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# News in Review

December 1999

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### Extreme Sports: Tempting Fate?

Like most News in Review stories, this analysis of the phenomenon of proliferating and increasingly dangerous sports is much more than what first meets the eye. This is a story about human behaviour, human needs, and contemporary social values. The story asks many fundamental questions: What is the nature of sport? When is the line crossed in terms of risk in a sport? Why do people engage in any recreational activity that puts their lives at risk, be it mountain climbing, drug use, heli-skiing, day trading, or reckless driving? Do extreme sports fulfill extreme needs? What social conditions or psychological needs generate these activities?

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# News in Review

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## Introduction

### Extreme Sports: Tempting Fate?

Why do we enjoy taking risks? In our society, there is a degree of danger and fear in many leisure activities, and as one snowboarder says, If there s no fear factor, I dunno, I don t think it s any fun. People water-ski, watch scary movies, or ride roller coasters knowing full well that their heart will race and they may get a knot in their stomach. Far from being an unpleasant feeling, people equate these thrills with entertainment and enjoyment and they keep coming back for more. However, there is fear, and then there is extreme fear. When watching a movie or skiing down a groomed ski hill, the actual physical danger is minimal if one is adept, well-trained, rational, and responsible. We know that we will survive the risk and continue our routine lives. Extreme sports, on the other hand, involve a real physical danger or death. That is the essence of these activities, which have steadily increased in popularity in the 1990s.

Extreme sports are derived from both traditional and non-traditional sporting activities. Traditional sports such as bicycling or skiing can be made extreme by modifying the equipment and locales. Extreme athletes, usually teenagers, will ride a BMX bike up and down steep ramps performing turns and flips that are evaluated by judges or, more importantly, their peers.

Extreme skiers will trek into backwoods, often avalanche-prone, areas to seek out the perfect powder or the best natural jumps. Skateboarding, bungee jumping, downhill mountain bike races, rock or ice climbing, and whitewater kayaking are among the many extreme sports practised today. Part of the mystique of

extreme sports is that they are new or radical. The limits of current extreme sports are constantly expanding and changing, and new sports are invented regularly to feed the thrill factor. Extreme athletes value highly the reputation of trailbreaker or outlaw that goes with being on the edge of what is acceptable.

Watching ultimate activities can also be compelling, if not exciting. Ratings for extreme sports programming are high, and television networks and specialty channels have rushed to incorporate them into their schedules. Audience ratings indicate that significant numbers of viewers enjoy watching athletes flirt with death. There is also evidence of a morbid public fascination; infotainment reality programming showing videotaped accidents and even deaths are popular with viewers. Even news programming is susceptible. When showing images of accidents, in sporting events or otherwise, there can be a fine line between what is legitimate public information and what is gratuitous titillation.

What makes people seek out these activities, and why are some people more likely to go to extremes than others? Are some risk-takers genetically predisposed to seek thrills while others learn or are socially conditioned through repeated exposure to actually like the feelings extreme risk-taking creates? There is also some debate as to whether humans have residual instinctive behaviour that makes high-risk adventure an evolutionary advantage. In sociological terms, to what extent have we actually made extreme sports culturally acceptable; are they really a manifestation of a society that is experiencing and acting out high-risk economic and social conditions? Extreme sports may also only be a fad. People may tire of their excesses. However, the full impact of extreme sports and their potential for harm, or for good, have yet to be objectively determined.

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# News in Review

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## A Relative Term

### Extreme Sports: Tempting Fate?

What's in a name? The 1920s were nicknamed the Roaring Twenties. Other decades have their descriptors: the Dirty Thirties, the Fabulous Fifties, the Swinging Sixties. Could a valid case be made for calling the 1990s the Extreme Nineties? Extreme is a common word some would say over-used to describe numerous areas in our society. It is used to describe aspects of such varied activities as sports, music, fashion, business, and even vacations. Dictionary definitions use words such as utmost, intense, or lacking restraint to explain extreme. However, words often fail to capture the essence of the feelings involved when experiencing or watching such activities.

