GOODBYE, GORDIE HOWE

Sport Participation and Class Inequality in the “Pay for Play” Society

Richard Gruneau

In the introduction to a major policy document in 1970, the late John Munro, then minister of Amateur Sport for the Trudeau-era Liberals, stated:

We must face the fact that the opportunity for involvement in sports and recreation is extremely unequal between the socioeconomic classes in our population. . . . It’s only fair, just as a dash in a track meet is only fair, that everyone has the same starting line distance to run. Unfortunately . . . the sports scene today resembles a track on which some people have twenty-five yards to run, some fifty, some one hundred, and some as much as a mile or more.¹

Forty-two years later, Roy MacGregor told me a story about a comment made to him over lunch by the legendary former director of the Canadian Amateur Hockey Association and Hockey Canada, Murray Costello.² “There will never be another Gordie Howe,” said Costello. He didn’t mean that we’d never see another player as skilled or as effective on the ice as Gordie Howe. He meant that the days of young men from working-class families in rural Canada going on to succeed in the National Hockey League are over. If a young male player these days isn’t from a family with enough resources to pay for power skating lessons, summer clinics,
expensive equipment, and travel for league games and tournaments, his chances of making it to the pros are slim.

I begin with these two quotations because of their dissonance. As far back as the early 1970s, Canadian sports policy declared an intention to level the playing field by removing barriers to participation in sport. Over the past forty years, there have been notable improvements: funding for athletic training and coaching and economic support for high-level athletes, a partial reduction of barriers to participation for girls and women, and the creation of somewhat greater opportunities for Canadians from diverse cultural backgrounds as well as for Canadians with disabilities. Still, Costello’s blunt prediction invites us to consider whether there has been any similar headway in reducing barriers to sports participation faced by Canada’s lower socioeconomic classes.

Some useful research was undertaken in the 1970s and 1980s that provided an early glimpse into this question. For example, research on athletes who competed at the 1971 Canada Winter Games and on elite tennis players in the mid-1970s points to the fact that a significant majority of competitive athletes at the time had parents who were highly educated; worked in professional, managerial, and skilled technical occupations; were of European ethnic origins; and were overrepresented in the top 25 to 40 percent of Canadian income earners. Similar research on the social backgrounds of national team athletes undertaken in the mid-1980s found even more pronounced patterns of socioeconomic exclusiveness. There is nothing to suggest that higher-level sport has become more accessible in the twenty-five to forty years since these studies were conducted. On the contrary, I would argue that the higher levels of sport in Canada today are less accessible to the lower classes than ever. Furthermore, considerable research over the past twenty years suggests clear patterns of class exclusivity, even at the lowest levels of sports participation.

In the remainder of this chapter, I examine some of these data to outline the scale of class inequality in Canadian sports participation and suggest some reasons why participation in organized sport is more out of reach for most Canadian families than at any time since the end of the Second World War.

**Spending More but Participating Less: Who Gets to Play?**

A Conference Board of Canada national survey in 2004 reported that Canadian households spent an estimated $16 billion on sport in 2004, representing 2.2 percent of all consumer spending and 1.2 percent of Canada’s gross domestic product (GDP). However, more interesting is the fact that household spending on sport
grew significantly after 1996, when it was only 0.9 percent of GDP. The average “active” Canadian family in 2004 was paying $1,963 per year in sport-related expenses for both adults and children, a third above the amount spent a mere eight years earlier. Over the next decade, family spending on children’s sport alone grew to an average of just under $1,000 per child, while expenses for families of “serious” athletes in 2014 reached an average of $1,657 per child. In some sports the averages can be even higher. For example, in hockey, the cost of registering a youth player and buying equipment can easily exceed $3,000 a year. On some highly competitive teams, when extra training, travel, and tournaments are added, the costs can run as high as $10,000.

However, while consumer spending on sport increased markedly between the mid-1990s and early 2000s, the percentage of adult Canadians, children, and youth who report being involved once a week or more in sports has decreased since 1992. According to information provided by Statistics Canada’s General Social Surveys (GSS), approximately 45 percent of adult Canadians reported “regular weekly involvement” in sport in 1992, compared with only 28 percent in 2005 and 26 percent in 2010—a 19 percent drop in the reported national adult sports participation rate over an 18 year span. The same surveys note that in 1992, 64 percent of Canadian children between the ages of eleven and fourteen, and just over 75 percent of those between fifteen and nineteen, reported participation in some form of sport at least once a week. However, by 2005, the overall rate of reported active sports participation had declined for eleven to fourteen year olds to 55 percent. For Canadian youth in the fifteen- to nineteen-year-old category, the sports participation rate declined to 60 percent by 2005 and to 54% by 2010.

**EXPLAINING DECLINING ADULT SPORTS PARTICIPATION**

Among the adult population, the gradual decrease in sports participation from the early 1990s to the present appears to be explained by several factors, the most obvious of which is Canada’s aging population. In 1991, individuals over the age of sixty-five made up only 11.6 percent of the Canadian population; by 2010, that percentage had grown to more than 14 percent.

