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Neal, S. orcid.org/0000-0002-2585-1245, Pang, B. orcid.org/0000-0003-2763-4321, Parry, K. orcid.org/0000-0001-9025-9101 et al. (1 more author) (2024) Informal sport and leisure, urban space and social inequalities: editors' introduction. *Leisure Studies*, 43 (6). pp. 875-886. ISSN 0261-4367

<https://doi.org/10.1080/02614367.2022.2162109>

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To cite this article: Sarah Neal, Bonnie Pang, Keith Parry & Clare Rishbeth (2023): Informal sport and leisure, urban space and social inequalities: Editors' Introduction, Leisure Studies, DOI: [10.1080/02614367.2022.2162109](https://doi.org/10.1080/02614367.2022.2162109)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02614367.2022.2162109>



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Published online: 11 Jan 2023.



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Informal sport and leisure, urban space and social inequalities: Editors' Introduction

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ABSTRACT

While informal sport may appear to be a poor relation of formal sport, participation in informal sport is now more popular than organised club sport. The special issue provides an opportunity to showcase international leisure studies research which variously explores the meaning and implications of informal sport as a growing form of collective leisure activity and the wider social affordances – and strains – of collective leisure practices. The Editors' Introduction focuses on the ways in which informal sport and leisure depend on sometimes hard-won public (parks, city squares, designed leisure spaces) and reused incidental urban space (e.g. post-industrial areas). It sets out the ways in which informal sport and leisure involves marginalised and precarious urban populations, gives rise to co-ethnic and ethnically diverse identifications, secures senses of belonging and citizenship, is gender and age ex/inclusive and is attractive to policy actors. It outlines how the articles collected in the special issue address what are still under-examined aspects of the informal sport phenomenon.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 5 December 2022
Accepted 12 December 2022

KEYWORDS

Informal sport; social life; leisure practices; social inequalities; cities; urban public space

The rise of informal sport

In one corner of a small, fairly nondescript but well-used park in a low-income neighbourhood in the north London Borough of Haringey, between the park's boundary wall, the tennis courts, the basketball court and the park's lawn space with willow and plane trees, there is a hardcore area which might once have been another tennis court but has now had an extra basketball hoop set up but generally feels rather abandoned and marginal in the park's otherwise very planned spaces. From early spring to late summer on most warm dry evenings and weekends this little space becomes a meeting place in which members of Tottenham's Central and South American migrant communities come to participate in and watch volleyball matches. There is a DIY dimension to the 'court' as on some days the volleyball net is tied to between the basketball hoop on one side and a pole and on other days the net is strung between two poles. This a volleyball court that has been made by the players. The players and the play are pretty skilled, loud and fast. The players (male and mostly young) and their audience – who seem to be family members and/or friends as these are much more mixed in terms of gender and age – gather at the edges of the assembled volleyball court, sometimes just sitting in groups and sometimes setting up little tables, sitting on blankets and sometimes with small barbecues and food.

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There seems to be betting on some of the matches. Social life happens. A neglected 'edge space' of the park transforms into a hub of dense sociality and informal sporting activity.

Taken from the pilot fieldnotes for the authors' current research project,¹ this description of informal sport and the related social interaction in a public space captures the focus of this special issue and situates its interest in exploring the meaning and conceptual significance of informal sport and its intersection with urban space, social interaction and social inequalities. The fieldnote conveys a social world that is eye-catching and intriguing. It is a scene that offers a series of indicative clues about how public spaces are used and micro-leisure spaces are made and constructed within them, highlighting the dynamic forms of social life in a multi-ethnic high-density city neighbourhood and the agentic forms of embodied social and spatial participation in the locality.

