

## SPORTS AND AMERICAN VALUES

- 1 Most social scientists believe that the sports that are organized by a society generally reflect the basic values of that society and attempt to strengthen them in the minds and emotions of its people. Therefore, organized sports may have a more serious social purpose than spontaneous, unorganized play by individuals. This is certainly true in the United States, where the three most popular organized sports are American football,\* basketball, and baseball, with soccer gaining in popularity.
- 2 Traditionally, Americans have seen organized sports as an example of equality of opportunity in action. In sports, people of different races and economic backgrounds get an equal chance to excel. For this reason, notes sociologist Harry Edwards, Americans have viewed organized sports as “a laboratory in which young men, regardless of social class, can learn the advantages and rewards of a competitive system.” Although Edwards specifically mentions young men, young women also compete in organized sports without regard to their race or economic background. The majority of American football and basketball players, both college and professional, are African-American, and about one-third of professional baseball players are Hispanics or Latinos. Women’s sports have grown in popularity in the United States, and they now have more funding and stronger support at the college level than in the past. The Olympics provide evidence of the increased interest in women’s organized sports. American women have won gold medals for several team sports—softball, basketball, and soccer.
- 3 The American ideal of competition is also at the very heart of organized sports in the United States. Many Americans believe that learning how to win in sports helps develop the habits necessary to compete successfully in later life. This training, in turn, strengthens American society as a whole. “It is commonly held,” says one sports writer, “that the competitive ethic taught in sports must be learned and ingrained<sup>1</sup> in youth for the future success of American business and military efforts.” In fact, about two-thirds of American boys play organized sports outside of school, and more than half of the girls do, too.
- 4 Amateur athletics, associated with schools and colleges, are valued for teaching young people traditional American values. The competitive ethic in organized sports contains elements of hard work and physical courage. Hard work is often called “hustle,” “persistence,” or “never quitting” in the sports world, while physical courage is referred to as “being tough” or “having guts.” Slogans are sometimes used to drive home the competitive virtues for the young participants:

*Hustle—you can’t survive without it.*  
*A quitter never wins; a winner never quits.*  
*It’s easy to be ordinary, but it takes guts to excel.*
- 5 In the process of serving as an inspiration for traditional basic American values, organized sports may be considered as part of “the national religion,” a mixture of patriotism and national pride on the one hand, with religious ideas and symbols on the other (see Chapter 3). Billy Graham, a famous American Protestant religious leader, once observed: “The Bible says

\*Generally, in the United States, when the word “football” is used, it refers to the American game of football. What is known as football in other countries is called “soccer” in the United States.

<sup>1</sup>ingrained: attitudes or behavior that are firmly established and therefore difficult to change

