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“[WE’RE ON THE RIGHT TRACK, BABY], WE WERE BORN THIS WAY”!¹

EXPLORING SPORTS PARTICIPATION IN NORWAY

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¹ The title for the paper is taken from the lead author’s field notes during an observation of a physical education lesson involving 14-year-olds at a lower secondary school in a provincial town in Norway on Thursday 29th August, 2012. In a dialogue involving several girls, the class teacher and the researcher, one girl (seemingly conscious of the fact, at a time when the pop-star Lady Gaga was touring Scandinavia with her “Born That Way Ball”) explained the girls’ enthusiasm and skill levels in Gaga-esque terms: “We were born this way!”

ABSTRACT

Based on quantitative data from the Norwegian Statistisk Sentralbyrå (Statistics Norway) study of *Mosjon, Friluftsliv og Kulturaktiviteter* (Vaage, 2009), this paper explores trends in Norwegians' participation in sports, with a focus on young people. Norway boasts particularly high levels of sports participation as well as sports club membership and young Norwegians are the quintessential sporting omnivores. Among other things, the Statistics Norway study reveals substantial increases in participation (among young people and females especially) during the period 1997-2007, a shift in the peak of participation to the late teenage years, a relatively high level of lifelong participants, a re-bounce effect in the post-child rearing years and a growth in lifestyle sports. Young Norwegians grow up in a socio-economic context of relative equality between the sexes and high standards of living. An abundance of natural and artificial outdoor and indoor sporting facilities alongside a well-established voluntary sports club sector and an elementary school system that emphasizes physical exercise and recreation, as well as high levels of parental involvement, add to the favourable socio-economic conditions to create seemingly optimal circumstances for sports participation. All this reinforces the sporting and physical recreation cultures deeply-embedded in Norwegian society and embodied by the very many middle-class parents in a country which, for the time being at least, remains relatively young in demographic terms. In terms of lessons to be learned for policy towards sports and physical education beyond Norway, there may be grounds for some optimism around parental involvement in children's sport as well as the potential appeal of lifestyle sports. That said, it is likely to be the greater socio-economic equalities in Scandinavian countries such as Norway that make them unrealistic benchmarks for sports participation elsewhere.

Key words: sport, participation, Norway, lifestyle sports, youth

INTRODUCTION

This paper utilizes data from the Norwegian Statistisk Sentralbyrå (Statistics Norway) study of *Mosjon, Friluftsliv og Kulturaktiviteter* [Exercise, Outdoor Life and Cultural Activities] (Vaage, 2009) in order to explore recent trends (in terms of rates, frequencies, forms and contexts) in sports participation among Norwegians and Norwegian youth in particular. Like its regional Scandinavian (Denmark and Sweden) neighbours and other Nordic countries (Finland and Iceland), Norway boasts particularly high levels of sports participation (Breivik & Sands, 2011). Indeed, young Norwegians are the quintessential sporting omnivores. For these reasons policy-makers elsewhere in Europe often look to Nordic countries such as Norway for a policy ‘recipe’ for higher levels of sports participation and, for that matter, physical activity. With this in mind, we seek to do two things in this paper: first, to contribute to a fuller understanding of just why Norway appears so successful when it comes to sports participation – especially among the young; in order that, second, we might tease out just what policy-makers – preoccupied with identifying potential policy initiatives from countries where sports participation appears to constitute a success story – might (and might not) realistically glean from developments therein.

In the first instance, however, we need to say something about overall sporting trends in Norway.

SPORTING TRENDS IN NORWAY

Levels and rates of participation

Consisting of four cross-sectional and nationally representative surveys (conducted in 1997, 2001, 2004 and 2007), the Statistics Norway (Vaage, 2009) study revealed that

participation in what we are referring to as sport² (but Vaage actually labels ‘physical activity to train or exercise’ – although they amount to the same thing) in leisure-time in Norway over the last decade or so increased among youth and adults (16-79 years) in general and females and older youngsters (16-19 years) in particular. While sports participation has tended in very many countries to be distributed along a bell-shaped curve, in Norway, in 2007, participation was asymmetrical – that is, negatively skewed (in statistical terms) towards the higher rates and frequencies (bouts). Put simply, more people were playing more sport more often. Alongside the relatively large and increased majority at the active or ‘regular’ (three to four times per week or almost daily) participant pole, the declining and relatively smaller numbers to be found at the rarely/never (‘inactive’) end of the continuum was particularly noteworthy. In Norway in 2007, a comparatively³ small proportion (8%) of adults aged 16-79 years responded that they ‘never’ engaged in sport. By contrast, a comparatively large proportion (42%⁴) reported participating three to four times per week or more, of which 18% had taken part almost daily (Vaage, 2009). Indeed, the most marked increases in the period 2001-2007 were among those who exercised ‘a lot’.

All of these figures compare favourably (sometimes very favourably) with similar (although not identical) studies of participation elsewhere in Europe (see, for example, European Commission, 2012; Sport England, 2011). They reveal the relatively high levels of regular participation among all age groups in Norway and among 16-19 year olds in particular. In fact, while there were increases in the proportions participating ‘regularly’

² Throughout the rest of the paper, sport, physical activity, exercise and physically active recreation will be subsumed under the label ‘sport’.

³ That is to say, in comparison with previous surveys of Norwegian sports participation as well as similar data from other countries, such as England.

⁴ The figure of 42% is indicative of an upward trend (28% in 2001, 39% in 2004, 42% in 2007): an increase of 14 percentage points in 6 years.

(three to four times a week or almost daily) across all age groups between 2001 and 2007, the greatest changes occurred in the 16-19 year age group – the number of 16-19-year-olds participating three to four times a week or more increased from 37% in 2001 to 60% in 2007, almost two-thirds of the age group (compared with approximately 40% among other adult age groups).