While there has been work published in *Leisure Studies* that focuses on lifestyle sport (see for example King & Church, 2015) and there is research that relates to the themes that this special issue addresses, for example, the social benefits of informal sport (Gilchrist & Wheaton, 2017); race, belonging and migrant identity (Aquino et al., 2020; Ratna, 2019; Thangaraj, 2015); policy approaches to informal leisure (Jeanes et al., 2019); urban spaces and leisure activities (Dunlap et al., 2020; Lin et al., 2020; Navarro et al., 2018; Pooley, 2020; Sabbe et al., 2019), sport and/or physical activity and social integration (Peperkamp, 2018; Ratna, 2017; Spaaij, 2015; Spracklen et al., 2015; Stone, 2018; Xiong et al., 2020), this is still very much an emergent field of study. Giving attention to research on informal sport and to the material public and appropriated spaces in which informal sport happens is necessary, not only because informal sport still has something of a below the radar status but also because the social and physical need for public and common space has been so effectively highlighted by the experiences of living through the COVID-19 pandemic. The special issue builds on and extends these existing studies as it seeks to advance empirical and theoretical analysis of the relationship between participation in informal sport and such optics as social inequalities, urban marginality, urban inclusion, migration, multicultural and superdiversity, gender, public space and landscape design and wellbeing.

Over the last decade, theorising on 'everyday and lived multicultural' has led to significant advancement in knowledge around what kinds of everyday practices make for inclusive diversity, engaging difference and negotiating division in urban communities. Work on conviviality and community (Neal et al., 2015, 2019; Rishbeth et al., 2018) articulates this in the context of living in culturally complex, mobile, superdiverse cities and situates the negotiation and management of exclusion, cultural difference and racism at the centre of questions around how people live together. Perceptions of public open space as an equitable social resource have been challenged by the rise of hate crime exacerbated by the recent political tensions of rising populist nationalisms, racial profiling practices by police and the vulnerability of the racialised 'other' while outdoors (see for example #blackwhilebirdwatching, #blackwhilerunning). The COVID-19 lockdowns and their regulation (see for example Bates and Moles and van den Bogert this issue) have also highlighted social inequalities in access to nature and recreational space – as well as the relative resilience of outdoor recreational activities – and shaped a new urgency to understanding the role of ultra-local greenspace in city life.

Paradoxically, participation in informal outdoor sports has become aligned with the policy agendas of various governmental and non-governmental organisations as a route for addressing integration agendas, providing youth services, tackling obesity, loneliness and low carbon lifestyles. The convergences and collisions between the individual agency, grassroots motivations and cultural dynamics of informal sport and these 'top down' or institutional strategies are explored further in the Issue (see for example De Martini Ugolotti, Singh Alukah, van den Bogert, Jeanes et al.). The articles presented in this special issue all contribute empirical and theoretical work that characterises the tensions and dynamic ways in which agency, practices of belonging and inhabiting cities, the negotiation of conviviality, policy interventions around cohesion and health occur across the axes of race, ethnicity, class, gender and age in informal sporting contexts. The articles move between explorations of embodied social practices in micro urban spaces to wider questions of how social solidarities and diverse recreational cultures are expressed and become visible in the use of

and/or appropriation of outdoor and community space. In doing so, they also examine the implications for animating the social life of cities and challenging entrenched inequalities.

Some informal leisure and sport activities are a familiar feature of everyday urban life and public space. ‘Jumpers for goal posts’ street football and alleyway street cricket are established self-directed, sometimes spontaneous, sometimes organised, sports practices. However, not only have the numbers of those participating in informal sport increased but there has also been an increase in what might be described as less familiar forms of informal leisure activities such as volleyball, parkrun, climbing boulders, parkour, frisbee, wild swimming and urban walking groups. This trend reflects the development and diversification of informal sport and leisure formations, accommodating collaborative interaction and, in some cases, competitive structures. While informal sport is a rather loose categorisation that lacks definitional consensus and evades precision, we follow Jeanes et al. (2019) in defining it in broader terms as relating to sport participation based on team, group or collective based physical activities but without a club structure, regulatory organisation, significant fees, formal membership and without formal rules or referees. Informal sport and leisure activities rely on open and casual access, where individuals join in on what might be organised and routine schedules but largely on a ‘turn up and play’ basis. It occurs in the public spaces in urban environments ranging from green spaces and open access facilities on social housing estates’ multi activity games areas (MUGAs) to ‘reused’ spaces such as residential streets, alleyways and city squares but also in some indoor sports spaces (Wise et al., 2018; van den Bogert and Jeanes et al., this volume). Activities may be ultra or micro local and neighbourhood based, some are ethnically bounded, others involve people with a range of ethnic backgrounds, and most are gendered in varied ways (Zou & Scott, 2017). While, informal sport activities can be spontaneous, they often have loose organisational structures and networks, occurring in a particular space, and at a repeated time. Casual ‘turn up and play’ games and ‘meetup’ physical activities increasingly have a digital life in that they are sometimes arranged via mobile phone apps and on social media forums (Wise et al., 2018).