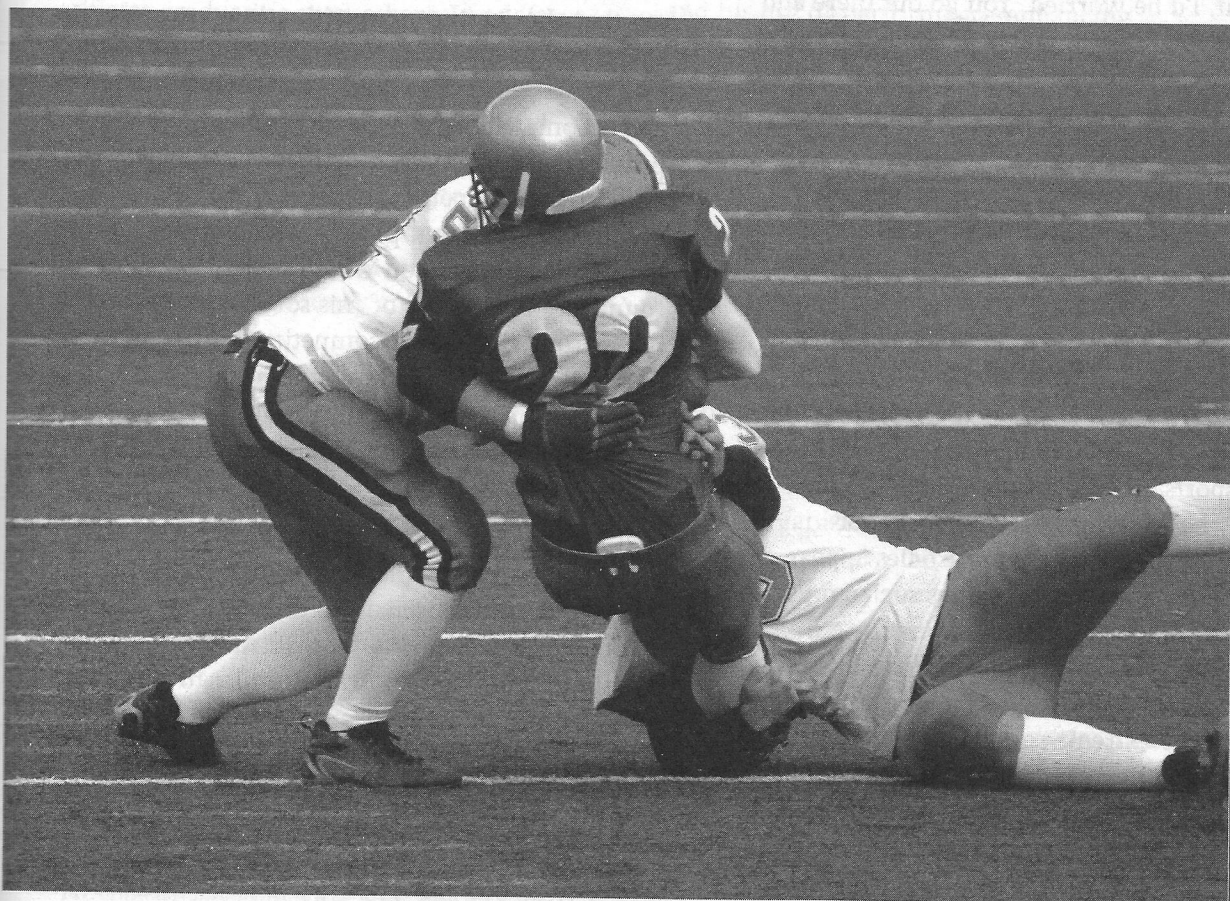
leisure and lying around are morally dangerous . . . sports keep us busy. . . . There are probably more really committed Christians in sports, both collegiate and professional, than in any other occupation in America.” On the other hand, in recent years there have been a number of examples of professional sports stars behaving very badly, and there have been significant scandals in college sports as well.

### Competition Carried to an Extreme?

6 Although sports in the United States are glorified by many, there are others who are especially critical of the corrupting power of sports when certain things are carried to excess. An excessive desire to win in sports, for example, can weaken rather than strengthen traditional American values.

7 Critics have pointed out that there is a long tradition of coaches and players who have done just this. Vince Lombardi, a famous professional football coach, was often criticized for stating that winning is the “only thing” that matters in sports. Woody Hayes, another famous football coach, once said: “Anyone who tells me, ‘Don’t worry that you lost; you played a good game anyway,’ I just hate.” Critics believe that such statements by coaches weaken the idea that other things, such as fair play, following the rules, and behaving with dignity when one is defeated, are also important. Unfortunately, many coaches still share the “winning is the only thing” philosophy.

8 There is, however, also a tradition of honorable defeat in American sports. Sociologist Harry Edwards, for example, has pointed out:



American football is a rough sport that sometimes causes injuries.

The all-important significance of winning is known, but likewise, there is the consoling<sup>2</sup> "reward" of the "honorable defeat." Indeed, the "sweetness" of winning is derived . . . from the knowledge of having defeated a courageous opponent who performed honorably.

