The social benefits of informal and lifestyle sports: a research agenda

Paul Gilchrist & Belinda Wheaton

Understanding sport through the lens of social benefit has become a mainstay of sport policy analysis. A wealth of research has considered how sport contributes to achieving wider social benefits, including improvements to health and well-being, life satisfaction, crime reduction, community cohesion and activism, environmental stewardship, educational attainment, labour market participation, civic renewal, urban regeneration and developing youth (Coalter 2007, Oughton and Tacon 2007, Brookes and Wiggan 2009). Over the decades governments and policymakers have advocated the use of traditional or mainstream sports for combating a range of social 'problems', from youth disengagement to poor health. Most recently, fears about rising levels of inactivity and obesity, particularly amongst children, are increasingly driving sports-based interventions and the question of sport's capacity to deliver public policy outcomes.

Yet, as Coakley highlights, sport-related policies tend to be based on the unquestioned belief that sport participation is beneficial and an effective tool for individuals and society more broadly (Coakley 2011). But as critical research in the sport development field has illustrated, there is a general lack of research evidence (Kay 2009, Coakley 2011, Darnell 2012, Weed 2016). Claims that sport interventions provide personal development (Coakley 2011) in for example overcoming obstacles, improving lives and creativity and decreasing disruptive behaviours are often unsubstantiated and the process of change not understood (Coalter 2007, 2010). The inability of traditional elite competitive sport to impact on youth (in)activity was vividly illustrated by the failure of the London 2012 Olympics to lead to the sustained increase in participation that it was claimed the Games would inspire (e.g. Roan 2015, Weed 2016).

While there is an established evidence base, and research programme for understanding and critiquing the social benefits of mainstream sport, the situation for lifestyle and informal sport is more piecemeal. This condition was observed over a decade ago when, along with our colleagues Alan Tomlinson and Neil Ravenscroft, we wrote a report for Sport England suggesting a research agenda that national sport policymakers and funders should make for lifestyle sport1 (Tomlinson et al. 2005). We recognised that lifestyle sports could help to achieve public policy outcomes, but that a new research agenda was called for with a view to placing the lifestyle sport participant at the centre of the analysis in order to fully benchmark impacts (Ibid.: p.40). While the report ended up relegated to a pdf on Sport England's website (before disappearing from cyberspace), it appeared to resonate with academics and practitioners internationally. We still receive regular emails requesting it and it has been well cited in a range of international research articles, consultancy reports and has informed revisions to national sport policies.

The questions we raised about the potential of lifestyle sport to inform public policy, and the need to understand and recognise their different governance structures (such as an absence of relevant NGOs), have become even more timely. Participation in lifestyle and action sports – such as skateboarding and surfing – is increasing rapidly in many national contexts and across demographic groups, fuelled by a buoyant transnational consumer industry and culture (for detail on this growth in participation and consumption, see Wheaton 2013, Thorpe 2014, Gordon 2015, Wheaton and Thorpe 2016). From the boom in skateboarding [identified as the fastest growing sport in the USA with over 10.1 million participants (NSGA, 2013)], to slacklining, parkour and circus sports, a range of urban- and nature-based lifestyle and informal sports are gaining in popularity, and policymakers

and governments are starting to take note. For example, a report to the Australian Government on The Future of Australian Sport argues that the growth of individualistic and lifestyle sports is one of the important 'mega trends' of the twenty-first century sportscape and contrasts with the decline of most team sports (Hajkowicz et al. 2013). In England, a recent report commissioned by Sport England on outdoor participation trends, including lifestyle sports activities, also recognises a shift towards 'taking part in activities for more functional or lifestyle reasons', also finding that 'The word "sport"' is a reason to not participate – 60% of adults indicate that they are not more active because they 'just don't like sports', they find the structures a 'turn off' (Gordon 2015: p.17). This is recognised in the new sport strategy for England, Sporting Future – A New Strategy for an Active Nation (HM Government 2015), which takes a more accommodating approach to lifestyle, informal and non-competitive sport in order to tackle flatlining sport participation and high levels of inactivity. It states: 'Sport must become more demand-led, recognising the different motivations, attitudes and lifestyles of its potential customer base', before advising that

> The sector must also adapt to suit how people want to engage in sport and physical activity. For some this will mean a social game of ultimate frisbee or skateboarding with friends, but others won't want to take part unless it is fiercely competitive and they are able to push themselves to fulfil their potential. Competitive sport is not just part of the formal talent pathway, but it is actually just another way in which some people want to take part. (HM Government, 2015: p.20)

This new approach finds a parallel in New Zealand, where outdoors and adventurous activities have long-been central to national identity and tourism. National sport policymakers are starting to recognise the importance of lifestyle sport, particularly for youth agendas (Thorpe and Wheaton 2015).

