

The Sociology of Amateur Sport: An Overview

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Abstract

This paper examines the amateur ideal to assess whether it is possible in today's sportsworld. The first section presents the defining characteristics of the amateur. The second reviews the dominant themes in the sport literature regarding the amateur ideal: (1) amateurism as a mechanism of class hegemony; (2) amateurism as exploitive ideology; (3) amateurism as an anachronism; and (4) amateurism as a citadel of purity. The final section of the paper examines amateurism in the contemporary context. The argument is that elite amateur sport has moved beyond the amateur ideal to become corporate sport. At another level, however, amateur sport thrives. Questions are raised that should guide future research on these true amateurs.

The amateur sacrifices everything, most especially financial gain, to achieve athletic excellence. The amateur with singular devotion devotes long hours of training to hone skills to maximize athletic performance. The amateur competes for the love of sport, and is therefore above venality. But just how pure are amateurs? How close do they approach these mythic qualities? Is the amateur ideal attainable in contemporary society? This paper explores these and related questions. The paper is divided into three parts: (1) a description of the defining characteristics of the amateur; (2) a review of the dominant themes in the sport literature regarding the amateur ideal; and (3) an assessment of the direction of contemporary amateur sport.

Defining the amateur

In the abstract, there is a consensus on what constitutes an amateur. The word "amateur" derives from the Latin *amator*, which means "lover". In short, the amateur is one who participates in sport because of love for the sport (Glader 1978; Underwood 1984, 166; Stebbins 1987, 23). This fundamental love for sport implies that: (1) the amateur derives pleasure from the contest; (2) the activity is freely chosen; (3) the process is every bit as important as the outcome; (4) the motivation to participate comes from the intrinsic rewards from the activity rather than the extrinsic rewards of money and fame; and (5) because there is a love of sport for its own sake, there is a climate of sportspersonship surrounding amateur sport. Regarding this last point, Andrew Strenk has said, "the term 'amateur' is an ethical word, suggesting that a certain moral conduct is expected [fair play, honesty, and a genuine respect for one's opponent]" (1981, 57). Another distinguishing characteristic of the amateur is that the activity is pursued as an

avocation rather than a vocation, as leisure rather than work. As Avery Brundage, the long time protector of the amateur ideal in the Olympic Games argued: "Sport is recreation, it is a pastime or a diversion, it is play, it is action for amusement, it is free, spontaneous and joyous – it is the opposite of work" (quoted by Guttman 1984, 116). Of course, when an athlete is paid to play, and therefore a professional, there is a high level of expectation for performance *by others*, with fines and public humiliation as sanctions for disappointing play. There is another fundamental difference between the amateur and the professional that goes beyond the technical distinction of whether the athlete receives remuneration from the sport. In the words of former professional football player, Peter Gent: "Professional athletics are first and foremost show business, dealing with illusion and entertainment. The first responsibility of the players is to the audience, not themselves. ... Audience satisfaction is not supposed to be a factor in amateur athletics" (1978, 7).

Among amateurs there is an important distinction based on the degree of commitment, sacrifice, and level of play. Those involved in recreational activities with a relatively low level of commitment, little time involvement, and who merely play at the game are what Robert Stebbins has called dabblers or players (1979). As such, they are not true amateurs. The true amateur is identified by his or her serious commitment to excellence in the sport as evidenced by hard work and a serious practice regimen. The result is a level of play and a knowledge of the sport that far surpasses that of the dabbler. Thus, using these variables of commitment, sacrifice, and level of play, we have a continuum with dabblers at the low end on each, followed by amateurs, with professionals at the high end on each dimension. Professionals are the most specialized and most highly trained. They may not exceed amateurs in skill level, although this is likely. For the dimensions of commitment and seriousness, professionals and amateurs may be indistinguishable.

