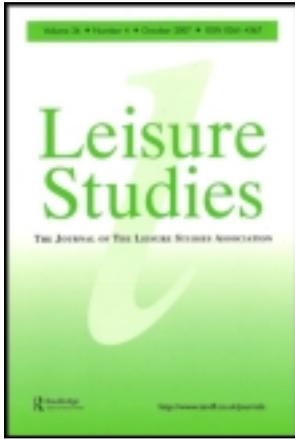


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Research note

Rugby Union among middle-aged American men: an exploration

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Although rugby union, a full-contact sport, is usually considered as a leisure activity in the domain of young people, the motivations and effects of rugby union played by middle-aged men are not clear. The purpose of this study is to examine the motivations and participation effects of middle-aged American men participating in rugby in the USA. This study concentrates on rugby union (hereinafter referred to as rugby) as opposed to rugby league. Data were collected through in-depth interviews during an international amateur masters' tournament. A total of 14 amateur rugby players with ages ranging from 35 to 52 were interviewed. This study found that the motivations for rugby participation were making friends, the love of rugby and self-actualisation. The participation effects of rugby were a long-term commitment, skill improvement and cultural awareness. Moreover, these findings on the motivations and effects of rugby help support the conclusion that this sport among the middle-aged group can be considered as a serious leisure activity.

Keywords: rugby union; leisure; middle-aged American men

Introduction

In their book *Barbarians, Gentlemen and Players: A Sociological Study of the Development of Rugby Football*, Dunning and Sheard observed that 'rugby is descended from the winter folk-games which were a deeply-rooted tradition in pre-industrial Britain' (2005, p. 1).

Due to 'the world wide trend towards grouping competitiveness, seriousness of involvement and achievement-orientation' (Dunning & Sheard, 2005, p. 4), rugby has gained popularity all over the world. Rugby union originally developed as an amateur sport; subsequently rugby league developed as a professional and semi-professional sport among working-class players. At the top level, both are now professional sports under which there are a wide range of semi-professional and amateur clubs. Today rugby union is most played contact sport in the world, with participants from 180 countries on six continents. The sport is celebrated every 4 years at the Rugby World Cup, which is the third most viewed sporting event following the Olympics and the FIFA World Cup (IRB Organisation, 2012). Furthermore, rugby has quickly developed into an important national sport and has even enhanced the

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national identity in some countries such as Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Argentina.

Although there are more than three million people with ages ranging from six to eight playing rugby around the world, rugby union is not as popular as basketball, baseball, American football and ice hockey in the USA. Like these sports, rugby has its unique characteristics, such as ‘fast running, towering kicking, fearless tackling’ (Guthrie, Brown, & Growden, 2007, p. 10). Given the inherent risk of injury in rugby as well as the tremendous variety of leisure activities available, this study explores the reasons why American middle-aged men choose rugby union as a leisure activity. In particular, this article presents the results of a study of middle-aged American men who are amateur rugby union players.

Rugby in the US

Although rugby has not developed in popularity in the USA as it has in other regions of the world, ironically, the USA. Rugby team is the only team which won the gold medal both in the 1920 Antwerp Olympics and the 1924 Paris Olympics (Rugby in the Olympics: History, 2012). However, many people in the USA are not even aware that rugby was once an event in the Olympic Games. There may be heightened awareness when rugby union in its shortened version (rugby 7s) is included in the Olympics in Rio de Janeiro in 2016.

According to the 2011 USA Rugby statistics, USA Rugby (formerly the United States of America Rugby Football Union) has approximately 90,000 registered members including both males and females (About USA Rugby, 2012). USA Rugby also supports its national team, the Eagles, in international tournaments. Rugby union in the USA is continuing to grow because of good promotion, the increasing athletic population, strong consumer base and the mature sports industry. The International Rugby Board (IRB) reports that the USA has a total of 457,983 registered and unregistered players. Surprisingly, the number of players in the USA ranks in third place behind England (1,990,988) and South Africa (651,146) among the current 97 unions in the IRB (Unions, 2012).