Other studies of sport in Norway outline a very similar picture regarding adults generally and young people in particular. Hence, in a recent report to the Norwegian parliament, the Royal Ministry for Culture [Det Kongelige Kulturdepartement] (2012), for example, observed that ‘Norwegians train like never before ... We train more often, we train harder and we train more.’ Three quarters of the population, the Ministry noted, reported engaging in ‘sport and physical exercise’ one or more times each week. Bergsgard and Tangen’s (2011, p. 59) reading of the market research company Synovate’s (2009) *Norsk Monitor* [Norwegian Monitor] data underlines the Ministry’s claim: ‘About three-quarters of Norwegians over 15 years old participated in physical training or exercise once a week or more in 2007’. This, they observed, reflected a steady increase since 1985, especially among those participating at least three times per week.

All-in-all, the absolute and relative⁵ proportions of young Norwegians taking part in sport on a regular basis in 2007 is striking. Particularly noteworthy is the relatively late stage of childhood/youth at which regular participation peaked. In 2007, the vast majority of children and young people were taking part in sport once per week or more in their leisure time, rising from nearly 8 out of every 10 6-8 year olds (76%) to almost 9 out of every 10 9-15 year olds (87%). Indeed, the proportions of regular participants (three to four times

⁵ In relation both to those Norwegians who do little or nothing in sporting terms as well as young people in many other similarly developed countries.

per week or more) more than doubled (16% to 39%) between the age groups 6-8 and 9-12, climbed again, by a quarter (39% to 50%), between those aged 9-12 and 13-15 and rose once more, by one-fifth (50% to 60%), among the 16-19 year olds. In 2007, nearly two-thirds (60%) of 16-19 year olds were taking part three to four times a week or more, of which 27% exercised almost every day. Thus, the proportions of children participating regularly increased among older teenagers to peak among the 16-19 years age group; that is to say, several years later than generally assumed to be the case in other countries, where the peak ages for participation in sport in schools as well as in leisure has tended to occur around ages 10-12 years – typically coinciding with the transition from elementary to secondary schooling.

In addition to the marked shift in the peak of sports participation in the first decade of the twenty-first century in Norway, there were significant developments in relation to girls' involvement in sport. Despite fluctuating sex-related differences during childhood (and the fact that boys exercised more than girls as age increased), by the time they approached upper secondary school (15 years) the levels of regular participation among the sexes had converged. Although 13-15 year old boys were almost twice as likely as girls to participate on an almost daily basis (25%:14%), girls were more likely to take part three to four times each week (34%:27%). Thus, when aggregated, the extent of convergence becomes apparent with very similar proportions of girls (48%) as boys (52%) engaged in regular participation (three to four times each week or more).

Having peaked among the 16-19 years age group, regular participation rates then began to decline among the 20-24 age group, with 43% taking part three times per week or more (25% and 18% taking part three to four times per week and about daily respectively). In

terms of what is variously called ‘lifelong participation’ in, ‘adherence’ to, and/or the ‘tracking’ of sports participation, it is interesting to note that late youth/early adulthood did not, nevertheless, mark the beginning of a long and steady decline in participation associated with growing older, as is commonly the case in countries such as the UK. In 2007, having dipped during early adulthood through to middle-age (20-44 years: the main years of economic and child rearing activity), rates of regular participation (three times per week or more) returned to virtually the same level as that for 20-24 year olds (43%) from the age of 45 through to retirement and beyond (25-34 years: 39%; 35-44 years: 37%; 45-54 years: 44%; 55-66 years: 40%; 67-79 years: 42%). At the other end of the continuum (that is, among those never taking part or doing so one to two times each month or less) – having declined markedly between the ages of 6-8 (24%) and 9-12 (12%) and steadily between 9-12 and 13-15 years (9%) and 13-15 years to 16-19 years (8%) – a long-term change of direction towards higher proportions engaging with sport either infrequently or never became apparent, beginning among 20-24 year olds (12%). Once again, however, it is noteworthy that across all age groups there were significant decreases between 2001 and 2007 in those never taking part alongside the increases in the proportions taking part regularly.

Forms of participation

When it comes to the kinds of sports they engage with, young Norwegians, like youngsters world-wide, are sporting as well as cultural omnivores, only more so. In addition to attending an average of 36 cultural events⁶ in the course of 2007 (Vaage, 2009), young Norwegians were also more likely to participate in the widest variety of sports compared to other age groups. Among the age group where regular participation (three times each week

⁶ ‘Cultural events’ include such things as visiting the cinema, theatre, library and museum and attending sports events.

or more) has appeared to peak latterly in Norway, 16-19-year-olds, almost 25% took part in at least 10 'branches' (different activities) of sport over the course of 12 months.

Young people also tended to be more active in particular branches of sport. While the youngest children were the most active in soccer, cycling, swimming and skiing, for example, older youngsters were the ones most likely to use gyms and health clubs – an area of substantial growth across all Norwegian age groups over the course of the decade 1997-2007, especially among the young and girls and young women. Trends in the 15 most popular sporting forms revealed, nevertheless, the (relatively) minimal and, in some cases, diminishing popularity of games (with the notable exception of football) among young people.

