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**“Good, Bad or Ugly? The Social Impact of Leisure”**

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## Introduction

I am delighted to have been invited to address this ILAM National Conference on *Leisure in the Social Context* and especially pleased to be appearing under the theme labelled *Best Value for Society* because what I want to say today concerns what I believe to be the inextricable link between social or human values and overall Best value.

Today's leisure professionals 'never had it so good', or so we might argue. On the face of it, 'leisure' seems to be in robustly good health. Discretionary spending is at record levels (Office of National Statistics, 1998), leisure products have diversified almost beyond measure, the profile of leisure within the national economy has never been so high (Mintel, 1998; New Leisure Markets, 1997), leisure courses are expanding rapidly in both further and higher education (SPRITO, 1998; Studd, 1998) and employment prospects continue to proliferate for those with the right skills for the industry (Minten, 1998). All this, then, should bring smiles to the faces of both the leisure providers and their customers and should assist with the regeneration of the elusive 'feelgood factor' in British society.

So why would anyone dare to suggest that this rosy picture might not be all it seems? In this presentation I shall argue that leisure, and more particularly sport, has assumed a central role in the national identity and is frequently appropriated by politicians, policy makers and pundits as a positive force for good in society. However, I also hope to demonstrate that the 'case for sport' has *not* yet been proven and that it has rested largely on rhetoric rather than proof. Along with other leisure sectors such as the arts, play and libraries, sport faces increasing pressure to account for both monetary *and* social value. I hope to show how it is possible to build an evidence-based model of Best value for sport by a careful synthesis of hard-nosed economic realism *and* concern for human and social development. I will do this through, first, raising questions about a few examples of what I shall call the good, the bad and the ugly and secondly, through an examination of one scheme for evaluating the social impact of sport.

## The good: 'motherhood and apple pie'

From Ancient Greece to modern Europe, whenever nation states and politicians have faced trouble, sport has been called upon to calm the populace. Wars between the various Greek states were temporarily suspended for the Ancient Olympic Games to take place British (Molson, 1974); the story of an Anglo-German football match during World War I is apocryphal; and the genesis of Action Sport in urban social unrest is now part of sports development history (Rigg, 1986). Sport, then, has special powers to heal social divisions and resolve differences between conflicting parties, or so it seems. Deeply held beliefs about these special powers underpin the ideologies of both Victorian 'muscular Christianity' and contemporary youth sport initiatives. If sport is a truly international language, as we are led to believe, then the contest for the World Cup will bring the nations of the world together in harmony.

A typical, modern example of this ideology of harmony is found in the 'five core values' of the British Sports Trust (1997). They are listed as:

- Personal development
- A stepping stone to employment
- Developing leadership
- Volunteering in communities
- Reducing youth crime

They say in their literature, for example "...sports leaders reduce crime..." (BST, 1997, p.4) and "...the [sports] awards promoted social skills; discipline and behaviour have improved and bullying has decreased." (ibid p.7). But according to a research report from New Zealand (Begg *et al.*, 1996) teenagers, especially boys, who are keen on sport are *more*, not less likely to become involved in delinquent behaviour. In that study, then the assumptions that 'sports build character' and that participating in organised sport exposes young people to strong conforming, rather than deviant, influences, were simply not borne out. Unlike the British Sports Trust, this study argues that *anti-social* qualities, such as aggression and cheating, can lead to success in sport. Who are we to believe?

Here are some other examples of contradictions. Positive claims have been made for the health-giving properties of sport (Van Mechelen, 1997), for the status of sport as children's favourite subject (ILEA, 1988) and for the contribution of sport and leisure to economic regeneration (Barber, 1998) - all good things - and only two months ago, the United States Women's Sports Foundation reported two large studies which found that teenage girl athletes are only *half* as likely as their non-athlete peers to become pregnant (Favnet@otd.com, 1998). But, the same report said that male athletes became sexually active *earlier* in adolescence than non-athletes: is this good? Sport is clearly a favourite medium for personal and community fitness *and* a favourite metaphor for political exhortations about the good life but I would counsel against seeing it *only* through rose-coloured spectacles.

### **The bad: 'too much of a good thing?'**

In contrast to guaranteed lifelong health and vitality, some of us carry the scars, both physical and mental, of over-indulgence in sport. Over-training injuries and exercise addiction are now common afflictions amongst both female and male sports participants (Brukner & Bennell, 1997). Indeed, sports medicine is now a commercial industry (Macauley, 1997) with rapid growth in the private sector and a proliferation of sports clinics and para-medical consultants. This may be good for the medics but can hardly reflect well on sport.