#### **Categorization**

Prior to watching this News in Review report proceed as follows:

1. Take a few moments on your own and write a short paragraph in which you summarize what extreme means to you. Try to balance your definition by using both positive and negative terms. For example, you may think that extreme experiences help define your individuality but at the same time you may also recognize that these activities might be foolhardy.
2. After you have written your summary, make a short list of activities that you would describe as extreme.
3. Now, working in small groups, discuss your definitions and

examples with others. What similarities and differences are there? What reasons are there for participating in extreme activities? What reasons are there for not participating in them?

### **Perception**

Now watch this News in Review program and while you do so, note carefully the different extreme sports shown. Note especially how they are depicted. For example, gravity competitions (skateboarding, roller blades, bicycle jumps) are often accompanied by fast and/or pulsating music. Likewise, film productions of heli-skiers incorporate various camera shots or slow motion that highlights the symmetry of the turns carved into fresh powder. These devices can alter the perception of the activity for both the viewer and the participant.

Extremeness touches all aspects of our society; all the connections are not immediately obvious. What is the effect of extreme sports on society? Use the following to help you organize your thoughts.

1. When do the activities cross the line and become extreme ?
2. What attitudes or words are expressed by the participants to justify these sports?
3. What feelings do you experience when viewing the images of these sports?
4. What impact do extreme sports have on society?
5. Do the inevitable and predictable accidents enhance or deter people from undertaking extreme sports?

### **Follow-up Discussion**

Those who regularly participate in extreme sports or are regular viewers of such events may have a different perception of life compared with those who play it safe. The increased popularity of extreme sports may also suggest that a significant portion of the population wants or needs a regular dose of intense activities. Discuss what effect this might have on the following areas: school, social activities, media, personal lives.

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## The Nature of Sports

### Extreme Sports: Tempting Fate?

Sport, games, and play are some of the most common words in our vocabulary but not necessarily the easiest activities to define. As you read the following information, think about how these three words may have acquired new levels of meaning for you.

#### **The Thrill Of The Hunt**

When early human society evolved from hunting and gathering to fixed agricultural communities, two things in particular happened. With a steady food supply, humans acquired more leisure time since they were not consumed with locating and hunting prey. Subsequently, they did not experience as often the thrills, risks, and rewards of the hunt. While the increased leisure time no doubt provided opportunities for invention and artistic expression, the absence of the hunt left a void. All human societies have subsequently devoted some energy toward creating games for entertainment, and a good proportion of those involve testing our physical limits.

#### **Undeclared War**

Uterior motives for sports have included preparing a society's citizenry for war, either generally, as a way to keep physically fit, or specifically through competitions that emphasized military components. For example, the first Olympic Games featured running events in which competitors raced in their full battle armour weighing 20-30 kilograms. Pankration was a combat sport at the Olympics that incorporated boxing and wrestling.

Competitors sometimes would die rather than admit defeat in this event. Events that have carried over into the modern Olympics, such as the javelin or equestrian events, would have also honed the skills of the Greek athletes for a future battlefield.

### **Pressure Points**

People who regularly participate in physical activity consistently describe feeling better afterward, often as a result of the release of endorphins, pain-inhibiting hormones that are released in the brain, giving the individual a slight but natural high. Whether the activity is walking, soccer, or full-contact karate, the effect usually is a reduction in stress that carries over into other aspects of our lives. Conversely, when there is a period of inactivity for a person who is usually physically active, stress levels build and negative behaviours increase. This can be manifested through crying, arguing, depression, or sociopathic responses such as road rage. Sporting activities can therefore become psychologically addictive, in that we feel a need for the positive releases provided.

While sports can benefit society by reducing negative behaviours, another psychological aspect of the sporting event can actually create the opposite effect. Many sporting events allow us to participate in a forum that lies outside the normal rules or limits of regular society. For example, slamming somebody into a wall in an office would be assault. In a professional hockey game it is called checking and is an acceptable part of the game and exciting to some fans. Fighting in many sports is punishable by temporarily sitting out of a game, or for more serious offences, missing several games in a row. Fighting in public will likely land an offender in court, if not a jail cell. On the one hand, having an outlet for our aggressive behaviours can be positive since it can release negative feelings. However, much as muscles can be conditioned to react in a certain fashion in a sport, aggression can also be conditioned. Not only is aggression often not punished in many sports, but it is frequently recognized and rewarded as a positive attribute. Sporting events and societal behaviour are closely linked.