Developing a research agenda

While there appears to be a greater recognition at government level of the potential of lifestyle and informal sports to inform public policy, subsequent academic research and commentaries have reaffirmed their potential still remains largely untapped, and research remains patchy at best (e.g. Gilchrist and Wheaton 2011, King and Church 2013, 2015, Turner 2013). This special issue intends to address this research void, bringing new research on aspects of social benefits in relation to lifestyle and informal sports into the public domain in order to catalyse further research and debate in this area. It builds on an ESRC-funded seminar series (April 2015–July 2017) exploring this topic (http://www.informalandlifestylesports.org.uk).2 The series' specific objective was to explore the different ways in which lifestyle and informal sports are, and could inform, various policy debates and developments across several areas, including health and well-being, physical education, the arts, sport, youth and community development, tourism and planning. A key intention was to bring academics from different disciplinary backgrounds into conversations with policymakers, educationalists and practitioners to share knowledge, discuss challenges and identify areas of potential contribution to the delivery of sport and public policy. Furthermore, it aimed to establish innovative approaches to enhancing and developing active lifestyles across the lifecycle being pioneered by lifestyle sport communities. A number of the seminar themes are touched upon in the seven papers that form this collection, including the different policy contexts in which lifestyle and informal sports are emerging, the adoption of lifestyle sports in delivering inclusive physical activity and the institutionalisation, governance and regulation of lifestyle sport cultures. We are pleased that policymakers and practitioners' voices are represented in this special issue, as research participants, collaborators and authors.

One key issue that has been identified is the absence of the kinds of (quantitative-based) evidence that policy communities and government value. As we have noted elsewhere (Gilchrist and Wheaton 2011), it is particularly difficult to capture participation rates, patterns and motivations in what are often unregulated, outdoor, nomadic, informal and non-association-based activities, existing outside of traditional sport provision. This is compounded by a relatively poor comprehension of the relationships between sport, lifestyle and consumer culture. As Horne notes:

> Exactly how these strategies impact on individual people's engagement in sport and active leisure may revolve around a better appreciation of the perceived value active participation in sport and physical activity has for different sections of the population. This relates to the connection in consumer culture between lifestyle and personal identity. (Horne 2011: p.219)

How, for example, can we come to understand the revitalisation of inner cities without appreciating the contribution of street culture and the part new media technologies play in disseminating and popularising playful urban cultural practices? How can we measure the socio-economic impacts of woodland mountain bike trails without understanding the centrality of countryside space to the coalescence and performance of teenage identities? Emerging research on many lifestyle sports activities including parkour, skateboarding, surfing and mountain biking has recognised the particular ways of life manifest in each activity and has demonstrated the importance of identity, lifestyle, consumer practices, and community engagement to engaging participants (e.g. Atencio et al. 2009, Bradley 2010, Gilchrist and Wheaton 2011, Rynne and Rossi 2012, King and Church 2013, Turner 2013, Fernández-Río and Suarez 2014). When these activities are presented in appropriate contexts and spaces that are sensitive to the needs of these communities (such as lack of adult control, self definition, a lack of rules and regulations and, in many, competitive structures or leagues), they have demonstrated the potential to engage young and increasingly older people (Humberstone 2011, Wheaton 2017), addressing community engagement, creativity and healthy lifestyles in new meaningful ways (Gilchrist and Wheaton 2011, O'Loughlin 2012, Thorpe and Ahmad 2015).

