What is Sport?

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In practical terms 'sport' is often defined by its social interpretation. What we consider 'sport' in one instance may not be in another; sport takes on many forms and is constantly changing based upon societal norms, trends, and new directions. [1, 2, 3]

Defining sport

Definitions of sport may also be accompanied by definitions for one or more closely related activities that are 'not' sport. [1]

Sport
A human activity involving physical exertion and skill as the primary focus of the activity, with elements of competition or social participation where rules and patterns of behaviour governing the activity exist formally through organisations and is generally recognised as a sport. [2]

Organised sport
The degree of organisation or institutional structure that surrounds and influences the sport helps to distinguish whether an activity is classified as 'organised sport'. [1, 4, 5, 6]

Sport participation
A 'sport participant' is a person who engages in some way in a sporting activity or event, including playing/competing; coaching, officiating, administrating, or other enabling roles (paid or volunteer); and/or supporting (e.g., cheering, being a fan, etc.). [7]

Physical activity
Any bodily movement produced by skeletal muscles that results in energy expenditure. [5]

Active recreation
Activities engaged in for the purpose of relaxation, health and wellbeing or enjoyment with the primary activity requiring physical exertion, and the primary focus on human activity. [2, 8]

Further definitions

Many definitions of sport exist in dictionaries, policy documents, and research papers. Some prominent examples include:

- An activity pursued for exercise or pleasure, usually requiring some degree of physical prowess, as hunting, fishing, racing, baseball, tennis, golf, bowling, wrestling, boxing, etc. [9]

- A human activity involving physical exertion and skill as the primary focus of the activity, with elements of competition where rules and patterns of behaviour governing the activity exist formally through organisations and is generally recognised as a sport. Active recreation activities are those engaged in for the purpose of relaxation, health and wellbeing or enjoyment with the primary activity requiring physical exertion, and the primary focus on human activity. [2]

- All forms of physical activity which, through casual or organised participation, are aimed at maintaining or improving physical fitness and mental well-being, forming social relationships or obtaining results in competition at all levels. [10]

- Sport covers a range of activities performed within a set of rules and undertaken as part of leisure or competition. Sporting activities involve physical activity carried out by teams or individuals and may be supported by an institutional framework, such as a sporting agency. [5]

- All forms of physical activity that contribute to physical fitness, mental wellbeing and social interaction (including casual, organised, or competitive sport, and indigenous sports or games). Sport involves rules or customs and sometimes competition. 'Play' (especially for children) is any physical activity that is fun and participatory, often unstructured and free from adult direction. 'Recreation' is more organised than play, and generally entails physically active leisure activities. Play, recreation, and sport are all freely chosen activities undertaken for pleasure. [4]

Guidelines

- Revised European Sport Charter, *Council of Europe*, (adopted 13 October 2021). The European Sports Charter provides guidance for the Council of Europe's member states to perfect existing legislations or other policies and to develop a comprehensive framework for sport.

- WHO guidelines on physical activity and sedentary behaviour, *World Health Organisation*, (2020). The WHO Guidelines on physical activity and sedentary behaviour provide evidence-based public health recommendations for children, adolescents, adults and older adults on the amount of physical activity (frequency, intensity and duration) required to offer significant health benefits and mitigate health risks. For the first time, recommendations are provided on the associations between sedentary behaviour and health outcomes, as well as for subpopulations, such as pregnant and postpartum women, and people living with chronic conditions or disability.

- National Sport and Active Recreation Policy Framework, *accepted by all Australian Governments*, (2011). The Framework, developed in consultation with sport and active recreation sectors, provides a mechanism for the achievement of national goals for sport and active recreation and sets out the agreed roles and responsibilities of governments and their expectations of sport and active recreation partners. Its purpose is to assist Australian governments to achieve a consistent approach to the development and adoption of policies that support increased participation; success in international competition; strong national competitions; and contribute to whole of government objectives.

- Sport, Recreation and Play, *United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)*, (2004). This report defines 'sport' as all forms of physical activity that contribute to physical fitness, mental well-being and social interaction. These include play; recreation; casual, organized or competitive sport; and indigenous sports or games. Sport involves rules or customs and sometimes competition. Play – especially among children – is any physical activity that is fun and participatory. It is often unstructured and free from adult direction. Recreation is more organized than play, and generally entails physically active leisure activities. Play, recreation and sport are all freely chosen activities undertaken for pleasure.

Related concepts

Terms (e.g., sport, recreation, physical activity, exercise) are often used interchangeably when they have similar structures and outcomes; and discretely to make a distinction of difference.

Modified sport
Modified sports can take many forms but are generally designed to be an introductory, or more accessible version, of a sport.

Social sport
Social sport, sometimes called informal sport, is a term used to identify engagement in sport in a less formal context.

Esport
Esports (electronic sports) is a collective term used to describe organized, competitive, video gaming.

Adventure, urban, and extreme sport
Core elements of sport (physical exertion and/or skill, competition, rules, and organisations) may apply, but not in a traditional sense.

Recreation
Active recreation is generally non-competitive physical activity engaged in for the purpose of relaxation, health and wellbeing, or enjoyment.

Play
Play refers to physical activities that are freely undertaken for pleasure, without externally imposed rules.

How Australians describe sport

Research by ORIMA for the Australian Sports Commission in 2022 found that generally people had a personal interpretation of what they considered sport, and in particular 'organised sport'.[6] Activities were more likely to be recognised as 'sport' if they were traditional sports, professional sports visible on TV, or at the Olympics – especially by those who weren't very engaged in sport. Other factors that individuals considered were the degree of physical exertion and skill required. At an individual level, people in the study put more emphasis on defining what 'organised' meant than on what 'sport' did – leaving it up individuals what they would consider to be a sport. [6]

Difference between 'sport' and 'physical activity'

The degree of organisational structure that surrounds and influences a physical activity usually helps to distinguish whether an activity is classified as 'sport', 'active recreation', 'physical activity', 'exercise', or any number of other terms. [5, 6, 10]

Sport activities are usually structured so that one or more of these conditions are satisfied: [6]

1. Individual or team performance is compared to another individual/team; or one's own performance is compared to a past performance or a recognised standard (i.e., benchmark).

2. Performances are achieved under known circumstances; rules are used as standards (i.e., how the activity is conducted, time and space limitations, use of equipment, etc.).
3. A recognised organisational structure oversees the process. Typically, organisations determine the rules, determine what an outcome means, record and compare results, and oversee the overall organisation and delivery of the activity.

These conditions add a sense of formality or structure to 'sport' that may not be present in other forms of 'similar looking' activities, such as active recreation or exercise.

For example, a group of people who meet in a common place (e.g., park, sports field, or backyard) and play a game of football would be engaged in 'social sport'. 'Social' because the element of organisational supervision is minimal, but 'sport' because the elements of competition (of a friendly nature) and rules are present. If the same group of individuals were registered in a football club and trained/played in an organised and structured competition under the supervision of a referee; they would be engaged in 'organised sport'. In each case the individuals may perform the same skills, produce the same physical exertion, and may realise the same personal benefits (health, fitness, personal satisfaction, etc.).

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