

Mountain biking is for (white, wealthy, middle-aged) men: the Cape Epic mountain bike race

Louise A. Bordelon & Sanette L. A. Ferreira

To cite this article: Louise A. Bordelon & Sanette L. A. Ferreira (2019): Mountain biking is for (white, wealthy, middle-aged) men: the Cape Epic mountain bike race, *Journal of Sport & Tourism*, DOI: [10.1080/14775085.2019.1654906](https://doi.org/10.1080/14775085.2019.1654906)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14775085.2019.1654906>




Published online: 20 Aug 2019.



[Submit your article to this journal](#) 




[View related articles](#) 



[View Crossmark data](#) 



Mountain biking is for (white, wealthy, middle-aged) men: the Cape Epic mountain bike race

Louise A. Bordelon^{a,b} and Sanette L. A. Ferreira ^{a,b}

^aDepartment of Geography and Environmental Sciences, Stellenbosch University, Room 233, Chamber of Mines Building, cnr Ryneveld Street & Merriman Avenue, Stellenbosch 7600, South Africa; ^bPrivate Bag X1, Matieland 7602, South Africa

ABSTRACT

The Cape Epic (an eight-day mountain biking stage race in South Africa) exemplifies the most difficult mountain bike race on the African continent and attracts a relatively homogenous group of participants who, in order to prepare for such an extreme event, must engage in serious leisure. Until quite recently, academics considered lifestyle sports, like mountain biking, as playful and more relaxed than traditional sports. However, most hobbies or leisure activities can become 'serious leisure' when the time and energy spent participating and preparing for them begin to resemble work. Despite stereotypes surrounding lifestyle sport participants as young, white, middle-class males, a preliminary analysis of data collected on the 2017 Cape Epic revealed that although ninety per cent of riders were indeed white males, sixty per cent fell into high-income brackets and the average rider age was 44 years. Using demographic information from Cape Epic participants and responses given in a series of in-depth interviews with riders involved in serious leisure, this study contributes to a better understanding of serious leisure and team participation in lifestyle sports by addressing social and business motivations, subcultures, and meaning for participants in this 'grey-area' where serious leisure meets lifestyle sports. Furthermore, contrary to changing demographics across many lifestyle sports to include women, children and the elderly, Cape Epic participants are not diverse; this is explored through the gendered experience of the Cape Epic and the socio-cultural environment of lifestyle sports within the context of post-apartheid South Africa.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 27 February 2019
Accepted 8 August 2019

KEYWORDS

Mountain biking; lifestyle sports; Cape Epic; gender; serious leisure

Introduction

Until the 1990s participants in lifestyle sports were mostly young, white, middle-class males. Most lifestyle sports¹ (including mountain biking) were born of the counter-culture movements in the late 1960s in the United States of America as opposition to or in protest over mainstream, modern culture (Bourdieu, 1984). Interest and participation in lifestyle sports experienced unprecedented growth in the 1990s with the advent of ESPN's X-Games and the promotion of various extreme sports events that were specifically aimed at young, white, Western, middle-class males (Beal, 1995; Beal & Wilson, 2004; Booth

& Thorpe, 2007; Kuehlwein & Schaefer, 2017; Rinehart, 2000; Wheaton, 2004, 2010). Since then, increased media coverage and more varied lifestyle sports offerings across multiple skill levels have commercialised many lifestyle sports into mainstream culture. This blurring of the boundaries between traditional competitive sports and lifestyle sports has made the latter accessible to a wider audience so encouraging participation by a broader demographic range, including women, children and older people (Cashmore, 2000; Dilley & Scraton, 2010; King & Church, 2013; Tulle, 2008; Van Bottenburg & Salome, 2010; Wheaton, 2017a, 2017b). Despite growing diversity, contemporary ideas about human participants in lifestyle sports continue to be plagued by imagery of young, predominantly male, athletically-superior participants who tend to be described as a homogenous group consisting of hardcore subcultures (Huybers-Withers & Livingston, 2010; Salome & Van Bottenburg, 2012).

One of the first academic studies on mountain bikers determined the demographic to consist of mostly young males (Cessford, 1995). King and Church's (2013) study on youth mountain bikers consisted of ninety per cent males. Additional literature concurred that most were thirty-something males with active lifestyles and professional careers (Morey, Buchanan, & Waldman, 2002; Getz & McConnell, 2011). One explanation for the dominance of males in mountain biking is the relatively high level of perceived risk involved, as well as the substantial time and monetary investments required to participate, both of which are generally associated with male participants (Laurendeau & Sharara, 2008; Thorpe, 2007). Ideas relating to risk-taking and lifestyle sports suggest that contemporary people in industrialised societies search for 'controlled risk' and desire the feeling of or experience of danger, negating the safety and protection that well-developed societies aim to provide (Beck, 1992; Wheaton, 2010).

Another reason for male dominance in mountain biking is the perception amongst young people that the countryside is seen as a masculine domain (Norman, Gerarda Power, & Dupré, 2011). A more recent study by Kruger and Saayman (2014) found that compared to road cyclists, mountain bikers in South Africa were younger, male participants motivated by athleticism, excitement (risk) and a drive for adventure.

Some research has been done into the changing demographics of lifestyle sports that now include the elderly, women, children and different ethnic groups (Huybers-Withers & Livingston, 2010; Salome & Van Bottenburg, 2012; Wheaton, 2010). Recent studies address older participants and women at the intersection of lifestyle sports and serious leisure (Dilley & Scraton, 2010; Wheaton, 2017a, 2017b). These studies demonstrate women and older people whose participation in lifestyle sport is career-like, with high levels of personal investment, central to their self-identity and physical well-being, concurrent with ideas relating to serious leisure. Wheaton's (2017a, 2017b) studies on older, 'silver-surfers' are focused on the higher end of the age spectrum however, middle-aged or 'mid-life' lifestyle sport participants have been largely ignored. In addition, most academics position lifestyle sports as having a more 'playful approach' to participation than traditional sports (King & Church, 2015, p. 284) and suggest individuality is prioritised over team participation or mentality (Rinehart, 2000; Wheaton, 2013). Considering the changing trends in lifestyle sport demographics, this study contributes to a better understanding of why the number of Cape Epic male participants vastly outnumber their female peers.

Thirty-five years ago, Stebbins (1982) developed his theory of 'serious leisure'. The theory of serious leisure shifts away from the idea that all leisure is casual and/or enjoyable.

Instead, as participants strive to accomplish goals within specific leisure activities, they often demonstrate a long-term commitment to the development of skills and knowledge to the point where their leisure pursuits can take on a work-like ethos (Stebbins, 1982, 2005). Serious leisure is defined as a hobby or activity that involves six key phenomena, namely perseverance; career-like milestones; personal investment; physical and psychological benefits; a sense of belonging to a unique subculture or community; and improved self-image (Stebbins, 1982, 2001, 2005).

Substantial time and economic requirements to participate in serious leisure favour those segments of the population who have more disposable income and fewer demands regarding their family and work commitments (Scott Shafer & Scott, 2013). These are often older people whose familial obligations have dwindled, whose business pursuits are established and who have the time and finances to spare. Due to the high costs of participation in serious leisure, especially mountain biking, only a minority of the population can afford to be involved (Del Carme, 2015). In South Africa, where 55.5% of the population lives below the poverty line, mountain biking is prohibitively expensive and excludes all but a small percentage of the population, most of whom are white (Lehohla, 2017).

Serious leisure and lifestyle sports have a complex relationship. Lifestyle sports are often seen as informal, even casual in nature, conflicting with serious leisure theory (Beal, 1995; Stebbins, 1997; Getz & McConnell, 2011). Existing literature on lifestyle sports suggests that even the most committed athletes often participate informally and may even avoid competition, making their participation difficult to monitor or quantify (Dilley & Scraton, 2010; Taylor, 2010; Wheaton, 2017a, 2017b). Stebbins' theories show merit; however, we argue that there are elements of 'serious leisure' that have been overlooked, specifically that social and business networking and interpersonal relationships are casual, or feminine (2001) and that sensory experiences or 'thrills in movement' are reserved for casual leisure (1997, p. 20). Teamwork and social networking, as well as descriptions of 'flow' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) are prevalent in our research findings and are key aspects of mountain biking and other lifestyle sports (Kay & Laberge, 2002). It seems pertinent to mention at this point that mountain biking, in the cross-country race format does not qualify as a 'nature sport'. Although nature (and indeed conquering nature) are elements of mountain bike racing, Krein (2014) clearly states that activities where humans are pitted against each other in competition are not nature sports.

In addition, there is evidence of growing consumerism in lifestyle sports (Huybers-Withers & Livingston, 2010), however, no (known) studies on serious leisure and lifestyle sports address exclusive, team-oriented events and few analyse the costs of lifestyle sports in competitive arenas or how economic status might further exclude non-traditional participants (Getz & McConnell, 2011). After an introduction to the Cape Epic mountain bike race and study methodology, the results are presented through experiences and motivations of Cape Epic participants in terms of self-image, luxury lifestyles, serious challenges, the gender imbalance, and risk found in nature. These phenomena are somewhat unique to this relatively homogenous group of middle-aged, male, teamed participants at the intersection of serious leisure and lifestyle sports.

The Tour de France of mountain biking

The Cape Epic is renowned as an extreme event on the international mountain biking calendar. Bart Brentjens, former Cape Epic winner and 1996 Olympic gold medallist in

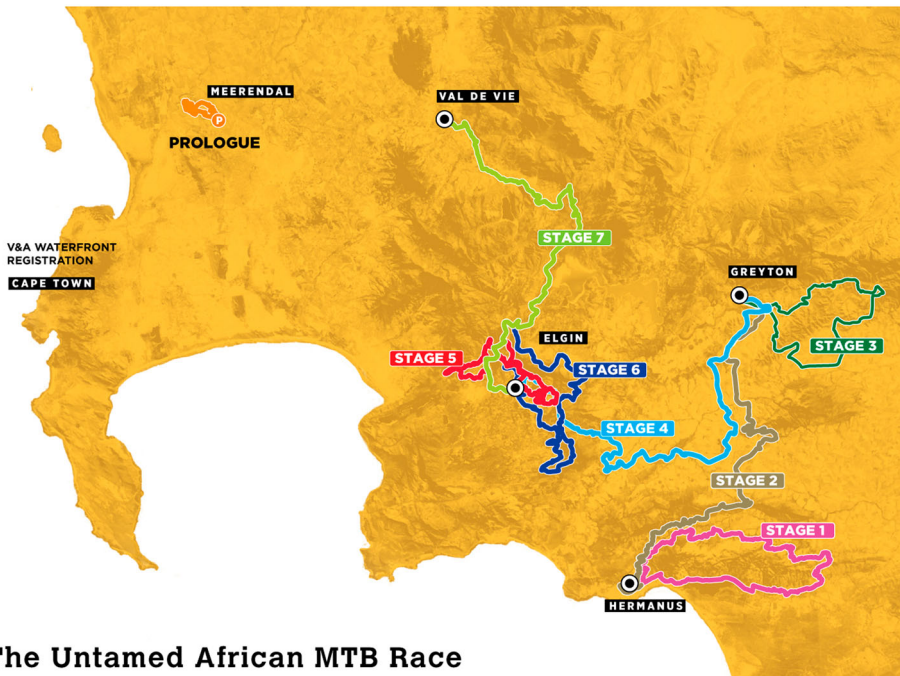
mens cross-country mountain biking, dubbed the Cape Epic as the 'Tour de France of mountain biking' (Millmore, 2013). Courtesy of Brentjens (also a former Cape Epic winner), it is widely considered as the hardest race on the Union Cycliste International calendar, and for this reason, it draws the elite crowd. Bordelon and Ferreira (2018) touched on the popularity of the Western Cape of South Africa (and the Cape Epic) as a mountain biking destination for professional mountain bikers. Study participants cited the temperate climate (particularly during the Northern Hemisphere winter December–March) and minimal time differences with Europe as their main motivating factors to train in the Western Cape during the off-season. These same professionals spend a great deal of time working on endurance training and hence, a long, difficult race like the Cape Epic draws a contingent of the world's elite professional mountain bikers every year. However, despite the extensive television coverage of professional racers and the evocative imagery used to promote the race, a very small proportion (3% in 2017) of Cape Epic participants are professional athletes. Moreover, contrary to the age-related findings of Kruger and Saayman (2014) that determined mountain bikers are younger, male participants, the majority of Cape Epic participants are older mountain bikers. In 2017, for example, 91% of riders were male and the average age was 44 (Cape Epic, 2017). Also, successful business people dominate the demographic. For example, in 2015, 53% of the participants were business owners and 69% held positions in upper-level management in their professional working lives (personal communication, Sarah Haigh, Cape Epic, October 25, 2016).

The first Cape Epic stage race took place in 2004 with 550 participants from 20 countries. Finishers in 2004 rode 788 km from Knysna to the finish in Stellenbosch in the Western Cape, South Africa. In 2017, 1332 riders from 58 countries covered a circuitous route of 691 km near Cape Town and finishing at Val de Vie Estate near Paarl (Figure 1). The race is the most televised mountain bike event in the world, being broadcast to 175 countries (Cape Epic, 2017). Although dubbed the 'Tour de France of mountain biking', the Cape Epic is quite different from the iconic road race in France. First, Tour de France is a 21-day stage race whereas Cape Epic is run over eight days. Second, Cape Epic is open to both professional and amateur² racers in teams comprised of two riders. As of 2017, entries for amateurs in Cape Epic are done through a lottery-type entrance system with no qualifying criteria, whereas entries for professionals are done on a case-by-case basis (Cape Epic, 2017). Tour de France riders are all professional cyclists who represent 22 qualifying Union Cycliste Internationale (UCI) World Tour teams with nine riders each (Tour de France, 2017). Third, Cape Epic had over 1200 male and female participants across a wide range of ages in 2017, the oldest rider being 65 and the youngest 25. Tour de France is an all-male race and in 2017 the 198 riders ranged in age from 22 to 40 years (Henrys, 2017; Lindsey, 2017). Table 1 shows that male participant numbers increased substantially from 698 rider in 2006 to 1122 riders in 2019, while female participant numbers only increased from 60 to 72 riders over the same duration. Table 2 shows the number of race participants by category from 2006 to 2019. It shows the creation of a new, Grand Masters category (50+) in 2013, and a steady increase in both this and the Masters categories. Tour de France riders fit the young, athletic male stereotype far more closely than Cape Epic riders do.

Media attention focused on professional riders, combined with preconceived notions of mountain bikers as being carefree, young, male and Western (Salome &



19 - 26 March 2017
691km | 15 400 Climbing



The Untamed African MTB Race

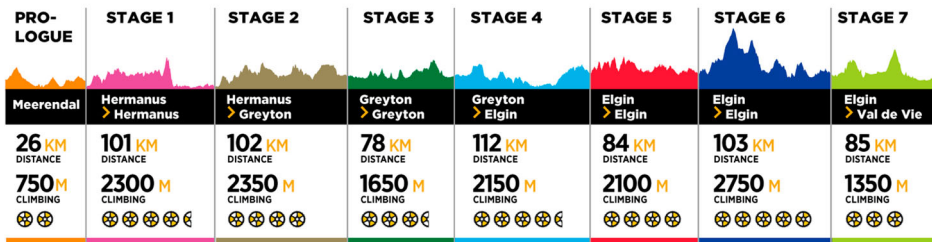
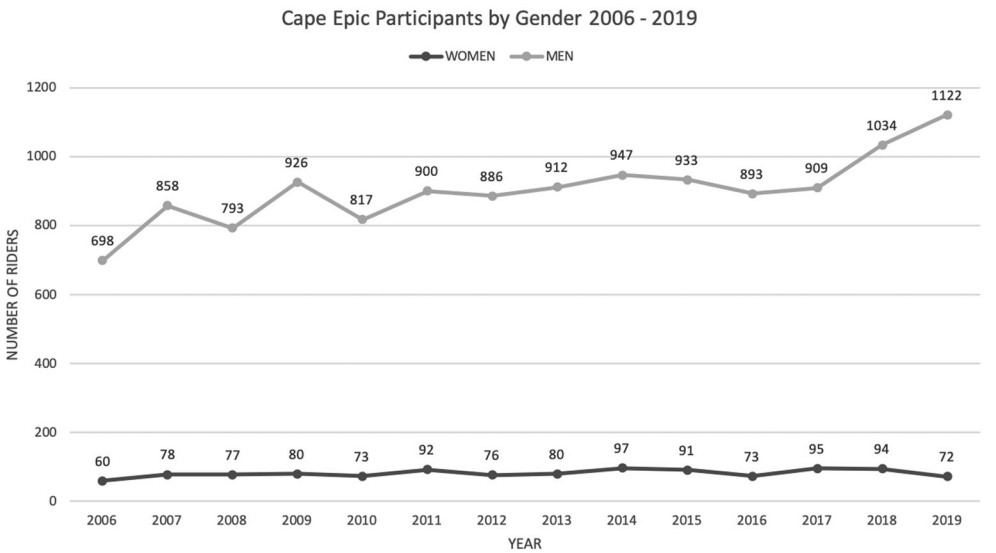


Figure 1. Route of the 2017 Cape Epic mountain bike race. Source: Cape Epic (2017).

Van Bottenburg, 2012) all sharing an ardent or fired-up attitude (Wheaton, 2004) to conquer nature (Brymer, Downey, & Gray, 2009) mean that Cape Epic participants are generally considered as athletically superior, carefree young men. Incidentally, this preconceived notion is not entirely incorrect. The demographic information shows that the group presents as a somewhat homogenous cohort of middle-aged, affluent, white men. Ninety per cent of Cape Epic participants are white males, their average age in 2017 was 44% and 69% of them held upper-level management positions in their professional lives.

Based on these cursory findings, this study contributes to understandings of serious leisure and team participation in lifestyle sports by exploring a motivations and experiences of Cape Epic participants aged 45–60. This is done in the context of South Africa, a developing country in a post-apartheid³ era, where barriers to participation in serious

Table 1. Cape Epic participants by gender 2006–2019.

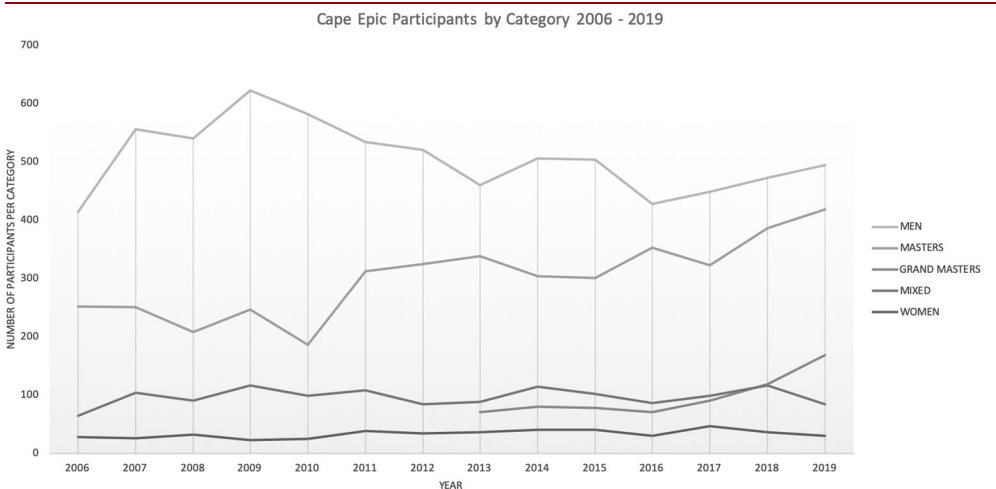


leisure and lifestyle sports include income, available time, race (primarily for previously disadvantaged individuals) and gender.

Methodology

This study followed a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences and consciousness of study participants (Van Manen, 1990). Phenomenological methods are useful in terms of exploring sports and physical activity in terms of ageing (Phoenix & Grant, 2009) and we considered it particularly appropriate for unpacking the gritty, textured and rich descriptive experience of participants in mountain biking and for the extreme nature of the Cape Epic race (Allen-Collinson, 2009).

Table 2. Cape Epic participants by category 2006–2019.



Thus, after Van Manen (1990) this study is both interpretive and descriptive in nature, with the intention of building a more complete picture of the lived experience of mid-life riders in the race.

Before we targeted mid-life participants, we acquired a large swath of quantitative and qualitative data from the organisers of the Cape Epic in order to better understand the bigger picture of this mountain bike race. The quantitative data comprises demographic information (age, gender, weight, ethnic origin, nationality, occupation and career level) that profiled all race participants from 2008 to 2017. Data was retrieved from the online entry forms required for competing in the race.

To supplement the organisers' findings and build a research agenda on participants, we conducted 12 in-depth interviews (each lasting approximately 60 min) with Cape Epic participants between 45 and 60 years to further explore the complex motivations for their serious leisure pursuits and their participation in the race. Based on the demographic data showing large numbers of older riders, middle-aged participants were purposefully recruited for interviews at the event where we had access to participants of varying ages and experience levels (Creswell, 2009). Nine participants were South African and three were international; nine participants were male and three were female. All the participants were white, affluent⁴ and involved in serious leisure.

As an avid mountain biker and would-be Cape Epic participant, the principal researcher found that riders were mostly interested and willing to talk to us about their mountain biking experience, particularly the Cape Epic. The interviews were conducted as discussions between people inside the cycling community (Minello & Nixon, 2017). Informed by the race organisers findings and focussed on Cape Epic experiences, meanings and motivations for mid-life riders aged 45 and older, the following questions guided our research: Why does the Cape Epic appeal to you in this phase of your life? How do you balance your preparation for this event with other life commitments? Do you feel like mountain biking and the Cape Epic provide opportunities for networking and social interaction? Is that your bike?!

As age is an important facet of this study, we have indicated each participant's age in parentheses after a pseudonym given to protect their identity. Their origins are also omitted or substituted with (country or city name). We analysed the interviews in terms of themes and trends that emerged from participant responses, or from literature pertaining to serious leisure lifestyle sports, and nature sports (Van Manen, 1990; Krein, 2014).

In addition, personal observations took place at the 2016 and 2017 events, where the principal author, like Wheaton (2017a), was immersed in the sport. Researcher perspectives and experience must be considered in qualitative research (Dupuis, 1999). As an experienced road and mountain cyclist, the principal author could participate in conversations about equipment, bicycles, training regimes and challenge or engage with anecdotal evidence. Interviewees clearly spoke to the principal author as another cyclist, assuming she understood various cultures and practices.

The focus of the study is exploratory and intended to discover and build on an understanding of non-traditional, middle-aged or mid-life lifestyle sports participants involved in serious leisure (Dilley & Scraton, 2010; Wheaton, 2017a, 2017b) and highlight the anomalies that this event presents in: low numbers of female participants, higher than average income earners, and a predominance of white, middle-aged male participants. In the following section, we use a narrative format to analyse interview responses under

the following key phenomena of Cape Epic participants and their experiences of the race: improved self-image, luxury lifestyles, serious challenges, gendered experiences, conquering untamed nature, privileged risk and high rollers.

Serious leisure, lifestyle sports and team mentality in the Cape Epic

Improved self-image and networking

Perceptions of stereotyped participants are fuelled by the selected media coverage of the Cape Epic event. Sarah Haigh, public relations and media manager for Cape Epic, explained that although professional mountain bikers make up only three to four per cent of the entire field of riders, they take up at least 95% of the television coverage (Personal communication, 25 October 2016). Similarly, the *Cape Epic ride guide 2015* (a 120-page magazine) presents 117 pages focused on professional riders, their profiles and photographs, stage previews and predictions, anecdotes, history, interviews and advertisements (often featuring professional riders). Only the last three pages include coverage and photographs of the experience of amateur racers (Brink, 2015). Amateurs involved in serious leisure are often seen to take on the persona of a professional rider (Scott Shafer & Scott, 2013). Ivy (56), a medical doctor, explained that mountain biking and training for the Cape Epic had transformed her physically. She took up yoga and strength classes in addition to pedalling and reported that her physique was completely transformed. Many Cape Epic amateur riders are nearly indistinguishable from professional riders on the bike, given away only by their race number in the general category. The same is noticeable off the bicycle where many of the interviewees dressed in bicycle industry branded gear or they requested their interviews to take place at a local bicycle shop café or on a bicycle ride.

Serious leisure requires a focus on one recreational pursuit and that often immerses participants in a subculture of like-minded individuals who take part in the same activities. This phenomenon develops into pockets of unique subgroups that share the same beliefs, morals and norms (Stebbins, 2001; Scott Shafer & Scott, 2013). The Cape Epic is seen as a 'career marker' for many riders (Shipway & Jones, 2008). South African, two-time Cape Epic winner Burry Stander said:

If someone comes to me and says he's done an Epic, or two or three, he's immediately part of the club. That person is a real mountain biker. You know they can suffer. You know there's so much behind the statement. It's the race that measures all. (Cape Epic, 2017)

Participation, especially finishing the Cape Epic, provides a rider with a level of credibility and sub-cultural capital in mountain biking and business communities (Green & Jones, 2005). Amateur participants mix with professional riders, see them in the race village; elevating their race experience and self-esteem. Respondents to a post-race survey in 2015 voted 'exposure to the world's elite mountain bikers' as number five out of twenty experiences the race provided (personal communication, Sarah Haigh, Cape Epic, October 25, 2016). Mountain biking and cycling is widely viewed and understood in South Africa, where cycling is the largest participation sport in the country (Gorin, 2019). Extreme endurance events are valued as training and learning experiences where corporate values and life lessons are learned, for example, self-development, time, stress and people management; they are thus accepted into the workplace and sometimes promoted within

corporate culture (Kay & Laberge, 2002). As a result, belonging to a community of mountain bikers can become all-encompassing and begin to dominate the corporate workplace environment as the norm. Simon (49) explained:

The board of directors sit in meetings and talk about their fitness, heart-rate zones, training plans, upcoming races and mountain bike equipment. The Chief Financial Officer's first line item on the budget for 2017 was new cycling kit and instead of a year-end function, the company paid every employee's entrance fee for a stage race.

This type of sentiment was heard many times in our interviews; businesspeople use the understood subculture as a means to communicate, socialise and establish connections inside and beyond the workplace. Interactions with professional riders added to this narrative and we observed heightened feelings of status and belonging. This is contrary to Stebbins' (2001) ideas that interpersonal relationships are casual and that serious leisure does not allow for networking and social, or business advancement outside of the workplace.

Luxury lifestyles for high-income earners

Lifestyles are another channel through which participants in non-professional sports express their interests and attempt to create a personal identity (Stebbins, 2001). Lifestyle sports may have evolved out of counter-culture movements (Bourdieu, 1984), but contemporary participants are increasingly creatures of consumption. Del Carme (2015) posits that in South Africa, 'mountain biking is the new golf'. Due to the costs involved, South African mountain bikers are affluent members of society. Along with networking and completing challenging events, rider lifestyle and status is a major draw card for most participants. Unlike golfers who place their equipment in the trunk of a vehicle, cyclists 'flaunt their wheels outside their vehicles' as a marker of lifestyle status (Del Carme, 2015).

Along with bicycle-related brands, the researchers observed affluence and privilege, characterised by various high-end lifestyles and products among the interviewees. This is further evidence of the substantial disposable income needed to participate in such an event. Walter (60) who drives a Porsche Cayenne, Mae (48) who wears Oakley

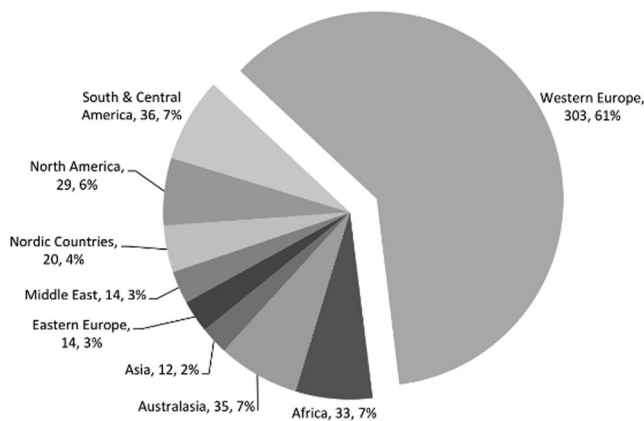


Figure 2. Occupation of participants in Cape Epics from 2008 to 2015. Source: Sarah Haigh, Cape Epic (2015).

sunglasses and a SUUNTO watch and Charlie (45), who is among other things, a recreational helicopter pilot, exemplify this.

The lifestyle feature is further demonstrated by luxury brands being represented in, or sponsoring mountain biking events. Formula 1 racing driver Alain Prost is a celebrity Cape Epic participant from another luxury lifestyle sport (Fenton, 2013), Land Rover is a sponsorship partner of Cape Epic and along with the provision of many luxury vehicles for event logistics, this brand sponsors a number of teams in the race (Cape Epic, 2017). In a 2015 interview, Michael Finch, editor of *Bicycling* magazine, concurred that advertisers interested in his publication are high-level luxury brands (Del Carme). Although mountain biking media concentrate largely on stereotypical lifestyle sports participants (Huybers-Withers & Livingston, 2010) the emergence of sponsorships from luxury lifestyle brands since the late 2000s is evidence of a shifting paradigm that sees participants in lifestyle sports as an economically valuable subgroup in the global economy (Wheaton, 2010). In South Africa, privileged people that can afford luxury brands are limited in number, so an event like the Cape Epic is an opportune chance to market luxury brands to a very specific target group of mostly white, affluent, middle-aged men.

This target group is exemplified by Cape Epic participants, of whom, more than two thirds are upper-level managers in their professional lives (Figure 2) and 10% of these work in the financial sector (personal communication, Sarah Haigh, Cape Epic, October 25, 2016). ABSA (a subsidiary of the Barclays Africa Group) has been the headline sponsor of the race since 2006. ABSA is one of Africa’s largest financial services providers, further implicating the banking sector and those employed in its halls in the demographic fabric of the race. Upon arrival at Cape Town International Airport visitors are greeted by a five-storey-tall billboard advertisement for ABSA and the Cape Epic (Figure 3) and a secondary billboard asking ‘How Big is your Brave?’

While the high cost of entry quite likely prohibits other would-be entrants (the entrance fee for 2018 is ZAR 74,900 or US\$ 5690 per team of two) the link between high-achieving,

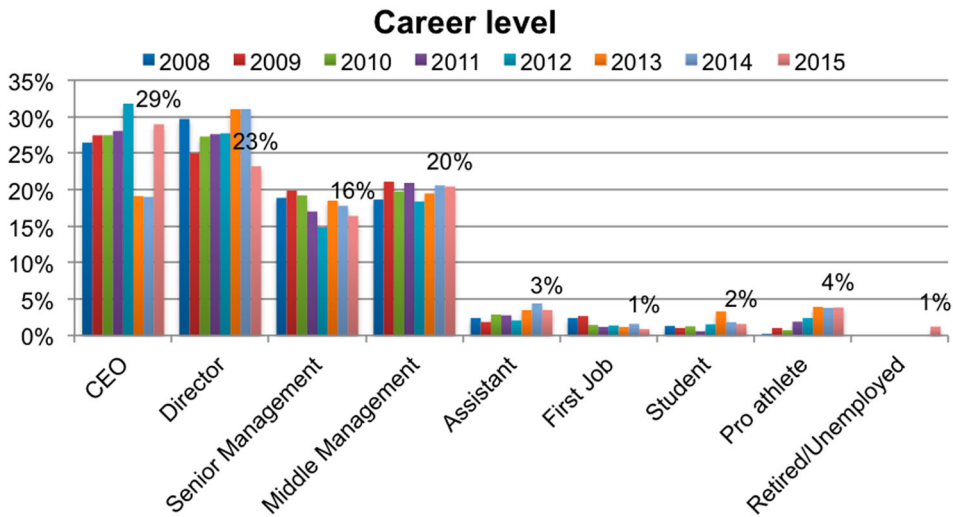


Figure 3. ABSA Cape Epic Billboard at Cape Town International Airport. Source: Photographed by the corresponding author.

high-earning professionals and a desire to perform in multiple aspects of their lives cannot be ignored (Heo, Lee, McCormick, & Pedersen, 2010). Training, travel time, financial commitment, skill development and industry knowledge are all key elements of success in serious leisure (Stebbins, 1982, 2005). This is particularly true for mountain biking. In 2015 the average entrant spent ZAR 145,710 (US\$ 11,000) to participate in the race (Cape Epic, 2015).

Only one participant was retired. Those that are not (and thus have limited training time) may spend even more money to gain a competitive advantage. Walter (60), the treasurer of a large corporation, started mountain biking six years ago at age 54. He claimed that he is willing to spend whatever it takes to get a competitive advantage. He stated that a lighter, more expensive bike and wheels with the right set-up could save him a lot of energy over a long day. Compounded over eight long days, the bicycle makes a considerable difference to Walter's performance and level of fatigue. David (45), a marketing executive, crashed during the first day of the 2017 Cape Epic and was forced to abandon the race. He was a sponsored rider, but nonetheless felt devastated by his inability to complete the race. Despite his race entry fee being covered, he had spent a year physically and mentally preparing for the race and a considerable amount of money in purchasing a new bicycle, cycling clothing, equipment and nutritional supplements as well as incurring appreciable travelling expenses. Joe (59) a local from the Western Cape explained that as his children grew older their demands on him in terms of nurturing and finance decreased. He now has more time to train and more disposable income to pay for the Cape Epic, without making sacrifices in other aspects of his life.

Once again, gender needs to be considered in spending patterns and participant homogeneity. Women in South Africa are less likely than men to spend large amounts of money on their bicycles and bicycle-related goods (personal communication, Craig Boyes, Specialized Bicycle Components, 24 February 2017). It follows that they are also less likely to spend a large amount of money on entering a mountain bike race that not only requires a large financial investment, but an investment in training time as well.

This is confirmed by the low numbers of female participants in the race. The number of women grew from 60 to 72 participants over fourteen years. These numbers include both 'women only' and 'mixed team' female riders. Male riders on the contrary, almost doubled in number, from 698 to 1122 over the same time period. This is in direct conflict with literature that states female involvement in lifestyle sports is increasing (Dilley & Scraton, 2010; Van Bottenburg & Salome, 2010; Wheaton, 2017a, 2017b); thus, it is possible that participation in the race is related more to economic status, expendable time, and income, and less about gender. That said, women in serious leisure can experience difficulty in sacrificing time spent with their families to participate in their chosen hobby; this is particularly true of mothers with young children (Dilley & Scraton, 2010; Spowart, Burrows, & Shaw, 2010; Wheaton, 2017b). Two of the three women we interviewed were single, with adult children. One was married with no children, meaning their childcare responsibilities had dwindled or were non-existent. One is a medical doctor, another a financial analyst and the third a real-estate developer; all three are career-driven, high-income earners. This facet cannot be ignored – they are empowered women who can 'challenge existing restrictive gendered identities' because they can afford the time and money to join their male counterparts (Dilley & Scraton, 2010, p. 129).

Serious challenges

There is nothing casual about the Cape Epic and riders take this challenge seriously. Participants in the Cape Epic must often endure or overcome challenges like extreme weather, physical obstacles, injury and mechanical failure. Over 40% of Cape Epic participants used the word 'challenge' in survey responses relating to their motivation to enter the race. For the serious overachiever who is earnest about leisure, the two preoccupations with the experience are finishing the race and surmounting the challenge. As Ari (45), a business owner said, 'I love a challenge. I push myself to the limit and then set myself other goals. It keeps me on my toes and feeds this desire to better myself in ways I never thought possible'.

All of the interviewees reported that they were committed to physical training at least four or more times per week in the five months prior to the event and all shared a work-like ethos toward training and preparation for the race, displaying signs of serious leisure participation (Stebbins, 1982, 2005). Remy (48), an international, retired investment banker said that he has always loved riding his bike. Early retirement allows him to exercise every day and continue to work as a consultant. Remy was interviewed at the 2017 Cape Epic and he was forthright about his good fortune:

I spent twenty years working really hard, working through lunch, through dinner and working nights. I only got to ride on weekends, if at all ... but I made a lot of money. A few years back I decided to quit and spend some of that money and do the things I love ... and then ... I'm an overachiever so I went all in, the bike, the training and it became like a job. I take it pretty seriously.

Remy's commitment to leisure pursuits resembles work. Serious leisure is often compared to work (Stebbins, 1982, 2005) and oftentimes a career-like evolution of the participant occurs.

Andrea (52) started cycling at the age of 40. She was a heavy smoker and about 23 kg overweight. Her progression from couch to Cape Epic has a career-like trajectory. Although she cites a friend and colleague as the reason for her getting involved, her development as a mountain biker had tentative beginnings. The ensuing development of skills, confidence and knowledge has culminated in a remarkable achievement, namely finishing the Cape Epic. For other riders, the competition is serious: Sven (50), a five-time Cape Epic finisher and retired professional sportsman, noted that although (for people like Andrea) finishing is in itself a great achievement, he always wants to place as high as he can. Sven said he would ride as hard as he could if it meant finishing ahead of one other team, 'even for 300th place'. Sven demonstrates a competitive mentality often overlooked in lifestyle sports. His professional sporting background in a team-based, competitive environment motivates him to attain and achieve wherever possible. Andrea, however, is satisfied by the achievement of finishing.

The differences in Sven and Andrea's experiences highlight that despite the demographic homogeneity of the group, there are different personalities, motivations and nuances within this cohort, not least of which, is gender.

Gendered experiences

Gender is a theme that was prevalent in all of our interviews with women and unwittingly so in our interviews with men. Charlie (45), races with a sponsored team, he partners with

former professional sportsmen (mostly rugby players) or other celebrities to ‘get them through the eight days and allow other guys (sic) to meet and network with sporting icons’. Charlie’s reference to ‘guys’ highlights the gendered aspect of Cape Epic subculture. In 2019 only 72 out of 1122 riders were women (Cape Epic, 2019). This conflicts with current trends and ideas about lifestyle sports and changing demographics, and a seemingly gender-neutral race that offers equal prize money for male and female winners.

The Cape Epic experience is heavily gendered, not only in terms of participation, but as an experience. Team names in the 2016 race reveal various patriarchal naming conventions that objectify or sexualise either women or the landscape: ‘Whoreiors’, ‘Paradise Pimps’ and ‘The Butcher and His Babe’ are three striking examples (Cape Epic, 2017). Maria (45) expressed her experience as a female rider as akin to finding herself in a men’s locker room:

Around day three I crawled out of my tent and there was a naked man applying his anti-chafe balm.⁵ The tents are set up close together ... (he) was about two feet from my face. Maybe he didn’t know there were women in that section of tents, but I felt really uncomfortable.

Andrea (52) did not feel the same. Instead, she became accustomed to the predominantly male environment and added, ‘The Epic is probably the safest place a woman can be’. She explained further that, ‘There is absolutely no testosterone left at the end of the day, it is all left out of the road — nobody has anything left to prove’.

Commitments in terms of time and money, the perceived risks associated with mountain biking and the outdoors are associated with male subjects and masculinity, thus male dominance in this sport and event is not surprising (Heo et al., 2010; Norman et al., 2011; Laurendeau & Sharara, 2008; Thorpe, 2007). Male dominance is evident not only in the demographic data but also in media depictions and coverage of the race. Huybers-Withers and Livingston (2010) investigated this shift toward a focus on male participants, more aggressive riding styles and hard-core masculinity and called for investigation into lived cultures to assess the impact on both male and female contemporary mountain bikers. Evidently, the circumstances and motivations of women participants in the Cape Epic and women mountain bikers in general require further investigation. It would be useful to know whether other women would like to participate but ultimately choose not to, or cannot afford to do so, and whether those that do participate, can, and do so for the same or similar reasons as their male counterparts.

Conquering untamed nature

Bart (49) an international participant, mentioned being in the ‘wild of Africa’. Although not clearly expressed or articulated, there are underlying post-colonial sentiments in many Cape Epic experiences and perceptions like this one of Bart. Cape Epic is a race that contributes to and builds on the idea of humans persevering through extreme conditions to conquer nature and ‘uncivilised’ places. The race organisers recognise this and play on extreme aspects to attract participants. Four examples illustrate this viewpoint. First, all posts on social media use the hash tag ‘#untamed’. Second, video footage of a professional rider crashing into a small antelope during the 2013 Cape Epic (Fenton, 2013) features repeatedly in promotional media. Third, survey respondents frequently used words and phrases that allude to adventure and overcoming nature, for example ‘conquest’,



Figure 4. Regional origin of the 496 international riders in the 2015 Cape Epic. Source: Corresponding author.

‘overcome the elements’ and ‘beat the heat’. Fourth, no outside assistance is allowed to riders and participants speak about ‘can-do’ and ‘DIY’ attitudes, both of which are core values of perseverance (Wheaton, 2010) and evidence of self-reliance.

Over 75% of the participants are males of Caucasian ethnicity and three out of four international participants are from Western countries (Figure 4). Mae (48) cites the landscape as a powerful motivator for participation in the race. In (city name) the mountain bike trails are limited and busy. In contrast, the trails experienced in the Cape Epic are extensive, varied and ‘out-of-this-world’. Figure 4 illustrates that 61% of the 496 international riders originate from Western European countries, 6% are from North American countries and 4% are from Nordic countries. In total, 71% of international participants (352 of 496) are from one of these three developed regions. It is possible that the large numbers of participants from developed regions are related to stronger currencies, minimal time differences (with Europe) and exposure to mountain biking or media broadcasting of the race in these regions. However, it is also plausible that the same participants, originating in developed countries, display self-imposed longing outside of their societal influences to experience risk through ‘flow’ experiences (Fletcher, 2008).

Privileged risk

According to Taylor (2010) motives for participation in mountain biking among other things, include enjoying the landscape (scenery), escape, freedom, thrill-seeking and feelings of ‘flow’. Flow is defined as a balance between risk and skill for optimal exhilaration or

experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Breivik, 2010; Heo et al., 2010; Taylor, 2010). 'Flow' was commonly cited by our study participants when talking about mountain biking. Ideas relating to flow are one aspect of Krein's (2014) argument on nature sports that we find problematic. Krein posits (of nature sports) that 'unpredictability and fluidity of natural features is absolutely central to them' (Krein, 2014, p. 199). In placing this emphasis on 'flow', Krein relinquishes the importance of his other qualifiers relating to human-made features or competition. 'Flow' is central to mountain biking; perhaps mountain biking presents an interesting platform on which to better define or challenge current ideas related to 'nature sports'.

Risky lifestyle sports like mountain biking are most popular in industrialised societies; the same societies that try to minimise risk, uncertainty and chaos and from which 71% of international Epic participants originate (Beck, 1992; Fletcher, 2008). Despite Stebbins' (1997) notion that thrill-seeking is reserved for casual leisure, participants in serious leisure and the Cape Epic are motivated by and enjoy opportunities for risk-taking. The Cape Epic provides an opportunity to disembark from well-organised urban environments (such as those found in certain Western European countries). Two foreign interviewees expressed sentiments suggesting an escape from everyday life and the urban realm as motives for participating in the race. In South Africa, society is less organised and somewhat chaotic. Although South African interviewees did not specifically mention a search for adventure or escape from the urban realm, Ari's (45) reference to 'finding his limits' suggest an attempt to go beyond his already successful business pursuits and his everyday life to find meaning in his own self and humanity (Lyng, 1990). Participation is thus directly linked to their position of privilege, success, and need to further validate their abilities; this is true of both South African and international participants.

Conclusion: the untamed reality

Despite the emphasis that promotional media and television coverage place on professional riders, who for the most part are young, white, athletic males, the majority of Cape Epic participants are white, privileged, mid-life males. The lack of growth in numbers of female participants over the past fourteen years is perplexing and conflicts with most of what is understood about the demographics of contemporary lifestyle sports participation.

The luxurious lifestyle and improved self-image of Cape Epic mountain bikers involved in serious leisure set them apart from traditional lifestyle sport participants involved in counter-culture movements. Cape Epic participants are instead driven by consumerism, competitiveness, and corporate values, all of which display elements of serious leisure, despite their prevalence in a lifestyle sport event. As a result of this affluent, male demographic, and contrary to the ideas of Stebbins (2001) that serious leisure excludes social elements – promoters of, and participants in the race, use the event as a business and social networking opportunity. Completion of the Cape Epic provides lifestyle sports participants in mountain biking with sub-cultural capital and credibility beyond the race that translates into their business relationships.

Also contrary to Stebbins' (1997) distinctions between serious and casual leisure, the serious participants in Cape Epic enjoy the experience of 'flow', 'thrills' and adventure, all of which Stebbins deemed casual, and which Krein (2014) ascribes to nature sports. In addition, overcoming the elements and surviving the challenge all typify nature

sports, adding to participant appreciation of, and the sub-cultural capital realised through finishing the race (Fletcher, 2008; Kay & Laberge, 2002), despite nature sports excluding competition from its narrative.

Women are a distinct minority in Cape Epic participants. Those women who can and do participate are often empowered by their business, personal and financial situations. As Fletcher (2008) proposed, the privilege may be as relevant to lifestyle sports as participant origin, and we add gender.

The Cape Epic is thus somewhat of an anomaly and provides an opportunity to challenge existing ideas relating to lifestyle sports, nature sports, and serious leisure. Despite trends showing more minority groups involved in lifestyle sports, female participation at the Cape Epic has remained somewhat constant instead of increasing. Although nature sports exclude competition, including mountain bike racing, the concept of 'flow' is central to the experience of the Cape Epic and thus challenges the parameters of nature sports. Serious leisure minimises social interaction, however, the serious leisure and teamwork experienced by those training and participating in the lifestyle sport of mountain biking is inherently social in nature. Thus, based upon these findings, this article challenges contemporary theories on lifestyle sports and serious leisure, it also presents a conundrum to nature sports through its core values of 'flow'. In the case of the Cape Epic, where serious leisure meets lifestyle sports, mountain biking is for wealthy, white, middle-aged men. It is intended that this study and the case of the Cape Epic provide a platform upon which these outliers might be further explored, added to, challenged or re-assessed.

Notes

1. Lifestyle sports are also referred to as alternative, action, adventure or extreme sports. In this case, after Wheaton (2010), we use 'lifestyle sports' because many participants refer to their activities as 'lifestyles' rather than 'sports'.
2. Amateur riders are paying entrants who are not currently full-time, professional, mountain bikers ranked by the UCI. Although amateurs may be sponsored or supported, they are not paid a salary or wage to participate in the race.
3. Under the system of apartheid, South Africans of different races were geographically and socially separated and non-white South Africans were denied access to equal educational, employment and other services. Although steps have been taken to remediate the effects of the system, a large majority of the 'previously disadvantaged' non-white population continues to live in poverty.
4. We expand upon this in the analysis, but our assessment of participant wealth (aside from their ability to afford the cost of the Cape Epic) was based on their physical possessions, occupations and verbal cues (for example one participant's reference to his helicopter).
5. Typically applied to a rider's bottom to prevent saddle sores and rashes.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This work was supported by a postdoctoral fellowship from Stellenbosch University and the National Research Foundation of South Africa.

ORCID

Sanette L. A. Ferreira  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6789-4243>

References

- Allen-Collinson, J. (2009). Sporting embodiment: Sports studies and the (continuing) promise of phenomenology. *Qualitative Research in Sport and Exercise*, 1(3), 279–296.
- Beal, B. (1995). Disqualifying the official: An exploration of social resistance through the subculture of skateboarding. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 12(3), 252–267.
- Beal, B., & Wilson, C. (2004). 'Chicks dig scars': Commercialisation and the transformations of skateboarders' identities. In B. Wheaton (Ed.), *Understanding lifestyle sports: Consumption, identity and difference* (pp. 31–54). London: Routledge.
- Beck, U. (1992). *Risk society, towards a new modernity*. (M. Ritter, Trans.). London: Sage.
- Booth, D., & Thorpe, H. (2007). *Berkshire encyclopedia of extreme sport*. Great Barrington: Berkshire Reference Works.
- Bordelon, L., & Ferreira, S. (2018). Going off-road: The Stellenbosch Winelands as a mountain biking destination. *African Journal for Physical Activity & Health Sciences (AJPHEs)*, 24(4), 659–672.
- Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Breivik, G. (2010). Trends in adventure sports in a post-modern society. *Sport in Society*, 13, 260–273. doi:10.1080/17430430903522970.
- Brink, T. (2015). Day in the life of an amateur. In *Cape Epic ride guide 2015* (pp. 118–120). Cape Town: Cape Epic.
- Brymer, E., Downey, G., & Gray, T. (2009). Extreme sports as a precursor to environmental sustainability. *Journal of Sport & Tourism*, 14, 193–204.
- Cape Epic. (2017). Retrieved from www.cape-epic.com
- Cape Epic. (2019). Retrieved from www.cape-epic.com
- Cashmore, E. (2000). *Making sense of sports* (3rd ed.). London: Routledge.
- Cessford, G. R. (1995). *Off-road mountain biking: A profile of participants and their recreation setting and experience preferences (science and research series 93)*. Wellington: Department of Conservation.
- Creswell, J. W. (2009). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience*. New York, NY: Harper and Row.
- Del Carme, L. (2015). Mountain biking is the new golf. *Sunday Times*. Retrieved from www.timeslive.co.za
- Dilley, R. E., & Scraton, S. J. (2010). Women, climbing and serious leisure. *Leisure Studies*, 29(2), 125–141.
- Dupuis, S. L. (1999). Naked truths: Towards a reflexive methodology in leisure research. *Leisure Sciences*, 21(1), 43–64.
- Fenton, R. (2013). Absa Cape Epic: Full report. *Bikemagic*. Retrieved from www.bikemagic.com
- Fletcher, R. (2008). Living on the edge: The appeal of risk sports for the professional middle class. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 25, 310–330.
- Getz, D., & McConnell, A. (2011). Serious sport tourism and event travel careers. *Journal of Sport Management*, 25, 326–338.
- Gorin, D. (2019). Biking Mad: Cycling has bewitched South Africa, are you one of the obsessed? *Business Day: Wanted*. Retrieved from www.wantedonline.co.za
- Green, B. C., & Jones, I. (2005). Serious leisure, social identity and sport tourism. *Sport in Society*, 8(2), 164–181.
- Henrys, C. (2017). Old-timers: Haimar Zubeldia joins the Tour de France 40+ club. *RoadcyclingUK*. Retrieved from www.roadcyclinguk.com
- Heo, J., Lee, Y., McCormick, B. P., & Pedersen, P. M. (2010). Daily experience of serious leisure, flow and subjective well-being of older adults. *Leisure Studies*, 29, 207–225. doi:10.1080/02614360903434092.

- Huybers-Withers, S. M., & Livingston, L. A. (2010). Mountain biking is for men: Consumption practices and identity portrayed by a niche magazine. *Sport in Society*, 13, 1204–1222. doi:10.1080/17430431003780195.
- Kay, J., & Laberge, S. (2002). Mapping the field of “AR”: Adventure racing and Bourdieu’s concept of field. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 19, 25–46.
- King, K., & Church, A. (2013). We don’t enjoy nature like that: Youth identity and lifestyle in the countryside. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 31, 67–76.
- King, K., & Church, A. (2015). Questioning policy, youth participation and lifestyle sports. *Leisure Studies*, 34(3), 282–302.
- Krein, Kevin J. (2014). Nature sports. *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, 41(2), 193–208. doi:10.1080/00948705.2013.785417
- Kruger, M., & Saayman, M. (2014). How do mountain bikers and road cyclists differ? *South African Journal for research in sport. Physical Education and Recreation*, 36, 137–152.
- Kuehlwein, J., & Schaefer, W. (2017). Ueber-branding: How modern prestige brands create meaning through mission and myth. *Journal of Brand Strategy*, 5(4), 395–409.
- Laurendeau, J., & Sharara, N. (2008). ‘Women could be every bit as good as guys’: Reproductive and resistant agency in two action sports. *Journal of Sport & Social Issues*, 32, 24–47.
- Lehohla, P. (2017). *Poverty trends in South Africa: An examination of absolute poverty from 2006 to 2015*. Pretoria: Statistics South Africa.
- Lindsey, J. (2017). 2017 Tour de France stage 1: Daily dish. *Bicycling*. Retrieved from www.bicycling.com
- Lyng, S. (1990). Edgework: A social psychological analysis of voluntary risk taking. *American Journal of Sociology*, 95, 851–886.
- Millmore, S. (2013). Songo Fipaza and Cape Epic: South Africa’s township youth riding on one man’s hope. *International Business Times*. Retrieved from www.ibtimes.co.uk
- Minello, K., & Nixon, D. (2017). ‘Hope I never stop’: Older men and their two-wheeled love affairs. *Annals of Leisure Research*, 20(1), 75–95. doi:10.1080/11745398.2016.1218290
- Morey, E. R., Buchanan, T., & Waldman, D. M. (2002). Estimating the benefits and costs to mountain bikers to changes in trail characteristics, access fees, and site closures: Choice experiments and benefits transfer. *Journal of Environmental Management*, 64, 411–422.
- Norman, M. E., Gerarda Power, N., & Dupré, K. (2011). Playing in the woods: Youth, leisure and the performance of gender relations in rural Newfoundland. *Annals of Leisure Research*, 14(2–3), 155–175.
- Phoenix, C., & Grant, B. (2009). Expanding the agenda for research on the physically active aging body. *Journal of Aging and Physical Activity*, 17, 362–379.
- Rinehart, R. (2000). Emerging/arriving sport: Alternatives to formal sports. In J. Coakley & E. Dunning (Eds.), *Handbook of sports studies* (pp. 504–519). London: Sage.
- Salome, L., & Van Bottenburg, M. (2012). Are they all daredevils? Introducing a participation typology for the consumption of lifestyle sports in different settings. *European Sport Management Quarterly*, 12, 19–42. doi:10.1080/16184742.2011.637171
- Scott Shafer, C., & Scott, D. (2013). Dynamics of progression in mountain bike racing. *Leisure Sciences*, 35, 353–364. doi:10.1080/01490400.2013.797328
- Shipway, R., & Jones, L. (2008). The great suburban Everest: An insiders perspective on experiences at the 2007 Flora London Marathon. *Journal of Sport & Tourism*, 13(1), 61–78.
- Spowart, L., Burrows, L., & Shaw, S. (2010). ‘I just eat, sleep and dream of surfing’: When surfing meets motherhood. *Sport in Society*, 13(7–8), 1186–1203.
- Stebbins, R. A. (1982). Serious leisure: A conceptual statement. *The Pacific Sociological Review*, 25, 251–272.
- Stebbins, R. A. (1997). Casual leisure: A conceptual statement. *Leisure Studies*, 16(1), 17–25.
- Stebbins, R. A. (2001). Serious leisure. *Society*, 38(4), 53–57.
- Stebbins, R. A. (2005). Project-based leisure: Theoretical neglect of a common use of free time. *Leisure Studies*, 24(1), 1–11.
- Taylor, S. (2010). Extending the dream machine: Understanding people’s participation in mountain biking. *Annals of Leisure Research*, 13, 259–281.

- Thorpe, H. (2007). Gender. In D. Booth & H. Thorpe (Eds.), *Berkshire encyclopedia of extreme sports* (pp. 103–111). Great Barrington: Berkshire Publishing Group.
- Tour de France. (2017). Retrieved from www.letour.com
- Tulle, E. (2008). *Ageing, the body and social change: Running in later life*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Van Bottenburg, M., & Salome, L. (2010). The indoorisation of outdoor sports: An exploration of the rise of lifestyle sports in artificial settings. *Leisure Studies, 29*, 143–160. doi:10.1080/02614360903261479
- Van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching lived experience*. London, ON: Althouse Press.
- Wheaton, B. (2004). Introduction: Mapping the lifestyle sport-scape. In B. Wheaton (Ed.), *Understanding lifestyle sports: Consumption, identity and difference* (pp. 1–28). London: Routledge.
- Wheaton, B. (2010). Introducing the consumption and representation of lifestyle sports. *Sport in Society, 13*, 1057–1081. doi:10.1080/17430431003779965
- Wheaton, B. (2013). *The cultural politics of lifestyle sport*. London: Routledge.
- Wheaton, B. (2017a). Surfing through the life-course: Silver surfers' negotiation of ageing. *Annals of Leisure Research, 20*(1), 96–116. doi:10.1080/11745398.2016.1167610
- Wheaton, B. (2017b). Staying 'stoked': Surfing, ageing and post-youth identities. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport, 1–23*. doi:10.1177/10126902