

# Encyclopedia of Recreation and Leisure in America

African American Leisure Lifestyles

by Vernon L. Andrews

equipment-based exercise (such as circuit training and a specialized indoor cycling commonly referred to as spinning) and water fitness. While aerobics continues to be a popular women's group exercise form, it continually evolves due to the changing market. In 2002, women comprised the largest group of health club members (52 percent) in the United States, thus providing a steady market for aerobics. However, the age composition of exercisers has changed since the 1990s; in 2002, the largest group of health club members in America (37 percent) was thirty-five- to fifty-three-year-olds (12.4 million), and an additional 17 percent were over fifty-five years old. The fitness industry recognized the changing market, with 61 percent of health clubs offering programs specifically for seniors. Fitness professionals, however, need to consider how aerobics can appeal to more mature consumers. Developments that make a concession toward this older demographic are "mindful fitness forms"—such as yoga, Pilates, and tai chi—and numerous incorporated mind-body exercise forms that combine elements of mindfulness with other exercise forms. Examples of such forms include yogaaerobics, yogalates, yoga sculpt, mind-body step, and any physical exercise executed with a profound, inwardly directed awareness or focus. These forms can shift the emphasis away from creating a perfect, youthful body to a more holistic sense of self, proper breathing, body alignment, and the use of intrinsic energy.

This trend might reflect the increasing popularity of "softer" mindful fitness activities over traditional group exercise forms such as aerobics. Based on its 2002 survey, IDEA predicted that group exercise forms such as core conditioning (functional muscle conditioning for the core of the body, for example, abdominals and lower back), yoga, Pilates, and water fitness would appeal to people of many ages and fitness levels and would grow at the expense of high- and low-impact aerobics. Those early aerobic forms, which for many still conjure up the image of a class filled with Lycra-clad, hollering, thin, "perfect" women, have become less appealing to the majority of health club clients.

*See also:* Commercialization of Leisure; Dance Classes

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## AFRICAN AMERICAN LEISURE LIFESTYLES

Ralph Ellison was once quoted by David W. Stone in *Lingua France* on the influence of African American cultural customs on American life by saying, "Without the presence of Negro American style our jokes, our tall tales, even our sports would be lacking in the sudden turns, the shocks, the swift changes of pace (all jazz-shaped) that serve to remind us that the world is ever unexplored, and that while a complete mastery of life is mere illusion, the real secret of the game is to make life swing" (p. 71). Indeed, Ellison pointed out what many would consider the essence of leisure life in America: joking, storytelling, participating in sports, playing jazz and other music forms, and making life swing and having fun. Ellison notes that the specific cultural way African Americans perform their leisure and life has added to the mix of what makes Americans unique in so many ways.

The leisure practices of African Americans have evolved over the years in very divergent ways from white leisure practices. The advent of the slave trade and forced migration from Africa meant that cultural ties to the homeland were very different for those with black, rather than white, ancestors. Whereas many leisure practices by whites could be easily expected to transfer via families and friends to the New World, Africans were pulled out of Africa and pushed into plantation life often with people they did not know and languages and customs they did not practice. What is more, the key component of leisure life is *time*—and slaves had little to bargain with.

William Leonard's definition of leisure in *A Sociological Perspective of Sport* is "free time from obligations, time to choose or not to choose to do certain things" (p. 400). The sociological concept of leisure, especially terms

such as “work,” “obligations,” and “choice,” seems more appropriately linked to a people who are “free,” rather than the severely restricted African American lifestyle during slavery and the post–Civil War Jim Crow segregation era. It is nonetheless instructive to review what freedoms and leisure activities African American slaves engaged in given their peculiar situation.

### **The Impact of Slavery on Black Leisure and Play Customs**

Given the average slave’s daily lifestyle of sunup to sundown work, preparing evening meals, and conducting household chores six days per week (Sunday was the “off” day), one suspects that little time was had for leisure pursuits. Combine the scarcity of time with the restrictions placed on slave mobility and there remain very limited options for leisure activity.

