

America's Sports Obsession

WHAT ARE SPORTS?

A sport is a physical activity that people engage in for recreation, usually according to a set of rules, and often in competition with each other. However, such a simple definition does not capture the passion many Americans feel for their favorite sports. Sports are the recreational activity of choice for a huge portion of the U.S. population, both as spectators and as participants in sporting competitions. When enthusiasts are not participating in sports, they are flocking to the nation's arenas and stadiums to watch their favorite athletes play or tuning in to see games and matches broadcast on television. Table 1.1 gives a sport-by-sport view of spectator interest in the United States, based on polling data from the Gallup Organization examining percentages of the population identifying themselves as at least "somewhat" of a fan of each sport.

There are two broad categories of sports: *professional* and *amateur*. A

professional athlete is paid to participate; an amateur athlete is one who participates merely as a pastime, not for pay. The word amateur comes from the Latin word for "love," suggesting that an amateur athlete plays simply because he or she loves the game.

SPORTS PARTICIPATION

Sports participation is difficult to measure because there are many different levels of participation, from backyard games to organized leagues, but analysts continue to refine research methods. The most direct approach is through surveys. One of the most extensive regular surveys is the Superstudy of Sports Participation, which is conducted annually by American Sports Data Inc. (ASD). The information collected by ASD is analyzed by organizations such as the Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association (SGMA).

Table 1.2 ranks sports by total participation. According to the National Sporting Goods Association (NSGA; 2007, the trade association for sporting goods retailers, more Americans played basketball than any other team sport in 2006. The NSGA estimates that 26.7 million people aged seven and over played basketball in 2006. Other popular team sports included baseball (14.6 million participants), soccer (14 million), softball (12.4 million), tackle football (11.9 million), and volleyball (11.1 million). Even though participation in cross-country skiing experienced a dramatic 36.7% increase, most team sports showed a decline from 2005 to 2006. Participation in basketball, soccer, softball, and volleyball all declined, whereas hockey participation grew by 6% and tackle football participation increased by 19.7% from 2005 to 2006.

Table 1.1

Sport	Percentage of Americans who are fans
Professional football (Dec. 2005)	59
College football (July 2006)	45
Professional baseball (Dec. 2006)	41
Figure skating (Dec. 2004)	41
Professional basketball (Dec. 2004)	38
Professional golf (January 2007)	36
College basketball (April 2006)	35
Auto racing (July 2006)	31
Professional tennis (Dec. 2004)	24
Professional ice hockey (Dec. 2004)	23
Professional or college soccer (June 2006)	19
Professional wrestling (Dec. 2004)	10

Table 1.2

Sport	Total	Percent change
Exercise walking	87.5	1.70%
Swimming	56.5	-2.60%
Exercising with equipment	52.4	-3.40%
Camping (vacation/overnite)	48.6	5.70%
Bowling	44.8	-1.30%
Fishing	40.6	-2.50%
Workout at club	36.9	6.50%
Bicycle riding	35.6	-13.30%
Aerobic exercising	33.7	0.00%
Weight lifting	32.9	-1.90%
Billiards/pool	31.8	-9.80%
Hiking	31	4.00%
Boating, motor/power	29.3	6.20%
Running/jogging	28.8	-1.60%
Basketball	26.7	-7.40%
Golf	24.4	-1%
Hunting with firearms	17.8	-8.30%
Target shooting	17.1	-14.10%
Baseball	14.6	0.10%
Soccer	14	-0.80%
Backpack/wilderness camp	13.3	0.40%
Softball	12.4	-5.00%
Football (tackle)	11.9	19.70%
Volleyball	11.1	-9.30%
In-line roller skating	10.5	-20.00%
Tennis	10.4	-6.90%
Skateboarding	9.7	-19.20%
Scooter riding	9.5	-8.50%
Mountain biking (off road)	8.5	-7.20%
Paintball games	8	-0.20%
Canoeing	7.1	na
Skiing (alpine)	6.4	-7.30%
Water skiing	6.3	-6.60%
Hunting with bow & arrow	5.9	-11.60%
Target shooting—airgun	5.6	-15.70%
Snowboarding	5.2	-13.10%
Racquetball	4	na
Cheerleading	3.8	15.60%
Wrestling	3.8	na
Muzzle loading	3.7	-8.70%
Skiing (cross country)	2.6	36.70%
Hockey (ice)	2.6	6.00%

Americans love to participate in individual sports as well. The NSGA estimates that 44.8 million Americans went bowling in 2006, making it the most popular of all competitive sports nationally. (See Table 1.2.) In 2007 Sports & Fitness Participation Report, the SGMA also identifies bowling as the most popular competitive sport and estimates the number of participants even higher, at about 54.3 million Americans in 2006. Billiards is also

exceedingly popular as a recreational sport, though its appeal has decreased in recent years. According to the NSGA, 31.8 million people shot pool in the United States in 2006, which was a 9.8% decline from 2005. (See Table 1.2.) Proprietors of bowling and billiards facilities are attempting to overcome a seedy reputation to draw in a new generation of enthusiasts.

