

Sport Sociology And The Origins of NASSS The Early Years, 1955-1980

**Andrew Yiannakis, Ph.D.
Professor Emeritus, University of Connecticut
Research Professor, University of New Mexico**

**Merrill Melnick, Ph.D.
Professor Emeritus
State University of New York, College at Brockport**

**Troy Morgan, M.A.
Assistant Professor, Metropolitan State College, Denver**

Andrew Yiannakis, Ph.D., is the Senior Founder and First President of the North American Society for the Sociology of Sport, and a recipient of the society's Distinguished Service Award (2002). He is now Research Professor at the University of New Mexico

Merrill Melnick, Ph.D. is Professor Emeritus at the State University of New York, College at Brockport. He is also one of the original Founding Members of NASSS

Troy Morgan, M.A., is Assistant Professor at Metropolitan State College, Denver

Introduction

The emergence and development of the North American Society for the Sociology of Sport (NASSS) is inexorably intertwined with the growth of Sport Sociology in North America and Europe. This paper focuses on this relationship, provides an historical context, addresses current problems and discusses future directions for both the field and the North American Society for the Sociology of Sport.

The Early Years

Works of a sociological and quasi sociological nature about sport can be traced back two or three centuries. While not all may be characterized as “sociological”, they nevertheless provide us with glimpses into patterns of behavior and cultural practices that a sociologist might find valuable and interesting. Some of the earliest works include the following: Sumner's Folkways (1901) in which the author devotes a chapter to “popular sports, exhibitions, and drama”; Holliman's American Sport: 1785-1835 (1931); Manchester's Four Centuries of Sport in America (1931); and Steiner's (1933) Americans at Play, among others. From Poland, Wohl (1966) reported a series of debates on sport that were published in the Polish journal Ruch in 1911 and 1912. About the same time Howard (1912) authored an article in the American Journal of Sociology entitled “Social Psychology of the Spectator” and, in 1921, we find one of the earliest efforts to develop a fuller sociological analysis of sport in a book by Risse, a German Sociologist, called Soziologie des Sports (cited in Wohl, 1966).

In the early 1950s, further efforts to analyze sport from a sociocultural perspective include works by Cozens and Stumpf (1953) entitled Sports in American Life, and Natan's Sport and Society (1958). During this decade we also see the emergence of works focusing on specific sports or activities such as Riesman and Denney's (1951) “Football in America: A study in culture diffusion”; Weinberg and Arond's (1952) “The occupational culture of the boxer”; Stone's (1955) “American Sports: Play and dis-play”; and Coleman's (1959) research on competition and academic achievement. These works were soon followed by Luschen's (1963) “Social stratification and social mobility among young sportsmen”; Kenyon and Loy's (1965) “Toward a Sociology of Sport”; Elias and Dunning's (1966) “Dynamics of group sports with special reference to football”; Schafer and Armer's (1968) “Athletes are not inferior students”; Zurcher and Meadow's (1967) “On bullfights and baseball” and by Heinila's (1971) publication on inter-group conflicts in international sport.

In England, McIntosh (1963), drawing partly on the works of Caillois and Huizinga, published one of the first socio-historical analyses of sport entitled Sport in Society, while in the United States Boyle (1963) published an insightful piece entitled Sport: Mirror of American Life. Shortly thereafter, Magnane (1964) in France published Sociologie du Sport and Kukushkin (1966) of the former Soviet Union wrote:

“The study of the sociological regularities of the development of physical culture in the Soviet Union is one of the most important aspect of research work in this field of science” (p. 242).

A significant trend that emerged in the early 1960s is characterized by works calling for a systematic sociological analysis of sport, and the development of an academic area of study devoted exclusively to this cultural phenomenon. Important contributors during this period include Horkheimer, a German Sociologist who wrote:

The more light [that] is thrown on the functions and possibilities of life in a sporting community, the more necessary it will become to make sport the subject of very serious theoretical and empirical studies, a subject for scientific research (1963, p. 26)

And Dumazedier (1966), a French Sociologist, proposed that.....

For the sociologist, sport is still very young, and we do not know very much about it . . . It is nonetheless necessary to establish in our industrial society a Sociology of Sport in order to be able to take appropriate decisions

In 1964 we also begin to see strong evidence of concerted efforts to organize. An eleven member international committee comprised of both physical educators and sociologists was formed as an outgrowth of the International Council for Sport and Physical Education. Later, this body became an affiliate of the International Sociological Association and held its first biennial congress in Cologne, Germany, in 1966. The theme of the conference was “Small group research in sport”. This same group later founded the International Review for Sport Sociology (which was to be later renamed the International Review for the Sociology of Sport).

In 1968, the Committee on Institutional Cooperation (CIC) held a symposium on the Sociology of Sport at the University of Wisconsin. The presenters at the conference included Gunther Luschen, Gregory Stone, Walter Schafer, Gerry Kenyon, John Loy, Brian Sutton-Smith, Harry Webb and Charles Page, among others. Later in the same year (in November) Kenyon edited and published the proceedings (Kenyon, 1968) of this conference in a book entitled Sociology of Sport: Aspects of Contemporary Sport Sociology. Subsequently, Kenyon (1969) also published a chapter in a book by Brown and Cratty called "A Sociology of Sport: On becoming a sub-discipline", in which he further reinforced the need for the social scientific study of sport. To further underscore the rise of this emerging field of study Loy and his mentor, Gerald Kenyon, published the first North American anthology in the sociology of sport entitled Sport, Culture, and Society (1969). This was a collection of mostly sociological readings about sport that provided an initial conceptual framework for organizing the available research of the period. The topics of this anthology included sport in ethnic cultures, sport and social institutions, sport and social processes, and the sport group as a subculture, among others. This anthology represented a significant contribution to the emerging field and many early Sport Sociologists modeled their scholarly efforts and college courses on the framework of this book.