Two developments in relation to forms of sports participation among Norwegian youth were particularly noteworthy between 2001 and 2007. First, although young people (and 16-19-year-olds in particular) were the most active age group as far as team sports were concerned, the popularity of major games (such as football) and 'traditional' games (such as handball), as well as relatively 'modern' games (such as basketball and volleyball), declined among young people. Second, the big increases in participation over the decade occurred in lifestyle sports (across all age ranges, 16-79), such as organized walking (which nearly doubled from, 48% to 87%), weight training (up by half, from 24% to 36%), jogging (up by about one-third, from 34% to 45%), and cross-country skiing (up by more than a quarter, from 38% to 51%). Interestingly, the largest increases in lifestyle activities occurred among 16-19-year-olds: especially in cross-country skiing (from 52% in 2004 to 59% in 2007); fast walking (60%: 72%) and strength training (63%: 72%). While trends in forms of participation over the decade up to 2007 were by no means clear-cut, it was

apparent that within the particular mix of conventional and lifestyle sports adopted by individual youngsters, lifestyle sports had become substantially more prominent in 2007 than they had been only a decade earlier.

It seems likely, therefore, that involvement in lifestyle sports played a part in shifting the peak of sports participation to a later point (an older age) in childhood and youth in Norway than hitherto and, for that matter, elsewhere in Europe. This is, in part, because the peak in participation in individual sports (and, by extension, lifestyle sports) represents not so much a peak as a plateau⁷⁻⁸ and whereas participation in sports generally (and in team sports in particular) peaks around age 13, the plateau in individual sports seems to postpone drop-off and drop-out to the late teens/early 20s.

A shift away from clubs and sport

Young people and adults in Norway made use of a wide range of sports facilities – including sports fields, floodlit trails, sports halls, indoor rinks and swimming pools – in 2007. Indeed, 40% of Norwegian children used sports facilities 20 times or more during the year. The facilities used most often by Norwegians of all ages – and girls in particular – were sports halls, while boys were more likely to use outdoor sports sites.

Since 2001, around three-quarters of all those adults (16-79 years) taking part in handball and under half of those participating in football, did so via sports clubs⁹ (70% of handball players in 2007 compared with 74% in 1997, and 42% of footballers in 2007 compared

⁷ Indeed, among those who exercise a lot, there appears to be *no* gradual decline in participation.

⁸ An escarpment may be a better metaphor than a plateau insofar as participation levels out before beginning a slow but steady decline from the late teens which flattens out somewhat around middle age.

⁹ It is worth noting that in order to take part in organized sport in Norway it is necessary to be a member of a sports club (and 70% of sports clubs are organized around one sport with the remainder being multi-sport associations) (Bergsgard & Tangen, 2011).

with 44% in 1997) and the proportion of children up to age 12 years who participated in sport via sports clubs increased by approximately 25% (from around 214,000 to 281,000) between 2001 and 2011 (Statistics Norway, 2011a). It is estimated that 70-80% of all children in Norway are members of a sport organization¹⁰ during their childhood or adolescence and around three-quarters of those who exercise in a sports club have begun to do so prior to age 10 (Toftegaard Støckel, Strandbu, Solenes, Jørgensen & Fransson, 2010). It is noteworthy, nevertheless, that the shift towards lifestyle sports and, to varying degrees, away from 'traditional' sports coincided with a diminishing role for sports teams and clubs – in young Norwegian's lives in particular. For some (other) branches of sport, the proportion of participants using sports clubs remained at about the same level over the period and the tendency for relatively small percentages of participants to take part via sports clubs also occurred in 2007 among those engaged in games such as tennis, volleyball and hockey. Among the increasingly popular lifestyle activities such as swimming, jogging and walking, however, less than 10% participated through sports clubs. The figures for 2004 also revealed that very few of those participating in outdoor sports such as biking, downhill skiing, cross-country skiing were associated with sports clubs. All-in-all, it seems that not only are the increasingly popular lifestyle sports growing independently of and beyond sports clubs, the same is true for some sports that have a strong tradition of being club-based in Norway (cross-country skiing, for example). There were, however, exceptions to this apparent trend. There was a significant increase, in particular, in the percentage of golfers taking part via golf clubs between 1997 and 2007. This is to be expected, however, given the pre-eminent position of private golf clubs in the provision of golf-courses.

¹⁰ There are about 12,000 Norwegian voluntary sports organizations, all under the umbrella of the Norwegian Olympic Committee and Confederation of Sports (NIF). The NIF is the largest voluntary organization in Norway (Toftegaard Støckel *et al.*, 2010).

The shift away from sports clubs was particularly marked among young people and appeared attributable in large measure to the growing popularity of lifestyle sports, especially as the youngsters approached youth. While 55% and 66% respectively of those 6-15 year old Norwegians who participated in football (59% boys, 49% girls) and handball (57%, 72%) did so 'primarily in sports clubs' in 2007 (Vaage, 2009), it was noteworthy that the same was not true for many lifestyle sports, such as swimming (10%: 9% boys, 12% girls), cycling (2%: 2%, 2%) and horse-riding (9%: 2%, 11%). This was particularly so in terms of the newer lifestyle sports – especially popular among the young – such as skateboarding/rollerblading (1%: 2%, 1%) and outdoor sports such as cross-country skiing (8%: 10%, 7%), alpine and Telemark skiing and snowboarding (4%: 4%, 4%). Once again, however, there were some notable exceptions in the case of strength-training (47%: 44%, 51%) and aerobics, gymnastics and fitness (56%: 47%, 62%). As in the case of golf, however, these activities are particularly dependent upon opportunities (including facilities) that tend to be provided in the main by clubs – in these cases, commercial rather than voluntary.

As well as revealing a seemingly diminishing role for voluntary sports clubs and teams in the sporting lifestyles of young Norwegians in the 2000s, the Statistics Norway (Vaage, 2009) study demonstrated how the proportion active in sport through a sports club tended to decrease with age among children and young people. It was 6-8 year olds who were especially likely to be affiliated to sports clubs while 13-15 year olds tended, to a much greater extent, to engage in activities without being affiliated to any sports team or club. As Bergsgard and Tangen (2011) observe, given their relatively higher levels of engagement with sport and sports clubs, it is unsurprising to find that children and young people are also those most likely to use sporting facilities such as (football) pitches, sports halls and

gymnasia, swimming pools and cross-country skiing tracks and to be the most prominent members of sports clubs. Using the *Norsk Monitor* data they too point up a ‘downward trend in children’s and youth’s active participation in sports clubs’ in Norway (Bergsgard & Tangen, 2011, p. 64) which, nevertheless, does not appear to have impacted upon overall levels of participation.