### **It s Not Whether You Win Or Lose . . .**

All sports feature some form of competition, even if it is with yourself or against an objective standard such as time, distance, or overcoming an obstacle. Some sports, such as figure skating, also involve a subjective evaluation of how the competitor performed. It would be unfair to characterize all sports as aggressive or combative in nature. All sports feature a symmetry and beauty of movement that represent a challenge to the limitations of such natural phenomena as gravity. This is

especially apparent when one watches slow-motion video of a sporting event. Each athlete strives to perfect the motions that will help him or her win, regardless of the respective sport's scoring system. Elvis Stojko works to perfect the quadruple jump, equestrian Ian Millar strives to make rider and horse one as they perform the required jumps, and Sammy Sosa will spend countless hours trying to reproduce the swing that produces 60 or more home runs year after year. The athlete, like the musician, the dancer, or the artist, must of course meet minimum expectations in the sport, but each is also motivated to meet or surpass his or her own personal standards. Every year, athletes get bigger, stronger, more graceful, more capable in the sport, and more innovative because they strive against the odds of human limitations in their attempt to achieve perfection.

Depending on your point of view, perfection may be impossible to attain; perfection is the ultimate, unattainable, but nonetheless desired goal. As expressed in the aphorism, *Man's reach must exceed his grasp, or what's a Heaven for*, the results of striving for perfection can be astounding. The balance and co-ordination that come from endless practice produce not just scores, but art. The movements of any top athlete are dance-like, especially when they can be analyzed through video replay. Indeed many sports shows create montages of highlights set to music, which resemble the aesthetics of a ballet performance. In every shot, the athlete is attempting to define the quintessential motion of the sport.

### **Discussion Activities**

1. What sports in particular incorporate aspects of war in them? Even though the chances are remote in modern society that athletes are being prepared for the battlefield, is there a similar psychological or sociological factor at work here? Do sports condition society to be competitive with other societies or within themselves, so that the best in that society emerges? Is there a difference in the competitive nature of the traditional male and female sports?

2. Think of examples of behaviour in sport that would represent broken laws if they occurred in day-to-day life. Create a comparison chart identifying (a) the behaviour, (b) the punishment or reward in the sport for that behaviour, and (c) the outcome of a similar behaviour in regular society.

3. List some minimum performance levels in a sport with which you are familiar that define success in that sport. For example, in running it used to be the four-minute mile until that was broken by Roger Bannister in the 1950s. Today top milers are expected

to break that in practice. Can the standards continue to rise or are there natural limits that nobody can break? How do changing performance levels affect a sport?

4. The graceful and effective movement of the human body, an enormously complex and advanced organism, has been admired, celebrated, and depicted for centuries. Sport has often merged with art. Make a list of specific examples. Are there some sports that seem to be more of a combination of sport and art than others?

5. Watch a few minutes of any sporting activity on video in slow motion. Describe the beauty of the movement with reference to the following: harmony, symmetry, grace, balance, agility, power, and the full engagement and integration of the human body. In your discussion, you may come up with other aesthetic qualities.

6. With reference to the aesthetic qualities and results mentioned in the question above, make a list of five sports and rank these qualities in order of importance, one being the most important. In your opinion, are there some sports in which it is not possible to separate the factors, all being of equal importance?

7. What aspects of science and even mathematics are also critical to sport? What, for example, is the critical role that gravity plays in many sports? How might physics be important to a sport like basketball? Why does a long-distance runner need to understand human biology? How can mathematical calculations be used to improve athletic performance? What sports are especially good examples of the science of human psychology?

8. Make a list of sporting activities that, in your opinion have none of the above qualities but are practised for other reasons. Suggest what these reasons might be.

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## A New Game in Town

### Extreme Sports: Tempting Fate?

These people do what?! This question used to arise with the advent of each new sport or endurance event that made the news. However, there are so many new extreme sports nowadays that spectators quickly get used to them. When a new sport is introduced, the pioneers of each innovation look daring, superhuman, and to the mainstream population, even a bit crazy. With time though, what appeared to be cutting-edge becomes acceptable.