Because older Canadians tend to participate in sporting activities at a lower rate than younger Canadians, the aging population partially explains the drop in participation in sports. However, the evidence of increasing economic pressures on Canadian families over the past thirty years is more striking. For example, between 1984 and 1994, the number of families in which one or more of the wage earners
was involved in “moonlighting” increased by more than 50 percent, and that rate appears to have increased into the 2000s.\textsuperscript{14} When adult Canadians were asked in the 2010 GSS about factors that limit opportunities for sport participation, approximately a third commented that they simply lack the time they used to have.\textsuperscript{15}

A recent Conference Board of Canada study covering seventeen countries gave Canada a “C” grade on economic inequality and emphasized the extent to which income inequality in Canada has worsened over the past twenty years. From 1990 to 2010, the richest group of Canadians increased its share of total national income from 36.5 percent to 39.1 percent, while the poorest and middle-income groups lost ground.\textsuperscript{16} Along similar lines, Statistics Canada reported that, in 1982, the median income of the top 1 percent of Canadian tax filers was seven times higher than the median income of the other 99 percent—whereas, by 2010, the median income of the top 1 percent had grown to be about ten times the median income of the other 99 percent.\textsuperscript{17} The Bank of Canada added to this economic snapshot by presenting data showing a dramatic upward swing in the household debt-to-disposable income ratio of Canadians over the past thirty years.\textsuperscript{18} Canadian families are working harder and carrying more debt than ever. The cost of servicing that debt takes away from other expenditures, unless one happens to be in the highest echelons of Canadian income earners. Life in the middle and lower echelons of the Canadian class structure seems increasingly characterized by a state of precariousness—carrying large personal debt while working multiple jobs, living on social assistance, underemployed, rarely employed, or never employed. Sports participation under these circumstances is a distant concern for many people in the face of the day-to-day realities of paying the rent and feeding themselves and their families.

To be fair, some of the rate of decline in adult sports participation revealed in Statistics Canada General Social Surveys between 1992 and 2010 can also be explained by the definition of “sport” used in the surveys, which emphasized competitive activities.\textsuperscript{19} “Non-sporting” activities such as recreational walking, hiking, and gardening are thus not included in the data, and yet it is precisely these sorts of less physically demanding (and often inexpensive) activities that many Canadians turn to as they age. On this issue, it is enlightening to contrast the 2005 data, which depict a 17 percent drop from 1992 in sports participation, with data collected in the Canadian Health Surveys of 1998 and 2005. When less structured forms of physical activity—such as walking, hiking, or gardening—are added to participation in recognized “sports,” there is an increase in physical activity levels: from 46 percent of Canadians reporting regular involvement in physical activity in 1998 to 51 percent
in 2005. This upward trend continued to be evident in 2010, as 52 percent of adult Canadians reported regular participation in physically active leisure activities.

Still, whether one considers participation in more traditional sports or in physically active recreation more broadly, the research on participation rates by adults suggests a consistent pattern of increasing exclusiveness. This is particularly evident for sports participation by Canadians with differing levels of education and income. For example, the 2004 Conference Board study showed that 46.7 percent of Canadians with a university degree or certificate were likely to be active participants in sport, in contrast to only 16.7 percent of those Canadians who had not finished high school. Similarly, in 2004, participation in sport was more than twice as high for Canadians with family incomes in excess of $100,000 than for families with incomes below $40,000. The 2010 GSS revealed a slight decline in sport participation (from 2005) in households earning over $80,000 per year. However, the rate of sport participation by higher income families was still approximately five times greater than that reported by low income families. Of course, these broad patterns are complicated by the inclusion of other aspects of social differentiation and inequality that are intertwined with differences in education and income. For example, women continue to be underrepresented in Canadian adult sport in comparison to men, as are Aboriginal adults and individuals who don’t speak English as a first language.

**Mapping and Explaining Changing Youth Participation in Sport**

Only fragmentary data for children under the age of fifteen are currently available in the Statistics Canada GSS update for 2010. Nonetheless, results from the 1992 and 2005 GSS include useful information on youth participation, rates from age five through the late teenage years. A summary of these changes is provided in table 12.1. Several trends are evident from the data in the table. First, at the national level, there is a significant drop in the reported sport participation rates of boys at every age level between 1992 and 2005. The trend is most notable in the fifteen to nineteen age group where there is in which participation dropped of 19 per cent between 1992 and 2005. More recent GSS data indicate that rates of participation for fifteen to nineteen year old boys remained relatively steady between 2005 and 2010. The overall drop in reported participation rates for boys, across all years, is 13 percent. The patterns of declining rates for girls seem less striking, especially in the younger age ranges. The overall drop in reported participation for girls aged five to nineteen...
is 6.7 percent, just over half the drop for boys. Furthermore, rates of reported sports participation for girls in the five- to ten-year-old range between 1992 and 2005 stayed relatively constant, with a slight reduction that is not statistically significant. There is some reduction in participation between 1992 and 2005 in the eleven to fifteen age range, although, again, it is smaller than the drop for boys of similar ages. Similar to the boys, the biggest drop in participation between 1992 and 2005—approximately 12 percent—occurs in the fifteen-to-nineteen age range. More recent data on active sports participation by girls in this age range reveals a further 13 percent drop in reported participation between 2005 and 2010.27

Table 12.1 National participation rates in youth sport, 1992 and 2005

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<tr>
<td>5–10 years</td>
<td>60%*</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>43%</td>
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<tr>
<td>11–14 years</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>62%</td>
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<td>15–19 years</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>51%</td>
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<td>All (5–19 years)</td>
<td>73.6%</td>
<td>60.6%</td>
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* Percentages refer to the total number of survey respondents.