Trends towards less formal participation notwithstanding, it is apparent that a minority – albeit a substantial minority – of youth and young adults continued to take part in sport via sports clubs: almost half (44%) of 16-19 year olds, just under one-third of 20 to 24-year-olds (29%) and a quarter (24%) of 25-34 year olds did so in 2007. In the case of 16-19 year olds this represented an increase of 3% on 1997 figures. For 20-24 year olds, however, it represented a decrease of 2% and for 25-34 year olds a more substantial decrease of 7%. The decline in membership of sports clubs generally but among young people in particular, alongside the substantial drop-off in membership among older youth, reflects the shift away from organized sport: while ‘53 percent of children aged 8 to 15 years old and 25 per cent of youth aged 16 to 19 years old exercised and competed in a sports club in 2009’, according to *Norsk Monitor*, ‘These figures had dropped by 7 and 12 per cent respectively since 1992’ (Bergsgard & Tangen, 2011, p. 67). As with forms of participation, it seems that the trend towards less formal, less organized venues for participation has not, however, resulted in an abandonment of sports clubs as vehicles for participation. Rather, it represents a (seemingly significant) shift in the blend of club-based and informal venues towards the latter as sports clubs become less important generally for children moving into youth and young adulthood.

In the company of others

Interestingly, the shift towards participation in lifestyle sports beyond sports clubs did not result in isolated participants in Norway. A high proportion of those who did not participate in sports through teams or clubs did, nevertheless, took part together with others when they trained, exercised and played sport. Even seemingly individual activities tended, very often, to be practised with others. In 2004, one-third (34%) of joggers, one-half of cyclists (48%), 'strength' training (54%) and walkers (55%), more than three-quarters of swimmers (79%) and downhill and cross-country skiers (82%) and almost all snowboarders and Telemark skiers (94%) were mainly involved in their sport in the company of others, such as friends. The proportion of sports participants who trained together with others changed little between 1997 and 2004. Indeed, the data suggests that activities such as swimming and skiing had become even more social activities in the latter years than hitherto.

More outdoor adventure, less outdoor life

The changes in participation in a particular area of sporting participation strongly associated with Norwegian culture – friluftsliv (outdoor life) – may well reflect a shift among Norwegian youth towards sports that offer alternative forms, as well as types, of participation to conventional sports. They may also represent alternative motivations to those traditionally associated with sport and, for that matter, friluftsliv itself. Over the period 1997-2011, for example, there was a marked decline in the proportion of the population that had been hunting, fishing and berry or mushroom picking in particular, especially among the young (Statistics Norway, 2011a). In addition, it was noticeable that young people tended to be most active in physically demanding (and often adventurous) sports such as skiing, skating, climbing mountains and ice, rafting and kayaking. It was also the young as well as younger adults who participated to the greatest extent in horse

riding, mountain-biking and snowmobiling in their spare time. ‘Berry and mushroom trips’, on the other hand, had become largely the preserve of older adults by 2007. Taken together, these developments in participation suggest the possibility that it is the activities *per se* that have captured young Norwegians’ imagination rather than a desire, primarily, to be in the outdoors – to live, in other words, the ‘traditional’, much-vaunted friluftsliv lifestyle.

MAKING SENSE OF SPORTS PARTICIPATION IN NORWAY

In this paper we have explored recent developments in sports participation in a country, Norway, in which participation has tended to be markedly higher than anywhere other than Scandinavia. In what follows we seek to make sense of these developments with a view, among other things, to teasing out what lessons might be learned for policy towards sport elsewhere in the world. While acknowledging that theorising is inevitably speculative, we endeavour wherever possible to ground our theorising in the available evidence. We are particularly aware of the dangers inherent in trying to extrapolate from the kinds of cross-sectional data generated by the Statistics Norway studies. We are equally appreciative of the fact that aspects of the Norwegian situation will inevitably be quite particular to that country and, indeed, the region. Before going further we want to say something about each of these caveats.

Because the Statistics Norway data are cross-sectional (rather than longitudinal) it is, of course, extremely difficult (probably, impossible) to find ‘causal’¹¹ connections in the findings. We cannot assume, for example, that the regular elderly participants in 2007 must have been the generational equivalents of the 16-19 year old cohort in this study; in other

¹¹ This is so even using a conception of causation dealing in terms of likelihood rather than certainty, interpreting cause in probabilistic terms.

words, that the older participants were once the young active ones who returned to sport after a two-decade hiatus spent focussed upon work and family commitments. Nor can we assume that those young and highly active in 2007 will remain regular participants in the future or, failing that, return to sport in late middle-age and beyond. It is quite possible that the elderly ‘regulars’ were uninvolved during childhood and youth and that the current highly active youngsters will drop out during adulthood never to return. It appears highly unlikely, however, that either of these things will be true. It seems far more plausible that, as with many kinds of leisure, ‘the people who continue to take part throughout adulthood were usually introduced and became committed when they were children’ (Birchwood, Roberts & Pollock, 2008, p. 284) and later-life involvement in sport, as with leisure, will depend largely on the ‘skills and interests that individuals carry with them from earlier life stages’ (Roberts, 1999, p. 140).

