

Real cyclists don't race: Informal affiliations of the weekend warrior

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Abstract / introduction

This study examines participation in an emerging sporting form that whilst removed from the conventional, retains a self-generated and mediated structure that provides an attractive alternative not fully explained by a shift to individualism. The study presents a cohort of capable sporting cyclists who develop a sense of belonging and self-identity through 'buying' into the social, semi-competitive, adrenaline-charged atmosphere of the weekend bunch ride. In contrast to traditional sports, participants go some way to distance themselves from serious competition and its associated layers of formality. Competition without consequence, excitement, sociability and multiple points for personal challenge (or not), combine with a sustained sense of control that diminishes the need for capable cyclists to seek out a formal structure and yet retains characteristics that fulfil the competitive urge.

Research problem

Whilst sport has purpose bound in rich tradition, more recently there appears to be a proliferation of new sporting forms that have presented 'alternatives', and potential challenges to these traditional ways of conceptualising and practising it. This 'new' conceptualisation of sport and associated concepts of individualism are critically interpreted through an investigation of the 'weekend warrior', a term used by a participant to describe large groups of cyclists who self-organise and informally 'compete' on public roads outside of the mainstream sporting club.

This paper explores the question as to whether or not a collective group of like-minded people who are retreating from their individualised world comprise the weekend warriors described in this paper, or if indeed they belong to something fundamentally more social that extends beyond the practice of sport itself.

Methodology / materials and equipment

forty seven participants participated in eight focus groups. Subjects were white, male (42 males, 5 females), aged between 25 and 55 years and tended to be socioeconomically privileged.

focus groups were conducted in accordance with the methods described by Krueger and Casey (2000). Questions pertinent to this study were open ended and designed to promote conversations around participant experiences in conventional club and or recreational road cycling. Specifically, how did people relate to their participation in the conventional sport / unconventional bunch rides that were identified by participants in this study? The focus group interview length ranged from 90 - 120 minutes and all focus group interviews were digitally recorded.

Unabridged transcripts provided the basis for analysis of focus group interviews while the lived experience of the authors (4 years participant observation in various recreational and competitive formats/locations) afforded an understanding of the shared values and language prominent in cycling sub-culture. Transcripts underwent an exhaustive thematic analysis and an analysis of oppositional relations



Key findings

Regardless of affiliation type, it was apparent that groups within both regional and urban areas had unofficially become members of pseudo-competitive cycling groups outside of conventional sporting structures. While conventional club members contributed numbers to these bunches they were in the minority:

There are a lot of people...that ride bikes who are just not interested in racing. All they want to do, is join a bunch and go off and have a ride, and they have a bit of a hit out and that, then go to the coffee shop... (Male, regional club cyclist)

Geographical Space

The physical space of the weekly bunch ride commences with the established meeting point, a local bike shop, street corner or community landmark and often concludes with a nominated post-ride café. The ride itself is centred on a dynamic occupation of public roads that is bounded by the shifting body of cyclists as the bunch reacts to the wind, road conditions and hazards. For the most part, cyclists ride two abreast but often the fitter, faster and larger bunches appropriate an entire lane (at times more) to the frustration of other road users.

Normative space

The second space involves social ritual in which a series of acts, exchanges and hand signals serve to outline accepted behaviour and create a normative space. This implicit knowledge also spreads to bunch etiquette and includes things such as pointing out obstacles on the road surface, rolling through for a turn at the front, and notification of approaching vehicles. The need for committees and officials to make decisions about circuits, rules, regulations, grading and enforcement is negated by the self-organising and internal regulation within the bunch and enforced by symbolic violence.

Identity Space

The distinction as to who belongs to the bunch and who does not is made through a process of identity manufacturing and impression management. Shaved legs, cleated shoes and trade team lycra as worn by professionals is the uniform of choice and people who want to buy into the tribe must purchase its symbols.

Well they're part of the scene, they have the gear and have the bike, ride to the café, have a cup of coffee, sit down for an hour, have a bit of a gas bag and then ride back home. And it's all about appearances.

Traditional Sports Re-traditionalised

Many of the individuals referred to in this study have indeed turned their back on traditional organised forms of the sport, but the 'group' in this case remains an essential ingredient. For the faster bunches all of the elements of competition remain but the seriousness, effort and rationality of competition are tempered by its informal nature. For the slower bunches it was the socialisation and in many cases the group discussions offered by the post-ride café ritual that acted as a strong attractor for these cyclists and provided the place and space for socialisation highlighted in the following:

To compete, there is something missing. I think you end up developing friendships or groups of your own to go out with and do your own cycling club which is not competitive. It's to do with companionship, but on a level of performance that you are really comfortable with rather than just sort of dragging along. (Male, metropolitan, recreational cyclist)

At least for many of the participants in this study, clubs failed to offer a tangible alternative to what was already attainable. There appeared to be little value to be gained from 'upping the ante' and committing the extra towards membership.

I see maybe there's this large bulk of social recreational cyclists that see clubs like ours as not being necessary. Why do we need them? We can get what we want out of our cycling. They can go down, if they want to really hammer it, go down Beach Road Saturday morning and the 'Hell Ride', that's harder than any club cycling. They can have their social aspect, they can enjoy it, they can go whenever they want to and not have to go to club events and still achieve everything they want out of cycling. And they don't have to pay registration... I think it's something, to a lot of them it's irrelevant, they don't need to be in the club to participate in cycling.

By removing the literal finish line and the extra layer of commitment imposed by the conventional sporting club, these participants enjoy excitement, sociability and multiple points for personal challenge, whilst taking comfort in the certainty of the outcome and strength from the collective group. They appear obliged to control for the unknown whilst shunning the ambiguity that comes with competition and the extra commitment of affiliation. Through an examination of this contemporary sport practice this study has explored the social construction of a community, which in spite of the rise of individualism, provides a space for social and political engagement. For the weekend warrior, formal racing was not a requirement of being a 'real cyclist' and membership meant a shared participation in the social ritual of this cycling neo-tribe.

