

Sport and geography

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For some, sport (or at least a particular sport) is a fundamental element of their lives (either as participants or observers), while for others, sport may seem like an annoying irrelevance or a trivial pursuit. Among its advocates sport is hailed as a valuable contributor to the building of character, the cultivation of team-bonding skills and the promotion of a healthy lifestyle. Others may see it as a malign influence encouraging aggression and an unhealthy competitiveness. Whether it is viewed as a positive or negative social activity, there is no denying it is a vital component in many people's lives, and its economic, social and cultural significance, locally, regionally, nationally and internationally, is difficult to ignore (Holt, 1989; Hughson *et al.*, 2005).

There has, for some time, been an interest in the connections between geography and sport, some of which are perhaps more obvious than others (Bale, 2000, 2002). For example, there is an elementary geography in the spatial distribution of sporting facilities or clubs. Given that sport happens in place and that, at an organised level, individuals and teams represent a place it follows that sport is intrinsically geographical. Sport, therefore, can be a useful mechanism for engaging with students and making them think about some key geographic concepts. This article provides a selective overview of some of the geographic relevance of various sporting phenomena.

Spatial patterns

One geographical take on sport is to examine where it is played. We can consider this at global, national and very localised scales. Some sports, such as Gaelic games, are spatially restricted to particular countries or regions, with Gaelic football, hurling and camogie strongly associated with Ireland (Cronin *et al.*, 2009). The origins and ethos of Gaelic games have been closely bound up with Irish politics and culture, and they continue to be intimately enmeshed with strands of Irish identity. Although these games are mainly played on the island of Ireland, they are not strictly exclusive to it. They are also played among emigrant Irish communities in the UK, the USA and elsewhere. While this provides an example of national games associated with a specific country, even within countries particular geographies of sport may be apparent. Within Britain, rugby league has traditionally been associated with northern England and linked to its predominantly working class ethos. This contrasts with the more middle-class (and southern) associations of rugby union. In England, football began as a predominantly northern phenomenon (again related to its origins as a male working class recreational activity in older industrial areas) but it is now more geographically widespread.

It is also apparent that some sports, although played in many countries, remain much more popular in some than in others. Examples include water polo, hugely popular in some

Sport is a component in many people's lives which has economic, social and cultural significance, locally, regionally, nationally and internationally. This article explores sport's evident geographic relevance by considering spatial patterns such as where different sports are played; the significance of sport and place, including the iconic nature of certain stadiums; globalisation within sport; and the use of sport for political and economic ends.



Figure 1: Children playing cricket among the fishing boats on the beach of Mamallapuram, India.
Photo: McKay Savage/Flickr (under a Creative Commons licence).

Balkan countries, and arm wrestling, which enjoys a higher profile in countries such as Russia and Ukraine than in the UK. While some sports remain fairly spatially restricted, others display considerable geographical diffusion, spreading out from core areas and being adopted elsewhere. A good example is cricket, which has spread throughout much (though not all) of the former British Empire (see Figure 1). The role of colonialism in this spatial diffusion is a clear demonstration of the intrinsic links between sport, politics and geography. Other sports, most notably football, have achieved global popularity such that, while some places (including Britain) may claim to be the 'home' of the sport, it is to all intents and purposes the ultimate global game (Goldblatt, 2007). In summary, some sports remain highly locality-specific, some manifest a clear spatial distribution, others display distinct patterns of spatial diffusion, while yet others, most notably football, have achieved a global reach.

Sport, space and place

The manner in which public money often underpins sports stadia and leisure centres is indicative of the importance of sport as a social activity, and the location of sports facilities in turn reflects particular geographies. Among the issues geographers can consider are the availability of land for buildings or pitches and competition from other land uses. The conversion of land to sporting uses often raises important geographical questions. The construction of golf courses (an extensive use of land) sometimes conflicts with other social needs such as housing, while in some countries such developments are seen as a drain on key resources such as water. In this way, sport can be seen to intertwine with serious geographical questions of resource availability, distribution and extraction.

Another geographical dimension to sporting venues is the symbolism which may be attached to them. Wembley has long been the 'home' of English football and has assumed the status of an iconic element in the landscape. Similarly, Wimbledon as a tennis venue has a significance that extends well beyond its immediate locality. Sporting clubs will usually have a regular 'home' venue and such places may acquire huge significance for the fans of that team, amply demonstrating the importance of links between people and place. The sense of belonging at a particular sports ground or even a particular part of a sports ground can be linked to ideas of topophilia (love of place) while for 'away' fans there may be feelings of topophobia (fear of place) (Bale, 2002). Certainly football grounds (such as Liverpool's Anfield) are, for many loyal fans, much more than mere spatial containers in which sporting events take place – clubs and their grounds are closely connected to issues of neighbourhood, locality and community (Holt, 1989).