Like the data on reported adult participation, these national averages require closer analysis. An obvious point is the extent to which national reported participation rates in sport for children and early teens may be influenced by the reduction of youth demographic groups as part of the aging of the Canadian population. In 1991, children under the age of fifteen made up 20.7 percent of the Canadian population—a figure that, by 2005, had shrunk to 17.6 percent.28 This drop has been offset somewhat since 2005 by larger numbers of families with children among new immigrants. However, participation rates in sport tend to be lower than national averages among children of new immigrants, especially in families where English is not the first language spoken.29

In addition, a number of less traditional sport and game activities that are not included in the categories of Statistics Canada surveys have grown in popularity in
recent years: for example, paint balling, inline skating, parkour, ultimate frisbee, mixed martial arts, and a variety of new “roller sports,” such as street long-board riding. At least part of the reduction of youth and teen participation in more traditional sports may be due to the growth of new recreational alternatives. While only scant socioeconomic research has been conducted on these activities in Canada, with the exception of mixed martial arts, there appears to be a strong connection between these “new” sports and other patterns of largely middle-class, white, and masculine consumption.30

There has also been increased competition for the time of children and teens, with accompanying economic costs, coming from the revolution in digital media that has swept across Canadian society since the early 1990s, and especially in the past decade. The amount of time spent watching television has declined among Canadian youth since the early 1990s, but this has been more than offset by increasing time spent using cellphones and smart phones, computers, and/or gaming consoles.31 A national study by the World Health Organization conducted in 2001–2 found that more than 80 percent of Canadian youth in grades 6 to 10 were spending over two hours per day in front of a computer screen or television.32 This study reported that it was not uncommon for some Canadian youth to spend as much as four to five hours per day in front of a television or computer screen, not including time spent texting or Internet surfing with mobile phones. Furthermore, in a world where cellphones and other electronic devices have become a “necessity,” children, adolescents, and teens are incurring new additional costs.

Still, as is the case for adult participation, rates of sports participation for children and youth are strongly shaped by a complex array of intersecting factors associated with class, ethnicity, race, gender, education, and income.33 Notably, GSS data have shown a consistent and sometimes dramatic income bias in youth and young adult sport participation over the past twenty years.34 In 2005, for example, adult Canadians whose annual household income was in excess of $80,000 were more than twice as likely to participate in sports as those whose household income was less than $30,000.35 Similarly, 63 percent of children from families whose household income was $80,000 or more took part in sports, compared to only 43 percent in families whose income was under $40,000.36 The survey also shows that the children of parents with higher levels of education are far more likely to participate in sport than children of parents with lower levels of education. Trussell and McTeer’s analysis of secondary data on sports participation in the 1998–99 National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth reinforces these findings:
Children's participation in organized sport was most strongly predicted by household income and parent's education. The higher the household income and parent's education, the higher the child's participation in organized sport. Income was the strongest predictor, suggesting that the financial demands associated with organized sport can create inequity in Canadian children's opportunity to participate in organized sport.37

The authors note a similar pattern in participation in “informal” sporting activities, although they suggest that the association between income, education, and sports participation is somewhat weaker.38 The point is that national survey data on children's sport mirror the socioeconomic biases evident in the national data on sports participation by adult Canadians. Because the pattern of relationships between income and participation is so strong, we can reasonably infer that declining rates in sports participation among children from less affluent Canadian families contribute disproportionately to the drop noted above in national rates of sports participation for both boys and girls aged five to nineteen years old between 1992 and 2005. Tony Hernandez and his colleagues note the gap in sports participation between high and low income earners in the 2005 GSS and argue that there was “an alarming shift” in declining participation rates in the fifteen to nineteen and twenty to twenty-four age categories between 1998 and 2005.39 In these age ranges, sports participation rates among high-income Canadians appear to have held steady, and may even have increased, since the early 1990s, while participation rates among lower-income groups have fallen off dramatically. This trend among youth and young adults is echoed in results of the GSS in 2010, which reported steep decreases in sports participation across all ages in Canadian families with incomes of less than $20,000.40 In other words, more children, youth, and young adults from families in the Canadian lower classes are likely to have dropped out of sports since the early 1990s than children from families found in the higher echelons of the Canadian class structure.

Gender differences provide an important sidebar to any consideration of this trend. Since the end of the Second World War, girls and young women from low-income families, often including members of marginalized ethnic and racial groups, have been chronically underrepresented in Canadian sports. There has also been a consistent underrepresentation of boys and young men from marginalized ethnic or racial groups in many sports. However, from the 1950s through the 1970s, young men and boys from working-class families had a significant presence in sports. For example, a 1976 study of the social backgrounds of Canadian professional hockey players showed a strong presence of players from families in which fathers were employed in professional or managerial positions. Yet, at the same time, over 60
percent of players came from families in which fathers worked in occupations related to farming, fishing, or logging, in semi-skilled manufacturing jobs, or in unskilled labour. Few families in similar circumstances are likely to send a player to the pros today.

Household composition, access to training and competitions, and the workplace involvement of parents are further indicators of youth sports participation, although these indicators are also often closely intertwined with factors such as income, ethnicity, race, gender, and family structure. In a world where Canadian family structures are changing and traditional two-parent families are on the decline, youth sports participation continues to be higher in two-parent families than in single-parent families. However, the gap in participation by children from dual- and single-parent families tends to be less in the case of boys than in the case of girls. Women lead most single-parent families, and the fact that income levels are typically lower for women than men following separation and divorce has a significant impact on children's recreational choices. Work and child rearing leave very little time for much else and there are immense pressures on family budgets in single-parent families, and especially in female-supported single-parent families. Such circumstances pose often-insurmountable barriers to sports participation.

