

## Chapter 5

# Maximising Action Sports for Development

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*Dr Holly Thorpe, University of Waikato*

**T**his brief paper identifies new trends in youth sport participation, particularly the growing popularity of non-competitive, informal, non-institutionalised 'action sports' (e.g. skateboarding, surfing, snowboarding, parkour). Drawing upon examples and research from within and outside the Commonwealth, it illustrates the potential of action sports for making a valuable contribution to the 'sport for development and peace' movement. As revealed through three distinct case studies, a number of valuable lessons can be learned about the potential of action sports for improving the health and well-being of children and youth in both (re)developing and developed nations.

The author makes a number of key recommendations for policy actions for Commonwealth member countries interested in using action sports to improve the health and well-being of children and youth. She advocates greater governmental and community investment in both new and existing action sport-related development and peace building (ASDP) programmes, both at home and abroad.

However, she also warns that care must be taken not to 'fit' action sports into existing frameworks and structures. Action sports have their own unique cultures and value systems that are often different to more traditional rule-bound sports, and thus it is necessary for organisations to work closely with action sport participants in designing programmes that meet both their needs and the desires of stakeholders. There is great potential for consulting and collaborating with action sport participants to further expand existing grassroots programmes, and to create new programmes that excite, inspire and empower children and youth, and offer a different set of social, physical and psychological skills when compared to traditional rule-bound sports. In so doing,

however, Commonwealth member countries should take care to avoid top-down models and instead approach such initiatives from a position of respect for the agency, autonomy and voices of action sport participants.

## 5.1 Introduction

The term ‘action sports’ broadly refers to a wide range of mostly individualised activities such as BMX (biking), kite-surfing, skateboarding, surfing and snowboarding that differ – at least in their early phases of development – from traditional rule-bound, competitive and regulated Western ‘achievement’ sport cultures. Various categorisations have been used to describe these activities, including extreme, lifestyle and alternative sports (Booth and Thorpe 2007; Rinehart 2000; Wheaton 2004). The term ‘action sport’ is increasingly the preferred term used by committed participants (many of whom resent the label ‘extreme sports’, which they feel was imposed upon them by transnational corporations and media conglomerates during the mid- and late-1990s).

Many action sports gained popularity in North America and some parts of Europe during the new leisure trends of the 1960s and 1970s, and increasingly attracted alternative youth who appropriated these activities and infused them with a set of hedonistic and carefree philosophies and subcultural styles. While each action sport has its own unique history, identity and development patterns, early participants sought risks and thrills, touted anti-establishment and ‘do-it-yourself’ philosophies. Core members saw their culture as ‘different’ to the traditional rule-bound, competitive and regulated Western institutionalised sport cultures (Beal 1995; Humphreys 1997; Wheaton 2004). For example, an early skateboarder, cited in the work of sports sociologists Becky Beal and Lisa Weidman (2003), proclaimed that the best part about skateboarding is that you, ‘don’t need uniforms, no coach to tell you what to do or how to do it’.

Since their emergence in the 1960s, action sports have experienced unprecedented growth – both in participation and in their increased visibility across public space (see, for example, Booth and Thorpe 2007; Rinehart 2000; Thorpe 2011; Wheaton 2004). During the mid- and late-1990s, television agencies and corporate sponsors began to recognise the huge potential in action sports as a way to tap into the highly lucrative youth market. Mainstream

companies quickly began appropriating the ‘cool’ images of surfers, skateboarders and snowboarders to sell products ranging from energy drinks to credit cards. The global exposure of the X Games and Gravity Games, the inclusion of action sports into the Olympic Games – particularly snowboarding, freestyle skiing, BMX and mountain biking (see Thorpe and Wheaton 2012a) – and the popularity of extreme sport video games and movies (e.g. Blue Crush, Dogtown and ZBoys), helped further expose these sports to the masses. As a result, action sport athletes have become household names. Indeed, skateboarder Tony Hawk, surfer Kelly Slater and snowboarder Shaun White were identified as being among the top ten most popular athletes among 13–34 year olds in North America (Transworld Business 2008). Surveys across Asia, Australasia, Europe and North America, including a number of Commonwealth countries, have also pointed to the increased popularity of non-institutionalised informal sport activities in general, and action sport specifically.

In assessing the rise of action sports, the most developed data sets are available from the United States. In 2003, for example, five of the top ten most popular sports in the United States were action sports, including inline skating, skateboarding and snowboarding (Thorpe and Wheaton 2012b). Estimates suggest more than 22 million Americans participate annually in action sports, particularly skateboarding, surfing, snowboarding and BMX riding, with many of these participants engaging in an array of action sports and practicing on a regular basis (Active Marketing Group 2007). Given the difficulty of capturing participation in these informal, outdoor, non-association-based activities, it is likely that participation rates are growing faster than these surveys suggest. Indeed when measures such as equipment sales and media commentaries are included, it is clear that in the twenty-first century many types of action sports are attracting an ever-increasing body of followers, outpacing the expansion of traditional sports in many Western nations (Active Marketing 2007; Gilchrist and Wheaton, 2011; Tomlinson et al. 2005; Wheaton, 2004). As British sport sociologist Belinda Wheaton (2004) explains in *Understanding Lifestyle Sports: Consumption, Identity and Difference*, many participants continue to embrace their countercultural heritage, viewing these activities as alternative *lifestyles* rather than as *sports*.