The second caveat is that aspects of sports participation in Scandinavian countries such as Norway will be particular to the region and country and the socio-economic context especially. In this regard, Coalter (2012) points up the substantial differences between Scandinavian countries and others, such as the UK, ‘on key factors such as the distribution of wealth, income inequality, general inequality, educational access and social mobility and gender’. He notes, in particular, ‘the central importance of the relative equality of income (and associated effects) in explaining a range of social issues’ (Coalter, 2012) in Scandinavia, including sports participation. It is worthy of note, therefore, that during roughly the same (decade or so) period (1999-2007) as the Vaage study of sports participation (1997-2007), average monthly earnings in Norway increased by approximately 50%: from 23,176 Norwegian Krona (NOK) per month in 1999 – roughly £2,317 – to 33,394NOK per month in 2007 – roughly £3,339 (Statistics Norway, 2011b).

Interestingly, the average monthly pay of men and women increased by similar proportions: from 24,393NOK to 35,035NOK for men and from 20,788NOK to 30,306NOK for women. Not only are the average earnings in Norway almost 50% higher than the OECD average (30,465USD compared with 22,387USD), more than three-quarters (77%) of Norwegians aged 15 to 64 (77% of men and 73% of women) are in paid employment, well above the OECD average of 66% (OECD, 2012). While women's pay tended, as in all developed countries, to be lower than men's, there was greater convergence by 2007 (with women earning 86% that of men) in Norway than pretty-much anywhere else beyond Scandinavia (Statistics Norway, 2011b). A rise in economic inequalities in the Nordic countries in the 1980s and 1990s notwithstanding, 'income distribution remains more equitable in Norway than in most other countries ... [and] levels of economic inequality in Norway are relatively compressed' (Chan, Birkelund, Aas and Wiberg, 2010). In addition, while the class origins of Norwegians affects their life chances in terms of intergenerational mobility, compared to other Western countries Norway retains higher relative mobility rates (Chan *et al.* (2010).

All-in-all, Norway performs exceptionally well against a variety of measures of socio-economic well-being and this is reflected in its ranking among the top countries in the OECD (2012) *Better Life Index* and in the top three most prosperous countries – along with Denmark and Finland, with Sweden ranked sixth and Britain 13th – in the Legatum Prosperity Index¹² for 2010 (Coalter, 2012). In addition to possessing the economic wherewithal for sports participation, they also have the time: Norwegians work 1,414 hours a year, on average – considerably less than most people in the OECD who work

¹² The Legatum Prosperity Index is an annual ranking of 110 countries developed by the Legatum Institute, a privately funded think tank. Based on 79 variables, it includes a number which are likely to be conducive to sports participation such as economic fundamentals, health, social capital, education, safety and security, personal freedom and democratic institutions.

1,749 hours. Consequently, only 3% (4% of men and 1% of women) of Norwegians in paid employment work 'very long hours', much lower than the OECD average of 9% (OECD, 2012). It seems, then, that the growth of sports participation between 1997 and 2007 (from a high base in relation to many other non-Scandinavian countries) coincided with substantial increases in income across all age groups and both sexes alongside the maintenance of social mobility and the entrenchment of relatively generous leisure time.

The significance of socio-economic context is particularly pertinent in the case of women's participation in sport. One of the main drivers for the increases in participation (particularly regular participation) has been a substantial growth in recent decades towards parity of participation between males and females across the developed world and in Scandinavia especially (Coalter, 2012). All countries recording high levels of sports participation, by definition, also record high levels of female participation (Coalter, 2012) and convergence between the sexes has been a feature of participation in Norway. Few countries can boast the levels of sports participation among women (young and old) of Norway and it is unlikely to be a coincidence that nowhere is women's social status (as indicated by the percentage of women in legislatures and senior positions in business; the proximity of male/female incomes; and the percentage of women completing higher education [Coalter, 2012]) of a similar standing to that of their male counterparts than in Scandinavia in general and Norway in particular. The rapid rise in the numbers of girls and young women in sport is very likely to constitute part of the explanation for the increased centrality of lifestyle sports and the growing demand within the more exercise-oriented disciplines (Fridberg, 2010) among young people in general and young women in particular.

A salient aspect of the Statistics Norway data is the high rates of participation generally and among young people especially. Equally conspicuous is the relatively late age at which participation peaks. Both may be partly attributable to the numbers of youngsters who remain in full-time education after the statutory minimum leaving age in Norway and who, as a consequence, 'are more likely to have free time, be provided with accessible opportunities for free or highly subsidized participation in a wide range of sports and mix with peers who are sports participants' (Coalter, 2012). Coalter (2012) observes that the longer period of 'independence' that remaining in education facilitates enables 'the development of a longer term commitment to participation as a lifestyle choice and the willingness and ability to protect it in the face of subsequent work and relationship demands' – something which is likely to be especially important for young women.

The potential significance of the link between education and social mobility in Norway notwithstanding, there are those who cast doubt on the propensity for (lengthened) education to have quite the impact on sports participation that is often assumed. From their study of the South Caucasus, Birchwood *et al.* (2008) concluded that many differences in sport participation rates that are commonly attributed to circumstances and experiences after age 16 (and in higher education in particular) already existed by that age and that family cultures were the source of the crucial pre-dispositions to participate which appeared to have lasting effects. They argued, in other words, that 'all the major, recognised differences in adult rates of sports participation between socio-demographic groups are generated during childhood, via cultures that are transmitted through families, and that post-childhood experiences [such as prolonged education] play a relatively minor direct part in generating these differences' (Birchwood *et al.*, 2008, p. 283). On this view, whether or not young people start or stop participating in sport – or, for that matter,

increase or decrease their levels of participation as they approach and negotiate adolescence and adulthood – may very well depend upon pre-dispositions that have been formed earlier in life (Birchwood *et al.*, 2008) rather than any well-meaning policy interventions or, for that matter, lengthened education. In this regard, Birchwood *et al.* (2008) remind us that changes in the overall rates of participation (whether up or down, overall) among particular age groups are probably best explained in terms of ‘the standard pre-disposition within a socio-demographic group’ (p. 284) towards participation in sport and, for that matter, all other forms of leisure. While they may not be straightforwardly deterministic when it comes to involvement in sport, or any leisure activity for that matter, socio-economic factors are likely to influence significantly the prevailing dispositions of particular socio-demographic groups (Birchwood *et al.*, 2008).

