Chapter 7
Active Leisure

College students dance away their spring break in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. Photograph taken on March 20, 1962, by Ron Kuntz. Courtesy of UPI/Corbis-Bettmann.
Baseball was the dominant spectator sport during the first half of the century. The National Football League was founded in the 1920s but did not attract a significant following until after World War II. Professional basketball and ice hockey first acquired mass audiences in the 1950s.

Baseball continued to draw the largest total attendance in the latter decades of the century, but football and basketball had larger per-game shares of the television audience. According to the NFL, eight of the ten most watched television programs ever were Super Bowl games. Professional football’s television revenues exceeded $1.2 billion in 1998, compared with about $600 million for basketball and about $300 million for baseball.

The rising income from television commercials and steeply rising ticket prices enriched the players. As late as the 1960s, ordinary players in professional sports were not paid much more than ordinary blue-collar workers. After 1980, however, their pay climbed rapidly. The stars in professional sports, whose large salaries were supplemented by huge fees from product endorsements, had some of the highest incomes in the nation, albeit usually for a relatively brief period of time. Many team owners benefited similarly. The Washington Redskins franchise was sold in 1999, after a particularly dismal season, for more than half a billion dollars.

Black players were barred from professional sports until 1947, when the Brooklyn Dodgers signed Jackie Robinson. At the end of the century, blacks held a majority of playing positions in basketball and large shares of the football and baseball rosters.

Other minority groups also achieved greater representation in professional sports. Among major league baseball players, for example, the proportion of Hispanics more than doubled in a decade, from 8 percent in 1987 to 17 percent by 1997.
Major Professional Sports
Attendance in millions

Players' average salaries in millions of 1999 dollars
Track and field performance improved significantly.

The charts show the American records from 1900 to 1998 in four men’s track and field events: the high jump, the long jump, the pole vault, and the mile run. Improvement in each of these events was intermittent. Some records went unmatched for decades; others were overturned within days.

From 1900 to 1998, the record high jump increased by 22 percent, the record long jump by 21 percent, and the record pole vault by 66 percent. The time of the record mile decreased by 11 percent. The extraordinary increase in the pole vault record was caused by technological advances that led to lighter and springier poles.

In 1900, the American records in all four of these events were also world records. As late as 1970, the American records in three of the four events were world records. In 1998, the long jump was the only one of these events in which an American held the world record. The high jump champion was a Cuban, the pole vault champion was a Ukrainian, and the fastest miler was an Algerian. But in the totality of men’s events, the United States held as many records as the next four countries combined. The United States was much less dominant in women’s track and field competition.
Men's Track and Field Records

High Jump
Inches

Long Jump
Feet

Pole Vault
Feet

Mile
Seconds

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The growth of leisure activities that followed World War II included significantly increased usage of the National Park System.

Yellowstone National Park—established by an act of Congress in 1872 in the territories of Montana and Wyoming “as a public park or pleasing ground for the benefit and enjoyment of the people”—was the first national park anywhere in the world. It launched a movement that sparked the creation of national parks in more than a hundred countries, as well as a complex network of facilities in the United States. In 1998, the National Park System included 77 million acres, up from just 3 million acres in 1900.

In addition to large national parks such as Yellowstone, the National Park System includes national battlefields and battlefield parks and sites, national military parks, national historical parks, national historic sites, national lakeshores and seashores, the national memorial at Mount Rushmore, national monuments, national parkways, national preserves, national recreation areas, national rivers, the national capital parks, national wild and scenic rivers, national scenic trails, and national wilderness areas—altogether some four hundred sites occupying about 3 percent of the nation’s land area.

In 1998, Yellowstone attracted 3.1 million visitors, primarily during the warmer months. Although this represented an increase of more than 50 percent since 1980, it was not sufficient to earn Yellowstone a place among the twenty most visited sites in the National Park System. Sixteenth-ranked Grand Canyon National Park, accessible all year round, attracted 4.6 million visitors, nearly 50 percent more than Yellowstone. The Great Smoky Mountains National Park, the third most visited site in the system, drew 10 million visitors, more than twice as many as the Grand Canyon. Still, the trend in visitor traffic at Yellowstone, shown in the chart, does reflect the trend for the National Park System as a whole.
The steady increase in membership in the Boy Scouts of America peaked in the early 1970s and then fluctuated during the last quarter of the century.