While informal sport may appear to be a ‘poor relation’ of formal sport, recent research shows that participation in informal sport is now more popular than organised club sport, with public health bodies needing to adjust strategies (and potentially funding) accordingly. For example, parkrun which started with a small number of runners meeting up to run together in a South London park in the early 2000s now has over 100,000 participants and a recent survey of parkrun participants found 85% reported better physical health and 79% reported improvements to their sense of happiness (Haake et al., 2018). Reflecting the parkrun story, a key finding in Nichols’s and James (2017, p. 2) comparative evaluation of social inclusion across EU sports clubs was that there was ‘a trend away from club-based participation [which] reflects a fragmentation of available leisure time’ and a preference for activities which ‘combine freedom to participate [...] with a group experience, at low cost, at a local venue and with an inclusive ethos’. The Australian Sports Commission similarly notes that ‘sport clubs are no longer the main choice for sport participation’ (Australian Sports Commission, 2016, p. 11), and in their *Better Health Briefing* paper Hylton et al. (2015) highlight the appeal of sport and leisure activities that can be engaged with on an individuals’ own terms and outside of organised sport bureaucracies and club cultures. Reflecting these shifts, in the UK, Sport England recalibrated its strategic focus away from ‘how many people are playing one sport or another’ to a broader ‘understanding how active people are’ (Sport England, 2016, p. 7). and to the development of its *Towards an Active Nation* strategy which seeks to promote socially inclusive opportunities for outdoor activities that appeal to a wider range of people (Sport England, 2020). This echoes the focus that Public Health England (2017) has placed on localities and the design of built environments for promoting health and health related outdoor activities. In this context, and at a time when increasingly heterogeneous and socially polarised cities are recovering from the COVID-19 health crisis, it is important to ask if and how informal sport may contribute to more inclusive urban life through its imaginative use of public space, its invitation to a wider participation in sport – not only by the fit and healthy – and its involvement of marginalised urban populations and those groups under-represented in club-organised sport. Indicative evidence that informal sport may have significant social reach comes from a UK-based

study of street cricket which found that 75% of the participants lived in some of the most deprived areas of England and 80% of the participants were from black and other racialised minority backgrounds (Chance to Shine, 2018).

However, the dynamic and contradictory nature of informal sport, the ways in which informal sport involves marginalised urban populations and is gender inclusive (or not) is a growing area of interdisciplinary study and engagement (see, for example, Book and Högdahl this issue). The special issue contributes to this evolving body of work by exploring the extent of affective and wider social benefits across practices of urban belonging and community-making associated with the sites occupied and animated by informal sport. The visible public nature of these activities is important here: informal sport participation raises pertinent questions about urban inclusivity and the concept of the right to the city, who participates and how these activities are viewed by non-participants. Lefebvre's (1991, 1996) concept of the right to the city suggests that senses of belonging and citizenship come from the everyday practices of inhabiting urban space rather than from formal political organisation or citizenship status. For Lefebvre the right to the city meant the right of all citizens to 'shape urban life and benefit from it' (Amin, 2006, p. 1017). Focusing on who gets to use and inhabit city spaces is key to urban inclusion, so understanding who participates in informal sport, in what sort of informal sport activities, where, when and why, answers pertinent questions about the significance – and limits – of informal sport for generating social trust, cohesion and senses of belonging.