This tendency is in direct contrast to the situation in high-income, two-parent families, where there tends to be less pronounced differences in rates of participation in youth sport between boys and girls. An exception is noted in the 2010 GSS data which indicate a drop in sports participation by girls and women from higher income families, between 2005 and 2010, while participation by boys and men from high income families has increased. The accessibility of sport can also include a range of additional factors. For example, travel requirements for sports competitions often requires access to a car in many parts of Canada, pushing participation further out of reach for many families. In addition, there appears to be a strong socialization effect such that children's organized activities mirror the priorities of their parents. In 2010, 90 percent of families in which one or more of the parents were involved in sports as either direct participants or administrators, children were active participants as well.

The Changing Organizational Context of Canadian Participation in Sports

There are three related phenomena that have made sports less available than ever to Canada’s lower classes. The first, as mentioned earlier, is the increasing financial
pressure faced by the Canadian middle and lower classes over the past twenty years and by the growing gap between rich and poor in Canada. The second is the spiraling cost of sports themselves. The third is related to a series of dramatic changes in Canadian society that are transforming community sports clubs and undercutting the abilities of municipalities and the public school systems to offer cost-effective sporting activities for children from less affluent families. These trends are also associated with the growth of private sector provision of sports training and coaching and a changing economy that has seen an erosion of facilities in many smaller Canadian population centres.

The Professionalization of Community Sports Clubs
Community sports clubs, or local volunteer sporting associations, which often work in loose partnerships with municipal recreation departments, continue to be fundamental to the Canadian sport system. In 1998, 19 percent of Canadians (aged fifteen and over) sampled in the GSS reported belonging to a sports club, a local community league, or another local or regional sport association. Between 1998 and 2005, the percentage of Canadians involved in club and/or league sport stayed relatively constant, with only a minor decrease from 19 percent to 18 percent, despite the much greater drop-off in participation discussed earlier in this chapter. However, volunteering in sports clubs and organizations appears to have increased during this time. In 2005, more than two million Canadians volunteered their time as administrators or helpers in sports clubs or organizations, up 18 percent from 1998. The upward trend in volunteering in sports organizations continued between 2005 and 2010. This trend appears to run counter to a broader trend in all Canadian voluntary associations—declining rates of volunteering, concomitant with increasing hours that remaining volunteers devote to their volunteer activities. It has become harder to get people to volunteer their time, with the result that fewer volunteers have to work harder to maintain established programs and levels of service. Indeed, Paul Jerbala noted that in 2000, a mere 25 percent of volunteers in Canada put in 73 percent of the total volunteer hours in the voluntary sector and that a growing number of volunteers preferred to give money rather than time.

How can we explain the increase in the number of volunteers in Canadian community sports clubs and associations between 1998 and 2010 when evidence shows that participation in the Canadian voluntary sector as a whole declined during a similar period? How do we reconcile the increased level of volunteering in sport with the fact that sports organizations themselves continue to say they are “desperate” for volunteers? Jerbala reports that just over a quarter of sports organizations
sampled between 2000 and 2003 continued to report a net loss of volunteers, the highest reported loss of all nonprofit organizations in the Canadian voluntary sector. Similarly, 58 percent of Canadian voluntary sports organizations said they were having difficulty retaining volunteers and planning for the future.\(^{51}\)

The answers to these questions are complex and require a more detailed analysis than can be provided here. Still, there is enough evidence available to suggest some plausible explanations. First, community sports clubs and associations typically face greater challenges today than they did in the early 1990s. Many clubs operate in a climate of substantially heightened expectations from sports participants and parents, as well as from larger regional, provincial, and national associations. Furthermore, most of the larger clubs and associations in Canada now run programs well beyond their traditional sporting season. Programs lasting ten or eleven months are increasingly common. In addition, many clubs and associations now have substantially larger budgets then even in the recent past, requiring higher levels of professionalism and accountability. Sports clubs and associations are also subject to growing demands for higher-quality coaching and facilities at all times of the year.\(^{52}\)

These factors raise the cost of providing programs and often create a need for additional volunteers. They also create new layers of administration in clubs and associations that were comparatively easy to administer twenty years ago. For example, the increasing attention paid by provincial and national sporting associations to long-term planning, player and coach development, promotion, event management, and financial and legal issues has created pressures for parallel levels of professionalism at the community level. The implementation of a national coaching certification program in Canada in the 1980s has been an important element of these pressures toward professionalism. Clubs have sought out certified coaches, and many clubs have set certification targets that need to be met by parent volunteers. This necessitates additional record keeping, as well as the organization of certification courses at the local level. In the face of all of these combined pressures, a growing number of the larger sports clubs and associations in Canada are moving away from an older model of casual volunteerism toward a more formal administrative model similar to that of small businesses or larger nonprofit NGOs.\(^{53}\)

Such changes create insatiable demands for volunteers, and especially for those who have the necessary time, skills, and qualifications to manage more complex levels of program development, planning, and administration. Recent increases in volunteers in Canadian sports clubs and organizations have simply not been enough to meet demand, especially in rapidly growing sports such as soccer. Recruitment to higher-level administrative positions, in particular, has not matched the growth
seen in volunteer coaching, and there are ongoing shortages of volunteer coaches with higher-level coaching certification. Many sports clubs and associations still struggle to find enough volunteers of any kind to run their programs, let alone volunteers with sufficient levels of commitment, free time, or qualification.