In the 1970s we note the emergence of important works by several authors such as Celeste Ulrich, George Sage, Marie Hart, Susan Birrell and Gunther Luschen, among others. In many of these works the authors identify and discuss possible linkages between Sport Sociology, Sport Science and the profession of Physical Education. These links were also discussed and debated at state, regional, and national conferences (e.g., annual meetings of the American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance). At the same time many saw this as an opportune time for Sport Sociology to establish itself as a foundational area in Physical Education, especially in the training of Physical Education teachers. Several scholars also argued that Physical Education needed to expand its horizons and incorporate knowledges and theoretical frameworks from the social sciences in order to broaden its academic foundation which, at the time, reflected a mostly biophysical basis. Initially, many such issues came to the fore in a seminal article authored by Henry (1964) entitled "Physical Education As An Academic Discipline". In this paper Henry helped clarify the various distinctions between a profession and a discipline and suggested ways for providing a broad academic basis that would help provide academic legitimacy to the profession of Physical Education. This important article encouraged the development of several sub-

disciplinary links between Physical Education and Sport History, Sport Philosophy, Sport Psychology and Sport Sociology.

Of all the sub-disciplines, Sport Psychology would prove to be one of the more successful at establishing itself as a foundational area for the training of Physical Education teachers. On the other hand, Sociology of Sport, after some promising overtures, failed to develop the knowledge and understandings that Physical Educators were looking for in order to strengthen the academic basis of their field. This failure to achieve a synergy between Sport Sociology and Physical Education can be explained, in part, by two factors.

First, Sport Sociologists failed to produce (or were not interested) the applied knowledge and understandings that could benefit Physical Education teachers. In fact early Sport Sociologists concerned themselves mostly with gaining legitimacy and recognition within the academic community (Loy, Kenyon & McPherson, 1980; McPherson, 1975, 1978) and focused their work mainly on the development of theory and the conduct of basic research. Further, many of the early works employed esoteric jargon which could be understood mostly by other academics. What Physical Education needed most at the time was a form of applied Sport Sociology which, in England, was referred to at the time as "Sociology of Physical Education". Furthermore, the context of the late 1960s and 1970s, with all of its political volatility encouraged Sport Sociologists to focus more of their attention on critical analyses of sport rather than on developing the applied dimensions of the field. In fact, much of the work published during this period challenged established beliefs about sport and its character building attributes, questioned the morality and educational value of commercialized amateur sports, addressed issues of exploitation, racism and sexism and debated the value of organized sports for children (Edwards, 1969, 1973; Loy & McElvogue, 1970; Devereux, 1971; Hoch, 1972; Griffin, 1973; Gerber et al, 1974; Felshin, 1974; Spivey & Jones, 1975, Gruneau, 1975; Greendorfer, 1977; Sack, 1977; Oglesby, 1978; Orlick, 1980). This focus of activity was much needed, we feel, and it was a significant contribution to the study and understanding of the role of sport in society; however, the mostly critical nature of some of these writings served to alienate leaders in both Physical Education and, especially, college athletics. This is not surprising because by the mid-1970s, the myth of the "purity" of American sport had been severely challenged and serious questions were raised about the educational soundness of the American sport model for children, women and young adults in college sports. For example, on the subject of children in sport Devereux (1971) questioned the value of adult-organized programs (e.g., Little League Baseball) and

suggested that such programs often deprived young participants of important educational experiences and helped retard their social, cognitive and emotional development. Devereux, who based his work on the works of Moore and Anderson (1969), and Kohlberg (1964), pointed out that the characteristics of a “good” learning environment in sport (as well as in other settings) should permit children to experience free and safe exploration, provide opportunities to assume the role of the generalized other, and explore a variety of emotions in a safe environment free from the critical eyes of adult supervisors and spectators. Devereux reported that he found few such positive characteristics in adult-organized children’s sports programs and his work made a strong case that the very social structures and processes associated with children’s organized sports were exploitative and damaging to the growth and development of children.

The growing sentiment that American sport was not without its own unique problems and issues helped set the stage for the emergence and development of a particular brand of Sport Sociology that was at once critical and condemning. Sport Sociology’s early marriage to a traditional, functionalist paradigm began to give way to a much more critical and conflict-oriented perspective. Embracing a more critical perspective, we might add, was at the time an intellectually energizing experience which inspired the publication of many books and articles. The downside, however, had the effect of distancing, and ultimately alienating Sport Sociology from both athletics and the Physical Education profession. In hindsight, we feel that such a distancing could have been prevented if critical Sport Sociologists provided more balanced analyses that included attempts to provide solutions to problems in sport. More on this point later in the paper.

However, not all of the newly emerging sub-fields shared the same fate as Sport Sociology. Sport Psychology, for example, with its emphasis on sport performance enhancement was, not surprisingly, received much more warmly by the Physical Education profession, intercollegiate athletics departments and professional sports. After all, most Sport Psychologists of the period focused much of their work on the positive aspects of sport and their efforts were seen as having practical value to the Physical Education profession, to coaches, and the field of professional sports. Sadly, many of their efforts reflected uncritical approaches and analyses (Ogilvie and Tutko, 1966) and their writings helped support a functionalist, and many argued, an overly conservative ideology. Despite the unfortunate title of their book which, according to the authors, misrepresented their perspective on college sports, Ogilvie & Tutko later expressed a disaffection with the structure of intercollegiate athletics and, in 1971, published a short piece in Psychology

Today with the title, "If you want to build character try something else" (Ogilvie & Tutko, 1971).