- 9 When the idea of winning in sports is carried to excess, however, honorable competition can turn into disorder and violence. In one baseball game, the players of two professional teams became so angry at each other that the game turned into a large-scale fight between the two teams. The coach of one of the teams was happy about the fight because, in the games that followed, his team consistently won. He thought that the fight had helped to bring the men on his team closer together. Similarly, a professional football coach stated, "If we didn't go out there and fight, I'd be worried. You go out there and protect your teammates. The guys who sit on the bench, they're the losers." Both coaches seemed to share the view that if occasional fights with opposing teams helped to increase the winning spirit of their players, so much the better. Hockey coaches would probably agree. Professional hockey teams are notorious<sup>3</sup> for the fights among players during games. Some hockey fans seem to expect this fighting as part of the entertainment.
- 10 There are some who criticize this violence in sports, particularly in football, which may be America's favorite spectator sport. From time to time articles appear in newspapers or magazines such as *Sports Illustrated*, one of the nation's leading sports magazines, criticizing the number of injuries that have resulted from the extreme roughness of the game, increased by a burning desire to defeat one's opponent. In recent years, there

has been a lot of attention paid to head injuries—brain concussions that cause problems as athletes age. There is evidence that these injuries cause brain damage that can be severe, even resulting in dementia.<sup>4</sup> People are particularly concerned about the injuries that high school players get in football games. The pressure to "hit hard" and win high school games is intense. In some parts of the country, especially in the South, boys start playing tackle football in elementary school, bringing the risks of competitive pressure to nine- and ten-year-olds. Concussions are also a problem for soccer players, particularly for girls (when "heading") because their necks are not as strong as boys.

- 11 Most Americans would probably say that competition in organized sports does more to strengthen the national character than to corrupt it. They would probably say that eliminating competition in sports and in society as a whole would lead to laziness rather than hard work and accomplishment. One high school principal, for example, described the criticism of competitive sports as "the revolutionaries' attempt to break down the basic foundations upon which society is founded." Comments of this sort illustrate how strong the idea of competition is in the United States, and how important organized sports are as a means of maintaining this value in the larger society.
- 12 Another criticism of professional sports is that the players and the team owners get too much money, while fans have to pay more and more for tickets to the games. Basketball, baseball, and football stars get multi-million-dollar contracts similar to rock singers and movie stars. Some have asked whether these players are really athletes or entertainers. Furthermore,

<sup>2</sup> *consoling*: making someone feel better when he or she is feeling sad or disappointed

<sup>3</sup> *notorious*: famous or well-known for something bad

<sup>4</sup> *dementia*: loss of the ability to think normally

players are often traded to other teams, or choose to go as free agents, and a whole team may move to another city because of money. In the past, teams and most players stayed in one city and bonded with the fans. Now professional sports are more about money and less about team loyalty.

- 13 College football and basketball programs are also affected by big money. The teams of large universities generate millions of dollars, and there is enormous pressure on these sports programs to recruit top athletes and have winning seasons. The pressure is on the young athletes as well. There are some high school students who would not be able to afford college if they did not get a sports scholarship. Once they are in college, it is often difficult to balance the demands of daily sports practice and the season game schedule with the need to study. Some colleges have a better rate of athletes graduating than others. In addition to the danger of failing academically, there is another reason why some athletes do not finish college. The very best football and basketball players are often recruited by professional teams while they are still in school. Some students may choose to give up studying for a college degree for the chance to earn big money and early success as a pro.

- 14 Another problem facing organized sports is the use of performance-enhancing drugs.<sup>5</sup> With the pressure to win so strong, a number of athletes have turned to these drugs. Although the use of most performance-enhancing drugs is illegal, it has now spread from professional sports down to universities and even high schools and middle schools. The use of these drugs puts the health of the athletes in danger, and it is ethically wrong. It goes against the American values of equality of opportunity and fair competition. But

by 2004, the problem had become so significant that President George W. Bush mentioned it in his State of the Union address:

*Athletics play such an important role in our society, but, unfortunately, some in professional sports are not setting much of an example. The use of performance-enhancing drugs like steroids in baseball, football, and other sports is dangerous, and it sends the wrong message—that there are shortcuts to accomplishment, and that performance is more important than character.*

The use of these drugs has called into question the achievements of some baseball players and their records for homeruns, etc., and several players have been denied admission to the Baseball Hall of Fame.

- 15 The case of cyclist Lance Armstrong and his use of performance-enhancing drugs has received intense international attention. Armstrong was widely respected in the United States (although many overseas were suspicious) for his seven Tour de France wins and his charity work fighting cancer. The U.S. Post Office was even an official sponsor of his cycling races. It was a shock to many Americans when the evidence of his drug use was revealed, and he was stripped of his cycling victories.

