

Sporting Lives: A Case Study of Leisure Careers¹

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THE CAREER PERSPECTIVE

Age is routinely listed among the most powerful predictors of leisure participation, yet researchers have rarely employed a career perspective systematically. Adopting such a perspective means recognising that:

- i. Past accomplishments of their absence create specific future patterns of leisure opportunity and constraint, as in occupational careers.
- ii. The social organisation of leisure activities presents structured opportunities for career progression as from club member to president, and from junior league to big-time, thereby creating incentives for individuals who begin to practise leisure pursuits to stay-in and get-on. Once again, the situation is analogous in paid occupations.
- iii. While career routes are laid-out and offer statistically predictable chances of progression, individuals are not inevitably propelled along pre-ordained leisure trajectories. They may drop-out or move sideways, acquire additional skills, and generate the exceptional drive to create non-routine opportunities. Again, needless to say, all this applies in labour markets.

Incorporating a career perspective in leisure research is desirable:

- i. To develop comprehensive explanations of how leisure is shaped by, and how it may help to shape, behaviour in other domains such as employment and domestic life. These inter-relationships are inevitably blurred in cross-sectional data since, for example, past rather than concurrent work and family situations may sometimes contain part of the explanation of present leisure conduct.
- ii. To identify critical life-phases when longer-term leisure patterns are set, then acquire a built-in momentum.
- iii. To identify any junctures and life-events which may render existing leisure interests vulnerable and, simultaneously, open new recreational opportunities.

METHODS

One reason why leisure careers are under-researched is that conducting longitudinal studies while people's biographies unfold would exhaust the researchers' own professional careers. However, Hedges (1986) has pioneered the methods, and has demonstrated that most adults have adequate powers to recall to reconstruct their leisure biographies, at least for relatively structured activities that are linked to particular times, places, and social relationships.

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Our new evidence is from a sample of 1,679 adults who were interviewed in their homes during 1987. Some respondents were selected from earlier surveys covering over 6,000 users of 46 different sports facilities in six UK cities. The remaining subjects were non-participants in sport, matched for age, sex, place of residence, and socio-economic status with the players. Among other topics, the 1987 interviews sought information about all the sports in which the respondents considered themselves to have been regular players during any period from age 10 onwards, and similar information about their histories of involvement in certain other leisure activities. The entire sample was re-interviewed 12 months later in 1988 with a 78 percent response, when more detailed information was collected about any changes in their sports participation and other types of leisure behaviour during the previous two years, together with the associated circumstances and the individuals' explanations. Thus, we have information about the broad outlines of the sample's lifetime careers in sport and certain other leisure activities, and more detailed complementary information on how and why any changes had occurred during the periods immediately preceding the two interview surveys.

FINDINGS

Consistency. Far and away the best predictor of whether a person will be a current participant in sport, as in many other leisure activities, is not some combination of age, sex, socio-economic and marital status, but whether the individual has played regularly in the past. 64 percent of all the current players in our survey had played at least one sport regularly during every year of their lives from age 16 onwards. Among the current non-participants, 42 percent had never played any sport regularly since age 20.

Substantial numbers of current players and non-players had moved into and out of sport during their adult lives, but most of the current players' breaks had been short. The longer a break had lasted, the lower were the chances of a resumption, and the greater the likelihood of any resumption proving short-lived. Conversely, the longer the length of uninterrupted sports careers, the greater the likelihood of the players continuing.

It was partly, but not mainly pure habit that had sustained uninterrupted sports careers. These participants had become bound into sport by the social relationships that were involved and the expectations of significant others, but remaining loyal to sport had often required a great deal of personal effort and initiative. Long-term loyalty was mainly due to the individuals wanting to continue to experience the satisfactions of using skills and maintaining social relationships that they had built-up.

However, long-term abstainers from sport were often effectively locked-out. Breaking into totally new leisure activities in later-life can mean surmounting numerous obstacles - maybe restructuring daily and weekly routines, acquiring new knowledge and skills, and entering new social networks.