Adult slaves used evenings, Sundays, and the occasional holiday to explore leisure activities. Children, as David K. Wiggins notes in *Glory Bound: Black Athletes in a White America*, had the most time to pursue leisure both inside of and outside the plantation, as they were often exempt from hard field labor until the age of fourteen or fifteen. When not lugging water to friends and family in the fields or doing odd chores around the estate, slave children’s leisure time was spent exploring the world around them. Activities included, as one former slave Acie Thomas notes, “Roaming over ‘broad acres’ of his master’s plantation with other slave children . . . [we] waded in the streams, fished, chased rabbits and always knew where the choicest wild berries and nuts grew” (Wiggins, p. 5). In addition, boys and sometimes girls would contribute to family welfare by hunting and fishing with their fathers at night; this was also time exempt from field labor. Families often engaged in trapping small game or fishing in streams. One might consider this “work” of sorts as it was to provide food and sustenance, but Wiggins notes that families (most often, it would appear, the boys and men) would “realize a much needed feeling of self-worth by adding delicacies to the family table” (pp. 5–6). Further, “There were not many activities in the plantation community where slave fathers and their children could share in the excitement of common pursuits. They both enjoyed the camaraderie and spirit that characterized these occasions” (p. 6). More typical of the leisure pursuits of children in the early 2000s, slave children also engaged in games. “Skeeting” (running and sliding on ice), cards (with grains of corn), racing, horse-shoes, stilt walking, pole jumping, jump rope, and marbles were prevalent games around the South. Some were traditional games learned and passed down over genera-

tions, and other games were concocted on the spot and adjusted to fit the situation, adhering to Ellison’s earlier hypothesis about black style and improvisation. According to authors Lawrence Levine, Shane White and Graham White, and Lerone Bennett, Jr., black men, women, and children on plantations around the South enjoyed other common leisurely pleasures such as humor, laughter and storytelling, constructing and singing songs of all sorts, the making of colorful garments for annual festivals and enjoying the celebration surrounding weddings. Black slaves were making the best of a bad situation by making life, such as it was, liveable in what spare time was available.

### **Emancipation**

Resulting from the brutal Civil War that the American North and South engaged in between 1861 and 1865, black “freedmen” would be able to pursue gainful employment, their own housing, families not torn by the master’s whip, and movement not restricted to the master’s property. The Reconstruction Era (1865–1877) was the Union’s answer to the challenge of 4 million penniless slaves, and though this period is known as a time when blacks gained many institutional advantages, it was a time also marred by governmental contradictions, restrictive black codes (a complex system of social, economic, and political controls on black behavior enacted by whites) and social confusion; the upshot, though, is that African Americans gained their freedom.

Though many ex-slaves, according to the *Ebony Pictorial History of Black America*, suffered the malaise of the time and “wandered from place to place, disillusioned, hungry, and ill. Others staked out small farms and began new lives. Still others, sensing their plight and deeply concerned, held conventions in various cities to discuss problems and map strategy” (p. 8). Leisure life, such as it was, was limited, but much less constraining than before. But the sheer joy of not *having* to work sixteen-hour days in the summer months must have begat an incredible lightness of being among the former bondsmen and women, and one must guess that despite scarce jobs and food, blacks engaged in all manner of leisurely pursuits, from hunting and fishing for sustenance to various games, dancing, and singing activities. Two institutions—education and the black church—greatly aided the black pursuit of freedom and liberty and were havens for leisurely pursuits.

### **Religion, Education, and Leisure**

Educational institutions were set up by the U.S. government’s “Freedman’s Bureau” and numbered more than

4,000 by 1870. These schools included “day schools, night schools, industrial schools, colleges—even Sunday schools. . . . Among the schools founded during the period were Howard University, Hampton Institute, Fisk University, Atlanta University” and many others, according to the *Ebony Pictorial History of Black America* (p. 17). These schools allowed for the pursuit of the leisurely activities of reading, conversing, laughter, dating, and various other small bits of taken-for-granted social interactions that combine to make life pleasant and uplifting. Thus, this baseline social leisure, while not elaborate as fox hunting or attending the opera as others did at the time, was new and different and, one has to guess, not much tarnished by the lack of gainful employment and wealth.

An aid to education—and one of the breakthroughs for black culture at the time—was that the black church came into formal existence and became the center of black life and leisure, in addition to fellowship. The church was the first black social institution controlled entirely by African Americans. Prior to emancipation, most blacks who were Christian had to sit in “crow’s nests” in the back of white churches and allowed only limited leadership roles. After emancipation, black preachers were free to evangelize and form larger institutions, such as the African Methodist Episcopal Church, which grew from 20,000 scattered members in 1856 to more than 200,000 by 1876.