The British ‘public school’ system (i.e. the collection of private schools) in the nineteenth century had a great impact on the development of international sport including rugby (Polley, 2010). Ex-public school boys (often called ‘old boys’) played leading roles in the codification of rugby. Polley also stated that:

the long-running emphasis on amateurism (particularly in rugby union and athletics), on playing the game in the right spirit, on playing for honour and health rather than for material rewards, on competing being more important than winning; all of these platitudes come direct from the public schools. (p. 18)

Unlike the definition in the UK of old boys (i.e. former pupils), which is not based on ‘age’, old boys’ rugby clubs were established in the USA with members who are 35 and older. There are many old boys’ rugby clubs attracting significant numbers of middle-aged American men who are playing the game at the amateur level in the USA. For example, Colorado Senior Old Boys Rugby Club (CSOBs) asks ‘Are you a Rugby Player, 35+++ , looking for a few more years of rugby fun and games. Then come and join us, the CSOBs!’ (Colorado Senior, Old Boys Rugby Club, 2012). Wild Geese Old Boys Rugby Football Club states ‘the club offers

35-and-over players competitive play, camaraderie, and exceptional hospitality' (Wild Geese Old Boys Rugby Football Club, 2012). Furthermore, the older rugby players have their own tournaments such as Golden Oldies Rugby Annual Festival, Can Am Rugby Tournament and Vintage Rugby World Carnival. These tournaments emphasise friendships, involvement and enjoyment. For example, the Golden Oldies Rugby Festival emphasises that:

rugby has created an exceptional global fraternity and this is happily inherent in the Golden Oldies movement. It is grassroots footy and traditional rugby friendship for those 35 years and over. (Golden Oldies Rugby Festival, 2012)

The serious leisure perspective

Although there is no research as to why middle-aged American men play rugby during their free time as a leisure activity, we believe the most appropriate theoretic approach for framing the data from our study is the serious leisure perspective.

The concept of serious leisure has received significant attention as a means to understand leisure involvement and participation. In 1982, Robert Stebbins, originally defined 'serious leisure' as,

... the systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer activity that is sufficiently substantial and interesting for the participant to find a career in the acquisition and expression of its special skills and knowledge. (Stebbins, 1992, p. 3)

Years later, the six types of casual leisure were developed. These consist of play, relaxation, active and passive entertainment, sociable conversation and sensory stimulation (Stebbins, 2001).

Many researchers have conducted a number of studies on a variety of serious leisure activities. Stebbins' (1979, 1992, 2001, 2002) studies covered amateur participants in theatre, archaeology, baseball, Canadian football (a form of gridiron football), comics, among others. Other research has also applied the serious leisure theory to sundry leisure activities, such as master's swimming (Hastings, Kurth, Schloder, & Cyr, 1995), adult amateur ice skating (McQuarrie & Jackson, 1996), bass fishing (Yoder, 1997), Kennel Club (Baldwin & Norris, 1999), motorsport events (Harrington, Cuskelly, & Auld, 2000), computer gaming (Bryce & Rutter, 2003), fantasy football (Gibson, Willming, & Holdnak, 2002), sport tourism (Green & Jones, 2005), museum volunteering (Orr, 2006), quilting (Stalp, 2006) and surfing (Cheng & Tsaur, 2012). Although none of the previous serious leisure research has been conducted on amateur rugby, Stebbins (1992) listed rugby as one of the serious leisure activities. He stated that 'such sports and games as baseball, hockey, rugby, chess, and recently shuffleboard (Snyder, 1986) are more accurately placed under the heading of amateurism, owing to their location in the Profession-Amateur-Public system' (1992, p. 14). However, since 1992, rugby union has become increasingly professional especially at the top level.

Purpose of the study and research questions

The purpose of this study specifically is to examine rugby involvement and the commitment of the members in a middle-aged amateur rugby club, as well as the

motivation and effects of rugby participation in middle-aged adults. Most importantly, the study aims to validate serious leisure theory as a framework for describing and explaining why middle-aged men play rugby during their free time. Therefore, the research questions addressed in this study are as follows:

- (1) Considering the high risk of injury in rugby, what motivates middle-aged American men to continue pursuing rugby participations?
- (2) What are the main effects of rugby on middle-aged American men who play this sport as leisure?
- (3) Do middle-aged American men who play rugby during their free time pursue it as a serious leisure activity?

Methods

Sample

A qualitative method was used in this study to explore motivations and effects of playing rugby among the middle-aged men. A total of 14 amateur male rugby players from a Southeast rugby club were interviewed before they attended the Vintage Rugby World Carnival. The average age of the interviewees was 44 years old, with the youngest being 35 and the oldest being 52 years old.

Data collection

A total of 14 structured interview questions regarding socio-demographic information, rugby participation and rugby effects were developed on the basis of consultation with amateur rugby players, researchers and colleagues. In order to clarify and elaborate on their responses, follow-up interviews were also conducted during and upon the completion of the international amateur masters' tournament. A total of six players were re-interviewed during the follow-up interview.

