



Editorial

Do recreational team sports provide fitness and health benefits?

In many countries, sedentary lifestyle has led to a number of epidemic health problems, including obesity, metabolic syndrome, and associated comorbidities. Countries have performed self-evaluations of the fitness status of their people: children, young adults, and the elderly. Policies for increased school-based physical education, and financial encouragement for extracurricular sports participation have been made, for example in Canada where registration fees for children's organized sport activities can be deducted from taxable income. Individuals fight sedentary behavior with sports such as running, cycling, walking, or regular attendance of a fitness gym. However, team-based recreational sports have received much less attention than individual sports in their capacity to foster fitness and health.

In this special issue of the *Journal of Sport and Health Science (JSHS)*, we provide information on studies aimed at investigating the fitness, health, motivational, and social benefits arising from team sports. Three studies from groups at the University of Southern Denmark and the University of Copenhagen are introduced: one dealing with small sided team handball for women,¹ another focusing on full-court and half-court basketball,² and the last one centred on European football (soccer) and its possible benefits across a lifetime.³ The general conclusions across these studies are similar and can be summarized as “team sports offer a social and motivational way for improving fitness and health”. Needless to say, the different sports provide different benefits.

One of the clever aspects of these studies is that the scientists chose “popular” sports. For example, the study on team handball was performed with young women. Hardly known as a sport in North America, team handball is a highly valued sport in Europe, and Denmark has been ranked among the top women's handball teams for many years. Aside from improved endurance and bone mineral density compared to a sedentary control group, the handball playing women also had high motivational and social scores, emphasizing the psychological benefits arising from a team-based sport.

Another unexpected finding came out of the football study. Here, bone mineral density in elderly and young players were compared to age-matched non-active controls. Not only did the elderly players have significantly greater bone mineral

density than their age-matched counterparts, they also had higher bone mineral density than the young, sedentary men, attesting to the benefits of life-long physical activity.

So, why don't we just all participate in team-based sports for our fitness and health, and why are such team-based sport approaches not widely implemented? One of the difficulties might be that team-based sports, in contrast to let's say running or cycling, need facilities, organization, and a group of people who commit to participate. Implementation of team-based sports across an entire country, and driven outside of an academic study, might be hard to implement, and this needs to be considered when evaluating team-based sports approaches to combat the “sedentary crisis” across countries.

Reading these manuscripts, I was reminded of how I grew up in a little village in Switzerland 40 years ago. At that time, every village, every town, and every city had the so-called “Turnverein”, a place where people would go for 2 evenings a week for 2 h and play soccer, or basketball, or they jumped or ran or did gymnastics, whatever the leader of the group had in mind. It was as much a sports gathering as it was a social occasion. I joined the Turnverein when I was 15. My father in his early forties and my grandfather in his early seventies were there too, providing an inter-generational framework. Also, some of my teachers, the mayor, the village priest, and many others, across all social classes were represented. The Turnverein provided the framework, every Tuesday and Friday for men, and every Monday and Thursday for women, to meet and play. Sport, socializing, politics, and local gossip were part of the evening before, during, and after the physical activity. My father was a lifelong participant in the Turnverein, and this despite him cycling to work every day 35 km (one way). How did we lose sport as a social construct uniting a village, a town, a country? How did we lose cycling and walking “good” distances to work as a way of transport? Is it possible to recreate physical activity as a social setting in a village, across a country in today's individualistic world where time for play has become so short?

References

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