- ii. *The crucial role of early leisure socialisation.* Most of the sports (65 percent) in which respondents would ever become regular participants had first been played during childhood and youth. These are the life-phases when people are most likely to play sports, and when many participants dabble in a large number of games. Thereafter, the trends had been towards dropping-out of sport completely, and towards those who remained active reducing their number of sports. Many take-ups in later life had been of sports that the individuals had played regularly earlier-on. Most respondents were basing the rest of their sporting lives on interests and skills first acquired in childhood and youth.

- iii. *Settling-down.* It is well-known that sports participation declines with age. It may be less widely appreciated that the give-up rate for sports also declines with age. Retirements from sports peak during youth and young adulthood. The oldest participants have the lowest retirement rates of all (provided they remain alive). Between ages 65 and 69, just 2.5 percent of the sports played by our sample had been given-up each year compared with 22.8 percent in the 16 to 19 age group. If individuals' sports careers survived into their mid-20s, the chances were that they would continue to play regularly for many years. By early adulthood, most people's leisure habits were settling-down to either include or exclude sport on a long-term basis.
- iv. *Later-life renaissance.* The sports take-up rate within our sample, like the give-up rate, declined with age from a peak of 18.9 per 100 persons per year in the 16 to 19 age band to just 3.9 between ages 45 and 49. However, from age 45 to 49 onwards, the sports take-up rate increased to 9.6 per 100 persons per year from ages 65 to 69. According to our evidence, the pre- and post-retirement years are life-phases during which individuals are likely to extend their leisure interests, certainly as far as sport is concerned.
- v. *Career maintenance.* Few sports players in any age-groups could be described as having settled in ruts and continuing to play mainly from habit. During childhood and youth numerous sports had often been played, many of which were relinquished quickly.

Longer-running sports careers had involved considerable mobility between sports, albeit usually within repertoires acquired when young. With age there had been a net movement out of team sports and towards more socially flexible pastimes, and later-on, into less energetic forms of exercise such as bowling. Some exceptional sports were popular in all age-groups, swimming being the main example. Such sports were supplying constant threads in otherwise diverse sports careers.

Giving-up sports was associated with dislocations such as leaving education, changing jobs, and having children. However, take-ups were also associated with these same life-events, showing that changed circumstances which threatened existing leisure interests can simultaneously open opportunities to develop entirely new or, more typically, to revive older interests. The individuals with uninterrupted sports careers had not remained loyal by avoiding, but by not only surviving dislocating life-events, but frequently using these occasions to change companions, places of play, and often their sports also.

The detailed information about changes in the sample's leisure behaviour during 12 months preceding the interviews revealed considerable ingenuity as individuals used old and new facilities, preserved existing and revived older skills and interests, and operated flexibly within their personal social networks to maintain their sports careers. Most take-ups did not coincide exactly with give-ups. Rather, the typical long-term sports career contained a great deal of overlapping. Certain pastimes had been phased out gradually while formerly secondary sports were nurtured into primary activities.

DISCUSSION

The features of sports career development described above applied among the men and women in the sample, and in all socio-economic strata. And many of these features were evident in lifetime careers in the other leisure activities about which biographical information was

obtained -- doing voluntary work, playing musical instruments, sport spectating, and doing football pools.

The implications for education in, and the promotion of, sports and other leisure activities include the following:

- i. Childhood and youth are the life-phases during which substantial numbers of total novices are most likely to be attracted into new activities.
- ii. Maintaining high levels of participation into mid-adulthood means preventing early retirements rather than recruiting totally new blood.
- iii. Young adults who drop-out of specific pastimes are not necessarily lost for good. As far as sports are concerned, provided they remain involved in some activities for most of their lives, they are always likely to return to games which they once enjoyed.
- iv. The post-parental life-phase, extending into retirement, is a period during which lapsed participants can be won-back. Today, nearly every country in the world has an aging population. Older citizens are an expanding and responsive leisure market, but one in which certain boundaries are defined by the range of leisure styles, skills, and interests that individuals acquired earlier in life.

REFERENCES

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PROCEEDINGS
Sixth Canadian Congress on Leisure Research
May 9-12, 1990

COMPTE RENDU DU
Sixième Congrès Canadien de Recherches en Loisir
Le 9-12 mai, 1990

University of Waterloo

***Leisure Challenges:
Bringing People, Resources and
Policy into Play***

***Les défis des loisirs:
agencer les personnes,
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