There is a strong tendency by advocates of the amateur ideal to denigrate the professional athlete. The implication is that the professional participates not out of love for the activity but for crass materialism and self interest. Rather than engaging in play, the professional is a worker, tied to a contract. Thus, the professional is tainted and the essence of sport lost. Consistently, the term "professional" is used pejoratively in sport while the amateur is glorified. This is an interesting difference with what occurs in other professions. The professional in theology, medicine, law, or education has accepted a high calling. Not so in sport. Perhaps the difference is that the professions insist that their members – clergy, doctors, lawyers, and teachers – comply with the code and standards of their discipline. The core of each of these codes is identical: "to place the good and welfare of the profession ahead of one's personal advantage or self-aggrandizement" (Harris 1983, 54). Professional athletes neither have such a code nor behave in a way consonant with a professional model. Hence, their self-aggrandizing behaviors tend to make their pejorative label earned.

Contrasting images of amateurism

The amateur ideal must be contrasted with reality. Is amateurism as lofty in the real world as its proponents would have us believe? To investigate this, let's examine four images of amateurism found in the literature: (1) amateurism as a mechanism of class hegemony; (2) amateurism as exploitive ideology; (3) amateurism as an anachronism; and (4) amateurism as a citadel of purity.

Amateurism as a mechanism of class hegemony

Anita DeFrantz, bronze medal winner in the 1976 Olympics and the first black woman elected to the International Olympic Committee, has said that amateurism has "always been a way to exclude people" (quoted in Tom 1988, 100). The amateur concept was a product of the nineteenth-century leisure class, whose ideal of the patrician sportsman (and it was a man) was part of their pursuit of conspicuous leisure. Consequently, to be a pure amateur required independent wealth, since the true amateur derived no income from sports participation. Explicit in the amateur ideal was the belief that one's athletic endeavor must be unrelated to one's work or livelihood, and that sport itself is somehow sullied, tarnished, or demeaned if one is paid for performing it (Eitzen and Sage 1986, 210).

The rationale for lower-class exclusion from amateur sports was expressed by Caspar W. Whitney in 1895: "Why there should be such constant strife to bring together in sport the two divergent elements of society that never by any chance meet elsewhere on even terms is quite incomprehensible ... The laboring class are all right in their way; let them go their way in peace, and have their athletics in whatsoever manner best suits their inclinations ... Let us have our own sport among the more refined elements, and allow no discordant spirits to enter into it" (quoted in Guttmann 1978, 31).

The rules and practices of sport in that day were exclusionary based on social class. For example, mechanics, artisans, and laborers were disqualified from rowing. The argument was that laborers would have a special advantage in that sport because the nature of their work made them physically stronger than gentlemen amateurs. Hence, they were declared professionals and therefore ineligible for amateur competition (Glader 1978). This aristocratic bias flourished in 19th century England (Glader 1979), Canada (Metcalf 1987), and the United States (Rader 1983).

The amateur rules and social arrangements (i.e., upper-class sports clubs), then, kept social inferiors from competing with the well-to-do. In effect, the rules and social arrangements established a system of "sports apartheid" with white males from the upper classes enjoying the advantages. Thus, the stratified society was maintained and unchallenged. The presumed superiority of the upper classes (recall that Social Darwinism was the dominant ideology of that historical period) was "proven" by their exceptional athletic prowess (Messner 1986). Thus, the institution of sport through the mechanism of amateurism reproduced and even justified existing social inequalities.

Similar arguments and policies have been used throughout history to keep oppressed groups disadvantaged. Women, for example, were barred from official competition in Olympic sports until swimmers were admitted in 1912, then

women runners were accepted in 1928. After considerable agitation by advocates for gender equality over a number of years, women were finally permitted to run an Olympic marathon in 1984. The male aristocrats who have dominated the International Olympic Committee throughout its history have consistently been slow to accept the opening of the "amateur" Olympics to "outsiders".

Amateurism as an exploitive ideology

Amateurism is a romantic notion with lofty ideals. In reality, though, sports organizations have sometimes used this concept to exploit the labor of amateurs while amassing considerable wealth for themselves. Two prime examples of this form of exploitation in sport are found in the prevailing amateur ideology promoted by the dominant organization in the Olympic Games and in big-time American college sports. I will use the latter as a case study to illustrate the exploitation of athletes through the use of the amateur concept (the following argument is taken primarily from Sack 1980; Sage 1985; and Sage 1987).