## Recreational Activities

- 16 Unlike organized sports, what is generally called recreation in the United States is not expected to encourage competition. For this reason, recreation is much more spontaneous and serves the individual's needs away from the competitive world of work. Nevertheless, much can be learned about the values of Americans from an examination of the kinds of recreation in which they engage. Many recreational

<sup>5</sup> performance-enhancing drugs: drugs such as steroids that some athletes use illegally to improve their strength or endurance

activities are organized at the local level and are paid for (in part) by local governments. Local Parks and Recreation organizations often offer a wide range of activities to community members. There is usually a Parks and Recreation department that operates a recreation center that has fitness equipment and offers classes, and it maintains outdoor facilities. These may include public parks, playgrounds, soccer and baseball fields, basketball and tennis courts, golf courses, walking and bike trails, and swimming pools. These facilities are open to all at little or no cost. During good weather, many communities sponsor outdoor activities and festivals that feature events such as food tasting, outdoor concerts, county fairs, contests, and races. Often, these are attended by whole families and groups of friends.

17 Some Americans prefer recreation that requires a high level of physical activity. This is true of the most popular adult recreational sports: jogging or running, tennis, and skiing. It would seem that these Americans carry over their belief in hard work into their world of play and recreation. The expression “We like to work hard and play hard” is an example of this philosophy.

18 Physical fitness is a way of life for these Americans. Some of them regularly work out at community gyms or private sports clubs—lifting weights, swimming, playing squash or racquetball; participating in aerobic exercise classes; or using exercise bikes, treadmills, rowing machines, or stair-steppers. Some choose to do long-distance running and may

participate in a marathon race. In addition to the famous Boston and New York marathons, there are races in many other cities and even in small towns, drawing from several hundred to thousands of participants. Few of the runners expect to win—most just want to finish the race, and over a half a million people do finish a marathon each year. The number of people participating in marathon races has gone down dramatically, but the number finishing them has gone up.

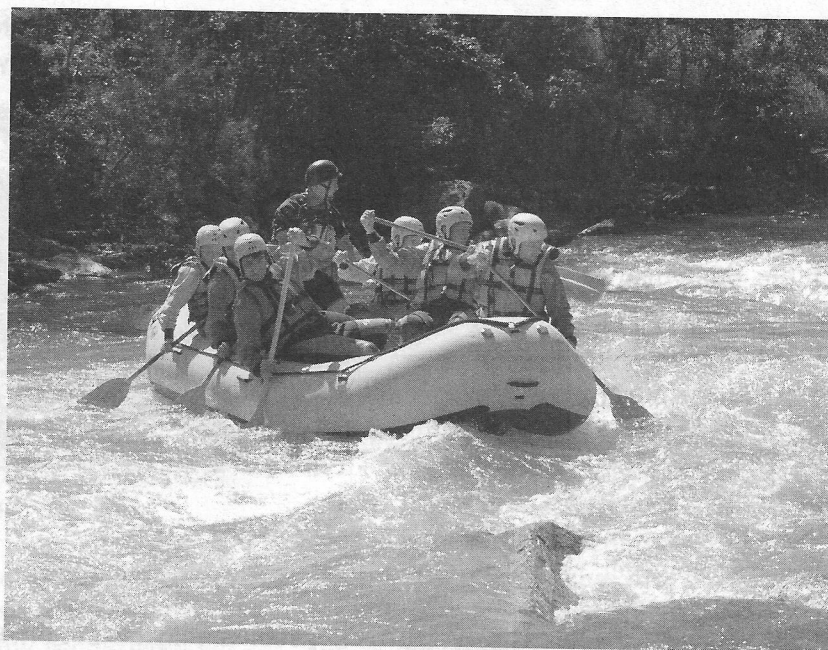
19 Most races are open to all, young and old alike, even those in wheelchairs, and many encourage walkers as well as runners. Charity races are also very popular. Participants ask people to sponsor them by contributing to the charity if they finish the race. The distances vary from 5K to 10K to full marathons and often include social events. The Race for the Cure to raise money for breast cancer research draws women who are breast cancer survivors and their friends and family, and those who participate to honor a loved one who has (or had) the disease.