People tend to forget past fads or movements, but each generation witnesses new ultimate sports. The movie *Forest Gump* highlighted the running craze that took place in the 1970s. While marathons 42 kilometre races that can leave competitors in a state of physical and mental exhaustion and that for the ill-prepared could be dangerous to the health have been run in Canada and the United States for over 100 years, participants numbered only in the hundreds. In the 1970s, race participation suddenly moved into the thousands. Today, the New York Marathon has over 20 000 runners, while the Los Angeles Marathon has had up to 50 000. Now if someone says he or she is a marathoner, the individual is considered interesting not crazy. To be crazy, you would be an ultramarathoner, who may run 80 or more kilometres in a single race.

Like many other trends in our society, sports seem to operate on a continuum. The traditional styles and formats become

commonplace and are replaced by revised or enhanced versions. The changes used to take longer, but like computers, a new generation of sports seems to be invented more and more quickly. Athletes who were tired of running or cycling or swimming in the 1970s combined all three to create the triathlon. They were the rebels who were held with disdain by purists from the three respective sports. Triathlon formats are not new but have existed for a long time in different events such as equestrian sports (the three-day event), but new triathlons in canoeing or snowshoeing now entertain fans tired of traditional triathlons. The permutations are infinite today as there are a host of ultimate competitions where athletes must perform any number of events together. New formats can be devised weekly to keep curious athletes and audiences engaged.

### **Activity**

Create a continuum or flow chart for a sport with which you are familiar. Show how the sport evolved through changes in rules, equipment, or competition formats. Compare your flow chart to those that other students have created. To what extent is almost any sport more extreme than it used to be?

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## When Different and Daring Become Dangerous

### Extreme Sports: Tempting Fate?

The problem with continuous change and innovation in contemporary sport is that in some cases the limits have clearly been pushed too far the risk factor has become an end in itself the extreme nature of the sport, as opposed to the sport itself, has become the primary reason for the activity. For the participant and the spectator who experiences the danger vicariously the experience has become irrational.

While there is an inherent risk in most sporting activities, contemporary culture, for whatever reason, motivates being daring and different as an end in itself and thus has produced an environment in sports in which risk-taking is a prime goal. For example, an extreme sport that is gaining notoriety is called BASE jumping. BASE is an acronym for Buildings, Antennas, Spans (bridges) and Earth (cliffs). BASE jumpers leap from one of these structures using a parachute, symbolically thumbing their noses at authority figures such as police or park rangers. One jumper, Thor Alex Kappfjell, has jumped off the Empire State and Chrysler buildings as well as the World Trade Center. If the winds shift or their chute fails, the jumpers can be killed. The founder of this sport, Carl Boenish was killed in 1980 in a leap off a cliff. Kappfjell was killed in July 1999 also leaping from a cliff. Another jumper was not killed when he jumped off the top of El Capitán in Yosemite National Park in June 1999 but drowned immediately after when trying to evade park rangers. According to the article *The Whole World Is Jumpable* in the July

19, 1999, issue of Time magazine, to date 39 of approximately 400 BASE jumpers have been killed.

It may be tempting to dismiss the BASE jumpers as a fringe group of outlaws, a description they actually cultivate, but there are a host of extreme sports that are gaining popularity. In When sports become too extreme, an article in the March 24, 1998, issue of the Christian Science Monitor, writer Alex Salkever notes: Although exact figures on how many extreme athletes exist are hard to come by, isolated statistical evidence and virtually all anecdotal evidence point to a rapid increase. For example, the number of climbers attempting the summit of Alaska's 6187-metre Mt. McKinley the tallest peak in North America has increased from 695 in 1984 to 1,110 in 1997.

