

# Casual Spectating in Sports Centres— a blessing or a curse

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Multi-Sport Complexes are aimed predominantly at an active participant market and are conceived, designed and built with this in mind. There are two basic justifications for their provision. Firstly, by grouping facilities together it is possible to share the common services of heating, lighting, changing and supervision, thus effecting a considerable saving against the cost of separate buildings for each activity. Secondly, this very grouping provides opportunity for what we have come to call—rather flippantly perhaps—'cross fertilisation', whereby those attending for one activity will see another going on and be tempted to take it up themselves. To better aid this process, we design in, both formal and casual circulation and viewing areas. This feature has the unfortunate effect of encouraging not only the genuinely curious for whom it is designed but also the bored youngster who is either unable, or unwilling, to recognise an opportunity for purposeful involvement in any activity promoted.

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The difficulties that this creates are directly proportionate to the complexity of the circulation and viewing areas. An indoor swimming pool, for example, being basically one very large room is more easily supervised than the galleries, staircases and multi-use activity spaces of the dry/indoor complexes.

With few exceptions, most Sports Centre Managers confirmed that a few weeks after opening on most evenings youngsters were roaming the building in packs. This ceased only when they were ultimately refused admission at peak times. Admittedly an unpopular action but absolutely essential if their project was to be successful. As the spotlight falls on these it is easy to forget that hundreds of users are offered and accept new games and activities. In many cases their interest was first gained by giving them an opportunity to view. Sports Centres certainly make more converts among the uncommitted casual spectators than single activity premises due to their programming philosophy which favours the casual user as distinct from the club player.

Sports Centre Managers have found by experience that to allow casual spectating by youngsters during evenings and at peak week-end times adds to their supervision problems. Many of them, at a given time in the evening, operate a simple rule discriminating between the young person coming to participate, and those young persons coming because they have nothing better to do. Some operate a casual spectator ban on 17-year-olds and under from 7.00 p.m. in the evening and throughout week-ends. Another recently had to bring forward their curfew time to 2.00 p.m. and the staff complement now includes both security guards and a full-time youth worker. Such has been the problem of letting uncommitted youngsters into the Centre that vandalism and general control have become an increasing headache. Operation of such a ban produces welcome comment from the genuine users, particularly adults.

The staff who had previously seen their facilities begin to degenerate into a 'dossing' area for bored youth confirm that minor vandalism is reduced, litter disappears and the social and circulation areas become pleasanter family meeting places. Some may consider the exclusion of youngsters at peak user times too high a price to pay and such bans have drawn criticism from those who believe it wrong to deny the opportunity to participate. This is a fundamental point of course as those refused admission are non-participants in the active sense and the problem of getting them involved remains.

Crawley Sportcentre sought a solution by promoting a scheme aimed exclusively at the uncommitted youngsters for a two-hour session one evening a week. Instruction is provided in a variety of sports activities and each Coach is briefed to impart only sufficient instruction to the novice to enable him or her to participate safely. The finer points of coaching fundamentals being sacrificed in order to procure the youngsters' involvement earlier. Experience shows that they tend to lose interest fairly quickly and for this reason several activities are offered simultaneously. All sophistication such as advanced booking and wearing appropriate playing kit are waived and it is not uncommon to see youngsters either singly, or in groups, changing frequently from one piece of apparatus to another after only a few minutes at each activity. An opportunity is taken to counsel the participants in a genuine attempt to channel them into more purposeful activity on other evenings.

Casual viewing has since been reinstated but spectating by teenagers, whilst tolerated, is not encouraged. Youth Night, as the two-hour Friday evening session has been dubbed, is management's attempt to tackle the problem in a positive way. We do not think the Centre has failed by initially not being able to cater for every bored teenager. On the contrary, much more harm can be done by allowing unlimited access to the Centre by these youngsters. There are members of our staff at all levels who feel so strongly that this positive approach is the right one that they freely give up their time to operate the scheme with volunteers from local clubs and particularly the local Sports Advisory Council.