20 The interest that Americans have in self-improvement, traceable in large measure to the nation’s Protestant heritage (see



Serious runners train hard for their races.

Chapter 3), is also carried over into the recreation habits of some people. It is evident in the joggers who are determined to improve the distance they can run, or the people who spend their vacation time learning a new sport such as sailing or scuba diving. The self-improvement motive, however, can also be seen in many other popular forms of recreation that involve little or no physical activity.



Many Americans enjoy rock climbing, white-water rafting, and motorcycling.

- 21 Interest and participation in cultural activities, which improve people's minds or skills, are also popular. Millions of Americans go to symphony concerts, attend live theater performances, visit museums, hear lectures, and participate in artistic activities such as painting, performing music, or dancing. Many Americans also enjoy hobbies such as weaving, needlework, candle making, wood carving, quilting, and other handicrafts.<sup>6</sup> Community education and recreation programs offer a wide range of classes for those interested in anything from using computers to gourmet cooking, learning a foreign language, writing, art, self-defense, yoga, and bird-watching.
- 22 The recreational interests of Americans also show a continuing respect for the self-reliance, and, sometimes, the adventure and danger of frontier life. While some choose safe pastimes such as handicrafts, gardening, or DIY (Do It Yourself) projects like building bookcases in their den, others are ready to leave

home and take some risks. Adventure travel has grown to be a multi-billion-dollar business. Millions of Americans have bought mountain bikes to explore the wilderness on their own. Many others are choosing to go white-water rafting, mountain climbing, rock climbing, skydiving, helicopter skiing, and bungee jumping. U.S. park officials complain about the number of people who take life-threatening risks in national parks and have to be rescued. "It is as if they are looking for hardship," one park official stated. "They seem to enjoy the danger and the physical challenge."

- 23 Not all Americans want to "rough it" while they are on their adventure holidays, however. There are a number of travelers who want "soft adventure." Judi Wineland, who operates Overseas Adventure Travel, says, "Frankly, it's amazing to us to see baby boomers seeking creature comforts." On her safari trips to Africa, she has to provide hot showers, real beds, and night tables. The Americans' love of comfort, mentioned in Chapter 5, seems

<sup>6</sup>handicrafts: skills needing careful use of your hands, such as sewing or making baskets

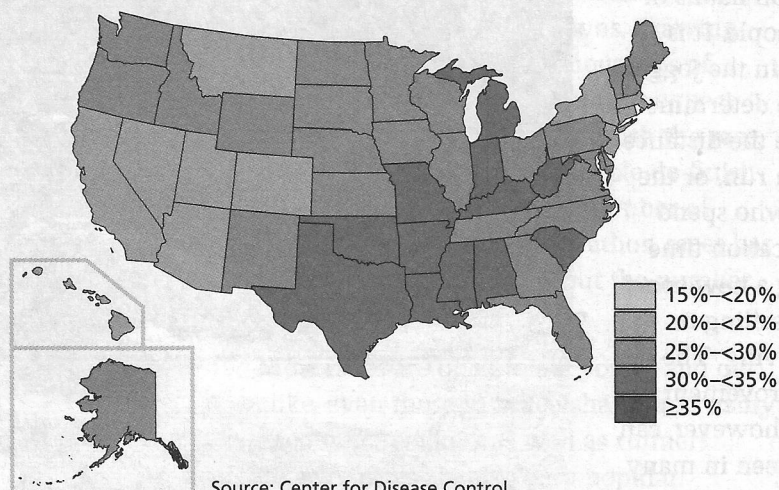
to be competing with their desire to feel self-reliant and adventurous. Others simply enjoy being outdoors in the United States fishing, birding, or observing other wildlife. More than 90 million Americans a year participate in these activities.