Data analysis

The objective of the study is to apply serious leisure theory to the participation of middle-aged men in rugby. A general inductive approach was used to determine the validity of applying the serious leisure perspective to rugby players. This approach is similar in ways to research aimed at developing grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). However, it does not explicitly separate the coding process into open coding and axial coding (Thomas, 2006). Moreover, the present study is an attempt to validate the fit of existing theory in a heretofore unexplored area. As Thomas (2006) suggested, the purposes of a general inductive approach for data analysis are to (a) condense raw data; (b) establish links between research objectives and research findings; and (c) develop a framework. Particular steps of inductive coding included preparation of raw data files, close reading of text, creation of categories, overlapping coding and uncoded text, and continuing revision and refinement of category system. After the transcripts of the interviews were completed, the transcripts were sent to each informant in order to ensure the accuracy of the transcripts for further elaboration and correction of the data.

Results

Six major themes were identified from the data analysis. The themes included making friends, the love of rugby (despite the risk and injuries), a long-term commitment, skill improvement, self-actualisation and cultural awareness.

Making friends

Most respondents showed a strong connection to their teammates as they perceived them to be *friends*. They also emphasised their friendship with competitors. For example, one of the interviewees, Bob, is 35-year-old front desk clerk. Although he has only played for 3 years, he reported:

Rugby is a ruffian sport played by gentlemen. You can see this in the way two teams beat the hell out of each other, then after the game, sit around and have a beer together, as if they were old friends.

The result of this study differentiates middle-aged male rugby players from most participants of other competitive sports. These players are unique in that their comrades are held above the world of competition and the friendships made are what keep them playing. This supports previous research that positive leisure experiences are associated with enjoying the friendships which are formed through participation (Patterson & Pegg, 2009; Prescott, 1994).

The love of rugby despite the risk and injuries

Our interviewees showed that their positive feelings strongly outweigh negative consequences such as injuries. Interviewees Fred and Dan commented that they travelled for competitions and must, therefore, make sacrifices by being away from their family. However, they are willing to do so due to their love of rugby. Fred stated that, 'I have already had a serious injury that required 9 months of physical therapy and I am still playing'. Dan stated, 'I may get hurt ... I may not perform up to the level expected by teammates ..., but I still play'. In fact, our respondents also pointed out that sacrifices must be made in order to play rugby because it is what they want to do. Kevin is 45 years old with more than 20 years of rugby experience. He knew injuries might prevent him from playing, but he has lowered his personal expectations of his physical performance and will continue to play. This result is supported by the studies of Patterson and Pegg (2009) and Devine and Lashua (2002) that gaining people's respect (e.g. feeling good about oneself and positive reactions) and a sense of personal pride (e.g. game participation) are positive benefits of serious leisure.

A long-term commitment

Playing rugby is not just for fun; it requires a serious commitment; conversely it establishes a network of friends. Most of our informants addressed the fact that they have been playing amateur rugby for decades and never gave up because of their dedication to their teammates. For example, Kent is 49 years old who has been playing rugby for more than 30 years. Kent stated that he has played at all levels including collegiate, club, union, regional and Old Boys. The teams encouraged

him to have a long-term commitment to play rugby. This supports Patterson and Pegg's (2009) study that joining a leisure-based association is important in the establishment of 'a sense of belonging and a net work of friends' (p. 398).

Skill improvement

Although our interviewees indicated that playing rugby was fun and enjoyable, they knew that rugby requires a certain skill to play and a substantial amount of time for training. Therefore, they need consistently to practice in order to improve their skills. For example, as Scott said:

We practice Tuesday and Thursday nights together ... get together on Saturday mornings to practice as well ... travel sometimes pretty good distances to play an 80 min game because we need to improve our skills ...

This response indicates that skill improvement is part of serious leisure engagement. This also supports previous studies (e.g. Cheng and Tsaur's (2012) study) that the attitudes of serious leisure participants are different from other leisure participants. They acquire skills and knowledge through consistent leisure participation.

Self-actualisation

Most informants expressed that they feel fulfilled and accomplished as well as socially connected through their rugby experiences. For example, Bob stressed:

Rugby has been a second family. In a club, you have men all ages, which can bring you drinking buddies, mentors, teachers, students, and brothers. It is somewhat of a fraternity, where the members are of any age ... rugby has given me people to ask for help, and give help.