The late 1960s and early 1970s also bore witness to the emergence of a plethora of anthologies and textbooks which provided us with many exposé-type works that focused on the various ills of intercollegiate and professional sports. They included: Scott's The Athletic Revolution (1971); Hoch's Rip Off the Big Game (1972), Parrish's They Call It a Game (1971); Meggyesy's Out of Their League (1971); and Shaw's Meat on the Hoof (1972), among others. These publications helped unveil the darker, back regions of American Sport and provided useful insights and understandings. Readers caught glimpses, perhaps for the first time, of the sordid underbelly of sport, including exploitation, drug use, racism and sexism, among other ills. Many such ills were later to be captured in movies such as "The Program" and "North Dallas Forty", to name just two. For historical reasons alone it is noteworthy to also list in this paper some of the earlier major works which helped shed light on sport, and helped contribute to the study of the phenomenon from a sociological perspective. The list includes publications up to 1979:

- Kenyon: Sociology of Sport (1969)
- Loy & Kenyon: Sport, Culture, and Society (1969)
- Sage: Sport and American Society (1970)
- Luschen: The Cross-Cultural Analysis of Sport and Games (1970)
- Dunning: Sport: Readings from a Sociological Perspective (1972)
- Hart & Birrell: Sport in the Sociocultural Process (1972)
- Talamini and Page: Sport and Society: An Anthology (1973)
- Edwards: Sociology of Sport (1973)
- Gerber, Felshin, Berlin & Wyrick: The American Woman in Sport (1974)
- Ibrahim: Sport and Society: An Introduction to Sociology of Sport (1975)
- Ball and Loy: Sport and Social Order (1975)
- Yiannakis, McIntyre, Melnick & Hart: Sport Sociology: Contemporary Themes (1976)
- Nixon: Sport and Social Organization (1976)
- Snyder & Spreitzer: Social Aspects of Sport (1978)
- Loy, McPherson, Kenyon: Sport and Social Systems (1978)
- Coakley: Sport in Society: Issues and Controversies (1978)
- Eitzen & Sage: Sociology of North American Sport (1978)
- Krotee: The Dimensions of Sport Sociology (1979)
- Eitzen: Sport in Contemporary Society (1979)

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, a number of Sport Sociologists also found themselves grappling with a number of conceptual and methodological issues as these related to the sociological enterprise. Particular concerns were expressed about the importance of achieving academic respectability and

credibility for this new and developing field. The related issues of relevance and application (Melnick, 1975, 1980) and the place of social advocacy also figured prominently in the debates of the period. However, for the most part, Sport Sociologists shied away from engaging in these debates and chose instead to restrict their scholarly activities to the production of mostly basic research and theoretical critiques. Interestingly, in mainstream Sociology, the applied research/work was also a popular area of debate and much was written on the topic. In fact, the applied uses of Sociology were the subject of a keynote address by Rossi, the President of the American Sociological Association at the 1980 annual meeting.

The turbulent times of the late 1960s and 1970s were due in no small part to the Viet Nam War and the resulting student demonstrations on many college campuses across the country. Social inequalities, racist practices and civil unrest no doubt added fuel to the emerging period of uncertainty in the United States. In the midst of such turmoil we also witnessed the emergence of an intellectual and political revolution in universities across the country. For the first time in American history students and faculty, who in comparison to Europe's academic establishments could best be characterized at that time as apolitical and uninvolved, found themselves besieging administration buildings, demanding an end to the Viet Nam War and a voice in the shaping of higher education! Paralleling these events this period also bore witness to the emergence of "paradigm wars" in several fields, including the Sociology of Sport. Advocates and proponents of functionalism, Marxism, symbolic interactionism, feminist critique, and cultural studies, to name just a few, were topics of serious theoretical debate, especially as these applied to the study of sport. Since sport had received little attention from mainstream sociology up to this point, it was unclear, especially among first and second generation Sport Sociologists, as to which theoretical perspectives would best serve this new field. For example, at the first NASSS conference held in Denver, in 1980, speakers presented papers from Marxist, feminist, and functionalist perspectives, among several others. As is usually the case with most, if not all developing fields, such "paradigm wars" were inevitable and contributed to healthy, and at times heated debates. Such debates focused on such issues as the role of advocacy in the research process and the relevance of "normal science" for sport sociological research, among others. Despite the differences, or perhaps because of them, many significant contributions to the body of knowledge were made as a result and the Sport Sociology literature of this period is replete with examples of some very fine, as well as pedestrian forms of scholarship. Underlying such debates was a struggle to define an identity for the newly developing field. This struggle continues

today and it is still unclear whether Sport Sociology is moving any closer to achieving a measure of consensus. What does appear to be the case is that critical theory, in all of its manifestations (e.g., cultural studies, feminist critique, post-modernism), enjoys current favor while functionalism, symbolic interactionism, hermeneutics and Marxism have fewer followers.

In summary, by the late-1970s, the Sociology of Sport could be best described as being in a state of theoretical and methodological flux as evidenced by the striking diversity noted in published works and papers presented at scholarly conferences.

1978: The Formation of the North American Society for the Sociology of Sport (NASSS)

Within the context of this emerging and developing field a group of Sport Sociologists met at the University of Minnesota, in 1978, at the second Big Ten CIC Symposium on the Sociology of Sport. The conference, which was organized by March Krotee, was attended by many leading scholars of the day. Following the final session, Andrew Yiannakis, after consulting with Susan Greendorfer, Lee Vander Velden and Merrill Melnick, proposed the formation of a Sociology of Sport society. Discussion ensued and various viewpoints and positions were expressed. Some believed that the group would be better served if it worked to develop the Sociology of Sport as a branch of the American Sociological Association. However, given the relatively low status of the field within mainstream sociology at that time, it seemed to many in the group that the formation of an independent organization was the better option. Many at the conference argued that an independent society would have autonomy and serve the professional needs of its members more effectively. After some debate a total of 22 conference attendees then adjourned to the lobby of the Mayo Memorial Auditorium and continued the discussion. Andrew Yiannakis was appointed by those present to moderate the session. Those in attendance were: March Krotee, George Sage, Eldon Snyder, Elmer Spreitzer, Lee Vander Velden, Peggy Cramer, Jim Bryant, Merrill Melnick, Tom McIntyre, Janet Harris, Jim Frey, Joel Thirer, Rich Lapchick, Dean Anderson, Gunther Luschen, John Loy, Andrew Yiannakis, Susan Greendorfer, Jim Santomier, Fred Hatfield, Dan Landers, and Jim LaPoint. Consensus was eventually reached on the need to form a new, independent society and then Yiannakis proposed the formation of a Steering Committee to manage the process. The Steering Committee decided upon by those present was composed of Susan Greendorfer, Lee Vander Velden, Peggy Cramer, Eldon Snyder, and Andrew Yiannakis. Yiannakis was chosen

as the Steering Committee's Chairperson, Susan Greendorfer as the committee's Treasurer, and Lee Vander Velden was selected as Secretary. Eldon Snyder agreed to serve as Member-At-Large. The committee was entrusted with the task of starting a newsletter, establishing a dues structure, planning an annual conference and investigating the feasibility of starting a scholarly journal.