The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) was formed in 1905 (under a different name) to deal with a number of problems that plagued collegiate sports (a high injury rate in football, unstable recruiting practices, and the lack of uniform rules). The NCAA has become a cartel that completely controls the mass commercial entertainment industry that is collegiate big-time sport. The NCAA and its members (the universities) make large sums of money from their enterprises. Some examples:

- The NCAA receives \$54 million a year from the sale of television rights to its Division I men's basketball tournament. Each team in the final four of the 1988 basketball tournament received \$1,150,000. Each of the 64 teams selected for the tournament received a minimum of \$230,700.
- Each team in the 1988 Rose Bowl received \$6 million.
- The University of Michigan has an athletic budget of \$16 million.
- Bobby Cremins, the basketball coach of Georgia Tech, receives \$160,000 a year from a sports shoe manufacturer.

These illustrations show the magnitude of money generated in big-time college sport. But unlike other profit-making ventures in society, the college sports industry insists on defining its work force as amateurs (Glasner 1987). In actuality, of course, the athletes are not amateurs. They receive compensation for their labors (albeit meager in relationship to what they generate), the athletes sign contracts binding them to a school and the dictates of the coach, and the sport they engage in is not participant-oriented but rather for the entertainment of others. The leaders of the collegiate sports world, however, actively promote the amateur ideology. There are several rationales for this fiction, as Allen Sack has noted:

"Among those who control universities the amateur ideology helps to validate claims for social status. Commercialism in any form has always been viewed as inconsistent with received and cherished academic values. This is especially true at America's most prestigious colleges and universities. By clinging to the myth that big time college athletes are amateurs and that sport is educational, universities can give an air of respectability to what is obviously "crass" commercial entertainment. Without the cloak of the amateur ideology, scholar athletes would assume the status of employees, college presidents and governing

boards would be exposed as sport's entrepreneurs, and the NCAA would suddenly come under scrutiny as an illegal business cartel" (1980, 5).

The facts are clear. The amateur myth in college sports facilitates the economic exploitation of labor to maximize profits for schools and the governing organization (see, Sack and Kidd 1985; Yasser 1984; Koch 1973; Sage 1982). That the NCAA and its amateur code restrict wages is obvious – the average yearly salary of college athletes in 1987-88 was approximately \$7,000, while players in professional basketball averaged \$510,000 and those in professional football averaged \$212,000. The situation is most blatant when considering the value of a college superstar compared to his actual wages while in college. For example, an economic analysis of Patrick Ewing's monetary benefit to Georgetown University revealed that he brought \$12.3 million to the University in additional spectators, television revenues, tournament appearances, and the like. The cost to Georgetown for Ewing's services was approximately \$48,000 for four years of room board, books, and tuition (Leslie 1986).

Amateurism as an anachronism

Being an amateur was once an avocation, a pleasurable activity pursued, without compensation, during leisure. But that vision of sport is clearly outmoded at the elite level in today's sportsworld.

At the international level, nations use sport success as a symbolic representation of their social, economic, and cultural greatness. In the communist countries this means that potential elite athletes are identified at an early age and given the best in coaching, equipment, facilities, sportsmedicine, and a subsidized lifestyle. These athletes devote their lives to athletic excellence. The elite athletes in the west are also subsidized so they can devote their lives to maximizing their sports potential, but the primary source of monies are affluent parents, universities, corporations, and to a lesser extent the state (Osterhoudt 1981). The point is that the original concept of amateur simply does not apply in the international sports arena, where competing at the elite level requires a full-time commitment, superb coaching, specialized equipment, and extensive travel.

Similarly, the pristine notion of amateur does not apply in sports that are part of the successful entertainment industry. When ABC television purchased the rights to televise the Winter Games in Calgary for \$309 million, the notion of the Olympics as amateur sport was clearly ludicrous. To its credit, the Olympics now permit athletes to capitalize on their celebrity status and athletic prowess while retaining their eligibility to compete. This was not always the case. The decisions by the International Olympic Committee and the various ruling bodies as to who is amateur and who is not has resulted in considerable hypocrisy over the years. As Bill Russell has put it:

"The hypocrisy of amateur sports is offensive to anybody who cares. To me, being an amateur is like being a virgin. It is an old idea that has some innocence and charm, celebrated mostly by people to whom it doesn't apply. It doesn't look as good on old people as on young ones. It is impossible to keep partially, though many try to do so. It is associated with deception and pretense. And even if you love the idea, you still can't help being suspicious when you see the pious

members of the U.S. Chastity Committee charging the public money to peep at their soiled virgins" (1979, 118-119).