The articles collected together here reflect the interdisciplinary orientation of informal sport research and draw on sociology, geography, sports science, leisure studies and landscape architecture to situate informal sport within urban everyday life. They examine its embodied, participatory and social benefits for city dwellers, particularly reflecting on uneven access to sport and recreation in socio-economically mixed or low income urban neighbourhoods with higher levels of migration and ethnic diversity. It is important to acknowledge the complexities around this, recognising that although its informality may support increased accessibility for some, the public and often performative aspect of these activities may exclude others. The articles that follow move beyond the informal sport associations of young, physically agile male players to explore racialised bodies, participation by women and girls, older people and those with lower fitness levels. The work in the special issue aims to examine informal sport as practice driven and consider emergent modes of embodied sociality speaking to urban belonging and exclusion, migrant settlement, community and place making processes.

Contextualising the special issue: informal sport, inequalities, exclusion and urban environments

While the health and cohesion aspects of organised sport with its social and economic benefits for cities are often celebrated, the racist abuse of high-profile players (Parry, 2015) serves as a powerful ongoing reminder of the conditional terms of inclusion in sporting arenas. As Spaaij (2015, pp. 303–4) argues, 'any generalised claim that sport is a mechanism for "good settlement" is contentious' because sport 'is also used to differentiate and exclude'. Until relatively recently, international research on sport and diversity was largely concerned with examining formal organised activity relating to professional sport and local sporting clubs (Adair & Rowe, 2010; Burdsey, 2007, 2010; Campbell, 2017; Carrington & McDonald, 2001). The focus on organised sport has been important in defining sport as a key site for understanding racism and exclusion (e.g. Burdsey, 2007, Burdsey, 2020; Carrington & McDonald, 2001; Parry, 2015; Back et al., 2001) but as Burdsey (2017, p. xviii) argues, this has meant that 'we still know very little about minority ethnic sporting cultures' themselves. Related to this, with a few notable exceptions (e.g. Clayton, 2009; Ratna, 2017, 2019), there is a lack of engagement with race, racism and ethnicity and the emergence of informal sport (Wheaton, 2015) and with superdiversity and sport generally (Rosbrook-Thompson, 2018). In the UK, Campbell's (2017) study of a local amateur football club in Leicester follows the club's story of its migrant and multicultural membership over forty years and reveals entangled narratives of racism and antiracism, wider migrant politics, solidarities and tensions. In Australia, Spaaij's (2013)

research on Somali refugees in organised soccer in Melbourne revealed benefits from participating in ethno-specific clubs such as increased access to club management positions. Soccer conferred multiple layers and scales of belonging such as belonging to ‘club’, to ‘clan’, to ‘Australia’, and transnational belongings. In short, research on those involved in organised sport culture has been increasingly situated, focusing on locality and sites of interaction as a means of understanding sport-based participation and the transformative and/or defensive interactions that this participation generates (Trouille, 2021). While the articles here explore the interpersonal and interactional dimensions of informal sport, they also pay attention to its localised urban environment – the design and planning of the spaces in which people play and watch, the different negotiations over space and the various formations of ‘community’ and who constitutes them – who uses the ball court and when.

In this context, the articles examine the ways in which informal sport is entangled with different traditions of urban space and city density and with contrasting histories and contemporary formations of migration, migrant settlement, gender and urban citizenship. The articles each focus on how the various spaces of the city – some deliberately designed to be formally used for sport and leisure practices and others which are reused and appropriated – become claimed and reimagined by informal sport and leisure practices. The articles draw on and mine a rich set of concepts – from conviviality (Gilroy, 2004); belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2012); the right to the city (Lefebvre, 1991, 1996); enacted citizenship (Isin, 2008) to diasporic space (Brah, 1996) spatial justice (Soja, 2013) and embodied performativity (Butler, 1990) – to develop insight into processes and practices of urban social life and urban place making.