On the ski slopes, the number of snowboarders rivals that of skiers. In cycling, downhill races on ski hills have multiplied. Bungee jumping, white-water rafting, and heli-skiing have all grown. Adventure vacations incorporating any or all of these activities have increased in popularity. In fact, one of the fastest growing categories for the Backroads Travel Company is extreme vacations where clients pay to challenge and exhaust themselves physically. According to Fortune magazine this number has increased by 44 per cent since 1997. In one such tour, extreme vacationers will undertake races combining biking, hiking, rafting, and climbing over a 90-mile course. Only 14 out of 62 starters finished the race. One man was pulled off the course with hypothermia and one woman quit after multiple end-over-end bike crashes.

### **Discussion**

To what extent is the wish for an ultimate experience a normal part of contemporary society? To what extent do extreme sports fulfill this kind of need in our society? What is the responsibility or role of the consumer of such spectacles?

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## Hard-Wired Or Learned Behaviour?

### Extreme Sports: Tempting Fate?

A recurring debate in the fields of law and psychology is the nature or nurture question: whether criminals are born bad or whether they learn anti-social attitudes and behaviour. The parallel question for extreme sports is whether or not some people are genetically predisposed to reckless behaviour. Do certain personality types naturally seek out risks more than others or do they learn to like the reactions of their bodies to danger? Is the rush of extreme sports a physiological, instinctive, or even addictive response? Sporting activity and the human body are interrelated and integrated. The mind and the body also function as a co-operative unit. Humans like to believe that their superior minds control their physical circumstances. In the case of extreme sports, what is the mind-body relationship? With these ideas in mind, examine the information below.

Humans are subject to a host of hormones and chemicals that alter our reactions. If we are startled, our hearts pound in anticipation of an imminent challenge or threat. This is nature's way of preparing us to deal with the uncertain outcome of the anticipated situation. Our accelerated heart rate rushes blood to our extremities, oxygenating muscles and other tissues, in case we need to flee. Our senses are sharpened, our minds are alert. One hormone that contributes to this is adrenaline. If we are attacked by a dangerous animal, for example, adrenaline is released into our bloodstream to give us the ability to get away from the threat. Once we have outdistanced the threat, adrenaline

is no longer released. While it is in the bloodstream, the person feels stronger, more confident, and in a continuing state of physical and mental excitement. Extreme sports can repeatedly create the rush of adrenalin until it becomes a need in itself, with the chase secondary. Therefore, for some individuals, the sensation of a very real threat posed by performing at one's limits, at the edge of control, can have an intoxicating effect and a self-perpetuating need for an adrenalin high.

Another group of hormones naturally produced by the body are endorphins. These hormones are natural pain killers released when the body is subject to stress or injury. Normal activities rarely cause the release of endorphins, but athletes can push themselves to the level where they are released. The experience is pleasurable and euphoric. Athletes describe it as a high during which they have an all-encompassing feeling of well-being. Endorphins are related chemically to morphine, which produces the same effect. While a crowded ski hill is unlikely to produce the effect, skiing a backwoods trail of virgin powder might do so.

While everyone experiences changes in adrenalin, endorphins, or other hormones, only some individuals seem to want to experience them more often. Why are some people happy to lie on the beach with a book while others need to spend the afternoon on a wakeboard, on a jet ski, or parasailing? It may be that some individuals become addicted to the hormones. Once they have felt the rush, they need to have it on a regular basis. Of course, repetition of an activity reduces the brain's perception of it as dangerous, creating a corresponding reduction in the release of hormones. The individual may need therefore to go to even greater extremes to create the rush. In essence, the rational part of the brain gives way to more instinctive responses. However, some individuals may not have had a choice. Another pleasure-producing chemical called dopamine is produced by the body when something enjoyable is experienced. The problem is that some people's brains may not react to the dopamine in the bloodstream as efficiently as others. This may be why two people participating in the same activity may not derive the same level of pleasurable sensations. To achieve an acceptable level of pleasure, one person may have to increase the levels of dopamine by engaging in an activity harder, higher, or faster. No matter what activity he or she engages in, the individual may be hardwired in such way that he or she is compelled to push the activity to an extreme in order to truly enjoy it.

### **Follow-up Discussion**

1. In general terms, how do we experience pleasure and/or pain

in contemporary society? Are there social conditions that motivate people to search out and experience one or the other? How does popular culture, as depicted in media such as advertising, rock videos, and blockbuster films, suggest or even promote extreme pleasure-seeking or validate painful experiences?

