

Assessing the sociology of sport: On cultural sensibilities and the great sport myth

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Jay Coakley

University of Colorado, USA

Abstract

On the 50th anniversary of the ISSA and IRSS, Jay Coakley, a foundational scholar in the development of the sociology of sport, reflects on the lasting power of the Great Sport Myth (GSM) to shape cultural understandings of sport. Situated in an unshakable belief about the inherent purity and goodness of sport, it is argued that the GSM has shaped uncountable decisions to embrace and sponsor sports despite their costs and what they may preclude in the way of other private and public choices. In assessing the challenges of the field, the author points to the influence of the GSM in masking and enabling personal power that has enabled ruling elites to appropriate public money for private gain. In looking ahead to future sociology of sport inquiry, scholars are encouraged to recognize how the GSM continues to undermine critical discussions and research on the culture and organization of sports and engage that understanding in more effective tactics for disseminating research that can facilitate social change and activism.

Keywords

development, social activism, socialization, sociology of sport, sports

Sport has the power to change the world. [applause] It has the power to inspire, it has the power to unite people in a way that little else does. It speaks to youth in a language they understand. Sport can create hope, where once there was only despair. It is more powerful than governments in breaking down racial barriers. It laughs in the face of all types of discrimination.

- Nelson Mandela, 2000 (speech at the Inaugural Laureus Lifetime Achievement Award, Monaco; http://db.nelsonmandela.org/speeches/pub_view.asp)

Corresponding author:

Jay Coakley, Department of Sociology, University of Colorado, Colorado Springs, CO 80918, USA.
Email: jcoakley@uccs.edu

Reflections on a lasting myth and the trajectory of the sociology of sport

After four decades of studying sports in society, I remain awed by the pervasive and nearly unshakable belief in the inherent purity and goodness of sport. Despite evidence to the contrary, many people combine this belief with two others: (a) the purity and goodness of sport is transmitted to those who participate in or consume it; and (b) sport inevitably leads to individual and community development.

Over the years, I have described the combination of these three beliefs as the Great Sport Myth, as depicted in Figure 1. During the past 150 years, the great sport myth (GSM) has shaped uncountable individual and collective decisions to embrace and sponsor sports, despite their costs and what they may preclude in the way of other private and public choices.

I'm not sure if the GSM led Nelson Mandela, an astute student of politics, to say what he said in his Laureus award speech (above), but I am certain that most people subsequently quoting his words have done so to express and affirm the beliefs that constitute it. In fact, as the assumed universal language of prolympic sports has spread worldwide, so have beliefs about sport's essential purity and goodness and the discourse making such claims.

The relevance of the GSM on ISSA's 50th anniversary is that it has led people worldwide to conclude that there is no need to critically study and analyze sport, because it is already as it should be. This conclusion has been a thorn in the side of the sociology of sport since its inception in 1965. Believers in the GSM don't take sociology of sport research seriously, nor will they consider funding or even encouraging it. They already know the truth about sport and their faith in that truth is much like religious faith – isolated from empirical reality and regularly expressed through unquestioned support of policies and programs in which sport is the focus. We who do critical research may not deal directly or regularly with these believers, but they continue to influence our lives.

Assessing the GSM in light of challenges for the sociology of sport

Research in the sociology of sport indicates that faith in the GSM does not emerge and grow in a vacuum. Well-positioned and powerful people foster and prey on that faith as they use the GSM to camouflage personal interests related to projects in which sport is presented as a tool for solving problems and contributing to individual and collective development. It's as if ruling elites had read Gramsci and concluded that sport, more than other civil institutions today, appeals to popular tastes in ways that make people gullible and subject to political manipulation and control.

This approach to wielding power has enabled ruling elites to appropriate billions of dollars of public money for private gain over the past three decades. For example, it occurs as bid committees comprising GSM believers and skilled opportunists sell their proposals to host sport mega-events to populations eager to celebrate their nation and its cultural heritage. The often repeated and unsupportable claim that the event will promote development for the common good, serves as a key incentive for public approval.

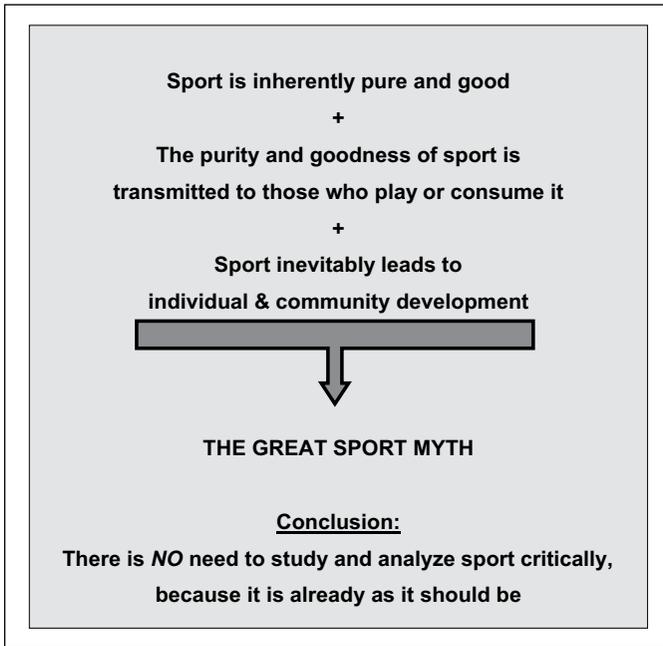


Figure 1. The great sport myth (GSM).