The likely significance for sports participation of far greater levels of socio-economic and gender parity in Norway than many countries notwithstanding, it is unlikely that these have been the sole contributory factors to the high levels and increasingly varied forms of sports participation to be found there. Sports participation is multi-dimensional and the ‘causal’ explanation is likely, therefore, to be multi-factorial. Thus, class- and gender-*related* (rather than simply class- and gender-*based*), sports participation will not be economically predetermined. As indicated above, the family is likely to be another highly significant variable¹³ – especially as fathers increasingly use leisure as a key means of fulfilling their fathering role and ‘place leisure at the heart of their parenting’ (Kay, 2009, p. 1) – not least because appropriate sports socialization in the family appears likely to withstand the effects of socio-economic constraint (Birchwood *et al.*, 2008). That said, the socio-economic context of relatively well-off families (with one or both parents in secure

¹³ Although, it is worth observing, better-off families are more likely to be involved in sports clubs.

employment) with more leisure time (due to shorter working hours and relatively generous paternity as well as maternity leave) appears to generate very favourable conditions for parental (fathers as well as mothers) facilitation of and involvement in their children's sport, as well as their own.

In terms of a 'family effect', Norway seems to epitomise the significance of parents as the conduit to a trinity of institutions – the family, elementary schools and sports clubs – in the development of youngsters' sporting dispositions (and sporting capital). Parents are centrally involved in the sports club scene in Norway, spending a large amount of time facilitating their children's involvement in sport as well as coaching, organizing and administrating activities (Toftegaard Støckel *et al.*, 2010). Parents also tend to be intimately involved (once again, in a voluntary capacity) with their children's elementary schools. The centrality of the family to Norwegian youngsters' sports participation is marked, as are the ways in which families form a kind of virtuous sporting circle with sports clubs and elementary schools (which combine relatively good sports facilities with an emphasis on physical exercise and recreation and high levels of parental involvement). The role of parents in the (potentially) mutually reinforcing trinity of parents, school and sports club is in keeping with the strong sense of community and high levels of civic participation said to be characteristic of Norway (OECD, 2012). This sporting trinity has been bolstered in recent years by a strengthening of cooperation between schools (especially elementary) and sports clubs (Toftegaard Støckel *et al.*, 2010). The close relationships between the three institutions and the interdependencies generated is likely to provide youngsters with a foundation for sports participation not just in terms of physical competencies and physical/sporting capital but also in terms of social and cultural capital – all the building blocks, in fact, for ongoing participation in sport.

The hypothesized pivotal role of parents in the increases in sports participation may have been reinforced by Norwegian demographics. Over the past two decades Norway has been a relatively young society populated by couples who have tended to have their children during a concentrated period around their late-20s to mid-30s¹⁴. The strong sporting tradition in Norway and the high numbers of sports-active (and relatively financially well-off) adults has created particularly favourable circumstances for an abundance of parents to pass their sporting capital on to their children. In this regard the drop-off from sports participation that tended to occur among the late-20 year olds and continue through to the mid-40s may well reflect a tendency for sports-active parents to pay greater attention to their children's sporting development than their own. This would also be consistent with the 'bounce-back' effect – to pre-25-year-old levels of participation – among the post-45 age group, when their children have reached youth and adulthood.

As well as the generally positive socio-political context in Scandinavian countries such as Norway, the particular (sports friendly) circumstances outlined above also include the longstanding centrality of sport in Norwegian culture (and, in particular, the significance for Norwegians of *friluftsliv*), alongside an abundance of natural resources for the increasingly popular lifestyle and adventurous sports such as mountain-biking, cycling, all forms of skiing and snow sports, mountaineering, orienteering and so forth. Outdoor life may hold special significance in the major cities where relatively high proportions of the population tend to live in flats or apartments.

¹⁴ The average age for Norwegian mothers and fathers at first birth and all births was between 28 years and 33 years in 2010 (Statistics Norway, 2011b).

In the context of increased wealth, convergence between the sexes, and family, sports clubs and school support for sport, as well as abundant natural and artificial resources, the breadth ('branches') of sports that young Norwegians engaged with was another noteworthy feature of the Statistics Norway data, alongside the high rates of regular sports participation among young people (well into the youth life-stage). This points to the possibility not to say likelihood that the aforementioned propitious circumstances for sport leads young Norwegians to develop wide sporting repertoires (Roberts & Brodie, 1992) in a manner that makes continued involvement through the adult years – or, at the very least, the probability of a rebound effect later in life – more likely. The proportion of older adults who have abandoned sport notwithstanding (17% among 67-79-year-olds in 2007), rates of 'regular' participation among older age groups approximate those of late youth/early adulthood such that almost half the adult population in Norway appear to resume levels of sports participation commensurate with late youth/early adulthood from late middle-age into old age. As Roberts and Brodie (1992) observed, when coining the term two decades ago, the point about 'wide sporting repertoires' is that whatever their reasons for dropping out of particular sports, where individuals are involved in several sports their entire sports careers are less vulnerable, especially at times of transition. All-in-all, it seems plausible that at least part of the explanation for the rise in sports participation in Norway in recent years has been the accelerated introduction of higher proportions of young people to an increasingly wide range of sports (Roberts and Brodie, 1992) which may have brought with it higher degrees of 'sports literacy' among young people and concomitant generational shifts in attitudes towards sport (Coalter, 1999). At the same time, and with Norwegian youngsters' high levels of involvement in cultural activities beyond sport in mind, the Norwegian situation may also lend support to Engstrom's (2008) finding that an individual with 'very high' cultural capital at the age of 15 would still be an active

exerciser several decades later in comparison with an individual with ‘very low’ cultural capital.