The Boy Scout movement was founded in Great Britain in 1908 by Sir Robert Baden-Powell and exported to the United States in 1910, where it absorbed two organizations for boys that combined pioneer and outdoor skills with character-building exercises. These forerunner organizations were Daniel Beard’s Sons of Daniel Boone and Ernest Thompson Seton’s Woodcraft Indians. All three founders remained active in the Boy Scouts organization for many years and contributed to its considerable success.

Scouting was originally intended for boys aged twelve to fifteen, but over the course of time, membership was extended to younger boys through the Cub Scouts and to older boys through the Explorers and Sea Scouts. Scouts at each level progressed through a hierarchy of rank that is based on specific accomplishments, signified by merit badges and other insignia. The participation of adult volunteers was always very high. At the end of the century, there were about four adult leaders for every ten scouts.

The Golden Jamboree of Scouting held at Colorado Springs in 1960 attracted scouts from all over the world and perhaps marked the apogee of the movement. Membership peaked at 6.5 million in 1972 and then declined sharply; it increased through much of the 1980s and then declined again. In 1998, the Boy Scouts had 4.8 million members, down 26 percent from the organization’s 1972 peak. In 1972, about 31 percent of the 19 million boys aged ten through nineteen were in Scouting. In 1998, about 25 percent of the 20 million boys in that age group were Boy Scouts.
Membership in Boy Scouts of America
Millions per year
(Includes Cub Scouts, Sea Scouts, Explorers, and adult volunteers)

1911 = 61,495
1998 = 4.8 million
The world record for land speed, not subject to any particular human limitation, increased throughout the century.

This was not a purely American record because several of the drivers, including the 1997 record holder, were British. But only the United States had the Utah salt flats and Nevada desert to provide the flat, open, hard, unpaved terrain on which massive automobiles could safely run a measured mile.

The chart shows a fairly constant rate of improvement from Henry Ford’s 100 miles per hour in a seventy-two-horsepower Ford Arrow at Lake St. Clair, Michigan, in 1904 to Andy Green’s 763 miles per hour in a Thrust SSC at Black Rock Desert, Nevada, in 1997. Early record-breaking cars were similar to production vehicles, with one or more internal combustion engines. By 1960, such a car was pushed to 400 miles per hour. Further advances became possible after the introduction of jet engines. At the end of the century, record-breaking vehicles resembled jet fighter planes without wings. Indeed, the 1997 record-holding driver was a British Royal Air Force pilot.

These steady improvements stood in sharp contrast to auto races on oval tracks, where the physical limitations inherent in the shape of the track and the actions of competitors imposed much tighter constraints on speed. Eddie Cheever averaged 145 miles per hour to win the Indianapolis 500 in 1998, which was nearly twice as fast as Roy Marroun’s average speed of 74 miles per hour in 1911 but a little slower than A. J. Foyt’s winning speed of 147 miles an hour for the same distance in 1964. The record for the Indy 500 was 186 miles an hour, set by Arie Luyendyk in a Lola–Chevy Indy in 1990.
Land Speed Record
Miles per hour

1900 = 66
1997 = 763

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Overseas travel by Americans greatly increased during the latter part of the century, but the number of foreign visitors to the United States increased even more.

For most of the century, the number of Americans who went abroad for business or pleasure exceeded the number of foreigners who came to the United States. During World War II, international travel for business or pleasure almost disappeared.

In the 1950s, the jet airplane ushered in a new era of international travel. The number of foreigners visiting the United States and other tourist destinations grew rapidly. Indeed, in the last half of the century, the number of foreign visitors to the United States increased one hundredfold, while the number of American visitors abroad grew more than thirtyfold. In 1980, for the first time, foreign travelers to the United States outnumbered American travelers abroad. Although this pattern did not hold from 1982 through 1990, foreign visitors to the United States again outnumbered American visitors abroad for much of the last decade of the century. Japan, the United Kingdom, and Germany provided the largest contingents of visitors. Their favorite destinations were New York, Los Angeles, Miami, San Francisco, Orlando, Oahu, and Las Vegas.

Europe was still the preferred destination for American travelers, but the Far East was close behind. Within Europe, the leading tourist destinations were London, Paris, and Rome, as well as classic attractions such as Florence, Venice, the Swiss Alps, and the French Riviera. Business destinations were more widely distributed.

The chart does not cover travel to or from Canada and Mexico. Figures on international travel within North America are difficult to interpret because so many people made multiple or even daily border crossings. It appears that the volume of traffic between the United States and its close neighbors grew at least as much as the volume of overseas travel.
Overseas Travel
Millions of travelers per year

1919 = 152,000
1919 = 47,000
1997 = 22 million
1997 = 24 million

Foreign visitors
Americans abroad

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