While the right to the city has been used to mobilise urban political movements, here it becomes a lens for conceptualising participatory practices and the everyday inhabitation and translation of urban environments into spaces of embodied belonging. These micro forms of participation involve the cultivation of a more collective and unstructured use of urban spaces, bringing those spaces to life (often increasing a sense of public safety), representing the city’s liveability and its potential for democratic inclusivity (Iveson, 2009). The articles in the special issue explore informal sport practices in the urban environments in a range of national contexts – Poland, the UK, Italy, India, the Netherlands, Sweden, Australia – with contrasting social and economic histories, process of urbanism and diverse formations of multicultural, migrant settlement and urban design. Tonkiss (2020) persuasively argues that as urban inequalities become more multi-dimensional, non-income related, environmental resources have become ever more critical for social inclusion and a key concern for governmental actors. Scholars such as Klinenberg (2018) and Latham and Layton (2020) similarly emphasise that it is the city’s physical spaces that shape interaction and provide the social infrastructure necessary for public life. Informal sport participation draws attention to the collective and unstructured use of urban spaces, the city’s liveability and sense of a safe public realm. This frames the focus in the special issue on how micro-social practices may generate democratic inclusivity at a particular conjuncture of intense social and cultural polarisation. The insistence across the articles that space is socially made is based on the recognition that space is not a blank setting in which social interactions are played out, but that the space itself shapes those interactions and is central to the participatory relationships and the contestations/struggles between socially different and differentiated city dwellers in unequal, divided cities (see for example Bates and Moles, De Martini Ugolotti, Singh Alukah, Jeanes et al., this issue).

Challenging ‘flattened’ accounts of social and ethnic diversity, the articles collected here focus on examining categories of difference across the populations inhabiting cities – younger and older, fit and unfit, diverse genders, long-standing multicultural communities, refugee and asylum seeker migrants, low and high wage migrant/non-migrant workers, and the juxtapositions between the temporary and the long settled, the advantaged and marginalised – and how they lay claim to and negotiate public space through informal sport and experience solidarities, senses of belonging, entitlement, exclusion, marginalisation and racism. Through the portal of informal sporting participation, the articles use various routes to consider how these everyday practices challenge

or transform encounters of difference, pre-existing social patterns, norms of living together and open new fault lines of tension as players voluntarily take part and learn how to negotiate the social relationships and social structures of the game.

Key themes of the special issue

A range of distinctive and connective threads run through the special issue and advance insight on the dynamic and affective nature of informal sport practices. The articles are methodologically notable in their shared use of qualitative approaches for the investigation of informal sport and in their methodological innovations as they productively blend autoethnography, ethnography, visual and policy text and participatory action research. These methodological approaches raise pertinent questions about co-production, reciprocity and how informal sport and leisure practices are researched (Back & Puwar, 2012). The ways in which COVID-19 both intensified the appeal of informal sport and doubled down on existing inequalities frames a number of the articles. It is most explicitly examined in Bates' and Moles' observation of the regulation of wild swimming in London and in van der Bogert's examination of the increased regulation of young Muslim men playing street football in the Netherlands. Both articles provide finely grained accounts of the ways in which the increased use and governance of public space during pandemic lockdowns was socially patterned and racialised.

Perhaps what is most immediately striking is the shared recognition of the extent to which informal sport and leisure is a *thriving social phenomenon*. All the articles reflect on the growth in the numbers of those who participate in informal sport and, alongside this, the growth in the different types of informal sport. We noted above that participation in informal sport and leisure practices is significantly increasing and this is a trend – and a theme – that is sutured into the articles as they move from wild swimming and street football to parkour, frisbee and cycling. The challenge of how to understand and explain the popularity of informal sport and the emergence of new types of informal sport and collective leisure is one that each of the articles seeks to engage with and address. With its focus on urban space and social inequalities, the special issue situates informal sport participation within the rapid transformations, the embedded and newer racialisations of increasingly multicultural and superdiverse urban space alongside the economic polarisations of the wider social world. While these macro forces play a role in shaping and driving the rise of informal sport, its appeal to marginalised and precarious urban dwellers reflects the micro and experiential worlds in the embodied and emotional affordances of informal sport participation. This is emphasised by De Martini Ugolotti when he argues that 'parkour provides a unique entry point to address the politics of belonging that unfold in urban spaces as contested sites where competing images of the city, the nation and of who belongs to them converge, clash and overlap'. For van den Bogert and Blachnicka-Ciacek and Trąbka, too, what matters is the point of slippage between the larger scale processes of mobility and settlement and the way in which informal sport participation has the potential to facilitate a 'reimagining of the city and [being able to] relate to the city on a personal level' (Blachnicka-Ciacek and Trąbka this issue). Blachnicka-Ciacek and Trąbka stress the limits to the inclusive possibilities of informal sport. In their study in two newly multicultural cities in Poland, they find that 'informal sport groups tend to be migrant-led with a small local presence or locally led with a small migrant presence'.