Despite the individualistic nature of lifestyle sport participation, accounts of participants' lived experience have noted the importance of the community and environment for participants' sense of identity, belonging, connection and affects. Youth-oriented research has identified the importance of unstructured space for these informal activities, foregrounding the significance of spaces for relaxation and social interaction, to just 'hang out'. Scratch-built skateparks and mountain bike trails, for instance, are areas where young people can congregate and where friendships are formed with like-minded peers (see King 2010, Taylor and Khan 2011). Young people value them as spaces to socialise outside of the home, and these sites are important to their senses of belonging and associated emotional economies; reasons grounded in lived experience (Brown 2016). In later life too, informal and outdoor settings for physical activity are increasingly being sought by older people, taking up adventures such as surfing and hot-air ballooning. In doing so, it is claimed, they are not only exhibiting a more youthful, 'risk-taking persona' (Pike 2011, p.8) but are actively resisting a dominant discourse of ageing linked to physical decline (Humberstone 2011, Liechty et al. 2012, Wheaton 2017).

The discourse of social benefits

The spatiality of lifestyle sport is important in other ways which bear upon the discussion of social benefits. It is well established that accounting for subjective feelings or felt attachments is not

enough to justify rights to use space or to legitimate presence; use is contingent upon the modification of behaviour and performance of citizenships (Parker 2007, Flemsaeter et al. 2015). In particular, the articulation of a discourse of social benefits has been crucial to quelling concerns which have been mobilised to restrict or prescribe spaces for informal and lifestyle sport (Rogers and Coaffee 2005). As articles in this special issue attest, participants have been adept at providing instrumental reasons that can support their practise, or they have recruited sympathetic supporters to their cause who are perhaps better versed in communicating with authorities. Several cases in this special issue demonstrate that the customary use of space is defended through the employment of a utilitarian calculus. This is the idea that the activity carries, demonstrates or promotes individual and social benefits, providing a case for policymakers and funders to justify expenditure, investment and strategic initiatives. Conversely, the utilitarian calculus is also mobilised to mitigate against the case for substantial disbenefits arising from the activity – for instance, through claims that it causes nuisance, harm, risk or destruction – with a view to demonstrating that such disbenefits are misleading, disproportionate, or harmful to rights of access and use. In risk–benefit calculation, the momentum appears to be on the side of the users who can persuasively demonstrate benefit.

The language of social benefits has become a defining feature of the modern landscape of lifestyle sport. In the USA, attitudes to the provision of lifestyle sports are shifting from participants being perceived as antisocial and deviant, to being embraced as creative entrepreneurial neoliberal citizens (Howell 2008, see also Borden 2015). It is a language adopted by participant communities, public agencies and private investors. Skateboarding is a prime example here. Drawing on case-study examples from skateboarding in Northern California, Becky Beal, Matthew Atencio, E. Missy Wright and ZáNean McClain illustrate that the popularity of skateboarding has also been accompanied by new private stakeholders who use the language of social benefits to synergistically market their brands and products through the sport. Notions of 'community development', 'well-being' and 'healthy' youth are being re-framed and authorised by private interests working within seemingly public skate spaces. Private stakeholders investing in skateboarding are now claiming that their contributions to skateboarding benefit the 'public' good in terms of health, youth and community development. This is a sign, the authors posit, of the neo-liberal conditions faced by the sport in North America, as market relations enter into democratic public space and redefine the standards of citizenship. These same conditions are traced by Nicola De Martini Ugolotti, in a study of parkour in Turin, Italy. De Martini Ugolotti shows that parkour, like skateboarding, is central to urban lives. It has been incorporated into urban regeneration processes, its global and youthful media appeal supporting efforts to rebrand the public spaces of the city. Sport programmes have turned to informal activities like parkour to animate residual areas by promoting an engagement with the territory by local communities and young people. Yet, parkour enjoys an ambivalent position in terms of urban place-making and community building. Following a group of (mostly) marginalised migrant traceurs, De Martini Ugolotti concludes that policy initiatives that seek to use and incorporate traceurs are not without contest or tensions. Whilst participants may help to deliver neoliberal urban policies through serving as positive exemplars of active youth in hard-pressed and under-resourced communities, in many instances their 'undesired difference' is made apparent, signalling a process of ambivalent incorporation. The finding complements the view imparted by Beal et al. that not only do we have to be careful about how the discourse of social benefit is deployed, but a reappraisal of the contribution of public and private interests operating in lifestyle sport communities is required. As Beal et al. suggest, there are long-term implications and concerns about this governance model such that being a 'good citizen' is equated with individual rather than collective or state responsibility. As such, scholars need to carefully consider the contradictions

between the personal desires of participants, the demands for social justice, the agendas of public and private agents, and what, realistically, can be achieved for the common good in neoliberal times.