While young, white, middle- and upper-class, heterosexual males often constitute a dominant force at the core of many action sport cultures (Beal 1996; Evers 2010a; Chivers Yochim, 2010; Wheaton

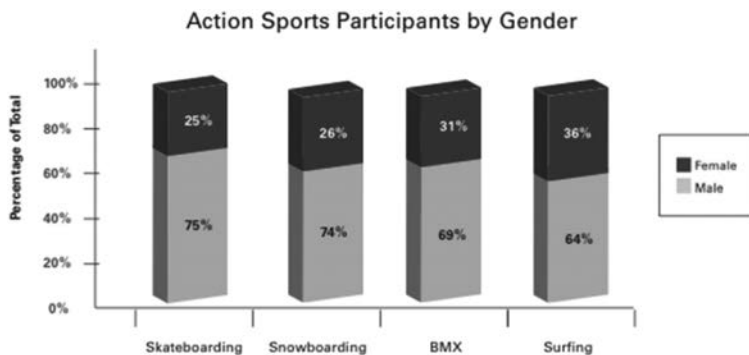
Figure 5.1 Size and influence of action sports in the United States



Source: Transworld Media Kit 2007

Note: This table was produced in 2007 by a US-based media firm, and thus should not be considered as up-to-date evidence of current action sport trends beyond the US context.

Figure 5.2 Average action sports participants by sex in the United States



Source: Active Marketing Group 2007

Note: This table was produced in 2007 by US-based marketing firm, and thus should not be considered as up-to-date evidence of current action sport trends beyond the US context.

2000), demographics are shifting, particularly on the margins of the sports, with increasing participation across different social classes and age groups, including females and minority groups. Indeed, women are adopting proactive roles in the action sports culture and industry, as instructors, athletes, journalists,

photographers, CEOs and manufacturers (Pomerantz et al. 2004; Thorpe 2005, 2007; Young and Dallaire 2008). As a result of the increasing visibility of female role models, the expanding female niche market, and opportunities for female-only lessons, camps and competitions, the number of female action sport participants of all ages has grown rapidly over the past two decades.

The growth of action sports in many Western and some Eastern countries (e.g., China, Japan and South Korea) is affecting broader trends of youth sport participation (Thorpe 2008). In contrast to the increasing rates of participation in non-competitive, informal and non-institutionalised sports, youth involvement in many traditional team sports such as basketball, (American) football, ice hockey and rugby, is declining, or slowing, in many countries. This is a noteworthy trend for governmental agencies and organisations involved in the funding and development of future youth sport opportunities and initiatives (Gilchrist and Wheaton 2011; Tomlinson et al. 2005).

## 5.2 Beyond football: action sports for development and peace building

For many years, action sports were thought to be the exclusive domain of privileged, white, narcissistic Western youth. Stereotypes of surfers, skateboarders, snowboarders and climbers as hedonistic, thrill-seeking, anti-authoritarian, individualistic youth continue to proliferate in the mass media and popular cultural sentiment. Since the mid- and late-1990s, however, action sport participants have established non-profit organisations and movements relating to an array of social issues, including *health*.

While action sports for development and peace building (ASDP) organisations are a relatively new topic of scholarly investigation, a few researchers are drawing on psychological theories and concepts to explain humanitarian and empathetic responses among action sport participants (see Brymer 2009; Brymer and Oades 2008; Wymeret et al. 2008). Yet such approaches have tended to oversimplify, decontextualise and romanticise the relationship between action sport participation and activism. Arguably, recent work by a select few sociologists and cultural geographers offers greater insight into the nuances and contradictions operating within and across these organisations, and the broader social context in which they emerge (see, for example, Laviolette 2006; Thorpe and Rinehart 2012; Wheaton 2007).

There is considerable variation within such action sport-related non-profit organisations and social campaigns. Some ASDP organisations – such as Chill, Surfers for Peace and Umthombo Surf Stars – can be broadly categorised within the ‘sport, development and peace’ (SDP) sector in that they use participation in action sports such as snowboarding, skateboarding or surfing as an ‘interventionist tool to promote peace, reconciliation, and development in different locations across the world’ (Giulianotti 2011: 50). For many others, while the physical act of surfing, snowboarding or skiing plays an important role in uniting members of these groups and inspiring potential donors, the action sport is not *directly* being used as an ‘interventionist tool’ as in many other SDP organisations. Rather, these organisations are founded by action sport participants who utilise pre-existing structures and connections within and across local, national and global sporting cultures and industries to raise awareness and fundraise for issues they deem to be socially significant. While some of these organisations remain at the grassroots level and are relatively unknown beyond the local community or outside the action sport culture, others are gaining recognition from mainstream social justice and humanitarian organisations for their innovative efforts and creative strategies to produce new forms of passionate politics in local and global contexts. For example, Surf Aid International received the 2007 World Association of Non-Governmental Organizations (WANGO) Humanitarian Award; and Skateistan has won numerous awards for its efforts in educating urban and internally displaced children in Kabul.