The SGMA notes in 2007 Sports & Fitness Participation Report that 28.7 million Americans went golfing in 2006. Most golf rounds were played by a core of 17.2 million adults who golfed at least eight times per year. Tennis, while less popular now than at its peak in the late 1980s, has been enjoying a comeback in the 2000s. In 2006 about 14.6 million people got out on U.S. tennis courts.

An interesting transition is taking place in youth sports participation. Generally, participation among youth in traditional team sports has been declining for several years. One exception is soccer, which is becoming a major sport in the United States. An increasing number of young Americans are also opting for extreme sports such as snowboarding. Golf has also enjoyed an increase in participation among youth since the mid-1990s, as has lacrosse, a modern game derived from a Native American competition that became popular among French pioneers in Canada. U.S. Lacrosse reports in the U.S. Lacrosse Participation Survey 2006 that 426,022 people played lacrosse in 2006, compared with 253,931 in 2001, and that over the previous decade the number of people playing lacrosse nationally had increased more than 10% per year.

Another way to gauge interest in sports is by examining how much money people spend on equipment. According to the NSGA, U.S. consumers spent more than \$24 billion on sporting goods in 2006. Table 1.3 shows consumer purchases of sporting goods broken down by sport.

SPORTS ATTENDANCE

Besides participation, another measure of interest in sports is the number of people who attend games in person. Sports attendance in the United States is dominated by the four major team sports: **baseball, football, basketball, and hockey**. In professional team sports, attendance is affected by two main factors: **the size of the market in which the team plays and the team's current success**. Big-city teams and winning teams typically draw bigger crowds than small-town teams and losing teams.

Table 1.3	2006	2005
Archery	\$ 398.3	\$ 372.1
Baseball & softball	\$ 402.0	\$ 372.4
Basketball	\$ 312.3	\$ 309.3
Billiards & indoor games	\$ 570.9	\$ 572.3
Bowling	\$ 181.5	\$ 183.5
Camping	\$ 1,534.6	\$ 1,446.5
Exercise	\$ 5,226.4	\$ 5,176.6
Fishing tackle	\$ 2,218.9	\$ 2,138.9
Football	\$ 101.3	\$ 95.2
Golf	\$ 3,662.0	\$ 3,465.5
Helmets, sport protective	\$ 159.1	\$ 153.3
Hockey & ice skates	\$ 142.2	\$ 138.5
Hunting & firearms	\$ 3,708.7	\$ 3,563.4
Optics	\$ 1,013.9	\$ 886.9
Racquetball	\$ 40.9	\$ 45.4
Skin diving & scuba gear	\$ 369.0	\$ 358.3
Snow skiing	\$ 615.0	\$ 642.7
Snowboarding	\$ 278.4	\$ 301.0
Soccer balls	\$ 74.3	\$ 66.5
Tennis	\$ 419.8	\$ 397.1
Volleyball & badminton sets	\$ 30.8	\$ 32.1
Water skis	\$ 43.5	\$ 42.2
Wheel sports	\$ 411.3	\$ 407.7
Athletic goods team sales	\$ 2,618.9	\$ 2,567.5
Total equipment	\$24,472.0	\$23,688.1

Major League Baseball (MLB) reports in the press release "Major League Baseball's Record Attendance Tops 76 Million" that just over seventy-six million people attended MLB games during the 2006 regular season, setting a new all-time high for the third straight year. Average attendance at an MLB game was nearly thirty-one thousand. According to the press release "NBA Sets All-Time Attendance Records", the National Basketball Association (NBA) also set a new season attendance record during the 2006–07 regular season, drawing 21.8 million spectators to its arenas, for an average of 17,757 per game. Professional football set a new record for the 2006 regular season as well. The Entertainment and Sports Programming Network (ESPN) indicates in "NFL Attendance Report—2006" that the total paid attendance for the National Football League (NFL) was 17.6 million, with an average paid attendance of 68,773 per game. The National Hockey League (NHL) has rebounded since its 2004–05 season was canceled due to a labor dispute. ESPN reports in "NHL Attendance Report—2007" that attendance in 2006–07 was 20.8 million, for an average of 16,956 per game, a new league record.

The other big sports draw in the United States is **auto racing**. The National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR), the nation's major stock car racing circuit, has experienced substantial growth in attendance over the last decade, though data from ESPN suggest that there was a drop-off in both attendance and television ratings for NASCAR races in 2006.