2. As is the case with so many human activities, why is it important to understand, appreciate, and develop the mind-body relationship? How can we determine when an individual has a healthy mind-body relationship? How does a healthy integration of the two become unhealthy or dangerous?

3. A standard rule throughout human history that societies have applied in order to maintain stability on an individual or a social level is that of moderation in all things. In terms of the human body, the human mind, or human society, why is this an effective principle? Why is the principle problematic when it comes to sports?

4. Research the endocrine system of the human organism and the field of endocrinology itself. Prepare a short presentation in which you summarize the mind-body relationship from a medical perspective.

5. Create a collage of print advertisements in which you contrast ads that encourage a rational and reasonable use of the human body with ads that promote an extreme use of the body. Present your collage to the class and deconstruct the ads you have chosen, explaining carefully the techniques used by the advertisers to influence the consumer, to create the desired effect.

6. To what extent might television news inadvertently excite the viewer? How should disturbing events in the news be presented in order to be informative but not exploitative? What was your overall reaction to the visual images in this News in Review report?

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# News in Review

December 1999

## Extreme Spectators

### Extreme Sports: Tempting Fate?

The Roman emperors used to stage massive sporting events to keep the population content. Their policy of bread and circuses achieved its goal of distracting the masses but became bloodier and more bizarre as the Roman citizenry tired of the traditional events. Gladiators who in earlier times were admired for good fighting technique were forced to fight to the death. Fights between animals, such as a bear and a tiger, were commonplace as were matches between Christians and lions, under Emperor Nero. Each excess had to be surpassed at the following festival.

A similar pattern may exist today with the advent of the so-called 500-channel television universe. Up until the 1980s, there were essentially only three television networks in Canada and the U.S. respectively, and they aired all the programs North Americans could view. For many years, the networks were centrally controlled and were conservative or even heavy-handed in introducing innovative programming; they could afford to be since competition was limited. Today, however, there are new networks, satellite dishes, and a multitude of specialty channels. These channels can offer viewers all-sports or all-music or all-drama all the time. Unfortunately, the high number of choices has divided the audience into smaller groups. Rather than dividing the television audience into three groups in Canada as in decades past, the audience may be divided into 30 groups. To fight for that all-important market share, television program producers must create increasingly sensational shows to attract

increasingly distracted viewers.

Sports, and especially extreme sports, appear to be the answer for some producers and television programmers. In *Get With The Programming* in the July 1999 issue of *Sport* magazine, columnist Armen Keteyian pointed out that while network ratings are sliding, sports ratings have held up. The networks bid heavily to attain or retain premier events like Wimbledon, the NFL, or the World Series because they have strong followings and will feed viewers into non-sporting programs. Billionaire media mogul Rupert Murdoch spent \$1.5-billion to buy NFL broadcast rights. He stated that We intend to use sports as a battering ram and lead offering in all our pay-television operations.

For the specialty channels, the independent stations, and even those networks that were unsuccessful in their bids for the premier sports, extreme sports events fill a void. Relatively cheap to produce, these events draw a good-sized audience and, more importantly for producers, lucrative advertising dollars. The target audience for sporting events is the 18- to 34-year-old male. Whereas an NFL football game may garner a 10.3 television rating for CBS, NBC's Gravity Games scored a 2.2 rating at a fraction of the cost.

The 200 000 spectators attending the September Gravity Games festival in Providence, Rhode Island, were proof to networks and specialty channels that similar television programming attracts large numbers of viewers.

### **Discussion**

1. What extreme sports programs can you name? Jot down a few examples and then list reasons explaining why you like or dislike viewing such programs. Compare your reasons with those of others in your group.

2. Extreme athletes participate in their sports for the thrills or the physical challenges. What do spectators get out of the events? Are extreme sport viewers like audiences in ancient Roman forums?

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# News in Review

December 1999

## Risk Marketing

### Extreme Sports: Tempting Fate?

Companies have taken notice of the popularity of the extreme sports among young people, especially teenaged boys. What used to be called underground or alternative has clearly moved into the mainstream. Marketing companies are moving these sports in this direction because a large amount of disposable income available to teenagers and 20-somethings is up for grabs. In the marketing magazine *Advertising Age*, writer Laura Petrecca notes just how large this is.