## Health and Fitness

24 In spite of all these opportunities to be physically active, however, many Americans are not physically fit, or even try to be. The overall population is becoming more overweight, due to poor eating habits and a sedentary<sup>7</sup> lifestyle. Government studies estimate that fewer than half of Americans exercise in their leisure time. Experts say that it is not because Americans “don’t know what’s good for them”—they just don’t do it. By mid-2000, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) sounded the alarm—almost two-thirds of Americans were overweight, and more than one in five were obese. The CDC reported that obesity had become a national epidemic. After smoking, obesity was the number two preventable cause of death in the United States. The government began a campaign to urge people to lose weight and get more exercise. But by 2011, the numbers were worse: More than one-third of American adults were obese. Incidentally, the obesity rate is higher in some states than others. The map above shows the percent of obese people in each state.

25 It’s not that Americans lack information on eating well. Newspapers and magazines are full of advice on nutrition, and diet books are best-sellers. Indeed, part of the

### PREVALENCE OF SELF-REPORTED OBESITY AMONG U.S. ADULTS BEHAVIORAL RISK FACTOR SURVEILLANCE SYSTEM, 2011



Source: Center for Disease Control.

problem may be that there is too much information in the media, and much of it is contradictory. For thirty years, the government encouraged people to eat a diet high in carbohydrates and low in fat to avoid health risks such as heart disease and certain types of cancer. Many Americans ate low-fat, high-carbohydrate foods and gained weight. Then in the early 2000s, high-protein, low-carbohydrate diets became popular.

26 Many Americans have tried a number of diets, searching for the magic one right for them. Some overweight people say the diet advice is so confusing that they have just given up and eat whatever they want. Since 1994, the government has required uniform labeling so that consumers can compare the calories, fat, and carbohydrates in the food they buy. More than half of Americans say they pay attention to the nutritional content of the food they eat, but they also say they eat what they really want when they feel like it. For example, they may have switched to skim milk but still buy fancy, fat-rich ice cream. As one American put it, “Let’s face it—if you’re having chips and dip as a snack, fat-free potato chips and fat-free

<sup>7</sup>sedentary: doing or requiring much sitting

sour cream just don't taste as good as the real thing."



Nutrition label from a small bag of chips

when they eat so much restaurant and packaged food. It takes time to prepare fresh vegetables and fish; stopping at a fast-food chain for fried chicken on the way home from work is a much faster alternative. Often, American families eat "on the run" instead of sitting down at the table together.

27 Experts say that it is a combination of social, cultural, and psychological factors that determine how people eat. A *Newsweek* article on America's weight problems referred to "the culture of overindulgence"<sup>8</sup> seemingly ingrained in American life. "The land of plenty seems destined to include plenty of pounds as well," they concluded. Part of the problem is that Americans eat larger portions<sup>9</sup> and often go back for second helpings, in contrast to how much people eat in many other countries.

28 Another factor is Americans' love of fast food. Although the fast-food industry is offering salads on its menus, most Americans still prefer "junk food." They consume huge quantities of pizza, hamburgers, French fries, and soft drinks at restaurants, not only because they like them, but also because these foods are often the cheapest items on the menu. Another significant factor is Americans' busy lifestyle. Since so many women are working, families are eating a lot of fast food, frozen dinners, and restaurant takeout. Some experts believe that Americans have really lost control of their eating; it is not possible to limit calories

29 First Lady Michelle Obama started a campaign to fight childhood obesity by stressing children's health and fitness. Her program is called "Let's Move," and it focuses on better nutrition as well as increased physical activity. She advocated for federal legislation requiring schools to offer healthier lunches, and she is encouraging kids to exercise more. At the White House, she planted a garden with the help of kids from D.C. inner city schools and called attention to the fact that many poor inner city neighborhoods do not have grocery stores that sell fresh fruits and vegetables. Many have only small neighborhood stores that sell chips and sodas and other "junk food" that is high in calories and low in nutritional value. Often, both children and adults who live in poverty have higher rates of obesity than the general population.

30 There is evidence of some improvement in the rates of childhood obesity. Mississippi is among the most obese states in the nation, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDCP), but its rate of childhood obesity has dropped in recent years. The state made important changes in the time for exercise and the type of food served in the public schools:

*Mississippi officials attribute the drop to a local focus on the issue, a 2007 law that mandated more physical education and a decision by the state school board to put more fruits, vegetables, and whole grains on menus.*

<sup>8</sup>overindulgence: the habit of eating or drinking too much

<sup>9</sup>portions: the amount of food for one person, especially when served in a restaurant



31 Not everyone thinks that having the government mandate exercise programs or school lunch menus is a good idea, but it does seem to be helping. The problem of childhood obesity is truly alarming: Nearly one in three children in the United States is overweight or obese. The numbers are even higher in the African-American and Hispanic communities, where nearly 40 percent of the children are overweight or obese.