The connections between people and sporting clubs and venues are amply demonstrated in debates over relocation. In recent decades a

number of professional football clubs have moved from older, often inner-city grounds to new stadia, often some distance from the original home. These moves have proved hugely controversial, raising important questions about the connection (and possible separation) of community and place. In the 1990s, 15 Premier League/Football League clubs moved to new grounds and others have followed since then (Duke, 2002). A variety of factors have influenced this such as the need for car-parking space, better transport connections and, in some instances, the chance to generate revenue through the sale of land. Former football grounds such as Filbert Street in Leicester have now been erased, becoming housing estates or retail parks (see Figure 2). While most moves have been within the same town or city, the relocation of Wimbledon FC from south London to Milton Keynes (changing their name to MK Dons in the process) is more akin to the moves of American football teams, where ownership changes have periodically resulted in clubs moving to other cities. Ground-moving and the separation of club and community is something which links into broader geographic considerations of the meaning of place and its significance in people's lives.

Territoriality is also a geographical characteristic associated with sport, and football hooliganism is one manifestation of this. Prior to the revamping and modernisation of many football grounds, a key objective of hooligans was 'taking' part of the ground seen as belonging to other fans. The claiming of space in areas in close proximity to the opposition club's ground on match days, and the 'invasion' of a foreign city for an international match can also be seen as a territorial expression of power (Storey, 2001; Spaaij, 2008).



Figure 2: Filbert Street was the home of Leicester City from 1891 to 2002. The site is now home to the Filbert Village development, built as accommodation for students at the nearby De Montfort University and University of Leicester.

Photo: Downing Developments.

Sport and globalisation

It is tempting to see the increased commercialisation and global reach of major sports as a prime cultural manifestation of globalisation (Duke, 2002). Football in particular has emerged as a vehicle for a whole range of commercial ventures. Major clubs in England and elsewhere have become more than mere sporting organisations, with a whole series of branding and merchandising opportunities offering an extensive global reach. From a geographical perspective, their place associations extend way beyond their home city, raising questions about the importance (or otherwise) of specific places and their connections to sporting clubs. The internationalisation and commercialisation of the game means enthusiasts can, if they so wish, watch club matches from various parts of the world via satellite broadcasters, and merchandising leaves British schoolchildren wearing Barcelona shirts with the names of Messi (an Argentinian) or Keita (a Malian player) on the back. Simultaneously, increasing ticket prices and other related developments have done much to exclude many from supporting their local club (Nash, 2000). Despite this, however, it is still the case that much football support is drawn from the immediate locality of the club. Equally, when football clubs participate in international competition, such as the European Champions League, support for England's representatives is still very evident.

Sport, politics and identity

In a broader economic and political context, sporting success is frequently invoked as a symbol of national prowess, and the hosting of events such as the Olympics is as much (if not more) a reflection of political agendas and economic imperatives as of sporting interests. The UK looks set to host a range of major sporting events in the next few years including the 2012 Olympics, the 2013 Rugby League World Cup, the 2015 Rugby

Union World Cup and the 2019 Cricket World Cup. Huge political significance is attached to this, with sizeable commercial gains for some. Staging major sports events ties in with economic projects associated with stadium construction and the provision of accommodation and other services for visiting fans. Such events can take on a key role in place promotion and in showcasing the merits of a particular city or country, while also allowing countries and political leaders to bask in the reflected glory of a successful event.

Also of geographic interest are the ways in which sport reinforces, or perhaps challenges, ideas of identity. The cultural significance of individual sportspeople such as the former boxer Muhammad Ali is clear while the connections between colonialism, culture, racism and identity associated with cricket have been extensively discussed (James, 1934; Marqusee, 1999, 2005). People and teams represent places and the connections between sport and national identities remain strong even within an increasingly globalised world (Bairner, 2001; Smith and Porter, 2004). There is a certain paradox in that football as the pre-eminently global sport shows no signs of post-nationalism in terms of the importance attaching to international competition. While the global reach of the sport produces a global fan base for the bigger teams in European leagues, people continue to remain loyal to their local club.

There is a myriad of sporting geographies, allowing us to think about the ways in which economic, social, cultural and political issues intertwine. Students can be encouraged to explore the history and geography of their own favourite sport. They can carry out simple exercises such as mapping the locations of football or rugby clubs in Britain, or listing the countries from which their favourite football club has players. Another useful exercise is to assess the impacts (economic, social, cultural, political, environmental) of the 2012 Olympics on London. What places (and who) will benefit or lose out? | **TG**

Useful webpages

'Planet Sport' on the GA website: www.geography.org.uk/projects/planetsport/#top

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