While the everyday operations of some of these organisations take place outside Commonwealth contexts, it is important to note that many ASDP organisations receive funding and support from the transnational action sports community of which Commonwealth youths constitute a dominant force. Moreover, many action sport enthusiasts from Commonwealth contexts travel frequently and are active users of social media for connecting and communicating with international communities to which they have travelled or plan to travel. As such, residents of Commonwealth member countries often play key roles as founders, directors, board members, funders, ambassadors and volunteers for ASDP organisations in international settings. For example, Surf Aid International (SAI) was founded in the Mentawai Islands in 2000 by travelling New Zealand surfer Dr Dave Jenkins (MD) and a group of his surfing friends. The

non-profit organisation now has offices in New Zealand and Australia, as well as in the US and Indonesia, and receives annual funding from AusAid and NZAid, as well as Australian-based surfing corporations (e.g., Billabong); it also has a number of Australian professional surfers acting as ambassadors (e.g., Joel Parkinson and Mark Occhilupo). Skateistan is another good example of a successful international ASDP organisation founded by a resident of a Commonwealth country while living abroad. Arguably, as the examples of SAI and Skateistan suggest, there is considerable potential for Commonwealth member countries to learn much from the efforts of their citizens who are currently using action sports to create positive social change abroad. Invitations might be extended for such individuals to bring their skills back 'home' and to establish similarly creative and effective programmes for children and youth in need in Commonwealth nations.

### 5.3 Value of action sports for development and peace building

To date, the founders of most ASDP organisations have typically been action sport enthusiasts (rather than experienced humanitarian or aid workers) who have been inspired to create change when they observed poverty, inequalities and injustices during their sport-related travel (see Thorpe and Rinehart 2012). Very few of the major SDP programmes offer opportunities for action sport participation. Yet there is potential for action sports to be successfully incorporated into existing SDP organisations' programmes, particularly those focused on improving the health and well-being of children and youth for whom action sports are often hugely popular. Arguably, Commonwealth nation states would also do well to consider the potential of action sports for enhancing cultural understanding through international exchange programmes, such as the 'sports envoy' initiative being adopted by the US State Department's Sports United (see reference list below).

Action sports offer the potential for developing different skills and learning opportunities when compared to the sports typically used in SDP programmes. In contrast to organised sports such as soccer and basketball, most action sports are non-competitive (although competitions are popular among elite performers), thus offering opportunities for children and youth to gain a sense of achievement without having to compete against, and beat,

another team or player. Rather, participants can learn alongside one another and gain a sense of accomplishment based on their own skills development. For example, a novice skateboarder can get much satisfaction and joy from simply standing on the board and rolling a few feet along a flat surface; an intermediate skateboarder in the same space might be filled with pride when he or she successfully ‘ollies’ (jumps) the board a few inches off the ground; whereas an advanced skateboarder might get a sense of achievement from performing a board-slide down a metal rail. When appropriately supported, action sports offer ample opportunities for individual empowerment through skills mastery (e.g., co-ordination, balance), as well as valuable social skills (e.g., communication, sharing of social space).

In contrast to many traditional sports that require umpires or referees to control the play and discipline the players, most action sports are self-regulating, and thus participants often quickly develop an implicit understanding of the cultural etiquette for sharing the space. There is also a celebration of play, self-expression and creativity in the use of space and movement in many action sport cultures, which may offer unique opportunities for skills development, communication and respect between participants in developing nations or war-torn communities. According to Sharna Nolan (a founding member of Skateistan), skateboarding is: ‘a fantastic tool for communication... We get kids from all different ethnicities building relationships with each other. So we’ve got Hazera kids with Tajik kids ...’ Continuing she adds, ‘We’ve also got girls skateboarding, but we had to teach the boys that, no, they couldn’t push girls off the board and that they had equal rights to be in that space’ (cited in *Skateistan: The Movie*). Similarly, Oliver Percovich (also a founding member of Skateistan) explains: ‘Ultimately, what Skateistan wants to achieve is building trust, links between Afghans... some understanding between ethnicities. Skateistan is mixing social backgrounds. Here a street kid can meet the son of a minister. We promote activities that don’t exclude’. With approximately half of the Afghan population under the age of 25, Skateistan is making a valuable contribution to building a more positive future by empowering one child at a time – through skateboarding and art, language and computer education in a safe, supportive and inclusive environment (Thorpe and Rinehart 2012).