In his well-cited article on 'micro publics' Amin (2006) argues that 'a lot is asked of public space' as a generator of a radical politics of multiculturalism and this resonates in relation to informal sport. Taking part in informal sports may have transformative elements, but exclusionary dynamics and wider social inequalities are ever present, pressing back hard and down on any disruptive achievements. We see some of that in van den Bogert's figures on the policing of street football players in Jeanes et al.'s account of the ways in which informal sport is excluded from community sport spaces, and in the absence of girls and young women in Book's and Högdahl's discussion of informal sport in public space. Bates and Moles also expose some of this 'pegging back' of potential in their study of wild swimming during the pandemic. They show how this opens up the 'democratic' possibilities of water but also highlight the extent to which not all bodies feel welcome at the lake, and not all ways of

movement are embraced. While some people find comfort in the pool and others find it in the lake, there are some bodies that are still not able to sink into either comfortably. For Singh Alukah, the focus is on how the highly contested demands being made from individual, collective, entrepreneurial and urban regeneration forces on a particular urban space work to undermine its availability as a site for informal leisure. Given the extent of the tensions, threats and caveats, the authorial voices that make up the special issue are careful in how they engage with and relate participation in informal sport with a 'politics of hope' (Back, 2021).

Reinforcing this caution is the *interrelationship between the precarities of social location and the precarities of urban spaces*. The fragility and uncertainties of urban space and how it is inhabited is a dominant preoccupation in the articles. The entanglement between social precarity and spatial precarity may not be surprising but the extent to which informal sport sits at their precise intersection means there is a particular intensity to this social-spatial dynamic. This theme has a strong presence in Jeanes et al.'s examination of access to sport space. They detail the lack of informal sport space and the tensions when informal sport participants use formal sport spaces. Exploring the tensions of who is in and not in spaces is central to Brooks' and Högdahl's engagement with an innovative form of what they term 'disrupter method' – a sort of methodological dada-ism – which they developed in response to the absence of young women, particularly Muslim young women, from public spaces and taking part in informal sport. By directly involving young women in public space they use participatory actions (so-called 'dis-turbances') to facilitate and generate an embodied reclaiming experience by taking part in informal sport in selected places of the city from which they have otherwise felt excluded. The precarious relationship between the embodied occupation of urban space through informal leisure practices is also explored by Bates and Moles in their study of wild swimming in London. They juxtapose the agentic and sensory sociality of wild swimming with the highly regulated approach to the sites of access/lack of access as managed by the local council through the haze of the COVID-19 regulation. Bates and Moles detail some of this regulation – fences and signs going up but at the same time they highlight a series of tactical contestations as people found gaps in the regulatory frameworks and still managed to slip through and around fences to swim. The tensions between informal sport and the availability and regulation of urban space are explored directly by van den Bogert in her research on street football in the Hague, where groups of young people being in public space became a focus of racialised policing during periods of Covid lockdown. Regulatory forces are also at the centre of Singh Aulakh's examination of how the rapid urban regeneration changes in a Mumbai neighbourhood affected the working of the maidan – a public square used for collective leisure, informal team games and social interaction. He draws attention to the importance of 'understanding the transformation of open spaces and informal leisure activities together, where the question of land/open space is not secondary to the activity or actor'. The nature of the relationship between urban policy, city space and informal sport is central to De Martini Ugolotti's study, too, as he examines the ways in which informal sport and parkour in particular came to fit into the urban planning visions of a post-industrial Turin. De Martini Ugolotti highlights how some of the most marginal spaces of the post-industrial city – the edge land and disused and/or 'unremarkable' spaces of the city – became the focus of parkour. The article explores the ways in which the marginal spaces used by toucouros not only animated and returned them to life but also how this animation has allowed a 'rebranding' of the city's identity and the development of a progressively framed, creative, 'empowering' and 'sport for all' policy approaches to urban inclusion.