Teen boys pack spending power estimated at \$650-billion a year, and there are hundreds of marketers that each want their share. Sponsorship revenue for extreme sports reached \$135-million last year, up from \$24-million in 1993, according to IEG Sponsorship Report. Add in player endorsements deals . . . and the number soars even higher.

The money is everywhere. Extreme athletes are scooping up endorsements for products ranging from potato chips to sneakers to deodorant. Providence, Rhode Island, the site of the annual Gravity Games festival, estimates it will make \$100-million over the next three years. Sponsors are now paying up to \$22-million to NBC for its Gravity Games and to ESPN for its X-Games. This may only be the beginning. According to the marketer for the Gravity Games, Gravity videogames, CDs, and theme parks are likely offshoots of the festivals. The Pepsi-Cola company, marketer of Mountain Dew, put the Games logo on the

sides of 400 million pop bottles.

Extreme sports celebrate individualism, and marketers recognize that 18- to 34-year-olds are also responsible for the shifts away from mainstream products. For example, the popular micro-breweries have forced the big beer producers to manufacture products that resemble the small-market products. Another example is the fast-food chains that added numerous food choices after offering only burgers and fries for decades.

Extreme sports participants and fans see themselves as rebels and outlaws. Their lives both in and out of the sports activities are extreme. As they see it, the markets will need to adjust to them, rather than the other way around. Judging by the money flowing toward the extreme market, it seems to be happening.

One example of this adjustment is the emergence of a new format of blended entertainment. The Warped Tour is an extravaganza of music, technology, and gravity sports demonstrations, often all occurring simultaneously. Audiences can listen to a variety of punk, ska, and rap artists perform on one stage while elite cyclists perform twists and jumps on an adjacent stage. The tour has been sponsored by the shoe company Vans, which wants to sell its shoes to the type of consumer attending these shows. The fans have been satisfied so far because the format combines their interests into an accessible package. The Warped Tour does not have the stigma of other alternative shows like Woodstock or Lollapalooza, which are designed solely as money-making ventures with entertainment or performance being secondary.

### **Discussion**

1. The growing popularity of extreme sports may be a double-edged sword. While sponsorship money and an increased television audience will financially reward athletes and popularize the sports, it may make extreme a cliché. Does the introduction of mass marketing of an extreme sport inevitably doom it to becoming simply a fad?
  
2. List examples of how money has altered sports or sporting events. Were these changes for the better or worse?

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# News in Review

December 1999

## The Role Of The Media

### Extreme Sports: Tempting Fate?

When trying to explain the surge in popularity of extreme sports, the impact of role models portrayed in the media has to be considered. Is this a case of monkey see, monkey do? TNN's Extreme Championship Wrestling, ESPN's X-Games, and NBC's Gravity Games are all big hits, and all are jam-packed with high-energy ads. The extreme programming and advertisements spill over into other time slots so that viewers, listeners, and readers are never far away from an extreme film clip, sound bite, or picture. The volume of extreme sporting and non-sporting programming must be contributing somewhat to the increased participation in adventure sports. Yankelovich pollsters (a firm that tracks opinions and does trend research) asked Americans if they like to imagine myself doing something I know I wouldn't dare to do. In 1995, 45 per cent agreed. By 1998, the figure was up to 53 per cent. An acceptance of extremeness is slowly growing in North American society. It may be planning family trips to a rock-climbing facility or a white-water rafting vacation. Middle-of-the-road people are more willing to count white-knuckle activities as options for their leisure activities than they used to be.

#### **Extreme Armchair Athletes**

The same poll, however, noted that the number of those who actually do things they consider dangerous has only edged up from 23 percent to 25 percent over the same period. The extreme culture may not imply taking the risks yourself but

enjoying watching others take them. The mainstream may satisfy its extreme appetite by buying a four-wheel drive vehicle, to be driven on city streets, or some radical clothing. Its contribution to extreme sports is providing an audience for media productions watching or buying extreme television programs, videos, and magazines in increasing numbers. The pressure is on then for the media to supply images of extreme activities to maintain this audience's attention. Since viewers get used to the standard tricks of an extreme sport, magazines and television programs will push for fresher (more dangerous) performances.