In contrast to many traditional, organised sports that were designed by men for men, most action sports developed in a

different gender context. As such, (Western) women have been active participants from early in the development of many action sports, thus offering opportunities for alternative gender relations. Percovich makes a similar observation of skateboarding in Afghanistan, explaining: 'lots of sports here are seen as for boys, [but] skateboarding was too new to be related to gender'. Whereas most traditional sports divide men and women into two separate and distinct groups, in many action sports, girls, boys, men and women often share the same space (e.g., the waves, a skateboard park, an indoor climbing facility, the snowy slopes), participating alongside friends and/or family members from both sexes and of varying ages and ability levels. Moreover, many action sports (e.g., skateboarding, parkour, ultimate frisbee, snowboarding) do not so explicitly privilege the male body (e.g., through speed, upper body strength, physical force), as do sports such as rugby, ice hockey or American football. Rather, the gender-neutral traits of balance, co-ordination, grace, personal style and the creative use of space, are highly valued within action sport cultures, such that boys and girls do not need to be separated in the learning experience (although, for cultural reasons, this may be appropriate in some contexts). In well-organised and appropriately supported environments, boys and girls can learn to respect one another and enjoy sharing the experience together. Arguably, action sports can complement the SDP movement by offering empowering learning experiences that encourage self-expression and creative thinking and, when supported appropriately, can develop a different set of physical and social skills among children and youth from different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds.

#### 5.4 Action sports: the potential for risk

Some members within the SDP movement have expressed interest in employing action sports for cultural diplomacy, development and/or peace building projects, yet a number of concerns have delayed such initiatives. In particular, some SDP organisations and agencies worry that action sports may pose heightened risk of injury for participants. While action sports have the image of being 'high risk', this is largely a misperception based predominantly on the successful marketing of these sports and their athletes as 'extreme'. As Douglas Booth and Holly Thorpe (2007) clarify in *The Berkshire Encyclopedia of Extreme*

### Box 5.1 Examples of action sports for development and peace building

**Boarding for Breast Cancer:** an educational programmes for female surf, skate and snowboard enthusiasts.

**Surf Aid International:** a non-profit humanitarian organisation dedicated to improving the 'health, well-being and self-reliance of people living in isolated regions', particularly in popular surfing locations in Indonesia.

**Waves for Change:** a South African youth development and HIV education programme rooted in surfing.

**Chill:** a US-founded non-profit providing underprivileged youth with opportunities to develop self-esteem and life-skills through board sports. The organisation now has 12 chapters in the US, two in Canada, and one each in Austria and Australia.

**Skateistan:** co-educational skateboarding schooling in Afghanistan, Cambodia and Pakistan.

**Umthombo Surf Stars:** an organisation providing street children in South Africa with opportunities to participate in beach-related activities, and training for future employment in ocean-related activities.

**Protect Our Winters (POW):** an international group of snowboarders and skiers committed to raising awareness of environmental deprivation, and particularly global warming.

**Surfers Environmental Alliance (SEA):** is committed to the preservation and protection of the environmental and cultural elements that are inherent to the sport of surfing.

**Surfers Against Sewage (SAS):** an environmental campaign group with a mission to rid the UK coastline of sewage.

**Surfers for Peace:** an informal organisation aimed at bridging cultural and political barriers between surfers in the Middle East.

*Sports*, many action sports are no more dangerous than traditional sports. For example, despite the 'extreme' image of snowboarding, in terms of the average number of deaths on the slopes, snowboarding is safer than skiing, bicycling and swimming. For

SDP organisations thinking about including action sports in their programmes, the cost and logistics of transporting additional safety equipment (e.g., helmets, shin pads, elbow guards) can be another complicating factor. However, SDP organisations might successfully explore sports such as ultimate frisbee or parkour, which require little equipment and, with the right coaching and support structures, can be very low risk.

Before governmental agencies or SDP organisations jump on the ‘bandwagon’ and start implementing action sport programmes in at-risk or developing communities, however, it is worth taking a closer examination of the informal, grassroots action sports participation already occurring within local contexts. As the two case studies in Annex 5.3 and Annex 5.4 illustrate, some action sport enthusiasts are creatively and proactively using these activities in their efforts to overcome the stress and trauma of living in spaces of conflict and/or natural disaster. In Annex 5.3, we see the importance of action sports for residents living in Christchurch (New Zealand) after the devastating February 2011 earthquake. For Christchurch residents who had been active participants prior to the earthquake, beaches, indoor skate parks and bouldering routes became ‘therapeutic landscapes’ – their sporting participation in these spaces helped some escape (if only temporarily) from the stresses of daily life. While the second case study is outside the Commonwealth context, it provides further evidence of the creative grassroots approaches being adopted by action sports enthusiasts in places of conflict and poverty. Annex 5.4 illustrates the value of parkour – the practice of running, jumping and leaping within the urban environment – for youth in high-density urban spaces with limited access to resources. More specifically, we see how young men in Gaza have embraced this activity as a physical form of self-expression and escapism. They proclaim the value of parkour for their resilience and coping with the frustrations, fears, anxieties and pains of living in the Khan Younes refugee camp. This case also illustrates another area where action sports are pioneers, that is in the use of social media (e.g., Facebook, YouTube) as cost-effective ways to engage participants in local and global contexts, and to communicate across borders. Both cases point to possibilities for Commonwealth member countries to provide a unique form of foreign aid through the support and development of grassroots ASDP organisations in disaster and/or conflict zones.