The first newsletter (The NASSS Newsletter) was published in December of 1978. Andrew Yiannakis served as editor. For subsequent issues, John Sugden was invited to join as Associate Editor.

In these rather humble beginnings we see the emergence of an organization which was later to grow and develop into a significant international society. It is important to note, however, that NASSS did not emerge in a vacuum. The publication of several significant works in the United States and Europe, and the various organizational activities among scholars on both continents set the stage and provided the basis for what followed in the late '70s and early '80s. The efforts, publications and presentations of earlier scholars made a convincing case that sport could be studied from a sociological perspective, and, that valuable theoretical and methodological insights could be derived from such study.

Just as importantly, many of us at the time also felt that the study of sport from a sociological perspective could yield important knowledge that would help provide solutions to problems in Physical Education, college athletics and professional sports. The enthusiasm and optimism among us could be strongly felt at the time and many of us began to devote our scholarly efforts to exploring what this new field had to offer. Thus energized we descended on Denver in the fall of 1980 for our first NASSS conference.

1980: The First NASSS Conference

In 1980, the first annual NASSS Conference was successfully held in Denver, Colorado. It was organized and moderated by Andrew Yiannakis. Jim Bryant served as the Site Chair and Susan Greendorfer functioned as Treasurer. Jim Frey provided invaluable advertising services, with support from the University of Nevada.

A total of 119 people attended. Ann Hall, George Sage and Jack Scott were the Keynote Speakers. Among other notables in attendance were Jay Coakley, Gregory Stone, Barry McPherson, Steven Messner, Eldon Snyder, Elmer Spreitzer, Lee Vander Velden, Janet Harris, Mary McElroy, Richard Gruneau, Rob Beamish, Howard Nixon, March Krotee, Cynthia Hasbrook,

Mary Duquin, Annelies Knoppers, John Massengale, Richard Lapchick, Allen Sack, Guenther Luschen, Dean Anderson, James Santomier, Wib Leonard, Dave Meggesey, Nancy Theberge, Merrill Melnick, Sue Birrell and Stan Eitzen, among many other well known scholars of the day.

Since then, NASSS has held a national conference every year. In 2004 (Tucson, Arizona), the society celebrated its Silver Jubilee. The conference was well attended (over 200 participants) and included visitors from several countries outside North America including England, Japan, Australia and Korea, among others.

Unfortunately, more recent conferences have evidenced a significant drop among American scholars and graduate students. The decrease in numbers most likely reflects some deeper problems in American Sport Sociology, including the failure of American Sport Sociologists to "connect effectively" with collegiate and professional sports organizations, with Physical Education professionals, the general public and, even more importantly, with the media. The rapid growth of Sport Management in the United States may have also contributed to Sport Sociology's problems.

While some American Sport Sociologists continue to contest the proposition that the field is beset by serious problems, let us examine the issue and consider the available evidence:

1. In the US, college course offerings in the area have been scaled back significantly since the 1980s.
2. Most doctoral programs have been eliminated. At the height of the field's expansion phase the following universities offered Ph.D. programs (in Kinesiology and/or Physical Education Departments) specializing in Sport Sociology:
 - (i). The University of Maryland
 - (ii). University of Illinois
 - (iii). University of Massachusetts
 - (iv). University of Minnesota
 - (v). The Ohio State University
 - (vi). The University of Connecticut
 - (vii) The University of Iowa
 - (viii). The University of Florida
3. Today, few of the schools mentioned earlier offer a major specialization at the Ph.D. level in Sport Sociology and those departments that have

retained the area offer it mostly as a minor, *often under the guise of Sport Management.*

4. Sport Sociology faculty positions are scarce and unless graduate students combine their specialization with Sport Management, or some other related area such as Media Studies or Communications, their chances of landing a tenured faculty position are rather slim. In fact, some of our most prominent Sport Sociologists are now administratively located in departments of Sport Management, Business and the like (e.g., Allen Sack and Ellen Staurowsky, among others).
5. In the United States fewer students are entering the field as a primary area of graduate study. However, many students continue to pursue the area as a secondary field in departments of Sport Management.
6. At many schools, Sociology of Sport courses that were formerly required are now offered as electives, if at all.
7. Positions vacated by retiring Sport Sociologists are not being filled. In fact, in departments where Sport Sociology courses are still offered these are now mostly taught by faculty who can best be described as "generalists", or whose primary area is Sport Management.
8. It has been increasingly evident that when the media invite commentary and interviews on issues about sport, Sport Sociologists are infrequently approached, if at all. This is not to diminish the efforts of such leaders in our field as Jay Coakley, Allen Sack, Othello Harris, Earl Smith, Gary Sailes, Richard Lapchick and Mary Jo Kane, to name but a few, but the point is clear. The media, for the most part, either don't know we exist or we simply don't matter. Interestingly, Sport Psychologists or coaches stand a better chance of being interviewed than experts in the Sociology of Sport.

It is noteworthy, however, that at the 2008 NASSS Conference in Denver, Colorado, Cheryl Cooky organized a round table session entitled: "Engaging the mainstream media: Strategies to inject sociology of sport knowledge into public discourse" in which Jay Coakley, Michael Messner, Richard Lapchick, Mary Jo Kane and

Genevieve Rail provided useful pointers and suggested some useful strategies for engaging the media.

It is not an exaggeration to suggest that 2008 was a watershed year for Sport Sociology. About this period we began to see concerted efforts at the institutional level to make Sport Sociology more relevant and, dare we say, more applied! Clearly key members of NASSS were beginning, en masse, to address ways of engaging the media and making our presence and contributions more widely known. However, involvement by more academics, especially among the younger members of NASSS, is necessary. This strategy, we feel, needs to be coordinated with leaders in our field and Sociology of Sport societies in the USA and other countries (e.g., ISSA) in order to maximize the impact of our efforts globally.