Additional claims about sport bringing about social integration and social inclusion also garner public support. In preparing for the 2014 Winter Olympic Games in Sochi, these claims were used to justify US\$50 billion in expenditures, from which a reported US\$20 billion went into the pockets of Russian oligarchs supervising President Putin's pet projects. The transfer of public money into private pockets occurs in less blatant forms in more democratic societies, but it occurs nevertheless.

Research by independent economists, political scientists and sociologists has been ignored as powerful representatives of cities and nations have spent hundreds of billions of dollars to host sport mega-events. Even a brief review of this research shows that such expenditures contribute little to the common good in any representative manner.

For many years, educators in British Commonwealth countries and North America have been captivated by the GSM. As a result they have routinely assumed that doing and even witnessing sport is inherently educational. 'Proof' of this has come through superficial snapshot comparisons of 'athletes' and 'nonathletes' combined with the personal testimonies of current and former athletes giving witness to their own sport-inspired transformations.

People claiming to be educators in the United States have also spent billions of dollars to sponsor varsity sport programs, without commissioning or consulting research that identifies the conditions under which the development of positive character traits or curriculum-based knowledge is most likely to be associated with such sports. Furthermore, they have never asked critical questions and commissioned research to document the

impact of school-sponsored sports on the culture and organization of schools and the allocation of scarce resources within schools and school districts.

A corollary of the GSM is that sport is inherently self-policing and that problems in sport are caused by individuals blinded by greed, fame, or an extreme desire to win as they play, coach, manage or own teams and events. Believers see these motives as character flaws that obstruct transmission of the pure and good lessons to be learned in sports. They therefore seek to preserve the assumed integrity of sport by having these morally corrupt individuals banned from the game. A highly publicized instance of this occurred when people condemned Lance Armstrong after he confessed to what nearly all of his cycling peers did during the time he was racing; at the same time, no one critiqued how professional cycling had been organized by promoters, sponsors and media executives in ways that required cyclists to train and compete at an intensity and frequency that destroyed their bodies.

The dissonance-reducing logic that leads GSM believers to demonize athletes whose actions are inconsistent with the perceived purity and goodness of sport also leads to the creation of enforcement agencies charged with identifying and sanctioning athletes believed to be morally flawed. The World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) and the United States Anti-Doping Agency (USADA) represent classic examples of this approach. Staffers in these agencies believe they are *the* key line of defense in preserving sport's purity and goodness and the transmission of these virtues to future generations of athletes and sport consumers.

On the GSM and future strategies for the sociology of sport

Overall, the GSM consistently undermines critical discussions and research on the culture and social organization of sports. As a result, the sociology of sport remains on the margins of sociology, physical education and sports studies. This is not always a bad place to be, but being positioned in this way calls on those of us in the field to engage in concerted, sustained and strategic efforts to discredit the GSM and replace it with a discourse informed by sound research that enables people to make informed decisions about sports in their lives and their communities.

The pervasiveness of the GSM and the way it is strategically nurtured by self-interested political and economic elites constitutes a significant challenge to the sociology of sport. Although we in the field feel comfortable presenting our critical research at ISSA conferences and publishing it in the *IRSS* and related journals, there remains a need for us to publicly disrupt GSM-based assumptions underlying policy-making, program funding and implementation, much sports science research, and everyday discussions about sports in society.

Because I currently enjoy post-retirement opportunities to do research and meet people associated with sports worldwide, I continue to see the powerful influence of the GSM on research, policy and public expenditures. Personal and public resources are invested in prolympic sport based on the belief that its purity and goodness is successfully transmitted to children, young people 'at risk', students in need of academic motivation and developmental experiences, and citizens seeking social integration and inclusion. At the same time, sport teams, events and programs are publicly funded, based

on the belief that they will revitalize communities and spawn needed forms of development. When anticipated changes don't occur, individuals are blamed and even demonized as being corrupt beyond hope.

Creating strategies to undermine the GSM and effectively challenge GSM believers and self-interested supporters remains an important task for scholars in the sociology of sport. Certainly our critical research must be the foundation for our strategies. But when dealing with the faith of GSM believers, research is not enough. Their faith usually trumps our facts. Additionally, their visions are often presented through slick presentations and public relations campaigns. Watching one of their highly emotive 5–8-minute publicity videos demonstrates that effective forms of proselytizing are not limited to religious fundamentalists. These videos are routinely produced by national Olympic Committees, sport federations, university athletic departments and individual college sports.

Presenting data showing that participation in prolympic sports involves variable experiences – some of which are not character building – and that sport projects have variable outcomes – some of which undermine the common good – is only a starting point for effectively challenging believers of the GSM. Unless our research is complemented by words and actions informed by long term goals and a clear theory of social change, we end up talking only to each other and becoming frustrated by the state of sports in society. For this reason, an activist strategy is required if our field is to grow and thrive. Retreating to the ivory tower is not an option.

Nearly a half century ago I was drawn into the sociology of sport partly by sociologist Harry Edwards, educator Jack Scott, socialist philosopher Paul Hoch and others who combined critical analysis with social activism. I was energized by their approach and used it to inform my teaching, research and community involvement. But their activism was focused almost exclusively on exposing processes of exploitation. This was important, but it didn't deal with the pervasiveness of the GSM, why people cling to it and how it is used by powerful actors at all levels of social organization.

At this point, we need to identify strategies that effectively lead large segments of the population to question the GSM and call for evidence-based planning plus transparency and accountability in the case of sports. Quality research is necessary, but it will not be sufficient in challenging and discrediting the great sport myth.

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