## 5.5 Conclusion

Of the 700+ organisations currently working under the SDP umbrella, the lion's share rely solely on a small selection of traditional sports – such as football, basketball, volleyball and hockey – in their efforts to improve the health and well-being of individuals and communities. Yet there is untapped potential in newer action sports (e.g., skateboarding, parkour, climbing, ultimate frisbee) for making a unique contribution to the SDP movement. It would be a mistake, however, for governmental agencies or SDP organisations to try to 'fit' action sports into existing frameworks. Action sports have their own unique cultural rules, norms and value systems, and participants tend to enjoy the anti-authoritarian, non-competitive, individualistic, creative and expressive elements of these sports. Organisations that deal mostly with traditional sports would do well to consult with action sport participants before developing programmes. Indeed, many valuable lessons might be learned from those individuals already working in successful ASDP organisations (e.g., Skateistan), and from those participants who have actively established grassroots groups in spaces of conflict and disaster. Furthermore, the local and transnational networks of action sports communities also offer interesting opportunities for cultural exchange programmes (either via physical travel or virtual dialogues facilitated by social media) that promote respect and understanding among action sport participants from within and across Commonwealth countries and other regions of the world. In sum, respectful collaborations with key individuals in both formal and informal ASDP projects have the potential to positively contribute to the sustainability and success of future youth-focused SDP projects.

### Further information

PK Gaza: A powerful video recording of the PK Gaza training day that was disrupted by Israeli bombing nearby. See: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=qE2eWIHEPwI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qE2eWIHEPwI)

Surfing Bangladesh: [www.surfingbangladesh.com/](http://www.surfingbangladesh.com/)

Skateboarders in Christchurch making the most of earthquake-damaged terrain: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=i2bvozq-KK8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i2bvozq-KK8)

Skateistan: [www.skateistan.org](http://www.skateistan.org) (Afghanistan), <http://kh.skateistan.org/content/about-us> (Cambodia), and <http://pk.skateistan.org/> (Pakistan)

US Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, Sports United, programmes using action sports for cultural exchange and diplomacy:<http://eca.state.gov/gallery/snowboarders-kyrgyzstan-visit-us>. Also see action sport athletes as 'sports envoys': <http://diplomacy.state.gov/discoverdiplomacy/explorer/issues/170128.htm>

Surfing For Peace: [www.surfing4peace.org/](http://www.surfing4peace.org/). For information on the Gaza Surfer Girl Project see: [www.surfing4peace.org/s4pindex/NewsAndEvents/Entries/2011/12/1\\_Gaza\\_Surfer\\_Girl\\_Project\\_From\\_Dream\\_to\\_Delivery.html](http://www.surfing4peace.org/s4pindex/NewsAndEvents/Entries/2011/12/1_Gaza_Surfer_Girl_Project_From_Dream_to_Delivery.html)

Surf Aid International: [www.surfaidinternational.org](http://www.surfaidinternational.org)

The Chill Foundation: [www.chill.org](http://www.chill.org), and [www.chillaustralia.org.au/](http://www.chillaustralia.org.au/)

Umthombo Surf Stars: [www.umthombo.org/website/surf/](http://www.umthombo.org/website/surf/)

Waves for Change: [www.wecanchange.co.za/Profiles/NGONPO/WavesForChange/tabid/475/Default.aspx](http://www.wecanchange.co.za/Profiles/NGONPO/WavesForChange/tabid/475/Default.aspx)