The papers in the special issue lead us to a more profound conclusion: the idea that lifestyle sport revels in an outsider status beyond the realm of government no longer holds true. A counter-cultural ethos is just one component of the complex and rapidly changing social formation of lifestyle sports (Daskalaki and Mould 2013, Gilchrist 2016). Activities like parkour, skateboarding, urban climbing and street dance cannot be reduced to resistance discourses in their challenge to the predetermined uses of urban space. Other narratives and experiences are present in their emergence and evolution which are not fully captured by the construct of opposition (Daskalaki and Mould 2013), and this includes stories about how the articulation of social benefits has enabled processes of connection, collaboration, compromise and partnership. A common story can be found here in different national contexts. Evidence has been provided to the field fromplaces as diverse as Philadelphia (Howell 2005), Newcastle upon-Tyne (Jenson et al. 2012) and metropolitan Western Australia (Wood et al. 2014) which shows that cracks have appeared in the stereotype of the skateboarder as anti-institutional rebel. Arguably, the cracks are now so wide that the case for the prosocial contribution of skateboarding now outweighs the case for antisocial behaviour. There is a dissonance between how wemight imagine the sport to be – it's often reported counter-hegemonic attitude (Beal 1995) – and the everyday reality. Iain Borden, for example, in reviewing DIY skateparks in the United Kingdom, finds that the idea of skateboarding as a 'world apart' is misleading, so

> what we see here is the oft-overlooked process of actually building somewhere to skate. [it is] a world of mud, muck and muscle, of timber, T-shirts and temporary formwork, of grey skies, 1930s semi-detached housing and patchy grass. In other words, this world apart is hugely ordinary in its context, yet, contrarily, just as extraordinary in its focused efforts and expenditures. (Borden 2014: p.11–12)

In their study of the development of a small skate park in a village in the south of England, Fiona McCormack and Ben Clayton show that the subcultural image of the skateboarder as nonconformist outsider may hold for some skaters but is not as apparent for others. Drawing on Bauman's theorisation of 'liquid modernity' and Bourdieu's concepts of social and cultural capital, they claim that other complex identities and resources within a young person's broader social networks and relations are mobilised in the process of lobbying for and gaining new facilities for skateboarding. The skaters involved in the policy process use these resources to negotiate an adult-centred policy environment which has started to become more responsive to the needs of all members of the community as a result of the adoption of localist policy agendas in the UK Government's approach to planning and development. The practical work of building capacities, sharing knowledge, stimulating interest and leveraging investment is also evident in the maturation of parkour in the United Kingdom. Paul Gilchrist and Guy Osborn show that participants, self-organising local communities, coaches and now a National Governing Body for the sport have worked hard to tackle the threat of exclusion by forming organisations, lobbying authorities, developing partnerships, engaging in community-based planning, fundraising, and building knowledge of local by-laws, recreational rights, risk assessment and health and safety legislation. Thus, acquiring a specialised knowledge of policy and legal landscapes has been essential to the legitimisation of the sport in many areas.

The research presented in the special issue reaffirms that new ontologies are needed that go beyond dualist thought, the dichotomy between alternative and mainstream which characterised earlier lifestyle sport studies (c.f. Rinehart 2008, Wheaton 2010, Crissey Honea 2013) to account for the elision between the predictable and unpredictable ways in which participants and communities work with organisations and the degrees of involvement, quasi-involvement and non-involvement in