While De Martini Ugolotti unpicks the racialised ambivalences – as well as the affordances – of this policy engagement what he, Jeanes et al. and a number of other authors highlight, is the *relationship between informal sport and policy interventions* and the paradox that lies at the heart of this (see also, for example, Wheaton & O'Loughlin, 2017). This is a recurring theme running through the special issue, addressing an empirical gap in the situated analysis of informal sport. Although the inclusion and wellbeing benefits of informal sports provide compelling reasons for them to receive organisational support, the very essence of these activities is their self-agency.

Developing policy initiatives that address the appropriateness and extent of externally driven support, advocacy and resourcing is a focus of concern and interrogation for a number of the authors in the collection. It is in this context that van den Bogert gives an incisive critique of the institutionalisation of informal sport, in her study of street football, played mostly by young men of colour in a working-class neighbourhood in the Hague, as she argues that informal sport is not only regulated by adults and policy actors – ‘policy makers started to focus on informal, lifestyle, or urban sports to pursue their “youth agenda”’ – but that its key value is viewed in governance terms as being a ‘bridge’ or stepping stone for getting young people into organised football and ‘not as a sport itself’. The vulnerability of informal sport to being bent to feed and fit into particular regulative policy agendas – and its ability to negotiate and resist this is variously explored by van den Bogert, Book and Högdahl, De Martini Ugolotti, Jeanes et al. and Blachnicka-Ciacek and Trąbka. The distinctions and agentic gaps between formally (i.e. ‘municipal’ or ‘youth services’) organised informal sport and community or peer led informal sport activities are clearly drawn by these authors. The concern of Blachnicka-Ciacek and Trąbka is with the dynamics of exclusion from informal sport for more recently settled refugees and migrants in the newly multicultural Polish cities. They found a range of barriers to informal sport participation which were countered once forms of scaffolding, peer leadership and resource allocation were in place. Given this, they suggest that a certain level of “curation” of sport initiatives is productive in ensuring diversity and inclusion for those migrants and refugees who might not have enough confidence or resources to do so otherwise. The “curated” approach is needed, therefore, to make those initiatives more visible and thus accessible to people. In their study Jeanes et al. explore the uneven resources available for informal sport, recognising that while national sport policy acknowledges ‘the importance of stakeholders broadening their understanding of what constitutes ‘sport’...this has not led to substantial action, funds or prioritising of diverse sporting formats’.

There is then real value in the way that the special issue brings together these different accounts of the policy-informal sport relationship as it engages with the contestations around space, urban inequalities, leisure practices and governance.

The idea of *embodied citizenship* threads through all six articles. The corporeality of informal sport – visible bodies being in open space and visibly engaged in collective leisure resonates not only with Lefebvre’s right to the city and the practices of inhabitation, but with the emphasis that citizenship scholars have put on shifting concepts of citizenship away from the public and formal realm to the emotional domains of personal life and everyday social worlds – what Isin (2008) has identified as ‘enacted citizenship’ and Lister (2007) as ‘lived citizenship’. Drawing on critical disability studies (Russell, 2012, Wiseman, 2014) embodied citizenship underlines how participating in the life of the city through the collective participation in informal sport sutures physical bodies into citizenship practices and related, if precarious, processes of entitlement, agency and belonging. The precarities of embodied citizenship are very present across the articles as, for example, in De Martini Ugolotti’s examination of the role of ‘physical cultural practice’; in the gendered body in Book’s and Högdahl’s scrutiny of sport designed public space; in van den Bogert’s account of COVID-19 racialised regulation of bodies during Covid regulations; and in Singh Aulkah’s concern with ‘claim making’ through bodily presence in urban space. In Bates’ and Moles’ account of the ways in which the wild swimming in the park lake moved from being a site of openness, celebration and ‘joyous chaos’ of multicultural bodies in water to a site of management which ‘dictat[ed] the type of person who was allowed to be a swimmer and the ways they could swim in order to fit into regulations and access the water’. Highlighting the inseparability of bodies and citizenship, Crossley (1995, p. 48) has argued that ‘the body is our way of being in the world, of experiencing and belonging to the world’ and the explicit and implicit convergence of corporeality and citizenship that runs through these articles is a valuable optic through which to approach and interpret the significance and meanings of informal sport participation.