### Skateistan: 'Skateboarding is just the carrot'

Skateistan – an 'independent, neutral, Afghan NGO' that provides skateboarding tuition, and art and language education, to 'urban and internally-displaced youth in Afghanistan' – began in 2006 when Australian skateboarder Oliver Percovich went to Kabul, Afghanistan, with his girlfriend Sharna Nolan, who had taken a position with the Afghanistan Reconstruction and Evaluation Unit. As soon as Percovich started skateboarding in the streets of Kabul, he was 'surrounded by eager children begging to learn how to skate'. Using the three boards he had brought to Afghanistan, Percovich 'developed a small school giving free skate lessons to street children'. Over the following months he 'scrounged' US\$7,000 in donations to buy more skateboards and equipment and set up some basic activities for the growing number of interested youth, and enlisted the assistance of two of his Australian skateboarding friends to help further develop Skateistan. Since 2007, Skateistan has received funding from foreign embassies (i.e., Denmark, Germany and Norway), with further assistance from private donations and fundraisers. To survive, and indeed thrive, in a highly competitive NGO market, Skateistan has also developed highly creative, collaborative relationships with skateboard companies. For example, skateboarding companies – Blackbox Distribution and TSG – have provided Skateistan with skateboarding equipment (e.g., skateboards, wheels, trucks and bearings) and safety gear (e.g., helmets and wrist-guards), and host various awareness- and fund-raising events in an array of countries (i.e., Australia, Germany and the United States). Skateistan is working with some of these companies to establish their own brand by coproducing, marketing and distributing helmets, skateboards, t-shirts, scarves and knee-pads worldwide; many of the graphics featured on these products are designed by Skateistan students during art classes. While the brand currently contributes just a fraction to the total percentage of the Skateistan income, Percovich recognises the development of the Skateistan brand as an important move toward a more sustainable organisation that is less reliant on external sources for funding.

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### Skateistan: 'Skateboarding is just the carrot' (cont.)

In 2009, with just over US\$700,000 in international donations and land gifted by Afghanistan's Olympic Committee, Skateistan built a 19,000 square foot indoor skateboard park – Kabul's largest indoor sports facility. Since the opening of this skate park, Skateistan has registered more than 1,100 Afghan children and youth (37 per cent female). Yet skateboarding is just 'the carrot' to 'connect with kids and build trust', says Percovich. Skateistan is receiving international acclaim for its efforts, winning the 2009 'Peace and Sport Nongovernmental Organization' award, and was the 2012 'Beyond Sports' winner of the 'Innovation through Sport' award. Skateistan was also selected as a Top 100 NGO for 2013 by *The Global Journal*, making it the highest ranking sport-related NGO. With such successes, Skateistan has expanded to offering similar skateboarding and educational programmes for children in Cambodia and Pakistan, and is currently in the process of building a second facility in Mazar-e-Sharif (northern Afghanistan). According to Sharna Nolan, who also became a founding member of Skateistan, as well as teaching key interpersonal skills and respect across cultural and gender divides, the aim underpinning the skateboarding instructional and educational programmes offered at Skateistan is to prepare Afghan children and youth to become future leaders: 'Skateboarding has given them more confidence. We want them to be problem solvers, to be part of the reconstruction of their country. We want them to have a voice'.

### The potential of action sports for post-disaster recovery: the case of Christchurch

A spate of recent natural disasters has prompted many scholars working in the social sciences and humanities to examine the economic, social and psychological impact of natural disasters, such as hurricanes, floods, earthquakes, tsunamis, fires and volcanoes. To date, little research has examined the role of recreational sport and physical activity in the recovery and resilience of individuals and communities affected by natural disaster. Sport – and particularly action sports (e.g. surfing, skateboarding, mountain biking, climbing) – may seem trivial pursuits in the wake of a natural disaster. However, in the weeks and months following a natural disaster, as individuals and communities attempt to re-establish familiar lifestyles and routines, sport and physical activity can play an important role in individual recovery and community resilience.

Interested to understand how committed 'lifestyle sport' participants adapted their action sport participation in the changing socio-cultural-economic-physical geography following an earthquake, the author travelled to Christchurch in March 2012. She conducted semi-structured interviews with 14 surfers, skateboarders, climbers and mountain bikers living in Christchurch before, during and after the earthquakes. This study is among the first qualitative examinations of the effects of a natural disaster on residents' everyday sporting practices.

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### The potential of action sports for post-disaster recovery: the case of Christchurch (*cont.*)

For the Christchurch residents in this project, beaches, indoor skate parks and bouldering routes became 'therapeutic landscapes' – their sporting participation in these spaces helped some escape (if only temporarily) from the stresses of daily life. For example, Aaron, a passionate surfer, described the importance of surfing for social interaction and fun with his peers, which had a lingering affect: 'There is such a strong presence of community and fulfilment in relationships within surfing... I think just getting away from it all for a few hours... you'd come back [from your surf] and be in a calm place for at least a few days'. Similarly, Will appreciated the short-term escapism and 'endorphin rush' that helped 'take my mind off everything for a while'. He also enjoyed the opportunities to 'connect with my friends and surfing colleagues from Christchurch': 'If you saw someone you knew in the waves, suddenly it's "how are you doing, how's your house, what's happening?" It was great to catch up with mates that you hadn't seen for a while'. Caitlin also describes the importance of her relationships within the climbing community following the earthquake: 'Some of us talked about what happened' and agreed that going climbing together was a good way to 'move on from it [the earthquake]'. For Caitlin, the climbing community and the reestablishment of familiar sporting routines aided her recovery from the disruptive experience of the February earthquake: 'Once I got back into it, I found climbing is a way just to carry on, move forward'. Brad expressed the pleasures offered by skateboarding after the earthquake: 'Other people in my family don't really do much at all anymore. They just kind of hang around, waiting for the city to be rebuilt, whereas I'll just go skating, and I'll be happy'. Participation also enabled some to regain a sense of normalcy and return to familiar bodily experiences, regaining a sense of identity and belonging to their sporting communities. For others, participation helped them (re)develop a physical connection to the natural or built environment and, in some cases, justified their decision to stay living in Christchurch (and contribute to the rebuild process) rather than join the thousands migrating from the city.