First Lady Michelle Obama has created a program to fight childhood obesity.

## The Impact of Television, Video Games, and the Internet

32 Ironically, as Americans have gotten heavier as a population, the image of a beautiful woman has gotten much slimmer. Marilyn Monroe, a movie star of the 1950s and 1960s, would be overweight by today's media standards. Television shows, movies, and TV commercials feature actresses who are very slender.<sup>10</sup> Beer and soft drink commercials, for example, often feature very thin girls in bikinis. As a result, many teenage girls have become insecure about their bodies and so obsessed<sup>11</sup> with losing weight that some develop eating disorders such as anorexia or bulimia.

<sup>10</sup> *slender: thin, graceful, and attractive*

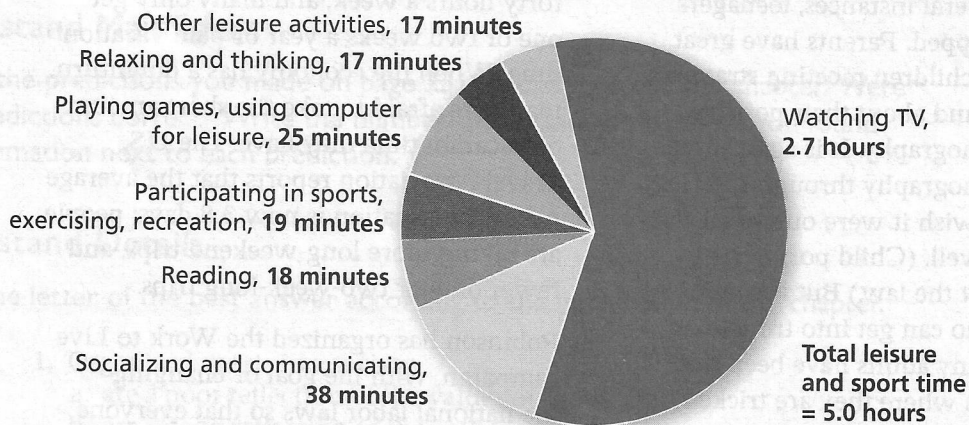
<sup>11</sup> *obsessed: thinking about a person or a thing all the time and being unable to think of anything else*

\* *Constantly clicking the remote control to change from channel to channel. (Note also the term "surf the web" that means to go from site to site, and surfing refers to the sport of riding the waves on a special board.)*

33 Another irony is that although television seems to promote images of slender, physically fit people, the more people watch TV, the less likely they are to exercise. Television has a strong effect on the activity level of many Americans. Some people spend much of their free time lying on the couch watching TV, channel surfing,\* and eating junk food. They are called "couch potatoes," because they are nothing but "eyes." (The small marks on potatoes are called *eyes*.) Couch potatoes would rather watch a baseball game on TV than go play softball in the park with friends, or even go to a movie. Cable and satellite TV bring hundreds of stations into American homes, so there is an almost limitless choice of programs. Americans spend more of their leisure watching TV than doing any other activity.

34 Another challenge is the effect of all this technology on children. Some worry that American children and young people are spending too much time watching television, using the Internet, and playing video games. One effect is that channel surfing and surfing on the web shorten a child's attention span. Also, research shows that multitasking is really switching rapidly from one task to another, and it is not really doing several tasks at the same minute. There is evidence that the brains of children and young people are being rewired by these activities. There is an effect on both their minds and their bodies. Clearly, they are not getting enough exercise. The government estimates that eight to 18-year-olds spend an average of 7.5 hours a day using entertainment media, including TV, computers, video games, cell phones, and movies. Only one-third of high school students get the recommended levels of physical activity.

## LEISURE TIME ON AN AVERAGE DAY



Note: Data include all persons age 15 and over. Data include all days of the week and are annual averages for 2010.  
Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, American Time Use Survey.

