a direct chance to influence their performance by way of augmentative play.

No such equivalents exist in the large majority of NCAs, with three possible exceptions being hunting, fishing, and wildlife photography (ie, avoid frightening your subject). Rather, augmentative play occurs while trying to meet the natural challenges posed by normally-occurring air, water, plants, animals, rock, ice, and snow.

[1]Some NCAs are pursued in the company of others not for reasons of competition but for those of safety, special know-how, sociability, and so on. Other activities, however, leave no choice but to go it alone, as is the case for hang-gliding, wave surfing, and skydiving.

Conclusion

The five preceding points make a strong case for treating of the NCAs as activity participation hobbies, rather than as hobbyist sports. To fail to do this is to risk overlooking in theory and research one or more the points, which are nonetheless, important features of the NCA. Today, the possibility of such oversight is reasonably high, given the dominance of sport as a social science research interest, popular pastime, and form of entertainment. Forcing the NCA into the Procrustean bed of sport when there is no inter-human competition distorts understanding of the former, while undermining the conceptual validity of the latter.

Endnote

[1]These are sometimes modified unobtrusively by humans as they challenge nature. For a short discussion of such modifications, see Davidson and Stebbins (2011, p. x).

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