There is also considerable anecdotal evidence suggesting that much of the increase in volunteering in sport over the past decade has been limited to areas requiring relatively low time commitment, such as coaching very young children or coordinating part of a competitive team or league. When sports administrators claim that it is more difficult than ever to recruit qualified volunteers, they most often mean recruitment to the coaching or administrative jobs that require a heavy commitment and are more technically demanding. Accordingly, many clubs and associations, especially the smaller ones, are forced to rely heavily on a very small core of “super-committed” volunteers. When these volunteers finally get burned out or retire, it is extremely challenging for the clubs and associations to find volunteers to replace them. In this sense, the trends in sports clubs and associations are consistent with trends affecting the voluntary sector as a whole.

This is one of the main reasons why some sports clubs have opted to create paid positions to undertake activities once undertaken almost exclusively by volunteers. Compared to other areas of the voluntary sector, such as health and welfare organizations or religious organizations, the use of paid employees in sporting clubs and associations has been, and continues to be, comparatively small. Still, over the past two decades, there has been an undeniable trend in community sports clubs toward hiring more employees, especially in technical areas such as coaching and athletic training. Hiring professionals in these areas, or increasing the number of professionals, not only adds to expenses; it also has a tendency to further escalate expectations among the club or association membership and elevate the professionalism brought to training and to athlete development.

Paid coaches and trainers, often on part-time salaries, have a vested interest in expanding existing programs and in designing new programming in ways that reinforce club members’ perceptions of the value of the paid professional’s work. In that way, a part-time position just might become a full-time job. Since the early 1990s, Canadian universities have produced a substantial number of physical education and human kinetics graduates who have opted to pursue careers as professional trainers and coaches rather than moving into the public school system. The result is a growing labour market in these fields, with an accompanying set of entrepreneurial pressures. Furthermore, over the past twenty years, there has been a substantial growth of professionalized private sector sports training facilities,
sports schools, and academies that sometimes compete with voluntary organizations or add supplementary services to them. This adds to the escalation of professionalizing forces in voluntary sports associations.

Once a community sports club or voluntary association begins to go down the road toward professionalism in coaching and training, it is unlikely to turn back. This trend has promoted a sea change in parent expectations. Long-time coaches frequently note that, over the past decade especially, parents of young athletes have come to expect greater knowledge from youth sport coaches than was once the case. These pressures are felt most strongly on high-level, competitive “select” teams where many parents expect that certified coaches will have at least a rudimentary knowledge of seasonal planning, of how to periodize training, and of how to conduct proper warm-ups for injury prevention. Parents have also come to expect high-level youth coaches to have an understanding of some of the principles of sport physiology, biomechanics, and sport psychology, in addition to the teaching of skills specific to certain sports.

Parents who become volunteer sports administrators often carry these expectations with them into the boardroom. More notably, the expertise now required to administer community sports clubs and organizations favours people who already work in professional and managerial occupations and who have enough flexibility, or seniority, in their work to devote a considerable amount of time to volunteer sports management. At the highest levels of sport administration in Canada, this trend was already evident as early as the mid-1970s. Research on samples of executives in national sports organizations at that time indicated that the percentage of executives with university educations rose from approximately 49 percent in 1955 to 75 percent in 1975, in contrast to 7 percent of Canadians with this level of education in 1960 and 10 percent in 1971. Similarly, whereas approximately 37 percent of the fathers of national sports executives sampled came from families with a parent in a professional, managerial, or skilled technical occupation in 1955, just over 46 percent of national sports executives in 1975 had fathers in these occupations. More recently, there is evidence of this sort of affluence bias has been seen across the whole range of Canadian voluntary sports organizations. For example, in 2004, Canadians in the $40,000 to $60,000 per year bracket were three times more likely to volunteer in sporting organizations than people in the under $20,000 per year bracket. Canadians earning $100,000 per year or more were five times more likely to volunteer in sports clubs and associations than low-income Canadians. Similarly, in 2010, coaches in Canada were five times more likely to come from families with annual incomes of greater than $80,000 than from families earning less than $20,000 per year.
The intersecting pressures of rising expectations in coaching and administration, longer and more varied programming, larger budgets, better financial accounting, understanding of liability issues, and the need to work with both local governments and, sometimes, sponsoring organizations not only complicate the jobs of volunteers sports executives; they also create new facility and training “needs.” Sports clubs and organizations across the country feel that they need more facility time—ice time, field time, gym time, and so on—and members often want access to higher-quality training and competition facilities (e.g., outdoor artificial turf, indoor venues offering winter training for summer sports, venues offering summer training for winter sports, etc.). At the higher competitive levels, coaches who are more professionalized want athletes to commit to additional training, including cross-training or strength training, and to more travel in search of higher-level competition.

The growth of these new “needs,” in an atmosphere where committed and qualified volunteers are often hard to find, can create additional pressures on a club’s administrative and financial resources. Programs such as holiday and spring-break camps, additional specialized skills training, off-season training, tournament hosting, or regional development competitions increase the workload and require additional qualified personnel. The growing trend toward paid coaching in many sports clubs runs parallel to a less immediately noticeable growth in contract positions in areas such as registration, scheduling, public relations and sponsorship, and website design and maintenance. These three trends—the hiring of paid coaches, the contracting out of formerly volunteer administrative activities, and escalating costs necessary to meet perceived new “needs” for training and completion—are developing unevenly in different sports and in different regions across the country, but their impact is subtly reshaping the way in which many of the larger community sports clubs and associations operate. Along the way, sport participation is continually pushed further away from Canada’s lower classes.