35 Others worry more about the quality of what children are watching on TV, the content of video games, and what they are seeing on the Internet. Many worry about the amount of sex and violence that children are exposed to as they watch TV, play games, and explore the Internet. Americans face a constant dilemma<sup>12</sup>—how to balance the right to free speech with the need to protect children and maintain standards of decency.<sup>13</sup> Because Americans place such a high value on individual freedom, particularly freedom of speech, they have traditionally been very hesitant to censor,<sup>14</sup> or even restrict, the flow of information by any means of communication. True censorship occurs when the government sets the standards; most Americans would prefer that the entertainment industry regulate itself, and the movie industry does have a rating system for films. The Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) “assigns the age and content ratings for video games and mobile apps, enforces advertising and marketing guidelines for the video game

industry, and helps companies implement responsible online privacy practices.”



“On the Internet, nobody knows you’re a dog.”

36 On the one hand, some people believe that the federal government should regulate the Internet to protect children. There have been instances where adults have met children or teenagers over the

<sup>12</sup> *dilemma*: a situation in which you have to make a difficult choice between two or more actions

<sup>13</sup> *decency*: basic accepted behavior, especially moral and sexual behavior

<sup>14</sup> *censor*: to examine books, movies, or letters to remove anything that is offensive

Internet and have persuaded them to meet in person. In several instances, teenagers have been kidnapped. Parents have great fear about their children meeting strangers on the Internet and about their possible exposure to pornography. It is against the law to send pornography through the U.S. mail, and some wish it were outlawed on the Internet as well. (Child pornography is already against the law.) But it is not just children who can get into trouble on the Internet. Many adults have been the victims of scams where they are tricked into giving personal information that allows criminals to steal money from their bank accounts, or even their whole identity. The anonymity of the Internet is valued by many, but it also has hurt a number of people. Most alarming is the cyberbullying of some teenagers that has been so hurtful that the victims have committed suicide.

- 37 On the other hand, many Internet users believe that government regulation could threaten the growth and vitality of the Internet. Some would argue that the lack of regulation has permitted the Internet's explosive growth and the development of new technologies to deliver it. Wireless technology now allows Americans to access the Internet just about anywhere, including, ironically, many fast-food restaurants. Many people are happy that technology has made it possible for them to communicate with just about anyone anywhere. However, this 24/7 access (24 hours a day, 7 days a week) has a huge impact on leisure time and Americans' ability to relax. Joe Robinson, in his book *Work to Live: Reclaim Your Life, Health, Family, and Sanity*, states, "The line between work and home has become so blurred that the only way you can tell them apart is that one has a bed." Robinson and others are trying to get American companies to offer more vacation time. The

majority of Americans work more than forty hours a week, and many only get one or two weeks a year of paid vacation time. When the economy has a downturn, many are afraid to take the short amount of vacation time they have. The U.S. Travel Association reports that the average American vacation is now 3.8 days; people are taking more long-weekend trips, and fewer one- or two-week-long trips.

- 38 Robinson has organized the Work to Live campaign, with the goal of changing the national labor laws so that everyone would be entitled to at least three weeks of vacation per year. He says that our founding fathers Thomas Jefferson and John Adams "believed that democracy was at risk if all attention in society was focused only on making money. It's hard to be an engaged citizen, not to mention a parent or actual human, when the overwork culture abducts you from all other responsibilities in life." He argues that Americans would be even more productive if they could have a month of vacation like most Europeans do.
- 39 Vacation time renews the spirit and gives people the energy and vitality to lead productive lives. Leisure time in the United States offers something for everyone; the only complaint that most Americans have is that they do not have enough of it. Americans, like people everywhere, sometimes choose recreation that just provides rest and relaxation. Watching television, going out for dinner, and visiting friends are simply enjoyable ways to pass the time. However, as we have seen, millions of Americans seek new challenges involving new forms of effort even in their leisure time. "Their reward," states *U.S. News & World Report*, "is a renewed sense of vitality,"<sup>15</sup> a sense of a goal conquered and confidence regained in dealing with life's "ups and downs."

<sup>15</sup>vitality: great energy and cheerfulness, and the ability to continue working effectively