policy processes (Daskalaki and Mould 2013). This point is developed in the reflections of Belinda Wheaton and Alister O'Loughlin, on parkour and the process of 'sportisation' (Maguire 2007). Drawing on post-subcultural approaches to youth (Muggleton and Wienzierl 2003; Wheaton, 2007), they urge us to consider the cultural politics involved in processes of incorporation of lifestyle and informal sports, to make apparent the forms of contestation and accommodation both within and between sports at specific moments. Context matters. A favourable policy environment that seeks to work with youth subcultures presents opportunities for collaboration, partnership and resource maximisation; other contexts may impose political parameters that curtail, constrain and warp the form of sport that emerges as participants engage with different state, commercial and civil society actors (Daskalaki andMould 2013). Wheaton and O'Loughlin show that hybrid forms of parkour, here Performance-Parkour (or 2PK) – a version of the activity rooted in the performance arts – have required a rethink about a singular model (or history) of sportisation. Rather than see a cultural fragmentation of parkour, as has beset other sports during their long march to institutionalisation and official recognition, parkour's National Governing Body in the United Kingdom has in fact sought dialogue and negotiation in an attempt to bring alternate pedagogic intents and styles into the fold. Consequently, a more accommodating governing structure has been fashioned based upon shared institutional power that recognises and celebrates difference.

Cross-cultural contexts are important too. Davide Sterchele and Rafaella Camoletto extend Thorpe and Wheaton's remark (2011, p. 832) that in order 'to understand the complexities of the cultural politics involved in the incorporation of action sports, attention must be paid to the particularities within each specific historical conjuncture'. They cast light on the glocalisation of parkour, revealing how different organisational and legal structures erected by national sports systems impact upon globalising forms of sport education and coaching. They focus on the introduction of the ADAPT (Art du Deplacement And Parkour Teaching) qualification programme in Italy as an emerging battleground for the definition of authenticity. Their research shows that the cross-cultural character of lifestyle sports can be partly re-shaped by the specific features of a local sports system and the impacts sport policymakers have in the authentication process by – perhaps inadvertently – favouring certain forms and meanings of the practice over others.

If careful thought is needed on dealing with the elision between the local and the global, then we also need to be mindful of the presence of other binaries – for example, those of manager and user, expert and novice, parent and child – which are producing more complex arrangements in the provision, maintenance and use of space. Kat King and Andrew Church focus on the challenges of lifestyle sport governance particularly sustaining participation in informal sports. As they argue, to understand the potential of lifestyle sports for achieving policy goals for participation in sport and physical activity requires more research into the activities and experiences of those involved in their management and delivery, as well as the diverse users. Their paper presents the perspectives of those involved in the delivery, clubs and communities of mountain bikers across the United Kingdom, highlighting the importance of an active informal user community, and giving participants a sense of ownership. Their findings suggest that sustaining participation in mountain biking requires policy and management initiatives that are built on and acknowledge the informal codependencies between clubs and user communities. As a number of the papers in this issue highlight, a range of different types of stakeholders are involved in these governance processes. However like many more traditional sports, volunteers, and particularly parents, are also playing an increasingly central role (see Beal et al., this volume). Yet, as King and Church outline, while their playful and non-traditional features may attract new participants less interested in traditional sports, the very liquidity of these activities may mean that the engagement of participants is fragmented and not sustained beyond a particular period in their lives.