Another important aspect of the rapid growth in participation in Norway, as well as the greater likelihood of becoming locked-in as on-going participants or later-life returnees, has been the increasing popularity of lifestyle sports in the developed world in recent decades – both absolutely and in relation to more traditional sports, such as team games. Despite the fact that sports clubs remain important social and sporting institutions in Nordic countries – for children and girls in particular – organized sport is not primarily responsible for the increasing levels of sports participation in Norway and Scandinavia. Rather, lifestyle sports have become the driver of increased participation among youth and especially among young women – ‘who are much less likely to take part in competitive and organized sport’ (Coalter, 2012). The situation is very similar elsewhere in Scandinavia. Fridberg (2010), for example, has noted that the growth of lifestyle sports in Denmark and Scandinavia has occurred alongside stagnation in traditional sports and games.¹⁵ The shift towards lifestyle sports in Norway between 1997 and 2007 occurred alongside a diminishing involvement in sport via sports clubs. This was true even for games typically associated with clubs and teams and despite the centrality of clubs to Scandinavian sporting provision and, for that matter, Norwegian culture. This is why Coalter (2012) takes issue with the supposed ‘importance of sports clubs and provision in explaining different levels of sports participation’ in Western countries as a whole and Scandinavia in particular. It is readily apparent from the Statistics Norway data that the voluntary organized sports club sector does not lie behind the substantial growth in

¹⁵ It is worth noting, however, that in Norway’s Nordic neighbour, Iceland, Eiðsdóttir *et al.* (2008) observed ‘an overall increase in vigorous physical activity and participation in sports clubs over the past decade among both genders’ (p.289). Similarly, in Iceland in 2007 more 14-15 year olds reported participating in sport and physical activity overall and in sports clubs since 1992.

participation in the decade 1997 to 2007 (although, as previously indicated, this may downplay or even overlook the role of sports clubs in the development of children's sporting capital as a foundation or, in some cases, precondition for later shifts towards lifestyle sports).

All-in-all, the growth in popularity of activities (whether so-called lifestyle sports, Xtreme sports or even variants on more conventional sports) characterized as being non- or, at least, less-competitive (than traditional team sports), more recreational in nature, flexible, individual or small group activities, sometimes with a health and fitness or adventurous orientation has been marked. It seems that the particular mix of conventional and lifestyle sports that Norwegian youngsters favour has shifted within a generation, with lifestyle activities more prominent in 2007 than they had been even a decade earlier. The popularity of lifestyle sports seems likely to reflect the preferred styles of participation of younger generations and, in turn, global processes of democratization and informalization – involving an increased emphasis on informal, relaxed behaviours among young people and between them and adults (van Krieken, 1998) – in the latter decades of the twentieth century. Particularly noticeable has been the tendency for young people to spend less time in organized and supervised sport and leisure settings. As young people and adults have been drawn increasingly towards less formal, less rigidly organized leisure activities so participation in sport has been marked by a shift towards informal and recreational forms and styles.

CONCLUSION

In this article we have charted and explored developments in sports participation in Norway in recent years and during the decade 1997-2007 in particular. Among other

things, we have noted substantial increases in participation (among young people and females especially), a shift in the peak of participation to the late teenage years, a relatively high level of lifelong participants, as well as a re-bounce effect in later life among many, and a growth in lifestyle sports.

In ‘making sense’ (or exploring the ‘causes’) of these developments we have taken as read Coalter’s observation that sport should be considered epiphenomenal: ‘a secondary set of social practices [largely] dependent on and reflecting more fundamental *structures, values and processes*’ (emphases added). We accept, in other words, the significance of *structural* (or socio-economic) conditions for participation in Scandinavian countries such as Norway. Social class and gender are likely to be prime movers in explaining sports participation alongside other structural features such as ethnicity and age, and while there are inequalities in Norway and Scandinavia these tend to be a good deal smaller than elsewhere (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010). We also acknowledge the enormous cultural traction of sport and physical recreation in Norway: in other words, the continuing, not to say growing, *value* of sport (in its broadest sense) to very many Norwegians. Finally, we point up the likely significance of developments in particular *processes*, such as the (sports) socialization effects of the trinity of parents, school and sports club alongside global processes of individualization and informalization.

In this context, it seems plausible to explain the increases in participation in Norway in terms of changes alongside continuities (that is to say, in processual terms) in already favourable *structural* (social and economic) conditions, (cultural) *values* and (social) *processes*. The most obvious ‘changes’ or developments, in *structural* terms, have been the growth in individual and social prosperity during the 1990s (in an already prosperous

country) alongside greater gender equality and a rising birth-rate in a relatively young (and sporting) nation. In terms of *values*, the strong sporting and exercise culture in Norway represents a large element of continuity in widely shared predispositions towards sport that have, nevertheless, undergone significant changes in the direction of informal lifestyle sports over the past two decades or more, especially among the young. Historically, sports participation in Norway has epitomised Roberts (forthcoming) observation that the most effective circumstances for sports participation – practised for over 100 years across the Western world – have been ‘public provision and voluntary organisation of sports teams and leagues’. More recently, however, it seems that changes in preferred forms and styles of participation – towards individualized and informal sports – have helped drive increases in sports participation, especially among young people. The growing popularity of lifestyle sports has been bolstered (possibly even generated) by the individualization of young people’s biographies (and, as a consequence, their sporting biographies) across the developed world. Even in Norway (with its very strong sports club culture), processes of individualization and informalization appear to be resulting in a shift, by degrees, out of clubs and team sports towards individual exercise, recreation/fun and lifestyle sports, including adventurous and Xtreme sports (Roberts, forthcoming). While the readily apparent movement away from sports clubs and teams towards lifestyle sports should not blind us to the significance of conventional sports and sports clubs for participation among children in Norway, it seems likely that the changed circumstances are producing shifts in the character of the sports young people (in particular) choose to play as well as how they play them. Against this backdrop, sports clubs and physical educators in Norway are coming face-to-face with the realization that teenagers are not responding to traditional sports provision in the same way that young athletes in sport clubs might be expected to –

they want, in other words to choose what they do and how they do it as well as who they do it with (Skirstad, Waddington & Säfvenbom, 2012).