Another example of contradiction is the Lottery. Whatever the benefits of the Lottery – and most would probably agree that it has transformed sporting opportunity at all levels of British sport – I would argue, as Ken Loach has done recently with reference to the arts (in Glaister 1998), that it is a *de facto* tax on the poor to serve the interests of the rich. Not only is the “people's Lottery” encouraging those *least* able to afford it to spend large amounts of their discretionary income on distant dreams at extremely poor odds (Bruce & Johnson, 1995) but also the risk of addiction is real. Where is the ethical rationale in funding our sport and cultural life from a gambling addiction? Also, despite efforts by the Lottery Awards panel to implement rigorous equity criteria, the articulate and literate are still better able to exploit the application system because they are better organised, more used to making written claims for resources and hold more cultural and

intellectual capital than others (Evans, 1995). Unless there is careful monitoring of *how* equity criteria are implemented in practice *after* the award of funds, then we will simply end up with more of the same, with the rich getting richer and the poor excluded, just as has happened with some previous Sports Council grant awards (Carr 1993). In short, in my opinion, we have swallowed a Lottery-shaped sugar-coated pill.

**The ugly: 'what you see is *not* always what you get'**

Social exclusion is one of the preoccupations of the new Labour government but some people in authority have expressed the view that social exclusion is simply *reflected in* sport rather than *generated by* sport (Banks, 1997). This seems to me to be a cop out. If sport is anything, it is a constituent part of our social fabric, not some fantasy add-on. It is precisely *because* sport has social impacts that we have to take both social exclusion and social responsibility in sport seriously.

Take, for example, the media and marketing hype surrounding the men's soccer World Cup: this masks deeply gendered divisions in our society. It is predominantly men who will attend, watch, and bask in the event and predominantly women, as is commonly the case with leisure activities, who will service their leisure needs (Thompson, 1992; Draper, 1989). Women will cook for men, clean around men and, as we saw during Euro '96, become targets for domestic violence if events on the field turn sour. A recent survey found that 50% of men argue with their female partners about the time they spend on sport (reported in *Leisure Management* May 1998, p. 5). I also understand that the human relations mediation agency 'Relate' has its own strategy ready to deal with the extensive relationship disharmony and victimisation of women through domestic violence which they expect to emanate from World Cup failure. This is one element of the social impact of sport that the nation clearly prefers to remain invisible.

Another, is the impact of child abuse in sport. A recent advertisement in *Leisure Opportunities* (April 27-May 10 1998) headed "Teacher Training Courses" said " ...No previous qualifications necessary except a desire to work with children." My own research into child sexual abuse in

sport over a twelve year period suggests that this is like offering honey pots to bees. Young people's sport is one the most active growth markets of today's sport industry: public and private bodies are pouring resources into an overwhelming array of initiatives from the National Junior Sport Programme, to TOPs programmes, to World Class Start, to Starting Well and many more. Rhetorical speeches from ministers and youth sport advocates urge us to back these campaigns for every possible reason from establishing lifelong fitness and health habits, to controlling boisterous behaviour, to instilling citizenship. For example, the Secretary of State on the benefits wrote recently

Everyone in Government recognises that PE not only contributes to the physical well-being of pupils, but that it also *improves academic ability*.  
(Chris Smith MP, in *The Observer* 1998) (italics added)

It seems that youth sport is universally to be welcomed. But, as we struggle to recruit a new army of coaches and volunteers to lead this expansion in youth sport, where is the safety net to protect them from sexual and other abuses? The Minister of Sport and the English Sports Council take the view that child protection is a social issue *not* a sport one: responsibility for child protection rests with the Home Office, they say, *not* with sport (Casey, 1998). Is this head-in-the-sand approach good enough for our nation's sporting future? Sexually abused athletes I have interviewed have told me in graphic detail how the 'social impact of sport' for them has been so traumatic, so devastating, that it has ruined not just their sporting ambitions but also their close relationships, their careers and their mental health (Brackenridge, 1997).

### **Best Value in sport**

The case for sport and leisure as a core public service is done no good at all if we perpetuate unproblematically the view that 'sport is good'. If we are all genuinely to benefit from the *good* social impact of sport then we must also acknowledge the bad and the ugly. And in order to distinguish between these we first need a sound evidence base. Arguably the most refreshing aspect of Best Value is that it embraces social impact assessment as well as financial stringency. Best Value methodologies, then, should render transparent the individual elements of social impact and measure each of them in the same way that traditional accounting approaches separate each cost element.

One such methodology, designed for sport, is **SportPrem**, a software package that integrates the principles of both human and economic value. Both ILAM, who commissioned the software, and the English Sports Council, who funded it, recognised at the outset that the rapidly-expanding sports development service in this country needs more detailed planning and evaluation in order to justify its place in the spectrum of services. They also accepted that sports development, in both local authority and governing body settings, was in need of a stronger evidence base. This was for two main reasons: first, to demonstrate high standards of service delivery and financial accountability in an era of tightening fiscal pressure and, secondly, to demonstrate effectiveness in meeting objectives. In other words, they rejected the rhetoric that 'sport is a good thing' as this was no longer seen to be a sufficient basis for public investment.