Similarly, the notion of retaining or recapturing the amateur ideal in big-time college athletics is not going to happen. Universities, college communities (e.g., Penn State University home football games bring an estimated \$20 million a season to the local economy) (Kleinfeld 1987), television networks, corporations, and other entrepreneurs benefit economically from the sport spectacle provided by college sport. With so many beneficiaries, commodified intercollegiate athletes will not return to the amateur ideal of another era. It simply will not happen. In a capitalist society, successful industries do not willingly quit business. George Sage has argued that while:

"reform is necessary, and imminent ... it will be in the form of admitting college athletes into full membership in corporate college athletics. The ideology that has prevented this from happening is no longer viable and the time has come for a thoroughly demythologized approach to college athletics" (1985, 1).

Finally, for sports authorities and organizations to cling unrealistically to the amateur ideal in a bureaucratic, commercial, and professional setting invites behaviors contrary to the precepts of the concept "amateur". The amateur code promotes sportspersonship, fair play, and honesty, but the enforcement of an impossible ideal invites the opposite traits – hypocrisy, cheating, lying, and corruption.

Amateurism as a citadel of purity

The final theme found in the literature on amateurism argues that "pure sport" is a worthy ideal. If sport were an end in itself, as it should be, then it would serve as a garrison against the sleaze and corruption so common to commodified sport. John J. Sewart (1985) has made a strong case that sport has been corrupted and subsumed by the commercial pressures on sport. The hypocrisy surrounding the amateur ideal is not a fault of the ideal itself but a consequence of the corruption of sport. Sewart, while eschewing the arrogance of the amateurism of the nineteenth century aristocrats, feels strongly that "sport should be pursued for the sake of the game, not for profit and not even for success" (1985, 78). The key issue is: what is the essence of sport? Sewart's answer is that it is in individual self-fulfillment:

"For the amateurs, sport is self-sufficient and complete. The denigration and corruption of sport comes when it is engaged in for utilitarian ends. Sport thus forfeits its virtuosity when it is taken up for reasons other than sport (e.g., profit, employment, personal fame, etc.) ... Amateurism is intended to keep sport a participant-oriented affair ... The defense of amateurism is most appropriately concerned with preserving sport's emancipatory and liberative values ... [When] sport becomes an industry, the amateurs feel that both sport and athletes [will] be degraded in the process. The argument offered is that of preserving sport *as an end*, as an activity that is participant oriented and thus satisfies a spiritual need of expression and creativity, rather than *as a means*, whereby the athlete is constrained to satisfy the needs of others (spectator oriented) in the market in order to earn a wage ... I have explored the fate of the amateur ideal in a market society. If this is a utopian vision, I can only wish that more people had it" (1985, 81, 83, 84).

Whither amateur sport?

One sociological axiom is that social institutions are microcosms of the larger society. Thus, we would expect amateur sport in nineteenth century England to reflect the realities of Victorian society. The amateur ideal that emerged in that setting reflected a stratified society, dominated by an aristocratic elite. Most citizens did not have the leisure time nor the resources to make a commitment to excellence in sport. Nor did they have the resources to attend sporting events, especially those held at any distance. The result was that, for the most part, sports contests were organized by specialized sports organizations, whose members were from the elite, and sport was engaged in and observed by the affluent few. The already affluent athletes were motivated primarily by the intrinsic rewards from the activity.

The organization and practice of sport as it occurred in Victorian England is far removed from sport as it is organized and practiced today. Elite amateur sport is now international in scope. Televised sports because of satellite and cable technology are now available instantaneously to almost everyone, worldwide. Huge bureaucracies dominate amateur sport. Sports participation is no longer restricted by social class. Contemporary elite athletes surely do not engage in sport as an avocation; attaining and retaining elite status requires a full time commitment that must be subsidized. And sport, even so-called amateur sport, is characterized by spectacle, commercialism, and power politics.