Creating propitious circumstances for sports participation

While examining sports participation in its own right, we have had one eye throughout this study on what light, if any, developments in Norway might throw upon the creation of favourable or propitious circumstances for enabling increased sports participation beyond the Nordic countries. The answer seems to be that the economic and social features of these countries – and Norway in particular – go a long way towards explaining the higher sports participation rates therein (Coalter, 2012). Thus, countries like Norway are not true comparators for others, such as the UK. There may, in other words, be little to be learnt about creating favourable conditions for enhancing sports participation – beyond, that is, lessons regarding the fundamental benefits for leisure and sports participation of reducing socio-economic and gender disparities. Perhaps the most obvious lesson is, therefore, that the key to improving levels and rates of sports participation is likely to lie primarily within the orbit of more contentious and politically demanding economic and social policies than sports policies *per se*. It is worthy of note, then, that sports policy in Norway has tended to be more closely aligned with other social policies than in many other countries.

The increase in the proportion of young people remaining in full-time education (up to and including tertiary level) in many Western countries in recent years appears a development that holds out the promise of delivering similar increases in sports participation to those witnessed in Norway. In the UK, however, the first decade of the twenty-first century brought higher proportions of young people staying-on in education but not the concomitant rise in sports participation. Relatively high levels of cross-generational

mobility are a feature of Scandinavian countries such as Norway and, as a consequence, educational attainment is likely to lead to social mobility and the expansion of the socio-economic groupings most likely to take part in and view sport as an important dimension of their lifestyles. By comparison, cross-generational mobility in countries such as the UK remains stubbornly resistant to the potential effects of increases in the numbers remaining in education for longer (Roberts, 2004).

One aspect of trends in Norway that are impacting upon other countries is the impact of processes of individualization and informalization and the concomitant popularity of lifestyle sports. In this respect, trends in sports participation in Norway are similar (though at exaggerated levels) to trends elsewhere in the Western world; albeit with levels of participation a good deal higher than any other than their Scandinavian and Nordic neighbours. The forms and styles of participation favoured by Norwegians – and young Norwegians, in particular – also appear an exaggerated version of forms and styles to be found elsewhere in the developed world. This is particularly so in relation to the growing popularity of more recreational sporting activities, including lifestyle and adventure sports, alongside the diminishing (or, at best, static) popularity of games among youth (and adults, for that matter).

All told, what appears different about Norway is Norway! It is highly likely, in other words, that the greater socio-economic equalities in Norway go a long way towards explaining the relatively high sports participation rates therein. By the same token, it is likely to be the greater socio-economic *inequalities* in countries beyond Scandinavia that make the latter quite unrealistic as a benchmark for sports participation elsewhere – not least because socio-economic determinants of participation inevitably lie well beyond the

control of sports policy (Coalter, 2012). Equally, it is highly likely that the expected effects (if these are not entirely spurious) of processes such as school physical education (PE), as well as developments such as lengthened education, will only operate successfully on sports participation amid other favourable factors (and favourable socio-economic ‘structural determinants’, in particular). Despite the widespread prevalence of beliefs regarding a ‘PE effect’ upon young people’s engagement with sport in their leisure and, in the longer run, over the life-course, there remains a dearth of evidence demonstrating this (Green, 2012). Indeed, while it is clear that sport is more widely and deeply embedded in Norwegian youth culture than in almost any other country in the world, it is worthy of note that, as Gard, Hickey-Moodey and Enright (2012) observe, youth culture is quite unlike school PE, not least because ‘it regularly celebrates the marginality of certain practices because of the way they create niches that reject the mainstream’. This is particularly true for lifestyle sports (Wheaton, 2004).

Although some young Norwegians may see themselves in relation to sports participation as simply ‘born this way’¹, in reality they grow up with sport (in the broadest sense of the term) as a deep-seated aspect of Norwegian culture such that it has become an established part of what sociologists would call the ‘group habitus’. Such predispositions appear to be intimately related to – even exacerbated by – relatively high levels of economic prosperity as well as class and gender parity. Sporting dispositions also seem to owe something to the especially central role of parents in early sports socialization in Norway alongside heightened levels of individualized and informalized sporting identities among Norwegian youth. If there are lessons to be learned for sports policy and PE from developments in Norway, they may well lie in the centrality of parental involvement from an early age, not only in their children’s sporting socialization but also in elementary school sport as well as

sports clubs. They may also involve recognition in policies towards PE and sport more generally of the increasing appeal of lifestyle and alternative and adventurous sports among younger generations worldwide. In the creation of favourable conditions Norway seems to be ‘on the right track’ for continued high levels of sports participation. It is likely to be a track, nonetheless, that other countries can only duplicate around the margins of sports socialization – within or beyond school PE – without much deeper and wider, mid- to longer-term changes in the direction of the social welfare democracies of the Scandinavian kinds, wherein a distinct emphasis is placed on equity, [socio-economic] participation and welfare (Antikainen, 2010).

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