Other service fields beyond leisure and sport, such as health (Tones & Tilford, 1994), education (HEFCE, 1996) hospitality and tourism (Johns 1996), have already developed sophisticated methods for measuring service quality and impact. However, the **SportPrem** design team have avoided complex, mathematically-based formulae in order to fit the practical world of the frontline SDO and sports coach. The approach adopted in **SportPrem** was chosen specifically to evaluate the social impact of sport by emphasising human development outcomes. This was important to us because one aim of the design team was to locate **SportPrem** firmly within an ideological context and to recognise that sports development has a *political and social* purpose and *political and social* impact. More particularly, for the sports development process to live up to its name, it must show evidence of all aspects of *development* - knowing (cognition), feeling (affection), doing (behaviour) and motivation (intention). Prior to running their SD programme, the **SportPrem** user is asked to spell out in full exactly what outputs and outcomes are to be achieved for each objective. Outputs include all the traditional *quantitative targets* which we have come to associate with sport services (in essence, 'more people, more places, more medals' Sports Council 1997) and outcomes include all the *qualitative targets* which the SDO wishes to achieve for their customers under the headings of Develop Knowledge, Develop Positive Feelings, Develop Involvement and Future Impact. **SportPrem** also addresses the hidden social impacts or benefits and costs of the *staff experience* which do not show up in traditional balance sheets, such as stress, team cohesion, or level of skill and the in-kind contribution of staff, volunteers and

sponsors, whether this be in time or material goods. Judging from our experience of running sample programmes through **SportPrem** so far, we think the industry will be staggered at the volunteer and in-kind subsidy that it enjoys!

The **SportPrem** approach to measuring the social impact of sport is consistent with other business place initiatives such as the 'social audit'. The term 'social audit' has rapidly become part of the lexicon of performance measurement in business and is clearly closely related to the government's push for Best Value. The **SportPrem** designers particularly welcome this move since the software matches many social audit principles, such as consulting all stakeholders and finding ways to measure social parameters both for external clients and for the work climate in which staff operate. Such is the importance now attached to the work climate that a Cambridge don has even established a Relationship Foundation at the University from which he conducts 'relationship audits' which can

...reduce violence and stress in prisons, improve efficiency and care in the health service and protect business and industry from expensive disputes. If you get the relationships right there is an economic benefit too...people are getting on well with each other...[but] you usually only measure them when there is a breakdown.

(Schluter in Wroe, 1997. P.14)

### **Conclusion: Best Value *from* sport for society**

A recent report on the social impact of participation in the arts suggested

The election of a Government committed to tackling problems like youth unemployment, fear of crime and social exclusion is the right moment to start talking about what the arts can do for society rather than what society can do for the arts...the new pragmatism can extend its principle of inclusiveness to the arts by embracing their creative approaches to problem-solving. Britain deserves better than the exhausted prejudices of post-war debates over state support for the arts.

(Matassaro, 1997, p.iv)

Substitute the word 'sport' for 'arts' here and we might well say the same. People in sport possess the skills of tactical planning and problem-solving and also show creative flair, skills that should equip us admirably to justify what we do. As I argued earlier, from 'Chariots of Fire' to 'Football in the Community', frequent claims have been made that sport contributes to social integration, or helps to ameliorate the plight of disaffected youth, or improves both personal and collective well-being. Under Best Value there is an imperative to demonstrate these social



impacts and I hope that **SportPrem** will be one effective tool for doing this. It places the concept of *value* at the core of performance measurement, interpreting the term in its widest, humanistic sense. Importantly, it also moves us away from an obsession with the evaluation of economic value in our assessments of cost-effectiveness, which has been characteristic of CCT, to an integrated view of *monetary and human value* which, I believe, underpins Best Value. Whereas CCT was supposed to address economy, efficiency *and* effectiveness, in reality, it addressed only the first two of these. Best Value and **SportPrem**, on the other hand, are focussed much more on effectiveness. By using **SportPrem** year on year, the SDO or their line manager will be able to monitor the long-term impact of their service against their overall mission and make an evidence-based case for future resourcing.

At a recent gathering of UK sport and leisure researchers, Derek Casey, of the English Sports Council, presented a research agenda for sport. It included a surprising array of topics about which precious little is yet known:

- longitudinal patterns of type and levels of sporting activity;
- motivation for drop out;
- the relationship, if any, between funded programmes and increases in participation rates and health standards;
- base rate data about participation in sport by low income and other minority groups;
- the impact of recreation schemes on community development...

and so the list went on. It was also clear from the seminar that social policy *for* and *through* sport is based on what might be called, at its most generous, "rapid-response research"; in other words, that ministers of all persuasions rarely let evidence get in the way of a pet policy.

The paucity of information available to underpin public policy for sport is alarming. If we and our politicians are to persist in our beliefs about the positive social impact of sport, and if we continue to use this as a rationale for investment of public money in sport, then we need a far better evidence base. The case for sport is only sustainable if all sides of the issue are accurately known and weighed, whether they be good, bad or ugly.

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Comment [CH1]: