Participation in sport and membership of traditional sports clubs: a case study of gymnastics in The Netherlands (with British comparisons)

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In the Netherlands, gymnastics is a major participation sport. Historically a high proportion of gymnasts have been members of clubs affiliated to the national governing body, the Koninklijke Nederlandse Gymnastiek Bond (KNGB). Over recent years there has been a steady decline in the membership of the KNGB. This paper reports the results of an investigation into this decline in membership. Prior to the study it was suggested that the cause of declining membership was an increase in the rate at which people were leaving the KNGB and one part of the investigation concentrated on identifying former members and analysing their reasons for leaving. However, on the basis of our evidence, it appeared that no more people are leaving than normal. The research indicated that the problem is that less people, in particular young people, are joining gymnastics clubs. The problem is not one of exit but one of entry.

Although the empirical results relate only to gymnastics in the Netherlands, the paper broadens the discussion to the international context by comparing the situation in the Netherlands with that in Britain. The Dutch structure of sport, and the position of the sports club in it, is similar to that in other northern European countries such as Denmark and Germany but the British situation is substantially different. Weisbrod's theory of the voluntary sector is used to investigate the broader question of the role of the sports club in the changing market for sport.

Introduction

This paper investigates a phenomenon that has become increasingly important in the Netherlands over recent years: the increasing numbers of sports participants that take part in sport outside the traditional sports club structure. The paper investigates the phenomenon for the specific sport of gymnastics, which traditionally has had a very high percentage of participation within the conventional sports club structure. Although the empirical research reported here is specific to gymnastics in the Netherlands, the findings are discussed in an international context. The structure of sports clubs in the Netherlands is representative to a large extent of a model of sports organization that is present in many European
countries, most notably Germany and the Scandinavian countries. In this model, sports clubs are financially dependent on government, and though autonomous to some extent, voluntary sports clubs work closely with government in the supply of sporting opportunities. An alternative model is the British one, where sports clubs are virtually completely independent of government in financial terms and such clubs are distant from government in communication and contact. These distinctions, noted by Kuhnle and Selle (1992), in the relationship between government and the voluntary sector in sport provide an interesting context for the empirical research reported here. The research is discussed within the framework of Weisbrod's (1977, 1988) theory of the voluntary sector as applied to sports clubs by Gratton and Taylor (1991).

The paper is divided into four sections. Firstly we look at trends in sports participation in Britain and the Netherlands pointing out their close similarity in the recent past. Secondly, we examine the relationship between participation in sport and membership of formal sports organizations, again making a comparison between Britain and the Netherlands. This comparison indicates that despite similarities in trends in sports participation between the two countries, the phenomenon under investigation (the declining proportion of sports participation taking place in the formal sports club structure in the Netherlands) is not a feature in Britain. The third section discusses the theoretical perspective taken in the study which is Weisbrod's (1977, 1988) theory of the voluntary sector. The final section reports the empirical research that investigates the reasons for the declining number of members of the Koninklijke Nederlandse Gymnastiek Bond (KNGB), the umbrella organization for gymnastics clubs in the Netherlands, and discusses the results in the context of Weisbrod's theory, paying particular attention to how different models of sports club structures can be more or less successful in catering to consumer needs in the sports sector.

Sports participation in Great Britain and the Netherlands

Both Great Britain and the Netherlands have been collecting data regularly on sports participation since the 1970s. For Great Britain the main source of sports participation data is the General Household Survey (GHS) and the latest data available relates to sports participation in 1990. For the Netherlands the most detailed source of sports participation data is the Aanvullend Voorzieningengebruik Onderzoek (AVO) and the latest data is from 1991. It is impossible to make direct comparisons between levels of sports participation in the two countries, because of substantial differences in survey methodology. However it is possible to notice broad similarities in the pattern of sports participation.

In both countries, there is a small group of very popular activities. In Britain, in 1990 these were: walking (with a 4-week participation rate of 41% and a 12-month participation rate of 65%); swimming (with a 4-week participation rate of 15% and a 12-month participation rate of 42%); and keep fit/yoga (with a 4-week participation rate of 12% and a 12-month participation of 19%). In the Netherlands, walking and swimming were also very popular, with 12-month participation rates of 23% and 30% respectively in 1987. In the Netherlands however, two other sports – cycling and skating – are particularly important
with 12-monthly participation rates of 24% and 15% respectively. For all these sports with relatively high participation rates, there is a common factor in both countries: for the majority of participants they are not formally organized and most participants are not members of clubs or other sports organizations.

Over time, on a sport by sport basis, neither the British nor Dutch data show much change between the late 1970s and late 1980s. However, it is possible to pick up more noticeable trends by grouping sports together in aggregate participation groups. Although sports participation is dominated by outdoor activities, indoor sport showed the fastest rate of increase over the period 1977 to 1986. The number of adults taking part in at least one indoor sport increased by nearly 60% between 1977 and 1986, compared with a 14% increase in those taking part in at least one outdoor sport (Gratton and Tice, 1994). Gratton and Taylor (1991) have argued that the main influence on this growth in indoor participation was the rapid increase in the provision of indoor facilities over the 1970s and 1980s. Within this general rise in indoor participation, women's participation increased faster than men's. They accounted for 51% of all indoor participants in 1986, compared with 42% of the much smaller number in 1977. Keep fit/yoga/aerobics, a sport dominated by women participants, had risen from a 4-weekly participation rate of below 1% in 1977 to become the fifth largest participation sport in Britain by 1990, with a 4-weekly participation rate of 11.6% in 1990.

Similar trends can be identified in the Dutch data, with indoor sports showing the largest rate of growth in participation and 'fitness/aerobics' having the highest rise in the participation rate in the 1980s, becoming the fifth largest participation sport by 1991. Again the large rise in indoor participation was influenced to a large extent by a rapid rise in the provision of indoor facilities, as in Britain.

Despite the difficulties in making cross-national comparisons, it is clear that both Britain and the Netherlands experienced very similar trends in sports participation in the 1970s and 1980s.

The relationship between sports participation and club membership: Dutch/British comparisons

There is a substantial difference between Britain and other northern European countries in the size and importance of sports clubs. Sports clubs in the Netherlands more closely resemble their counterparts in Germany and Denmark than those in Britain as Table 1 shows.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Number/ clubs</th>
<th>Number/ members</th>
<th>Members/ club</th>
<th>% population as member of club</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>UK (1988)</td>
<td>150 000</td>
<td>6 500 000</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>11.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>36 000</td>
<td>4 000 000</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>26.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany (1991)</td>
<td>75 000</td>
<td>23 000 000</td>
<td>306</td>
<td>29.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark (1992)</td>
<td>13 000</td>
<td>1 850 000</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>36.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Britain's sports clubs are smaller and more numerous than their continental equivalents. However, a much smaller percentage of Britain's population is a member of a sports club than for the other European countries in Table 1. Estimates of the percentage of the population belonging to sports clubs vary from 11% to 16% in Britain (Sports Council, 1993), whereas in the Netherlands they range from 27% to 33% (CBS, 1993). Football has the largest number of members in both countries at around one million in both cases. However, given that the Dutch population is less than a third of the British, this membership represents a much higher proportion of the Dutch population in comparison. The third largest number of members in the Netherlands at about 300 000 is for the sport of gymnastics. For the same sport in Britain, there are only about 70 000 members of affiliated clubs.

This difference can be illustrated further by comparing expenditures on sport by Dutch and British consumers. Collins (1991) showed that Dutch consumers, on average, spend substantially more on admission fees and subscriptions than the British, reflecting to some extent the higher levels of club membership. In 1985, Dutch consumers spent, on average, £25.96 per head of population on sports club subscriptions/lessons/fitness. In Britain, the equivalent figure was £9.35.

Another major distinction between Britain and the Netherlands is the relationship between sports clubs and local government. In the Netherlands, as in other European countries such as Germany and Denmark, local government directly provides facilities for clubs to use. In addition, many clubs receive subsidies from government. The Sports Council (1993) has pointed out the favourable treatment of sports clubs in one of these countries, Denmark:

'In Denmark, legislation has been in place since 1968 giving local authorities a statutory responsibility to provide subsidies and facilities to local sports clubs. Recent legislation (1990) details the type of support local authorities have to provide. For example, all public facilities suitable for sporting activities have to be made available free of charge to clubs; clubs owning facilities or renting facilities from other organisations are entitled to receive a minimum of 75% of operational expenditure form the local authority providing the club’s activities are for children or young people under 25 years of age. Obviously this type of support has to be financed by a higher tax rate. However this public contribution to the voluntary sector enables clubs to develop their activities successfully whilst still maintaining their independence and autonomy.' (Sports Council, 1993).

This close relationship between government and sports clubs is completely different from the British situation, where clubs in general get no special benefits from government and where most clubs must generate all of their income.

These differences in levels of club membership and government financial support in continental European countries would suggest that sports clubs are in a much stronger position in these countries than in Britain. However trends over time suggest that in some Dutch sports, clubs are losing members whereas the numbers of sports clubs and sports club membership is increasing in Britain. Other countries having similar sport club structures to the Netherlands, such as Germany and Denmark, have also experienced reductions in sports club membership and faster rates of growth in sports participation outside the conventional clubs (see Heinemann, 1993). The central question tackled in this research
study was why such a decline in club membership has occurred in the sport of gymnastics in the Netherlands. However, before we move on to this question we examine one particular theoretical perspective on the voluntary sector in sport.

The voluntary sector in sport: a theoretical perspective

There has been little theoretical discussion of the role of the voluntary sector in sport. However, one economist, Weisbrod, has analysed a specific role for the voluntary sector and this approach has been used by Gratton and Taylor (1991) in an attempt to apply that theory to sports clubs.

Weisbrod (1977, 1988) provided an economic rationale for the existence of the voluntary sector. He saw the voluntary sector as essentially fulfilling the same role as government, namely providing collective goods. There is a need for this sector, Weisbrod argued, since government fails to correct for all private market failures. Weisbrod argued that two reasons are particularly relevant to the stimulation of voluntary sector activity. Government itself lacks adequate information on consumer demands and also government officials often follow their own personal objectives rather than acting on the basis of abstract concepts of allocative efficiency and distributional objectives.

Government may be an efficient provider of collective goods if demand for such goods is homogeneous. In circumstances where there are diverse demands, the voluntary sector is likely to be the more efficient provider. He argued:

‘when a collective good is collective for only some persons – in the sense that the good enters positively the utility functions of only those persons – the potential for organising collective good activity outside of government, in voluntary non-profit organisations, appears more likely.’ (Weisbrod, 1977).

In effect, Weisbrod said that there has to be a wide degree of consensus on the collective nature of a good before government enters the market. For minority interests government is likely to fail to provide collective benefits:

‘the undersatisfied demand for collective type goods is a government “failure” analogous to private market failures. That is, the combined willingness of part of the population to pay for an additional collective-type goods exceeds the incremental cost of providing them and yet government, responding to majoritarian interests, does not provide them.’ (Weisbrod, 1988).

Government fails to obtain relevant information on consumer demand when demand is heterogeneous and fragmented, even when the nature of the good concerned is collective. There are several reasons for this.

Firstly there is a motivation problem. The behaviourist model indicates that politicians are likely to be more concerned with the objective of maximizing their chances of re-election than meeting an abstract social welfare objective. Where there is a majority demand for a collective good then the two objectives are likely to lead to the same action, provision of the good. However, for minority interest collective goods, the re-election objective is not necessarily fulfilled by provision.

Secondly, there is an information problem. For majority interests, there is less likely to be a problem in politicians perceiving the demand for the collective
good. For minority interests, it is much more difficult to establish the strength of demand.

Added to this are the inefficiencies in the implementation of the decisions of the politician through the bureaucratic process. It is perhaps not surprising that there is a significant part of consumer demand for collective goods that goes unmet by both the commercial sector and government. The voluntary sector fills the gap.

Weisbrod's argument is specifically relevant to sport because the nature of the demand for sport is such that demand is likely to be fragmented. Data on participation rates from the GHS and the AVO shows that demand for any particular sport is a minority demand. At the same time participation in sport is a collective good in the sense that there are presumed societal benefits (reduced health expenditures, reductions in crime, etc.) over and above benefits to individual participants. The sports club, therefore, in Weisbrod's terms, arises out the failure of both markets and government to provide for a heterogeneous demand for sport. Markets fail to provide sufficiently because of the collective nature of the good; governments fail because of the heterogeneous nature of demand.

Weisbrod discussed the wide spectrum of types of non-profit organization. At one end are what may more appropriately be called 'clubs'. Buchanan (1965) analysed the economic formation of clubs. The benefits of such organizations accrue only to the members of the club; in fact, Buchanan saw the objective of such a club as the maximization of the net benefit of the typical member. The good provided is collective in a sense, but it is excludable, and is made exclusive to the club members.

At the other end of the spectrum 'collective-type non-profits, such as providers of medical research and aid to the poor, produce public-type services that bring widely shared benefits' (Weisbrod, 1988). These organizations are more like mini-governments. Government does not provide such collective benefits because of their minority nature or because of information inadequacies. Such organizations are, however, likely to be publicly subsidised and receive a large part of their income in the form of contributions, gifts or grants. Weisbrod suggested a 'collectiveness index' to measure the percentage of an organization's income that comes from these sources. An organization that provides mainly private goods and services to its own members (i.e. clubs) would be expected to have a 'collectiveness index' close to zero. At the opposite extreme, any non-profit providing purely collective goods (i.e. all the benefits accruing to individuals who did not pay for them) would have a collectiveness index approaching 100. Thus we have a whole variety of voluntary sector organizations.

It seems that many British sports clubs (e.g. amateur football clubs and athletics clubs) would be at the 'private good' end of Weisbrod's spectrum of voluntary sector organizations. Weisbrod argued that this type of non-profit is more similar to the commercial sector. Most of the income comes from membership dues and from sales. There is little or no public subsidy since few if any benefits are generated to non-members: the collectiveness index therefore should be very low. There is some limited data available which suggests that this is the case for the majority of sports clubs in Britain (see Gratton and Taylor, 1991; Henley Centre for Forecasting, 1992). Thus the product provided by the typical sports
club is essentially a private product. People participate in the club for reasons of self-interest. The motivation of club members is not to generate the collective benefits of sport but rather to maximize benefits for club members. The fact that some of the collective benefits are incidentally generated (e.g. the health benefits and possibly the occasional generation of an elite performer) may mean that the club is treated favourably by local government (e.g. subsidised charges for ground rental or facilities). Normally we do not see direct government involvement at this level of sport in Britain. Despite such lack of intervention, British sports clubs seem to be flourishing. If Weisbrod’s analysis seems to be applicable to the British sports club context, the question arises of why we see so much more government subsidy and involvement in Dutch sports clubs.

One of the reasons for the difference is that for many sports (in particular major team sports such as football and hockey) the club plays a community role in the Netherlands in the way that a similar club in Britain conventionally does not. For instance, in Britain school is the major organization responsible for children’s sport. In the Netherlands, that responsibility rests with clubs. Football clubs have coaches to teach children sports and organize competitions for children of all ages. Parents also tend to be associated with the clubs where their children participate and are the main source of voluntary help for transporting the children to matches, organizing refreshments, washing kit, etc. Thus clubs are closely identified with individual communities and play a socialization role which would normally fall to the school in Britain. Britain subsidises similar activities through the education system. It is perhaps not surprising then to see much higher levels of subsidy to Dutch clubs since they take on this role. The Dutch club produces a more collective good than the British equivalent. At the same time such partnership between government and the voluntary sector has led, in some sports, to the situation of decreasing membership of sports clubs even though participation in sport is increasing. It is to this problem that we now turn.

An investigation into the causes of the declining numbers of members in the KNGB

The KNGB was formed in 1987 from the merger between the two main gymnastics governing bodies. Since that time it has consistently seen a decline in membership numbers each year. Junior membership dropped from 161 776 in 1988 to 158 015 in 1992. The most serious decline in membership, however, has been in senior membership which declined from 120 101 in 1988 to 99 783 in 1992. The KNGB, together with the Netherlands Sports Federation (the national body to which all the major sports organizations are affiliated), commissioned the present research to investigate this decline in membership numbers.

The hypothesis under investigation was that membership numbers were declining because of dissatisfaction with the product provided by the KNGB leading to more people leaving. The method of investigation was therefore to survey first a sample of current members to ascertain whether there were genuine feelings of dissatisfaction and, second a sample of those that had left the KNGB over the last three years to establish the reasons for leaving. Both samples
were drawn from KNGB membership records. In addition to these samples, questions relating to gymnastics were added to a national survey of sports participation carried out from a sample of all adults in the Netherlands aged 16 years and over by the Netherlands Institute for Public Opinion and Market Research (NIPO). Full details of the sample sizes and response rates are given in Table 2.

The KNGB is responsible for a wide range of sports under the general title of gymnastics. These are divided into two broad groupings for the purposes of the discussion of the results below. Firstly there are the 'traditional activities': recreative gymnastics, competitive gymnastics, trampolining and rhythmic gymnastics. The second group will be referred to as 'new activities' and include skigym, callanetics, aerobics, jazzgym, sportfit 55+, conditioning and acrobatics (or acrogym). This wide range of activities for which the KNGB is responsible includes those activities that have shown the fastest rate of increase in demand over the 1980s: the fitness and exercise activities.

Results

Current members

The sample of current members was predominantly made up of women (87%) whose main reported activities were the traditional activities defined above. The most popular activity amongst these members was recreative gymnastics – 45.4% of the sample reported this as their main activity. This was the major activity for every age category except 16–20 years. The second most popular activity was conditioning with 14.8% reporting this as their main activity. Each of the other activities were named as the main activity by less than 10% of the sample. The sample was restricted to senior members (16 years and older) only and a random sample of these gave an age distribution which was dominated by older participants. Over 75% of the sample were over 30 years old, and more than half were over 40 years old. This age distribution is shown in Fig. 1 with a comparison with the sample of former members.

There were significant differences between the preferences of the younger age groups and the older ones in relation to types of gymnastic activities. The most popular activity for the 16–20 years age group was competitive gymnastics. The only other age group where this was mentioned at all was the 20–25 years
These differences between older and younger members is significant when related to the main purpose of the members survey – the level of satisfaction with the current provision by the club. Table 3 shows that for members over 30 years old there were virtually no negative comments when asked about this. Nearly all were ‘satisfied’ or ‘very satisfied’ with the provision for their activities. On the other hand, less than 50% of the 20–30 age group were ‘satisfied’ or ‘very satisfied’ with provision for them. Levels of satisfaction were slightly higher for the 16–20 age group, but well below those of the over 30s.

The evidence from this sample therefore indicated a high average level of satisfaction with club provision. However, the less satisfied were concentrated in the smallest group which was younger members who preferred the newer activities and wished to participate more than once a week.
Gymnastics in the Netherlands

Table 3. Level of satisfaction of current members with the activities provided by age

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of satisfaction</th>
<th>16-20</th>
<th>20-25</th>
<th>25-30</th>
<th>30-35</th>
<th>35-40</th>
<th>40-45</th>
<th>45-50</th>
<th>50-55</th>
<th>55-60</th>
<th>60+</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very satisfied</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>23.1</td>
<td>29.0</td>
<td>27.6</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>23.1</td>
<td>35.3</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfied</td>
<td>42.1</td>
<td>36.4</td>
<td>36.4</td>
<td>70.4</td>
<td>65.4</td>
<td>54.8</td>
<td>62.1</td>
<td>82.1</td>
<td>76.9</td>
<td>58.8</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>21.1</td>
<td>36.4</td>
<td>36.4</td>
<td>14.8</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsatisfied</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>18.2</td>
<td>18.2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very unsatisfied</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (100%)</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>207</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Former members

Figure 1 indicates that the average age of the sample of former members was substantially lower than for the sample of members, although the gender distribution was similar, with 91% women. Of the sample, 63% were below 35, with 45% between the ages of 25 to 35. The most popular activity they participated in, when a member of a gymnastics club, was again recreative gymnastics. However, other activities were much more important than in the sample of members, in particular competitive gymnastics, aerobics, jazzgym and conditioning gymnastics, each of which had participation by over 10% of the sample. This is perhaps partly a reflection of the different age distributions of the two samples.

The main focus of the questionnaire for former members was to identify the reasons for leaving the club. The respondents were given 19 possible reasons why they might have stopped their membership of their gymnastics club and they were asked in each case to say whether the reason was ‘very important’, ‘less important’ or ‘not a reason at all’. Of these 19 reasons, 12 of them were related to aspects of the club itself including level of subscription, supply of different activities, quality of accommodation and quality of training and coaching. The other seven reasons related to the specific situation of the respondent rather than the club. Virtually no evidence of club-related factors could be found and the most important reasons for the respondent leaving the club were the personal circumstances of the respondent including change in family circumstances, new job, new baby, new house etc. Another important reason was injury or illness. Some left the club because they became fed up with gymnastics as a sport. In fact one general characteristic of the sample was that two thirds of the respondents (67%) were no longer regularly participating in gymnastics at the time of interview. The general picture was one of changed circumstances leading to the respondent giving up both the sport and membership of a club. For those still participating, 40% of them did so in a gymnastics club. Thus they had moved clubs in response to changing personal circumstances rather than left the club system altogether. Out of the total sample, only 5% were continuing to participate in gymnastics and doing so in a commercial leisure facility.

The reason stated as important in the decision to leave the club are indicated in declining order in Table 4. The only club-related effects cited as important by more than two respondents were for poor accommodation and lack of cater-
Table 4. Former members: percentage giving this as very important reason for leaving club

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Private reasons</td>
<td>42.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of time</td>
<td>32.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Injuries/health</td>
<td>26.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bored with gymnastics</td>
<td>16.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moved house</td>
<td>9.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends left</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor accommodation</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No catering facilities</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n = 27.

ing/bar facilities. In both cases only four respondents out of 78 regarded these as important in their decision to leave.

It is perhaps not surprising, given the predominance of under 35 year-olds in the sample, that reasons such as lack of time, changed family circumstances or injuries should be the major reasons for giving up club membership. Other sports research has shown that such factors are the main reason that people drop out of sport, and this is certainly what has happened for the majority here. The problem for our research was that we still had to discover the reason for declining membership in gymnastics clubs. There was nothing to suggest in the sample of former members that there had been an increase in people leaving clubs. The reasons given were typical rather than unusual.

National survey of all participants in gymnastics (NIPO)

NIPO is a commercial market research organization that, among other things, carries out a regular survey of sports participation in the Netherlands entitled 'Sport in Nederland'. In 1992, 4,512 adults (aged 16 and over) were questioned about their sporting activities. Of these, 2,032 were active in sport. It is an omnibus survey and for the purposes of this research two questions were included, each of which had two sub-questions. One question dealt with sports participation in the previous three years in a commercial sports facility, which activity was involved, and the most important reasons for choosing such a facility. The second question dealt with people who in the last three years had left a sports club and the reasons for this. Other questions were about participation in specific activities, including gymnastics, and participation within sports clubs.

The results showed that 16% (315 respondents) had participated in at least one of the activities defined as gymnastics earlier in this paper. Of these, 78% were women and 22% men. Of the total number of participants in gymnastics, 54% participated in a gymnastics sports club. However, Table 5 shows that this average reveals substantial differences between age groups. For the over 25s, a majority of the participants are members of a gymnastics club. For those in the 16–25 age group, however, only about a third are members. In fact the table shows a very close relationship between participation in clubs and age: the older the gymnast the more likely that he or she is to be a club member.
Table 5. Participation in gymnastics, in and outside clubs, by age

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Percentage of n (in club)</th>
<th>Percentage of n (outside club)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>16-20</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>27.5</td>
<td>72.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-25</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>75.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-30</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>53.1</td>
<td>46.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-35</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>56.1</td>
<td>43.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-45</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>19.7</td>
<td>62.9</td>
<td>37.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45 and older</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>31.7</td>
<td>69.0</td>
<td>31.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>315</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>53.7 (n = 169)</td>
<td>46.3 (n = 146)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This table indicates that the question the present research was commissioned to answer (Why are more people leaving clubs?) was almost certainly the wrong question. On the basis of our evidence, no more people are leaving than normal. The problem is that less people, in particular young people, are joining gymnastics clubs. The problem is not one of exit but one of entry.

Part of the reason for the reluctance of young people, who participate in gymnastics activities, to do so in clubs may be, as identified above, the preference of younger participants for different types of gymnastics activities to older participants. Given the fact that clubs are dominated by older participants and traditional activities, it is perhaps not surprising that younger people look outside the formal club structure in order to satisfy their demand. Table 6 tends to confirm this view.

When asked whether they had participated in sport in a commercial sports school or fitness centre in the last three years, a much higher proportion of younger people answered ‘yes’ than older people. The most popular activities for those respondents who had used commercial provision was fitness (51%), aerobics (26%), weight-training (16%) and conditioning training (13%). Only 4% of respondents who used commercial facilities did so for recreative gymnastics.

When asked for the main reasons for using such facilities, the three most important reasons were: ‘professional coaching and training’ (32%), ‘good facilities/apparatus’ and ‘no obligations for voluntary duties’ (19%).

Table 6. Participation in sport in a commercial sports facility within the last three years, by age

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age (years)</th>
<th>yes</th>
<th>% of total</th>
<th>no</th>
<th>% of total</th>
<th>no answer</th>
<th>% of total</th>
<th>total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>16-20</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>213</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-25</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>283</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-30</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>285</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-35</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>252</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-45</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>294</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>418</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45 and older</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>493</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>580</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>602</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>1351</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2031</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In relation to the question on whether people had stopped taking part in a sports club in the last three years, 24% of all respondents that were active in sport had done so. However, the main reasons given were similar to those reported above – private reasons and health/injury. For the gymnasts (10% of those having given up a sports club) the fact that give-up rates increased with age again suggests that the problem is not people leaving clubs, but rather the reduced entry into clubs of young people to replace the leavers.

**Discussion**

These results suggest that in a country such as the Netherlands that has historically had a well-developed sports club structure with a high proportion of all sports participation taking part within these clubs, such clubs may be failing to meet the changing consumer demands of younger generations. This seems to conflict with Weisbrod's theory of the role of the voluntary sector in catering to consumer needs.

Weisbrod's model of a voluntary sector that fills a gap in demand left by both the commercial sector and the government sector is not consistent with the evidence found in this research. Rather we find a picture of consumer demand unsatisfied by government and the voluntary sector, and met by the commercial sector. Although Weisbrod's model seems an appropriate one for the Anglo-Saxon voluntary sports club, it does not seem to be applicable to the structure of sports clubs in northern continental European countries. In this continental model, sports clubs are financially dependent on government and work closely with government, contrasting with the Anglo-Saxon position where the sports club is independent of both government and the commercial sector.

Other research in Denmark and Germany, where the sports club structure resembles that in the Netherlands, has highlighted problems of meeting the demands of consumers when the relationship between the voluntary sector and government becomes too close. One Danish commentator, Riiskjaer (1990), has argued that such an approach by government towards the voluntary sector may destroy the essential nature of voluntary sector activity. It runs the risk of changing the voluntary sector from cooperative bodies with largely voluntary labour to neo-corporate bodies with paid officers that are simply agencies of government. Riiskjaer sees an increasing direction of the voluntary sector by government, and the increasing financial dependency on government of the voluntary sector in sport, as a dangerous development. Weisbrod's analysis indicated that the real danger of this approach is that the voluntary sector itself is subject to the government failure to meet heterogeneous consumer demand as discussed above. That is, when the relationship between government and the voluntary sector becomes too close, the voluntary sector ceases to operate as a third agency rectifying the deficiencies of government and the market.

Heinemann and Horch (1987), in their financial sociological analysis of German sports clubs, argued that the form of financing of clubs influences the degree of responsiveness of clubs to members' interests. Horch (1994)
attempted to test the hypothesis that the larger the share of government resources in the total resources of a voluntary association, the more oligarchic the decision-making process. Horch found that it was not so much the method of financing that determined the degree of democracy within the club, but rather the size and age of the club. He found the smaller and younger the club, the greater the degree of democracy. Heinemann’s (1993) study of German sports clubs found that the larger, older sports clubs were the ones that were experiencing reductions in membership, suggesting that the lack of democracy in larger clubs led to problems in meeting the demands of members.

Thus there is some evidence that the sports club structure that is common in Scandinavian countries, the Netherlands and Germany, with high levels of government financial support, runs the risk of being unresponsive to consumer demand in the same way that government itself fails in its attempt to meet consumer demand for collective goods. This is likely to be a bigger problem when there are large changes in preferences for different types of sporting activity by participants in different age groups, as has happened in gymnastics over the last decade. The research by Heinemann and Horch (1987) indicated that larger, less democratic clubs are likely to under-provide for the new demands of younger participants and to continue to provide conventional products to an increasingly older membership. This certainly seems to be the case in the sport of gymnastics in the Netherlands. Given the failure of both government and the voluntary sector to cater to the changing demands of participants, it is the commercial sector that has provided for the unsatisfied demand.

The consumer who turns to the private market option will expect to pay a higher charge and in return will get a product closer to his or her individual demands. The consumer is also likely to choose a form of the good that maximizes his or her personal benefits, and probably minimizes external benefits. The evidence from the present study showed that the newer type of gymnastics activities are the ones that are increasingly provided by the commercial sector, rather than the conventional gymnastics clubs. The availability of such activities in the commercial sector fits in more closely with the time constraints of the consumer than the traditional activities provided by clubs. The sports consumer may pay a higher price in the commercial sector but there is no obligation to provide time and effort in voluntary help, as would be the case in a club. Given the increasing pressure on time, consumers may prefer to save time by paying a higher price.

The collection of activities collectively referred to as ‘gymnastics’ is particularly open to such competition from the commercial sector. The activities involved are essentially individual in nature, where the participant has clearly defined demands for facilities and coaching/training. In other more collective sports, for instance soccer, voluntary clubs are better able to compete because team sports require a much higher level of information in order to organize competition. Clubs have information advantages and can acquire such information much more cheaply than the commercial sector. Thus the argument in this section will not apply to all sports, and for many team sports voluntary clubs are likely to have substantially cheaper production costs than commercial providers.
Conclusions

In this paper, we have indicated how consumer demand for sport is continuing to fragment over a widening range of activities. In particular, under the general set of activities referred to as 'gymnastics' we have shown the rising demand for new types of gymnastic activity, particularly in the young age groups. In the Netherlands, this changing pattern of demand has led to a switch in sectoral provision away from conventional clubs towards the commercial sector. Other commentators have indicated that similar trends are evident in Denmark (Riiskjaer, 1990) and in Germany (Heinemann, 1993). We find little evidence to support the conventional view that the cause of declining membership of gymnastics clubs was due to an increase in the numbers leaving clubs. It seems that a much more important reason that club membership is declining is that younger gymnasts are joining clubs to a much lesser extent than previous generations.

These results have been discussed in an international context, in particular by drawing a contrast between the British structure of sports provision, where smaller self-help clubs are the norm, and the continental one, of which the Netherlands is but one example. Using the theories of Weisbrod as applied to sports clubs, we have argued that the institutionalized nature of the government/voluntary sector partnership in the continental model makes sports clubs less responsive to fragmentation and heterogeneity in consumer demand for sport. In Weisbrod's terms, clubs are subject to the same government failure problems as government itself. Consequently, unsatisfied demand tends to be met by the commercial sector.

References