We suggest that the above list of factors is a clear indication of the existence of major problems in American Sport Sociology. Yet, the availability of an extensive corpus of published scholarly work, the presence of several professional organizations and societies, the existence of thriving scholarly journals, and the many conferences held regularly in the US, and around the world, would suggest otherwise. So what is the problem? Why are college and university teaching positions in Sociology of Sport in the USA so scarce? Why have most Ph.D. programs in Sport Sociology been eliminated? Why is the Sociology of Sport, with a few exceptions, a marginalized area of study in American higher education?

Our analysis suggests that we need to distinguish between (a) the scholarly study of sport pursued by individual academics, on the one hand, and (b) the collective failure of the field to institutionalize and establish itself as a viable and relevant academic entity in universities, and with various bodies in the world of sport. This is where we believe the disconnect resides. Also, while many Sport Sociologists are continually engaged in research and scholarship, most pursue this line of research activity as a secondary area to their primary discipline (mostly Sociology) and the expectations of their "home" departments. This is not surprising because few universities adequately recognize the academic significance of Sport Sociology and anyone publishing in this area whose home department is not Kinesiology, Physical Education, or Sport Management, is less likely to move up the academic ladder and obtain tenure. But, as we mentioned earlier, there are fewer and fewer graduate programs in such departments (except in Sport Management) and few job opportunities exist in the United States for those specializing in the Sociology of Sport. And those who study Sport Sociology

in departments or programs of Sport Management must "spin" their work to conform to a sport management, rather than a sociological model. Thus while many in various academic fields in the United States may be publishing in the area of Sport Sociology, few today are actually "invested" in the field as their primary academic and professional area. Thus, while the field may appear healthy in the area of knowledge production, the structure and institutional foundations of the field in the USA are weak. The diminishing list of course offerings, the disappearance of graduate programs and the lack of job opportunities for Sport Sociologists in the US are major indicators, we assert, of a very sick patient.

The Future of American Sport Sociology: Some Speculations

We believe that the future of the Sociology of Sport in the United States is very much dependent upon how we go about addressing the key issues and questions that beset the field, and the kinds of solutions that we are able to provide. In our view the key issues and questions we raise in this paper must be addressed and successfully resolved by American Sport Sociologists if the field is to survive, and thrive. In our view some of the major issues and questions include the following:

(i) Relevance and Importance of the Field

First, we need to address the relevance and importance of the field to society, the world of sport in general and its role in academe. It is not far from the mark to suggest that the study of sport has always suffered from a sense of academic irrelevance. While sport is generally viewed as a legitimate venue for recreation and amusement, it has struggled to gain support as a phenomenon worthy of scholarly attention. Perhaps Sport Sociologists have done a poor job of convincing others that the analysis, description and explanation of sport is a worthy academic enterprise in and of itself; and, the justification for the existence of the field "on liberal arts grounds" has proved to be an inadequate argument in legitimating Sport Sociology in today's competitive, academic marketplace. The failure to make a strong case for the field's relevance and application is another major contributor to this state of affairs. While other fields and disciplines such as Philosophy or History, to name just two, may also experience pressures in academe, or the public sector, they are deeply embedded in the mores of western thought and civilization and this helps ensure their survival and legitimacy. Sport

Sociology, as a new field of study, on the other hand, has no such legitimacy in American higher education so its existence, legitimization and future growth must be continually defended and promoted.

(ii) A Critical Emphasis But Few Solutions

Harsh, critical analyses of sport (and the absence of solutions), while academically necessary and worthwhile, have also contributed to the schism between Sport Sociologists and the very institutions they seek to better understand. In fact, Sport Sociologists are often seen in the public eye as “sport haters”. Given the fact that we live in a society in which sport is perceived to play a significant and positive role in the lives of many, it is not surprising that the Sport Sociologist’s critique often falls on hostile, if not deaf ears. Understandably, the public finds itself often confused by Sport Sociologists who declare that they love sport but just hate how it’s exploited for political and economic gain. Further, it is evident that American Sport Sociologists have not done a very good job of pointing out that their critiques are limited to those systems and structures that exploit, or contribute to the maintenance and reproduction of racist, sexist, and other oppressive practices (Foley, 2000). Nor have Sport Sociologists convincingly clarified in their works and presentations that their efforts to expose the various ills, and often abusive practices that oppress participants, are actually intended to help the very athletes who are often the victims of such oppression and exploitation. As a result, we have also made enemies of many of the very participants we have tried to help. We believe that the disconnect between our work, and the very individuals we are attempting to help, is the fact that most critical analyses of sport, with some exceptions in earlier works (Hoch, 1972; Edwards, 1973; Adler & Adler, 1985; Hughes & Coakley, 1991), offer few if any solutions to the problems faced by those involved in sport. This is not surprising to us because much of the work in the last thirty or forty years has been mostly critical, inaccessible, driven by esoteric theoretical excursions and off-putting jargon intended for like-minded scholars than a more broadly-based readership. Further, there is little evidence in many such works that there is any real concern and caring for the sport participants themselves, as evidenced by the dearth of efforts to advance a Sociology of Sport that aims at providing solutions. Which brings us back once more to the question of developing an applied Sociology of Sport whose primary goal, Yiannakis asserted in 1989, should be "the amelioration of the human condition" in sport (Yiannakis, 1989).

(iii) Teaching Sociology of Sport As a Forum for Advocacy

Some Sport Sociologists may be guilty of favoring some issues to the exclusion of providing their students with a broader, more balanced perspective on the relationship between sport and society. Some may have politicized their course content to such a degree that they have lost much of their "scientific objectivity". In fact some have even used their classrooms as "bully pulpits" in order to engage in personal advocacy. We're not convinced that the classroom is the appropriate forum for such activity. No doubt this approach has cost the field in terms of "turning off" many students, and has helped to further distance Sport Sociology from colleagues, administrators and the general public.