This increase in size meant more money for the church, which in turn led to facilities for cooking, picnics, weddings, funerals, and other cultural events that are part and parcel of collective group leisure and key to individual esteem and self-identity. The church was thus much more central to black life than other social institutions, as James Horton and Lois Horton note in *A History of the African American People*. The church provided an “anchor for black communities. One of the few institutions that African Americans could completely control, the church provided an arena for mobilization, education and collective expression” (p. 106). Some churches provided leisure outlets for congregants, such as classes in sewing and cooking, concerts, lectures, and a gymnasium. Some even provided child-care facilities, freeing up time for these leisure activities.

While other centers of leisurely conversation and gathering places were important, such as pool halls and barbershops, these were primarily the domain of men. Horton and Horton note that “The church provided women with an opening to public life, often leading them into the women’s club movement and . . . the political arena . . . women were the activists, representing two-

thirds of the membership of the National Baptist Convention, the largest organization of black Americans” (p. 107). Leisure, recreation, and sporting activity would grow over the next 100 years as blacks moved north and west and gained a foothold in employment, property ownership, educational institutions, and politics—all aided, in some way, by the assistance of the black church and its members.

### Northern and Western Migration

Slowly, blacks began to realize that the economic pursuits that preceded leisurely lifestyles could be had by leaving the South. Inspired by reading in periodicals such as the *Chicago Defender* that jobs and safe living awaited them across the infamous Mason-Dixon line (demarking the North from the South), many chose to migrate north from 1900 to 1920 to cities such as New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Detroit, and Cleveland, in addition to many other smaller cities. African Americans were thus both “pushed” out of the South by racial hatred and “pulled” to the North by the promise of jobs, safety, and a much more leisurely lifestyle.

Though migration north was problematic—violence awaited blacks who were seen both as wage reducers and strikebreakers by white unions—these problems were small in comparison to the bigger problems if blacks stayed in the South. As it turns out, migration north opened up multiple social opportunities for advancement, aided by organizations such as the Urban League, the YMCA, the NAACP, and, as noted above, the black church and its many denominations. The move west to cities such as Richmond, Oakland, San Francisco, Seattle, and Los Angeles happened primarily post–World War II and added to both the fabric of these communities and the fabric of black social and economic life in shipyards across the west coast.

Gainful employment meant money for more leisurely pursuits in the evenings and weekends, and thus taverns opened up in west coast cities such as Oakland and Richmond. These places provided respite for blacks to relax, listen to black music, and fraternize with the opposite sex. Employers such as Kaiser Shipyards in Richmond sponsored baseball programs and other organized leisurely pursuits for employees, who often participated, but more often, according to Shirley Ann Moore in “Getting There, Being There: African American Migration to Richmond, California, 1910–1945,” African Americans “chose their own recreational pursuits.” Many of these “round-the-clock” shipyards insisted on Sunday work, which severely cut into the leisure pursuits of many black

workers intent on a better life. Thus, absenteeism was high on Sundays, and many blacks, like “European immigrants of the turn of the century . . . viewed their unauthorized absences as a way of reaffirming their cultural value system which placed great emphasis on kinship, friendship, and religious ties”—all part of the greater framework of leisure and cultural belonging which was becoming vital to black life (Moore, p. 122).

World War II was also the first time that black and white truly functioned side by side in any organized fashion. This came about during service in all branches of the military, it and was a humbling experience for whites as, according to Arthur Ashe in *A Hard Road to Glory*, “It was a difficult adjustment to make since blacks dominated sports contests in all branches of the armed forces. It put to rest notions of the natural superiority of whites over blacks . . .” (p. 6). The postwar period led to a boom both in black economics and in black participation in sports and other entertainment avenues. William Leonard notes, in *A Sociological Perspective of Sport*, that more and more people pursue leisurely activities such as sport and entertainment—products of popular culture—due to the increasing rise in discretionary time over the past 150 years. This trend certainly is true for black culture, and sport and entertainment are also significant as they are channels of opportunity in which African Americans have been allowed to advance socially and economically.

### City Life’s Impact on Black Leisure and Play Customs

City life in the twentieth century had many advantages and disadvantages for the black population of the United States. The advantages of having a critical mass meant small businesses, churches, and social life thrived for a time in large communities such as Harlem, Chicago, and Oakland. Recreation facilities were swamped with black kids seeking shelter from the heat and often tough conditions. As Arthur Ashe notes in *A Hard Road to Glory*, “Factories, churches, Urban League Chapters, Travelers Aid societies, fraternal organizations, YMCA’s, and YWCA’s struggle to make life more pleasant for new arrivals” (p. 4). These new arrivals sought shelter in these community organizations and sought leisure activities.