Money from corporations, television, sponsors, and spectators now drives elite sport. What we have witnessed in the past half century or so and what has surely accelerated since 1970 when television began infusing sport with huge sums (Rader 1984), is the commodification of sport. This concept refers to the social, psychological, and cultural uses of social structures for the commercial needs of advanced monopoly capital (Young 1984, 7). The human consequences of commodification are dramatic. Human beings are objects – interchangeable parts – in their role as workers in the production process and they are objects to be manipulated in their role as consumers. In the sports realm, administrators (e.g., the International Olympic Committee or the NCAA) allow profit maximizing decisions to take precedence over humane considerations. Sports enterprises produce what they can sell and sports spectacles attract customers. Today's top level athletes, whether so-called amateur or professional, are workers who sell their labor power – their ability to draw crowds – to employers. Thus, players are employees. Sometimes they are exploited, under the guise of amateurism, by artificially low financial rewards, misrepresentation (e.g., college athletes receive little for their services but they are led to believe that they are student-athletes who will receive a college education – a myth for many, especially black athletes; see Eitzen 1988), or by being treated as instruments for producing victories and income. This last point is made forcefully by Jean-Marie Brohm:

"Every sport now involves a fantastic *manipulation of human robots* by doctors, psychologists, bio-chemists and trainers. The "manufacturing of champions" is no longer a craft but an industry, calling on specialized laboratories, research institutes, training camps, and experimental sport centers. Most top-level athletes are reduced to the status of more or less voluntary guinea pigs. "Hopefuls" are spotted young, the less talented are methodically weeded out and those that remain are then systematically oriented according to their

potential. The specialists in this sporting Gulag stop at no human sacrifice in their drive to push back the limits of human capacity and transcend biological barriers" (1978, 18-19).

In short, sport and its participants are like any other commodity – "Something to be marketed, packaged, and sold ... The consequence of the process of commodification is that the multifarious forms of human activity lose their unique and distinct qualities to the principles of the market" (Sewart 1981, 47-48).

This is what elite amateur sport has become (Furst 1971). The principles of the market place dictate the rules, procedures, and the processes of elite sport. The implication, of course, is that societal forces have transformed sport into something unrecognizable from the amateur ideal. This change, I argue, is nonreversible for the foreseeable future. We are not going to return to anything resembling pure amateurism at the elite level. Elite, commodified sport is too important to nations, sports organizations, corporations, communities, athletes, and fans for there to be a reversal in the dominant trend. In short, elite amateur sport is corporate sport. To call it "amateur" is a fiction with potentially damaging consequences for athletes. My plea is that we remove the hypocrisy, call it professional sport, and treat athletes fairly as professionals.

At another level, however, amateur sport thrives. There are athletes between the "dabblers" and the professionals who strive for excellence in sport in relative obscurity. They may be triathletes, "master's" runners, softball players, rowers (see Halberstam 1985; Kiesling 1988), or whatever, who are committed to their sport, to enjoying the activity, and to fair competition. They gain only from the experience, not from extrinsic rewards. For them the process is prize enough. They are true sportswomen and sportsmen because they truly understand the essence of sport. They are the true *amateurs*, for they are engaged in sport because they love it. They and we are ennobled by their spirit, tenacity, commitment, and idealism.

But who are these true amateurs? How do they withstand the powerful societal forces that would move them otherwise? Under what social conditions can amateurism be realized and nurtured? Are there structural conditions that limit amateur sports participation by class, race, and gender? Can youth sports and school sports be organized to insure that amateur ideals prevail? How shall amateur sport be governed? If sport is a microcosm of society, then is true amateurism possible in a capitalist society? These and related questions should guide our inquiry as we research this sports anomaly in our marketplace-centered societies.