Also, they experience psychological fulfilment in their life through rugby. As Nick remarked:

It's been a life of total abundance, you know everybody does everything they can to their fullest ... they play with abundance, they drink with the same thing ... everything they do is in total ... just to the max and that's why I love going on tour with rugby people ... everything is done to the full, nothing is held back.

In addition, many respondents also shared their mental growth through the game, e.g. 'Rugby not only teaches loyalty, but also endurance, toughness of mind and spirit. It also makes you think on your feet. I also found that you learn to respect your opponents'.

Cultural awareness

Our interviewees indicated that playing rugby creates their identity. This identity supplies players with a collective culture and group mentality. Scott said:

The unique thing about rugby is that after a game there are socials ... rugby is world wide fraternity ... it's so unique that after you play a violent, physical game that you come together and enjoy the social side of it because it is a huge fraternity

Interestingly, they pointed out that learning about different cultures through the tournament tours was a unique asset in playing rugby: 'Rugby has made me more culturally aware'; 'The tradition, the cultural awareness, but most of all, my friends'; 'I have three friends now ... one's South African, one's Australian, and one's from England', 'I hadn't ever really even met someone from another country before I started playing ... and right now I'm in Ireland so I've learned a lot about the Irish culture in the past three days ... it's nice to get away and have another group of people to give me advice and go drink beer with'; 'My expectations for this experience were that I wanted to see a different part of the world'.

In summary, the six major themes lend validity to the proposition that this sport is a serious leisure activity. Serious leisure is occasionally to persevere when one encounters difficult situations, develop a personal career in the activity, gain knowledge and skill, enhance self-actualisation, connect each participant in a social world and enable participants to be proud of themselves. In other words, rugby meets the six distinguishing qualities of serious leisure (Stebbins, 1992).

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine the rugby involvement and commitment of the members in a middle-aged amateur rugby club, as well as the motivation and effects of middle-aged adults' participation in rugby play. Most importantly, this study aimed to validate the application of serious leisure theory to the activity of rugby engaged in by middle-aged men. Although Stebbins listed rugby as one of the serious leisure activities in his studies, Stebbins and other leisure researchers have not applied the serious leisure perspective to the sport of rugby played by middle-age men. However, the findings of this study revealed that the middle-aged male players are motivated to continue pursuing rugby as a serious leisure activity.

Previous leisure research heavily concentrate on youth development (e.g. Harinen, Honkasalo, Ronkainen, & Suurpää, 2012; MacDonald & Shildrick, 2007; Safvenbom & Samdahl, 1998), women (e.g. Dempsey, 1990; Kay, 1996; Safvenbom & Samdahl, 1998) and older people (e.g. Heo, Lee, McCormick, & Pedersen, 2010; Joseph, 2012; Yau, & Packer, 2002), research on middle-age men leisure is rarely found in previous leisure research. Therefore, this study adds new knowledge to leisure studies through a study of an older age group. At midlife, leisure activity begins to be modified due to the effects of ageing (Godbey, 2008). However, this study implies middle-aged men may not necessarily seek a new leisure activity if they have a serious leisure activity.

The results of this exploratory study found middle-aged men play rugby for honour and health which also support the traditional value of playing rugby among ex-public school boys in the UK addressed in Polley research (2010). The middle-aged group has inherited the right spirit of playing the game and they emphasise the amateurism which originated in British public schools' sports. These findings can also be connected with the development of the leisure constraints theory created by Crawford and Godbey in 1987. Often studied by leisure researchers, health and age, as leisure constraints, are associated with leisure participation among all age groups. However, both of these factors were not perceived by the players in this study as constraints or barriers to their participation.

This study has provided preliminary results based upon qualitative research with a small sample of middle-aged male rugby participants in the US. The amateur

character of US rugby union is more pronounced than any other rugby unions due to history of the sports development in the country and the popularity of the big four American professional sports. Studying American amateur rugby provides some new knowledge of rugby development as an international sport particularly the ethos of participation among its players.

In summary, we recognise this study has several limitations. First, quantitative research with a large sample size should be conducted. Second, further research should be conducted in different cultural groups in countries such as South Africa, France, Japan, Australia and New Zealand. Last, research on leisure constraints among middle-aged rugby players should be conducted to understand what factors other than health and ageing issues affect their leisure participation. Future leisure constraints research needs to focus on ethnographic research to augment standardised constraint themes (e.g. health and ageing) that would lead to the improvement of understanding leisure constraints globally (Dong & Chick, 2012).

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