**The Turn to Sport as a Strategy of Community Economic Development**

The professionalization of community sport in the past twenty to thirty years has also been influenced by a dramatic set of economic changes that have been affecting Canada since the early 1980s. A destabilizing global deflation from 1973 to 1975, matched with high levels of public debt in virtually all Western nations, shook public confidence in the ability of governments to meet the economic challenges of the late twentieth century. At the same time, emerging digital technologies were opening up opportunities for innovation in a wide range of fields including...
computing, software development, media production, security, design, and advertising. These technologies created new areas for economic growth and promised more “flexible” alternatives to the rigidities of centralized industrial workplaces. The drive for flexibility in production was accompanied by a belief among conservative groups that solutions to the economic problems of the early 1980s could be solved by clearing away obstacles for economic growth, not only on a regional and national scale but internationally as well. The result was a sustained push from business-friendly political parties to decrease levels of political regulation in economic life in order to reduce the cost of doing business and open up new markets. This push for deregulation was often accompanied by intense lobbying for cutbacks in government expenditures matched with tax reductions to create an impetus for increased consumer spending.

These events created conditions for an extraordinary expansion in the 1980s and 1990s of “cultural industries” associated with publishing, film, television, music, the Internet, advertising, and design. The scale of this transition is striking. For example, in Canada, between 1971 and 2001, the “cultural sector labour force” grew by 160 percent, compared to a growth of 81 percent in the overall labour force. Accompanying this, the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement in the late 1980s and the subsequent North American Free Trade Agreement precipitated an economic shift that saw many traditional industrial and manufacturing jobs leave the country for other parts of the world. This occurred in conjunction with a reduction in stable large-scale employment in manufacturing industries due to new approaches to flexible production now made possible by computerization and robotics and necessitated by a more segmented and discriminating consumer market. In this context, as traditional industrial employment rates eroded, new pressures and financial hardships challenged the older Canadian middle and working classes. Additionally, cities and communities across the country were forced to consider less traditional forms of economic production. For many cities and communities, the production of “events” emerged as an area of economic activity that began to rival the more traditional making of things.

Changes in the global economy in the emerging world of flexible accumulation hit Canada’s single-industry resource towns especially hard. From the 1960s through the 1970s, many of these towns had well-developed sports facilities—often built and heavily subsidized by the town’s major industry—that created opportunities for young athletes, many of whom were from working-class families. Some of these clubs—like the legendary Ocean Falls swim club in British Columbia or the Trail, BC, track and field club—produced Olympic athletes in large numbers. The
collapse or shrinkage of these towns is, perhaps, a comparatively minor influence on broad patterns of sport participation across the country, but it has certainly contributed to the reduction of opportunities for sport participation by Canadians from lower-class families.

By the late 1980s, with resource industries and manufacturing eroding in many parts of Canada, the cultural economy was increasingly seen as a viable area of economic growth, even in Canada’s larger cities. This provided new incentives to host highly visible sporting attractions, such as professional hockey, baseball and football teams; Indy-car races; the Pan-American Games; the Commonwealth Games; and the Winter Olympics. An “event-driven,” tourist, and service-oriented approach to economic development rippled from the largest cities down to Canada’s regional cities, smaller towns, and municipalities. In some instances, this led to a reevaluation of community sport, not so much with respect to its value for cultural citizenship or health but more with respect to its potential for economic development as a cultural industry. It is in this sense, for example, that Kamloops, in south-central British Columbia, has worked over the past fifteen years to rebrand itself from a former “mill town” to “Canada’s Tournament Capital.”

In sport, so-called world class events such as major professional sports or the Olympics are in short supply and carry significant financial risk. Even prominent second-tier events such as the Grey Cup or the Commonwealth or Pan-American Games are far beyond the financial means of most Canadian communities. Still, there are many inexpensive regional and national events, such as national youth sport championships or big international youth tournaments, that civic boosters believe can help to fill local hotels and keep cash flowing to local retailers and restaurant owners. For that reason, civic boosters have an interest in promoting such events heavily, and over the past twenty years, this has helped to integrate even comparatively low competitive levels of Canadian sport more tightly into the media, hotel, and travel industries. At the same time, sports organizations—always desperate for funds—have become increasingly reliant on big club events (such as tournaments) as sources of revenue. Some of these events, such as the well-known Québec International Peewee Hockey Tournament, have been in existence for many years. But the trend in nearly all sports is for the growth of more and bigger sporting events, including events at the adult and masters levels. This trend partially explains why the proportion of active Canadians (that is, Canadians who regularly engage in sports) who participated in tournament competitions grew from 36 percent in 1998 to 39 percent in 2005 and to 41% in 2010.65
Larger sports clubs and associations have become integrated into cultural economies in two significant ways: first, by providing a pool of unpaid labour necessary for the provision of a popular social service, or set of events, that represents an aspect of economic consumption (sporting equipment and clothing; the use of cars to travel to games, matches, or events; restaurant meals while travelling, etc.), and second, through the growing tendency toward paid employment for coaches and trainers, as well as through the contracting out some of the club’s administrative work. In Canadian communities today, some of the larger nonprofit sports clubs and associations, with thousands of registrants or members, operate on an economic scale similar to small businesses. As these clubs and organizations become professionalized, they often opt to develop higher-profile competitive programs in order to add to—or in some instances, to replace—an earlier commitment to a more cost-sensitive approach to community recreation.