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Un Aperçu de la Sociologie du Sport Amateur

Extrait

Cet article traite du problème suivant: L'idéal amateur a-t-il sa place dans le monde sportif d'aujourd'hui? La première partie de l'article énonce les caractères distinctifs de l'amateur. La deuxième partie passe en revue les thèmes dominants de la littérature sportive en ce qui concerne l'amateur idéal: (1) L'amateurisme comme mécanisme d'hégémonie de classe; (2) l'amateurisme comme idéologie exploitive (3) l'amateurisme comme anachronisme; et enfin (4) l'amateurisme comme bastion de pureté. La dernière partie de l'article examine l'amateurisme dans le contexte d'aujourd'hui. Il est d'avis que le sport amateur d'élite a dépassé le stade de l'idéal amateur pour devenir un sport corporatiste. Quoi qu'il en soit, le sport amateur est bel et bien en plein essor. Les questions soulevées actuellement devraient orienter les recherches futures vers ces vrais amateurs.

Zur Soziologie des Amateursports – ein Überblick

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Artikel diskutiert das Amateurideal, um abschätzen zu können, wie weit es noch heute tragfähig ist. Der erste Abschnitt stellt die definitorischen Merkmale des Amateurs dar. Der zweite Abschnitt gibt einen Überblick über die wichtigen Themen zum Amateurideal in der Sport-Literatur und zwar: 1. Amateurismus als ein Mechanismus der Klassenherrschaft; 2. Amateurismus als eine Ausbeutungsideologie; 3. Amateurismus als ein Anachronismus und 4. Amateurismus als eine Festung des Puritanismus. Der letzte Abschnitt stellt eine vergleichende Analyse des Amateurismus dar. Das Argument lautet, daß der Elitesport sich vom Amateursport weg entwickelt hat zu einem korporativen Sport. Auf einer anderen Ebene jedoch entwickelt sich der Amateursport erfolgreich. Es werden Fragen aufgeworfen, die die künftige Erforschung des eigentlichen Amateurs bestimmen sollten.

Sociologia del deporte Amateur: una Vision de Conjunto

Resumen

El presente artículo examina si el ideal del amateurismo es aplicable en el mundo actual del deporte. La primera sección presenta las características definitorias del amateur. La segunda revisa los temas dominantes en la literatura sobre el amateurismo: 1/el amateurismo como mecanismo de la dominación; 2/el amateurismo como ideología de la explotación; 3/el amateurismo como anacronismo; y 4/el amateurismo como "ciudadela de la pureza". La última sección examina el amateurismo en el contexto contemporáneo. La idea principal es que el deporte de elite amateur he transformado el ideal amateur en deporte corporativo. Sin embargo, a otro nivel, el deporte amateur prospera. Se plantean interrogantes que puedan servir como guías para futuras investigaciones en relación a estos "ingenuos" amateurs.

ソシология любительского спорта: обзор

В статье изучается идеал любительства и возможности его осуществления в современном мире спорта. В первой части перечислены определяющие черты любительства. Во второй — изложены важнейшие темы спортивной литературы связанные с идеей любительства: /1/ любительство как механизм классовой гегемонии; /2/ любительство как идеология эксплуатации; /3/ любительство как анахронизм и /4/ любительство как пятнадель чистоты. В заключительной части проанализируется любительство в современном контексте. По важнейшему аргументу любительский спорт высокого класса способствовал тому чтобы идеал любительства привел к общественно организованному спорту. Тем самым на другом уровне любительский спорт обогащается. Возникает ряд вопросов выясняемых дальнейшими исследованиями о настоящих любительских спортсменах.

アマチュアスポーツの社会学 概観

〈抄録〉

本研究は今日のスポーツ界においてアマチュア理念が可能かどうか評価することを検討している。第1節ではアマチュアの明確な特徴が示される。第2節では、アマチュア理念に関するスポーツの文献における主なテーマをレビューする。つまり(1)階級・ゲモニーのメカニズムとしてのアマチュアリズム(2)搾取的イデオロギーとしてのアマチュアリズム(3)時代錯誤としてのアマチュアリズム(4)純潔の最後のよりどころとしてのアマチュアリズム、といったテーマである。最後の節は以下のような現代的コンテクストにおけるアマチュアリズムを検討している。エリート・アマチュア・スポーツはアマチュア理念を超えて企業的スポーツに変化している。しかし、別のレベルでは、アマチュア・スポーツは繁栄している。これらの真のアマチュアに関する将来の研究を導くであろう数々の疑問が提起される。