Similar observations can be made in post-disaster spaces around the world. For example, following the 2010 Chilean earthquake, inline skaters took to the streets to practice their skills on damaged infrastructure. Skaters in New Orleans developed a makeshift skate park under the interstate in Gentilly. More recently, surfers along the east coast of the United States were making the most of Hurricane Sandy swells, and skateboarders in New York quickly took to appropriating hurricane-damaged terrain in highly creative ways. In the wake of natural disaster, participation in lifestyle sports appears to offer enthusiasts with opportunities to redefine physical and emotional disaster geographies. Based on this research, it might be argued that Commonwealth nation states would do well to give greater consideration to the role of non-traditional sporting spaces for residents' recovery and resilience following a natural disaster.

## Grassroots action sports in spaces of conflict: the case of parkour in Gaza

To date, action sports have been a predominantly Western phenomenon. Yet with the rapid expansion of the internet and the global reach of action sport companies (e.g., Quiksilver, Billabong, Burton), events (e.g., the X Games) and media, children and youth throughout the Eastern world are also increasingly exposed to action sports. While some reject them as 'crazy American sports', others adopt and re-appropriate these activities in relation to their local physical and social environments. In the Muslim world, for example, surfing is gaining popularity in Iran and Bangladesh; Pakistani youth are taking up skateboarding in growing numbers; and sandboarding is a popular activity among privileged youth (and expats) in Saudi Arabia. While the following example is outside the Commonwealth context, it points to the highly creative approaches being adopted by young action sport enthusiasts in places of conflict and poverty, and the potential of action sports for improving perceived quality of life.

The practice of parkour is quickly gaining popularity among groups of young men in the Middle East. Simply defined, parkour (also known as 'the art of displacement' or free-running) is the practice of moving fluidly and efficiently across an urban environment, and often involves spectacular manoeuvres (inspired by gymnastics, break-dancing, climbing and/or skateboarding) on obstacles found in city spaces. Parkour is arguably one of the most accessible action sports. In contrast to skateboarding, surfing or sandboarding, which require (often expensive) equipment (e.g., skate-, surf-, sandboards) and access to specific types of environments (e.g., smooth concrete, waves, sand-dunes), parkour requires little more than a pair of shoes fit for moving efficiently within the urban environment. Today, groups of (mostly young male) traceurs and free-runners can be found in Bahrain, Doha, Egypt, Israel, Kuwait, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Some parkour groups are relatively small, informal groups of young men who train together, whereas others have grown into highly organised, hierarchical and commercial organisations with hired training facilities and coaches.

The grassroots development of parkour in the conflict-torn Gaza Strip is particularly interesting. Parkour reached Gaza in 2005, when recent university graduate Abdullah Anshasi watched the documentary *Jump London* on the Al-Jazeera documentary channel. He promptly followed this up by searching the internet for video clips of parkour, before recruiting Mohammed Aljkhbayr to join him in learning the new sport. Continuing to develop their skills, they soon found parkour to be so much more than a sport: 'it is a life philosophy' that encourages each individual to 'overcome barriers in their own way'. To avoid conflicts with family member, local residents and police, members of PK Gaza (the name chosen by the group) sought out unpopulated spaces where they could train without interruption. Popular training areas included cemeteries, the ruined houses from the Dhraha occupation, United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) schools and on the sandy hills in Nusseirat, formerly an Israeli settlement now deserted in the centre of Gaza City. The latter has particular meaning for the youth, who proclaim that by practicing parkour in the space, 'we demonstrate that this land is our right'.

As part of the younger generation of technologically savvy Gazan residents, the founders of PK Gaza are explicitly aware of the potential of the internet for their parkour practices, and also for broader political purposes. 'We started filming ourselves with mobile phones and putting the videos on YouTube', explains Aljkhbayr; they have continued to develop more advanced filming techniques using borrowed cameras and editing the footage on a cheap computer. The PK Gaza and Free-running Facebook page has almost

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## Grassroots action sports in spaces of conflict: the case of parkour in Gaza (cont.)