Absences and future directions

While the papers in this collection speak to some of the central questions emerging from the ESRC seminar series, a wider range of issues and contexts were addressed that are also important in developing future research and understanding. While articles on the sports of parkour and skateboarding dominate this special issue, this was not deliberate and the landscape of lifestyle sport is characterised by its increased diversity. Nonetheless, these urban (and suburban)-based activities are particularly interesting in policy terms; they are often the most accessible activities in terms of cost and are activities gaining in visibility and popularity in policy contexts. Both, however, remain quite male dominated. As Thorpe (2014) has argued in reviewing action sport-based development programmes, despite their potential benefits, programme funders and delivery partners need to be more critical to ensure they don't reinforce some of the less savoury aspects of action sport cultures such as forms of exclusion based on gender, age, sexuality, ability and ethic/religious backgrounds. An important theme addressed by the seminar series was the experiences of minority participants in these informal sporting spaces. While participation in lifestyle sports has tended to be associated with youthful white men, over the past decade, increasing numbers of women and girls have been taking to these sports, reflected in, and driven by the buoyant and expanding 'girl-focused' consumer market (Comer 2010, Thorpe 2011, Thorpe and Olive 2016). Concurrently, an ageing demographic is apparent in lifestyle sports activities, propelled by life-long participants who have aged with their sports, and older men and women who are taking up lifestyle sport increasingly in later life (Wheaton 2013, 2017). Across many lifestyle sports, white bodies are seen to be the 'natural' occupants, seen as having the 'right to belong' (Puwar 2004; 8), which often works to exclude racialised groups. In particular, the nature-based spaces in which many lifestyle sports take place, such as beaches and hills, are overwhelmingly white spaces (Wolch and Zhang 2004, Erickson et al. 2009). However, Chivers-Yochim (2010) also describes the culture of skateboarding in Michigan as an 'imagined community' of whiteness. A two-day seminar considered the experiences of these 'less visible' participants and consumer groups, includingminority ethnic groups, girls and women, and older participants across a wide range of activities (including roller derby, surfing, paddle-boarding, community dance and walking) and contexts from Bournemouth beach to New Zealand. This seminar reminded us of the importance of recognising the specific forms of exclusion and barriers to inclusion (in relation to sexuality/gender/race/ age/dis-ability) that operate in these informal sporting spaces, and the role of individuals and institutions (from the media to action sport industries) in promoting greater equity.Wheaton and O'Loughlin's paper (this volume) provides insights into understanding how lifestyle sport provisionmay be structured in ways that provide more equitable movement experiences that encourage social inclusion. Drawing on literature on community dance pedagogy, their case study highlights the benefit of organised parkour experiences and pedagogic styles that are non-hierarchal, non-competitive and challenge the established hierarchy of 'teacher as expert' (Fernández-Río and Suarez 2014, Grobowski and Thomsen 2015). As considered in the seminar series, the potential for lifestyle sports and their alternative pedagogies within the physical education curriculum (Jones 2011, lisahunter 2011, lisahunter 2015), particularly to engage children with little interest in competitive sport, still remains largely uncharted.

While the papers here have focused on lifestyle sports, the questions raised have pertinence for many other emerging sports and activities that like parkour, dance and interactive video-games, sit on the boundaries between sport, arts and play, or activities that are evolving into sport-fitness hybrids. Clearly, traditional sports can no longer assume they have young peoples' ear. The decision to include surfing,

skateboarding and sport climbing in the Tokyo 2020 Olympics clearly demonstrates that even the Olympic Movement is having to respond to new consumer interests to remain relevant to younger generations through the co-optation of youth-oriented action sports into the Olympic programme (Wheaton and Thorpe 2016). In these contexts, traditional sport must compete for attention against an ever-increasing range of leisure activities and trends in the digital world, and in 'real' time and space. Nor does a one-size fits-all approach work in an increasingly fragmented cultural context. Movement cultures do not respect neatly demarcated policy domains. Following Watson et al. (2016) – in their discussion of the relationship between dance and physical activity – the discursive differences and disciplinary dilemmas mobilised by lifestyle and informal sport is potentially knowledge producing, and greater acknowledgement of these tensions and differences better positions us to inform policy, practice and provision. Locating sport within broader social, cultural, political, legal and economic contexts requires us to think across boundaries and to adopt more agile approaches to policy analysis. For example, the discourse on social benefits within skateboarding could be seen as a community-led response to the strict enforcement of property rights (Carr 2010). On another level, it might be viewed through the lens of health promotion and child development initiatives that encourage risky outdoor play to counter sedentary lifestyles (Dumas and Laforest 2009). The upshot of this is that there is still much to be learned about lifestyle and informal sport by appreciating the ways in which they interact with different policy domains, networks and communities. Trends like the Pokémon Go phenomena that came and then rapidly disappeared have important lessons for understanding how people engage with their world in physically active ways, where they engage, and why. As a local authority sport development officer suggested at one of our seminars, the game challenged him to think anew about social benefits and the policy response as it opened up the use of urban space and parks in ways he had never seen, with participants walking vast distances daily. That informal activity continues to surprise authorities simply reinforces our point: sport policymakers still have much to learn about informal and lifestyle sport. This special issue signals that there is now a body of literature available from which the learning process can begin.

Notes

1. 'Lifestyle sport' is used here as an umbrella term that refers to a range of participatory, informal and thrill-seeking urban and rural sporting activities that are qualitatively different to traditional, rule-bound, competitive and institutionalised sport. They are characterised by their challenge to the dominant Western 'achievement sport' culture and values. For further discussion of the concept, see Wheaton (Wheaton 2004, 2013) and Gilchrist and Wheaton (2016).

2. Hosted by the University of Brighton, in partnership with Brunel University and Bournemouth University.

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