The Erosion of Public Funding and the Growth of Privatization
Socioeconomic barriers to sports participation have also been influenced by a set of political changes beyond more localized trends affecting sports clubs and associations and by the increasing costs of sports equipment and facilities. For example, Canadian municipalities have generally been committed to offering affordable recreational sport programs of different types, but over the past twenty years, municipalities have seen more and more costs offloaded onto them by provincial governments. This has made revenue generation a source of greater concern for municipalities, making it more difficult for local sport and recreation departments to justify the scale of subsidies necessary to make sport participation available to less affluent Canadian families. This has occurred alongside increasing demand for newer and higher-quality training facilities, such as multiple-use swimming pools, tennis bubbles, and artificial turf.

In the early postwar era, there was substantial public investment in Canada in “war memorial” pools and arenas, as well as in new tennis courts, baseball diamonds, and grass playing fields. In the mid-1960s, another boom led to the construction of numerous publicly subsidized “Centennial” pools and arenas and to another round of growth in the construction of playing fields. There has also been more recent federal investment in community sports facilities through the infrastructure works plans of the 1990s and the economic stimulus policies of 2009–10. Still, in many instances, these investments have involved cost-sharing arrangements that have required large municipal expenditures. Today, municipalities across Canada still subsidize the cost of arenas, baseball diamonds, tennis courts, and playing fields.
However, the price tag for newer “higher-end” or “value-added” facilities has taken off at the very moment when municipal budgets have reached a crisis point. In many communities, spending large amounts of public money on sports facilities challenges the will of municipal politicians, unless the expenditures can be justified as part of a broader logic of community economic development.

To meet the high cost of upgraded pool and arena facilities, equipment for training, or artificial turf playing fields, many communities have moved toward increased “user-pay” approaches to facility construction and use. Today, users are being asked to contribute to the building of these facilities or to pay more for access to them than was the case twenty and thirty years ago. In addition, new types of partnerships have formed between municipal governments, voluntary sports clubs and associations, and, sometimes, private sector providers. The success of these partnerships varies widely, but in many communities, they are now viewed as the only way in which expensive new facility developments can move forward. Such partnerships typically commit community clubs and associations to substantial fundraising and often to substantial debt. The result is a trend toward increasing quality in sporting facilities along with greater opportunities to stage sporting events. But a parallel trend of escalating expenses for both municipalities and facility users represents a slow decline in the ability, or the willingness, of municipalities to subsidize the cost of sports in Canadian communities.

Somewhat similar trends can be seen as a result of the erosion of funding directed toward the public school system, especially in situations where municipalities and schools share facilities. By the late 1990s, school boards across the country were struggling with funding freezes or cutbacks and had begun to implement or to raise fees for public access to school facilities and programs. For example, Donnelly and Kidd note that in Ontario between 1998 and 2002, the number of schools charging for community use increased by 119 percent. In addition, in 2002–3, user fees for access to school facilities were being charged by 94 percent of Ontario secondary schools, up 21 percent from 2000–2001. In Toronto, one consequence of this was a 43 percent drop in the number of outside community groups using schools between 1998 and 2002. A survey in 2002–3 found that 45 percent of high school physical education programs in Ontario were charging user fees and that user fees were charged in 78 percent of school sports programs. A decade later, increasing costs for access to school facilities and increasing user fees for sports programs have simply become a fact of life for parents and students.

Furthermore, the decaying infrastructure of school sports facilities that were built during the baby-boom era has created a need for massive reinvestment that
can’t easily be accommodated within public budgets. These multiple factors have created a cost spiral such that school sports programs are constantly facing challenges of fundraising, increasing the advantages of schools in affluent communities. For example, in Ontario in 2001–2, Donnelly and Kidd report, the top 10 percent of schools raised the same money as the bottom 79 percent put together. The development of user-pay specialty “sports academies” within the public school system is one strategy that many school boards have adopted to raise revenues. In one sense, these schools make high-level sport participation more available within the public schools system. But with “tuition” costs that can run in excess of $350 per month, these sports academies simply represent another face of the privatization of both Canadian education and Canadian sport. If postwar school sports programs in Canada once played an important role in subsidizing sports opportunities for children, adolescents, and teenagers, they are much less likely to do that in today’s “pay-for-play” society.

**Conclusion**

I began this chapter with two contrasting quotations: the optimism and commitment to “fairness” in John Munro’s declaration in 1970 of a new sport policy and Murray Costello’s recent pessimistic assessment that “there will never be another Gordie Howe.” I have presented research suggesting that Costello’s pessimism is well warranted. Significant social class differences continue to affect Canadians’ sport participation. These class differences disproportionately involve Aboriginal Canadians, many single women, members of immigrant families, and Canadians with lower income and education levels, from both white and non-white racial groups. But most significantly, these disparities are anchored in a widespread decline over the past twenty years of the economic well-being of Canadians from a wide variety of backgrounds. This economic deterioration stems from broad economic, political, and social changes far removed from the world of sport. In this regard, it shouldn’t be surprising that the increasing gap that has grown in Canada over the past twenty years between rich and poor has implications for understanding today’s falling rate of sport participation. A substantial part of the falling rates of reported sport participation between 1992 and 2010 can be explained by a noticeable withdrawal from sport participation by middle- and lower-class Canadians, and especially by males from lower-class families. The issue here is more complicated than the fact that Canadians in middle- and lower-class families simply began to have less time and less money. The increasing financial pressure faced by many Canadians over the
past twenty years is accompanied by a complex set of intersecting factors that have pushed the cost of sport participation higher and higher. Sport in Canada today has been reshaped significantly by substantial reductions in various forms of “public” subsidy, either by volunteers, governments, or schools. The professionalization and privatization of sports organizations, the integration of sport into community economic development, and redirections of government expenditures has led to the gradual expansion of a “pay-to-play” philosophy.