As informed students of the role of sport in society we, as academics, possess deeper insights into the ills that plague commercialized amateur sports at all levels. As such, it behooves Sport Sociologists to speak out, write about, and promote activities that can bring about institutional change. We take the position, however, that our role in the classroom must be divorced from advocacy. Rather, we believe that as teachers it is our primary responsibility to challenge students to think critically by presenting all sides of the argument and then letting the students form their own opinion, even if the opinion they eventually espouse may ultimately seem short sighted, or incorrect to us. If we are unable to stand back and present all sides of an argument in a reasonably unbiased manner, regardless of how we see a problem or issue, we then run the risk of losing our own credibility with many of our students and, eventually, the only ones who take our classes are those whose opinions agree with ours. Putting it plainly, we end up "preaching to the choir"!

(iv) The Place of Advocacy

While we believe that advocacy has no place in the classroom we are also of the opinion that positive social change and "the amelioration of the human condition" can best be effected by those who are most knowledgeable. And who is best qualified to provide leadership in this important endeavor than Sport Sociologists who possess the knowledge and the analytical skills that can make a difference?

To be effective social advocates, however, we need to keep our roles of academics distinct and separate from our roles as advocates. Therefore, advocacy must be conducted outside the classroom, with organizational support and the necessary financial resources. Joining together to build a

power base is one of the most efficient ways the field can become an effective change agent. Unfortunately, our efforts to date have been largely ineffectual, primarily because we lack, for the most part, organization, unity, commitment and support. There are exceptions, of course, and we note the efforts of Cary Goodman and Allen Sack in their work with the Sports For The People organization in the Bronx, in the early 1980s, and the current work of The Drake Group and the Women's Sports Foundation. This is important work that is based on organization and group involvement, and perhaps the only viable way we can hope to successfully challenge the "power brokers" the block change in sport. We also need to recognize that advocacy is a form of political activity, and unless we're committed to advancing social policies, working together, and have a well articulated social agenda, our ultimate impact on making the sport institution more democratic and socially just is likely to be ineffectual and inconsequential.

(v) Importance of Marketing

For the most part Sport Sociologists have generally displayed a reluctance to "market" what they have to offer. Some probably cringe at the thought of doing so because the word conjures up notions of capitalist, exploitative, and deceptive commercial practices. Yet, in the competitive world we live in those who fail to engage in effective marketing practices are not heard, and ultimately lose out. If the message we wish to convey fails to reach its intended audiences, then the field's ability to inform, educate, and enlighten becomes highly problematic. At the very least, we recommend that NASSS and ISSA create a marketing arm (and we have several Sport Management colleagues in both organizations who can help), to assist the field in accomplishing this major objective. This is a worthy topic for debate and may make for a stimulating round-table session at future conferences in both Europe and North America.

(vi) A Commitment To An Applied Sociology of Sport

The issue of relevance and application in Sociology of Sport surfaced in the literature almost fifty years ago. Since those early works by Wohl (1966), Lenk (1973), Voight (1974), Melnick (1980) and Luschen (1985), among others, the need for an applied Sociology of Sport has been the subject of considerable debate in published works and presentations (Sage; 1977, 1985; Greendorfer, 1985; Widmer, 1977; Gruneau (1978); Ulrich, 1979; Heinemann, 1983; Rees, 1984; Luschen, 1985; Massengale, 1985; Hellison,

1986; McPherson, 1986; Sack, 1986; Yiannakis, 1986, 1988, 1989a, 1989b, 1990; Yiannakis & Greendorfer, 1992; Kjeldsen, 1988; and Santomier, 1988, among others), and has been the focus of deliberation at three major national conferences (NASSS, Boston, 1985; AAHPERD, Cincinnati, 1986; NASSS, Cincinnati, 1988). Yet, despite an increasing interest in relevance and application relatively little has been done to further the conceptual or methodological foundations of an Applied Sociology of Sport (Yiannakis and Greendorfer, 1992). At recent NASSS Annual Conferences, however, there is evidence of a move in this direction, especially in areas involving the application of Sport Sociology to the solution of problems in international sport and inter-cultural conflict (more on this later on in the paper).

Among Sociologists, the discussion about the issue of relevance and application in Sociology predates Sport Sociology by at least a decade, as evidenced by a variety of published works (Coller, 1955; Yonebayashi, 1960; Veidemanis, 1964; Jalowiecki, 1967; Gelfand, 1975; Street and Weinstein, 1975; Demartini, 1979; Rossi, 1980; Berk, 1981; Boros, 1981; Kalmuss, 1981; Murphy, 1981; Watts et al., 1983; Sherohman, 1984; Lyson and Squires, 1984; Klein, 1984; Bulmer, 1985; Foote, 1985, among others), conferences on the topic, job advertisements, and course and program developments. Several journals are also in existence which are devoted exclusively to works in applied sociology (e.g., *Applied Sociology*; *Sociological Practice*; *Journal of Applied Sociology*; *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare*; and *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, among others).

Today, applied research is still viewed with mixed feelings among Sport Sociologists and many social scientists, and many still believe that applied work is not really worthy of their best efforts. Yet, it is exactly through the conduct of solid, applied work that the relevance and usefulness of the field can best be demonstrated to society and the world of sport. However, with the exception of a handful of published works (Yiannakis, 1989a, 1990; Yiannakis & Greendorfer, 1992), applied work in the Sociology of Sport is still a much neglected area, and this has further enlarged the gulf among Sport Sociologists and the public and private sectors.

(vii) What Exactly Is Applied Sport Sociology?

Applied activity is work that is of practical value to society. It speaks to: (a) the provision of timely solutions to problems of practical importance and significance; (b) helps bring about social change; and (c) contributes to the amelioration of the human condition. Thus, applied work concerns itself with

what "ought to be" rather than with the description, discovery and explanation of "what is" (Yiannakis, 1989a; 1990).