4,000 followers from around the world, and the group also posts regular YouTube videos that can receive upwards of tens of thousands of views. Both Facebook and YouTube are key spaces for interaction and dialogue with youth beyond the confines of the Gaza strip. In so doing, 'we contribute very significantly to raising international awareness of what is happening in Gaza. We offer video clips, photographs and writings related to the situation in which we live in the Gaza strip and deliver the message to all the peoples that [are] watching online that there are oppressed people here', proclaimed Aljkhbayr. Interestingly, these virtual spaces also enable dialogue that may contribute to building respect between participants of varying socio-cultural, religious and/or national backgrounds based on parkour participation. For example, YouTube videos created by the PK Gaza group receive support in Arabic and English from fellow parkour enthusiasts around the world, including the following comment from an Israeli parkour practitioner: 'Amazing guys! You got so much better than last year. I hope there will be peace between us one day', the message was signed 'Peace from Israel!'

Furthermore, with such global exposure, the PK Gaza group began to receive offers of support from individuals and groups around the world. For example, an Australian viewer offered to design their logo, which now features on the team website and t-shirts. In February 2012, with sponsorship from the Unione Italiana Sport Per Tutti ('Sport for All'), three of the original PK Gaza team were able to travel outside Gaza for the first time and attend the Italian Free Running and Parkour Federation's annual event in Milan. On this trip, they also performed in Rome, Bologna and Palermo, and met free-runners from across the world. The young men used this trip as an opportunity for informal cultural diplomacy and raising awareness of the plight of those living in Gaza. As this example suggests, virtual communications between action sport participants from different countries have the potential to facilitate online and physical cultural exchanges that offer unique opportunities for enhancing empathy, mutual respect and understanding of different cultures and ways of life.

As well as raising awareness of the conditions in Gaza and offering a temporary escape from the harsh realities of everyday life, the PK Gaza team strongly advocates the socio-psychological benefits of their everyday parkour experiences. They proclaim the value of parkour for resilience and coping with the frustrations, fears, anxieties and pains of living in the Khan Younes refugee camp. As Anshasi explains, 'I have witnessed war, invasion and killing. When I was a kid and I saw these things, blood and injuries, I didn't know what it all meant... this game [parkour] makes me forget all these things'. Similarly, Aljkhbayr describes a dire situation, 'We have wars regularly and the sanctions make our lives miserable', but parkour 'has given me the ability to overcome many obstacles. It's made me steadfast and has given me the strength to face the pressures of the occupation'. Continuing, he explains, 'There is always a problem here of one sort or another. If it's not the war or the sanctions, then it's an internal issue. It's depressing, but we try to practise self-help. We try to be our own doctors'. As the following comments from Gazan psychologist, Eyad Al Sarraj (MD) suggest, some medical and health professionals also acknowledge the value of such activities for young men living in such a stressful environment:

*Many young people in Gaza are angry because they have very few opportunities and are locked in. An art and sports form such as free-running gives them an important method to express their desire for freedom and allows them to overcome the barriers that society and politics have imposed on them. It literally sets them free.*

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### Grassroots action sports in spaces of conflict: the case of parkour in Gaza (cont.)

Such observations are supported by a plethora of research that has illustrated the value of physical play and games for resilience in contexts of high risk and/or ongoing physical and psychological stress (e.g., refugee camps), and the restorative value for children and youth who have experienced traumatic events (e.g., natural disasters, war, forced migration) (see, for example, Berinstein and Magalhaes 2009; Evers 2010b; Kunz 2009; Orayb 2005; Rung et al. 2011).

The pioneers of parkour in Gaza, Mohammed and Abdullah, are now working with a group of peers to support the next generation of parkour enthusiasts. They do so with the hope of the 'formation of a large academy to train new generations... and disseminate among young men and women all over Palestine'. According to Enshasi, one of the trainers for a group of 8–16 year old male parkour enthusiasts: 'My main focus as I grow older is to make sure that PK Gaza continues as an art and sports form in Gaza. I do not want it to die with us. This is why now I feel our main focus should be on training the next generation. They are young minds and bodies who want to be set free'. The regular training sessions and informal peer mentoring provided by the PK Gaza leaders offer boys and young men growing up in Gaza valuable social networks beyond the family, and support structures that facilitate coping and resilience through everyday physical pleasures. Perhaps most importantly, the social and physical experiences offered through parkour offer youth a sense of hope for a future with surmountable obstacles.

As illustrated via the brief case of parkour in Gaza, some youth are demonstrating remarkable agency in creating sporting opportunities that cater to their own and other local children and youths' physical, social and psychological needs. Such activities may not meet traditional definitions of sport, yet groups such as PK Gaza are adopting highly creative and resourceful approaches to realise some of the goals at the heart of the SDP movement. Acknowledging and privileging the knowledge of youth involved in grassroots sporting groups seems particularly important in regions, such as the Middle East, where the huge and growing population of young people has the potential to 'shake present regimes from within more devastatingly than even the forces of international politics' (Fuller 2004: 4). For Commonwealth nation states willing and/or able to provide aid to regions in need, offering funding and/or social support for grassroots action sports programmes might be considered as a unique and valuable approach to improving the health and well-being of local children and youth.

### Note

1. Parkour is the practice of running, jumping and leaping within the urban environment.

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