While the articles can of course be read and engaged with in any order, their ordering here reflects our editorial curation. Opening with Charlotte Bates and Kate Moles auto/ethnographic examination

of wild swimming and ‘the power of wild swimming, to restore, refresh and bring people together’, while mapping the inequalities of spaces and the practices of wild swimming, highlights the importance of the sensory and corporeal aspects of informal sport and the limits and affordances of these in generating belonging and place attachment. Keeping the corporeal aspects of informal sport as a central concern, Nicola De Martini Ugolotti explores how young men from migrant backgrounds engage in informal physical cultural practices and connects these practices both to embodied senses of entitlement to inhabit city spaces and to wider questions of citizenship. While still attentive to the embodied qualities of informal sport participation, Kathrine van den Bogert identifies and provides a granular discussion of the different forms that informal football in Dutch multicultural neighbourhoods takes, from unorganised non-time bound street football to municipality-organised football and then community-organised ‘grassroots’ football. Drawing on her ethnographic work with young Muslim men she analyses the in/exclusionary dynamics of each. In their qualitative study of young migrants living in an emergent urban multicultural Eastern Europe, Dominika Blachnicka-Ciacek and Agnieszka Trąbka also focus on a range of different types of informal sport, the exclusionary tensions in terms of those to whom informal sport appeals, and who can access and participate in it and how it is organised. With their focus on the ways in which informal sport is ‘excluded from community sport spaces’ Jeanes et al use the concept of spatial justice to explore the tensions between the growth of informal sport, access to sport space and national policy. In their article, Karin Book and Elisabeth Högdahl maintain the emphasis on exclusionary processes and barriers – particularly in relation to gender – to informal sport participation. Their concern is to examine how gender barriers are embedded within the spatial and organisational infrastructure which supports and facilitates informal sport. As a methodological intervention and a data driven analysis, the article presents the experience-based, participatory method used in the authors’ Equaliser research project and discusses the multi-faceted barriers the project’s norm breaking methods exposed. Staying with the nature and form of the urban spaces in which informal sport takes place, Balbir Singh Aulakh examines the maidsan – an open space outside the Noor-ul-Huda mosque in Dharavi, Mumbai. The maidsan has remained as an open space as the city while the communities around it have been transformed by urbanisation, development, regeneration, migration, and densification. It is a space of what Singh Aulakh calls ‘simultaneity’ in that it supports and facilitates a range of collective and non-collective social practices and informal leisure activities (playing box cricket, badminton or volleyball), that residents engage in a range of competing and overlapping ways. Singh Aulakh traces the fragile negotiations and contestations between the different uses of and demands on precious open space in a Global South context and, through his focus on informal leisure spaces within informal settlements, highlights (and addresses) a relatively unexplored area within the literature of leisure and urban studies.

Finally, we return to the volleyball match with which we began in our introduction. The work done by each of the articles frames and informs our own fieldnote observations. The collective participation of a co-ethnic group in a volleyball match on the edges of a small public park in a superdiverse area of North London is one element in the wider social phenomenon that informal sport represents. The articles open up the in/exclusive meanings, and social significance of the observed volleyball match. The articles sharpen the ways in which to analyse and understand informal sport practices. The authors engage with the multi-faceted forces and ambitions that shape the embodied practices, which make up self-directed and peer-led sporting activities and constitute ways of inhabiting and claiming particular micro and mundane spaces of city.

Note

1. Just Turn Up: informal sport and social participation in the superdiverse city is a two-year project (Oct 2022–September 2024) funded by the Economic and Social Research Council ES/W008343/1. The Principal Investigator is Sarah Neal and the Co-Investigators are Bonnie Pang, Keith Parry and Clare Rishbeth.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Andy Smith and the *Leisure Studies* Editorial Team for all their support in bringing this special issue together. We would like to thank Allan Cochrane for comments on an earlier version of this Introduction. While this special issue predated our funding from the Economic and Social Research Council, we would like to acknowledge this award (ES/W008343/1) for our current research project which builds on the themes discussed here. Finally, we would like to thank each of the contributors who have made the special issue possible.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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