It is important to underscore, therefore, that until the field incorporates and institutionalizes an applied perspective, recognition of its importance and acceptance among Sport Sociologists and the public may well continue to remain an elusive goal. There is hope, however. It appears that a new cohort of up-and-coming Sport Sociologists is beginning to use sport to achieve larger objectives that few among the first generation Sport Sociologists conceived as possible, or even worthwhile. Their work is currently focusing on resolving issues of international/inter-cultural/inter-ethnic conflict (Sugden, 1991; Lyras, 2007; Lyras & Kotziamani, 2008; Lyras & Yiannakis, 2008; Wolff et al, 2008; Stemen, 2010), helping to achieve peace initiatives and contribute to positive social change in accordance with United Nations guidelines (2003) for development and peace through sport (Lyras, Yiannakis & Kartakoullis, 2005). This focus has been steadily gaining more momentum and, under the leadership of Alexis Lyras from Georgetown University, the first conference of its kind was held in 2013 at Ancient Olympia, Greece, called "Olympism for Humanity". This is a global venture which "aims to advance Olympism, Peace Building, & International Development Scholarship and Practice".

(viii) National Level Networking

On the national level in the United States Sport Sociology has not fared well in its association with organizations such as AAHPERD (some may recall that the Sport Sociology Academy of AAHPERD is now defunct). While a relationship with Physical Education may or may not be one Sport Sociologists covet, it is one that must be seriously explored because physical educators and coaches can be important social change agents if applied work is to be successfully implemented. The recent merging within the National Association of Physical Education and Sport (a major division of AAHPERD) of Sport Psychology, Sport History and Sport Philosophy into a single administrative entity is quite revealing and is indicative of our field's perceived irrelevance in the eyes of many physical educators. However, if Sport Sociologists truly believe that sports and physical activities are important social contexts for enhancing personal growth and development, then we should not be reluctant to seek out meaningful alliances with the Physical Education profession and, in particular, the relatively new American Kinesiology Association; this association, incidentally now numbers over 100 institutions.

(ix) International Level Networking

At the international level only a handful of American Sport Sociologists have sought membership in international societies (e.g., ISSA, ICSSPE) and as a consequence, the impact of American Sport Sociologists in the international arena, with a few exceptions, has been relatively minimal. We believe that at least four reasons may account for this. (1) NASSS's relatively small membership (less than 300 active members) may undermine its ability to function effectively in the international arena. (2) Failure by many American Sport Sociologists to contribute in applied work, an area that European and Canadian Sport Sociologists have excelled in, has muted the impact of those few from the United States whose works speak to application, (3) Most American Sport Sociologists appear to have little interest in global sport issues and problems, choosing instead to focus on topics pertaining mostly to American college and professional football and basketball. This we believe is a narrow and provincial focus and we need to encourage more of our colleagues to begin to think more globally; there is hope, however, as more Sport Sociologists begin to embrace the concept of globalization in their work. In this regard we recognize the pioneer work of Joe MaGuire from Loughborough University, UK.

(x) Problems and Challenges For Applied Sport Sociologists in the 21st Century

While the future holds exciting opportunities for doing Applied Sport Sociology in the 21st century, opportunities are of little value if Sport Sociologists do not recognize them as such, or do not take advantage of them. However, before understanding, planning and action are brought into play, it is essential for Sport Sociologists to define and map out the opportunities and challenges they are likely to face in the decades ahead. We offer the following suggestions for the reader's consideration:

(a) Steadfast allegiance to several competing theoretical perspectives or "schools of thought", including the artificial methodological division between qualitative and quantitative forms of research, have led to conflict within the membership, and undermined the field's political base. Further, if this conflict continues, it may well drain the organization's intellectual energy and divert attention from more important and pressing issues. While we are well beyond the "paradigm wars" (we hope!) we alluded to earlier, there is still a need to

move beyond such intellectual confines and adopt a perspective of inclusion. Let us focus on the strengths that unite us, not the differences that divide us!

(b). The lack of cohesion alluded to above is partly due to the fact that Sport Sociology continues to lack a clear and strong identity as an area of study. This lack of identity, which is further exacerbated by uncertainty as to its location within the academic community, makes the field vulnerable to intellectual and territorial cannibalization. This situation has implications in at least two areas:

(a) As undergraduate and graduate Sport Science/Sport Studies programs in the United States continue to de-emphasize Sport Sociology as an area of concentration, the popular field of Sport Management has systematically engaged in a process of incorporating sociologically-based subject matter, theories, and research methodologies to suit its own particular needs. If this continues unchecked, the result is likely to be an even greater identity degradation for Sport Sociology. In fact, the current trend in the United States is for Sport Management programs to offer courses entitled "Issues in Sport" and "Issues for Sport Managers", among others, which we view as thinly veiled attempts to co-opt major areas of subject matter from Sport Sociology. Ironically, what we are now witnessing is the transformation of Sport Sociology into an applied field that helps inform several subspecialties within Sport Management. So, while the applied orientation that some Sport Sociologists have been calling for over the past twenty years may not take strong root in Sport Sociology, a type of application with a mixture of Sociology and Business is emerging in departments of Sport Management. There is no question that as Sport Sociology grows and develops around the world a boundary issue will need to be addressed between itself and the field of Sport Management. However, we recognize the fact that the preeminent field that takes the credit for currently developing an applied orientation is not the Sociology of Sport, but Sport Management. There are some good reasons that help explain this development. First, Sport Management is a hybrid area that combines theory and application and draws from a number of parent disciplines such as Sociology, Social Psychology, Economics, Management and Marketing. Theory, relevance, methodology and application have been arguably integrated into a unified field of study in Sport Management, a situation which clearly demonstrates that the field has successfully resolved the conflicting dichotomies of theory, relevance and application. Further, the inter-disciplinary nature of Sport Management equips and enables proponents of the field to address issues in sport by employing diverse and multidisciplinary perspectives, an approach that more adequately reflects the complexities of the real world of sport and society. So what does all this

mean for Sport Sociology? Has the emergence of Sport Management made Applied Sociology of Sport a redundant or obsolete sub-specialization within the Sociology of Sport? While we don't believe this to be the case we suggest that this may be a useful topic for debate at future conferences in North America and Europe.