It is interesting to see that the most recent national sport policy document, presented in 2012, continues to suggest that inclusivity in sport is a major policy principle, albeit in a less dramatic manner than in 1970. The policy document repeatedly emphasizes a commitment to ensuring that “opportunities are provided for persons from traditionally underrepresented and/or marginalized populations to actively engage in all aspects of sport participation, including leadership roles.”

I would suggest that in terms of the effect of class inequality on sport participation, all Canadian sport policies, including that of 1970, have been complete failures by any standard. There has never been much political will to even begin to consider how the challenges of class inequality affecting access to sports might be met. This is one reason why there has been virtually no consideration—in politics or media, or among sports organizers themselves—of the many contradictions in Canadian sports policy, with initiatives and policies in some areas having the unintended consequence of making sports more and more economically exclusive.

For example, I have argued elsewhere that, since the late 1980s, substantial public expenditures on major sporting events or on specialized spectacular facilities have had the effect of directing revenues away from areas such as schools and local municipalities, which have always played an important role in partially subsidizing the cost of sport participation. The more public money Canadians invest in such events and in the kind of sport system that supports them, the more out of reach sport will be for the majority of Canadians. In the coming years, when Canadians communicate about sport, we will have to decide whether equalizing opportunities for Canada’s socioeconomic classes really matters. If it does, addressing the problem will involve much more than the production of platitudes in national sport-policy documents about striving for “fairness” or “level playing fields.”

NOTES


2 Roy MacGregor, personal communication, November 2012.

3 See Munro, *A Proposed Sports Policy for Canadians*.


6 Beamish, “Persistence of Inequality.”


8 Ibid., 8.


Goodbye, Gordie Howe
19 For the purpose of the GSS, Statistics Canada defined “sport” as an activity that “involves two or more participants engaged for the purpose of competition” and is governed by “formal rules and procedures” and “requires tactics and strategies, specialized neuromuscular skills, and a high degree of difficulty and effort.” Canadian Heritage, *Sport Participation 2010*, 8.
22 Bloom, Grant, and Watt, *Strengthening Canada*, 4.
23 Ibid.
30 The largely white and middle-class aspects of such “lifestyle sports” are widely noted. For example, see Belinda Wheaton, ed., *The Consumption and Representation of Lifestyle Sports* (London: Routledge, 2012).
32 Ibid.


35 Ifedi, Sport Participation in Canada, 2005, 21. The figures were 40.3 percent and 18.9 percent, respectively (27). By 2010, the rates of participation had dropped to 33.1 percent ($80,000 and over) and 15.2 percent (under $30,000), but the income-based disparity clearly remained. Canadian Heritage, Sport Participation 2010, 28.

36 Ifedi, Sport Participation in Canada, 2005, 33.

37 Trussell and McTeer, “Children’s Sport Participation in Canada,” 115.

38 Ibid, 121.


40 Canadian Heritage, Sport Participation 2010, 23.


44 Clark, “Kids’ Sports,” 54.

45 Canadian Heritage, Sport Participation 2010, 23.

46 Ibid., 37.


48 Ibid.

49 Canadian Heritage, Sport Participation 2010, 52.


51 Ibid., 8.


53 The challenge of increasing professionalism is widely noted in the literature on sports organizations. A summary of this literature is available in Sandalio...

54 This pattern seems to be supported by data from the 2010 GSS that indicate an increase (since 2005) of Canadians volunteering to coach but a decrease in Canadians moving into administrative positions with sports organizations. Canadian Heritage, Sport Participation 2010, 49.

55 Jerbala, “Sport, the Voluntary Sector, and Canadian Identity,” 7. In 2006, when Jerbala wrote, nearly three-quarters (73 percent) of sports organizations had no paid staff.

56 This observation is based on informal discussions held over the past five years with more than twenty different coaches in ice hockey, track and field, and soccer.


58 Ibid., 16.

59 Bloom, Grant, and Watt, Strengthening Canada, 4.

60 Canadian Heritage, Sport Participation 2010, 53.


63 Useful summary discussions of this point can be found in Timothy A. Gibson, Securing the Spectacular City: The Politics of Revitalization and Homelessness in Downtown Seattle (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2004); and Mark Douglas Lowes, Indy Dreams and Urban Nightmares: Speed Merchants, Spectacle, and the Struggle over Place in the World Class City (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002).

64 See the introduction in David Leadbeater, ed., Mining Town Crisis: Globalization, Labour and Resistance in Sudbury (Black Point, NS: Fernwood, 2008).

65 Canadian Heritage, Sport Participation 2010, 44.

66 Peter Donnelly and Bruce Kidd, “Realizing the Expectations: Youth, Character, and Community in Canadian Sport,” in The Sport We Want: Essays on Community Sport in Canada (Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport, 2003), 25–44.

67 Ibid., 32.

68 Ibid.

69 Canadian Sport Policy 2012, 9, 11, 21.