One example reported in *When Sports Become Too Extreme* in the *Christian Science Monitor* (March 24, 1998), was that of a \$50 000 prize posted by the K2 surf-equipment company for anyone who could ride the biggest wave and get it on film. On the judging panel of the K2 contest were editors from both of the major surfing magazines. When Oahu's Quicksilver Invitational surfing competition was cancelled because the 40-foot waves were too big, one lower-level surfer had to be physically restrained from trying to set out to try his luck. The surfer argued that the guards were interfering with his constitutional right to make money. In a like fashion, inexperienced individuals try stunts that are beyond their level or put themselves into dangerous situations unaware of all the risks. Even top-level athletes can be surprised by uncontrollable natural conditions such as avalanches for skiers or shifting winds for parachutists. Dan Burnett, a mission co-ordinator for a Search and Rescue Group in Colorado, has had to recover the bodies of 28 people killed in accidents related to people skiing in restricted areas. He notes: For corporate sponsors to push for irresponsibility for the glitz of it is crazy.

### **Analysis**

In your opinion, to what extent are media of various kinds responsible for the proliferation of extreme sports? Should they reduce the amount of extreme imagery they depict? How influential are the media in determining how people behave?

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# News in Review

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## Discussion, Research, and Essay Questions

### Extreme Sports: Tempting Fate?

1. Conduct a media analysis of extreme sports on television. First, scan the television guide listings to determine the most popular time slots for these programs. Second, select a program and create an organizer based on the following criteria: number of dangerous acts portrayed, number of violent acts shown, behaviour of the participants, behaviour of the spectators, how the show was enhanced (for example: camera angles, slow-motion replays, music), and the number and types of sponsors shown either during the program or during ads shown during commercial breaks.

2. Research and study popular non-athletic games such as Monopoly or chess. What is the nature of the game? How does the competitive element of the game work? What is at stake? How do you win? Is the game primarily one that rewards the vanquishing of an opponent only or one that uses competition to develop the abilities of all the players? After conducting your research, write a short essay on the nature of games people play.

3. Michael Biker Sherlock took two gold medals and two silver medals in downhill skateboarding and street lugging at the Gravity Games in Providence, Rhode Island, and received \$35 500 in prize money. About the increasing amounts of money for sponsorships and prizes Sherlock was quoted as saying, As long as you don't change the way you are or the way you reflect

yourself for your sponsors, then you're not a sellout. You have to stay true to yourself. How difficult might it be for a competitor like Sherlock not to become conventional when faced with sponsors' demands and lifestyle changes that wealth brings? Write a response to this question in the form of a letter or an editorial that will be published in a specialty sport magazine.

4. Numerous references were made in this News in Review program and articles to the addictive nature of risk-taking activities. Another extreme activity that has grown in popularity is taking the drug Ecstasy. A Toronto Star article on Ecstasy reported that a survey of drug-use by Ontario students conducted in November 1999 and released by the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health revealed an eightfold increase in Ecstasy use among high-schoolers since 1993. It found that the drug has been used by 4.8 per cent of Ontario students from grades seven to OAC. While the scientific jury is still out on the physical effects of Ecstasy, the psychological effects are clear. While not physically addictive, Ecstasy, like extreme sports, can produce sensations that make average pleasure seem mundane. The article suggests that Ecstasy users will enjoy little in their lives apart from the artificial high. One drug counsellor noted: It shifts the paradigm of what happiness is. So there's a lot of really jaded 18-year-olds out there who have experienced the mountaintop they've been to Everest on Ecstasy so what the hell is a new boyfriend or girlfriend or an A on that English paper? Like they care. Research and write a report on the physical and psychological effects of Ecstasy.

5. Critics of extreme activities say that society ends up paying for the recklessness of daredevils through expensive search and rescue operations. Should society have to pay for rescues or even medical bills for individuals who voluntarily put themselves at abnormal risk? Write a short speech outlining your point of view on this issue.

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