(b) A second trend that appears to be emerging in the United States is the slow but gradual absorption of the field by Sociology Departments. If this process proves successful, then Sport Sociology will find itself as another sub-area such as the Sociology of Religion, the Sociology of Work, and the Sociology of Medicine within mainstream Sociology. This may enhance the academic legitimacy of the sociological study of sport but it is unlikely to contribute to the development of an applied orientation in the way we have previously argued. More importantly, the possibility of establishing any meaningful practical links with physical education, athletics and professional sports will be lost because it is reasonable to assume that Sociology Departments are less likely to be interested in developing such links. In order to prevent this from happening Sociologists who study sport must first develop the academic self confidence to engage in applied work without feeling intellectually inferior to their colleagues. Until progress is made in this area, the development of an Applied Sociology of Sport within Sociology that truly focuses on the amelioration of the human condition in sport will be slow in coming.

(xi) The Need to Expand the Field of Study

In the United States most works in Sport Sociology reflect what we consider to be a rather narrow and provincial focus. We are in agreement with Duncan (2007) that the sociological study of sport should encompass more than just *varsity high school, college and professional sports; that is, the study of the elite athlete* (Duncan, 2007)! While this issue has been more adequately debated among early European Sociologists of Sport (Erbach, 1966; Dumazedier, 1966) it is only recently that the topic has made its entrance onto the American academic landscape. We recommend, therefore, that Sport Sociologists need to begin thinking about sport from a much broader perspective; one that also incorporates sport as a participatory leisure activity and a popular form of physical recreation and culture. After all, fewer than 1% of all participants are actually athletes! However, in our obsession with world records, Super Bowls and celebrity athletes, many of us have placed the emphasis on the study of a small percentage of elite competitors.

Most importantly, we have ignored the fact that the majority of active sport participants are not elite athletes. Yet, our work over the past fifty years has focused mostly on the development of a Sociology of Sport that excludes the vast majority of participants. What we have in fact been party to is the development of an "exclusive Sociology of Sport". While there is some evidence that the current crop of Sport Sociologists may be attempting to remedy the matter (see samples of presentations at the 2010 NASSS Conference in San Diego at: <http://www.nasss.org/2010Program.pdf>) we suggest that it is now time for leaders in the United States to redefine the term Sociology of Sport and expand its boundaries to reflect a more inclusive orientation.

While there are legitimate scholarly reasons to broaden the scope of the field, there are also compelling practical reasons for doing so. If we fail to accept this challenge, we stand in danger of losing the areas alluded to above to the field of Recreation and to those who study the Sociology of Leisure. There are already signs that this is happening but, in our judgment, it is not too late for Sport Sociologists to still seize the day. We urge our Sport Sociology friends and colleagues, therefore, to take advantage of this critical moment in the evolutionary history of the field and begin developing a Sociology of Sport that captures the phenomenon in all its manifestations and contexts. In fact, ***let us develop a Sociology of Sport for all!*** A Sociology of Sport that also speaks to the needs of the majority!

Summary and Suggestions for the Future

We continue to encourage the use of critical theory in research but also wish to encourage Sport Sociologists to begin developing heuristic frameworks which will help discover solutions to everyday, sport-related problems. In addition, Sport Sociologists should not be satisfied with simply exposing social ills. They need to go beyond the documentation and critique of abuse, exploitation, racism and sexism in sport and start asking themselves how their work might contribute to positive social change that ultimately contributes to "the amelioration of the human condition" in the world of sport, as Yiannakis suggested nearly twenty five years ago (Yiannakis, 1989a). In order to do so, it may be helpful if Sport Sociologists became more involved in the professional activities of similar-minded national and international societies around the globe (NASSS, ISSA, etc). Related to this proposal is our recommendation that North American Sport Sociologists establish closer links with Sociology of Sport societies in other countries by engaging in collaborative, cross-cultural and inter-cultural research and change initiatives.

In particular we suggest that NASSS should establish closer links with such organizations, movements and initiatives as the movement for Sport for Development and Peace, and Alternative Sports (Thorpe, 2008; and Olympism and Social Justice (Lyras & Kotziamani, 2008; Wolff et al, 2008). While there is some evidence that such activity is beginning to take place we need a critical mass to add more clout to this enterprise.

While the Canadian-American connection has remained strong since the early days of NASSS, NASSS members and NASSS as an organization can do a better job reaching out to Sport Sociology societies in Japan, Germany, Greece, France, South Korea, England, Australia, New Zealand and Finland, to name just a few of the countries where Sociology of Sport is afforded greater status and respect. In fact, we would like to see the establishment of an international division within NASSS, in collaboration with ISSA, to promote and facilitate cooperative activities and projects across international boundaries. By institutionalizing this process, we are more likely to see official channels of communication established, mutual funding sources identified, and greater international collaboration among a broad spectrum of scholars and institutions.

In summary, we have endeavored to provide a historical overview of the emergence of the Sociology of Sport in North America as an academic field, while paying particular attention to the unique problems and issues currently facing American Sport Sociologists. While our prognosis for the future of the field in the United States may strike the reader as perhaps overly pessimistic, we remain guardedly optimistic that the problems and challenges we've identified and described are not insurmountable. And, there is some evidence in recent years (Nixon, 1991), including papers presented at more recent NASSS conferences, that more Sport Sociologists are expanding their focus to include more applied work, as well as work with leisure sport participants. Sport Sociology has reached a critical juncture in the United States and the challenges that lie ahead should perhaps not be viewed as insurmountable obstacles but as *exciting opportunities*; opportunities to reinvent ***a Sociology of Sport that is theoretically diverse, has a broader scope, and is also more relevant and responsive to the needs and expectations of the world we live in.***

Finally, we believe that the ability to provide solutions as change agents in the world of sport may be assisted by developing a redefinition of the scope of the field, and what it means to be a Sport Sociologist in the 21st century. We are proposing, therefore, that the ***academic training of the Sport Sociologist in the 21st century*** must be reconceptualized to include, at the very least, a thorough grounding in:

(i) theory and (ii) multiple methodologies; (iii) applied work (and knowledge transfer activity) that encompasses both national and international issues and concerns; (iv) the skills necessary to get involved using sport to achieve conflict resolution and address peace initiatives (Sugden, Lyras et al.; Wolff et al, 2008; Stemen, 2010); (v) the skills of marketing and in engaging the media, (vi) the skills necessary to develop a broader scope that goes beyond the limited study of elite athletes, and, (vii) the acquisition of the necessary skills to engage in effective advocacy.

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