More and more, though, as Ashe noticed, the recreational and leisure activities of black urban youth more and more were geared toward the “big five: baseball, basketball, football, boxing and track” (p. 5). These were sports stressed in the public school system and were thus free of charge to poor youth. These sports formed the nu-

cleus of future black sports participation and of leisurely viewing by black fans of sport.

Indeed, the movie *Hoop Dreams* plays on the very notion that sports was a way for black youth to escape harsh postindustrial conditions in urban America. The documentary film, released in 1994, was premised, notes Liam Kennedy in *Race and Urban Space in Contemporary American Culture*, “on the dream of upward mobility, the movement from margin to mainstream . . . which traditionally features narratives of impoverished athletes triumphing over great odds in pursuit of the American Dream” (pp. 100–101). This pursuit of the American dream—and sport as a vehicle—has been fed by the commercialization of American culture in general, and the targeted urban black young male consumer culture, specifically. But leisure/recreation activity as career option is predominantly the domain of black youth.

African American adults in cities have engaged over the years in a variety of leisurely pursuits, from fishing and gardening to singing and dancing; summer barbecues and picnics; games such as chess, cards, and dominoes; attendance at theaters, concerts, and sports events; membership in civic and fraternal organizations, and meeting at social centers such as bars, pool halls, and barbershops for neighbourly or political conversations. In these activities, black Americans have converged with the larger society, while retaining, as Ellison noted earlier, a specific, deliberate “style” that moves toward improvisation, spontaneity, and individuality. Many black family and civic celebrations happen in and around local urban parks. And though blacks use local parks much more than they use National Parks, urban facilities are often fraught with problems, as Dorceta E. Taylor notes in *Identity in Ethnic Leisure Pursuits*. Those problems extend beyond unwatered grass or poor baseball diamonds into such security hazards as gang hangouts, local dens of drug abuse, homelessness, and parks as places of violence.

### African American Diversity and Other Recent Trends

With the advent of other avenues of mobility in post-civil rights America, African Americans began to expand both their leisure options and career options. The diversification of African American culture—as a result of the end of Jim Crow segregation, the civil rights movement, voting rights, expanded education options, affirmative action, and other legislation—led to more blacks entering the working- and middle-class ranks. With more money and more time come more African American options for leisure, including a wider variety

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of entertainment, recreation, leisurely travel and vacations, and expensive hobbies such as skiing and golf. Both of these latter activities—which cross the boundaries of sport and leisure—have large numbers of African American participants, and many are members of either local or national clubs and organizations.

With the diversification of school systems and increased black entry into university ranks, youth are finding that leisure need not be tied to sport/career options. Hiking, camping, and urban gardening can go side by side with break-dancing, surfing the Internet, and riding dirt bikes as options for urban/suburban and rural leisure. The elderly are finding “mall walking” and travel to be enjoyable forms of leisure later in life, and families are finding leisurely enjoyment in packing up the minivan with local soccer or softball players after the game and heading to the local pizza parlor. Leisure pursuits of African Americans are as diverse in the new century as employment options, locales for living, university affiliations, fraternal and sorority allegiances, parochial sports team fanaticism, and degrees of religiosity. If nothing else, one can be assured that those leisure choices will grow as black style and creativity produce black success in American social institutions in the future.

*See also:* Expansion of Leisure, Rap Music Audiences, Slave Singing/Music Making, Southern America Leisure Lifestyles

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## AGRICULTURAL FAIRS

To effectively understand contemporary American agricultural fairs, one must examine the historical context from which these fairs originated. Following the American Revolution, the relative alienation from Europe forced American farmers to develop independently their own technologies and methods for agricultural production. Efforts to improve agricultural efficiency also fostered the development of agricultural societies and associations whose mission served to disseminate and display agricultural technologies and practices. In particular, these associations afforded farmers who operated small holdings opportunities to exhibit and view displays of livestock and produce in which theory had been transformed into practice. Farmers could win premiums in competitions in the areas that interested them. Organizers gave prizes for sheep shearing and plowing trials. Sheepshearing contests were especially important because of nationalistic and commercial implications. The raising of fine wool for cloth implied domestic self-sufficiency and the beginnings of a competitive trade base for agriculturalists. While all of these early efforts petered out, they functioned as forerunners to the present-day county fairs.

Agricultural societies eventually began to spread from New England to the South and Midwest by the 1820s. Even though the agricultural societies attempted to serve the interests of all social levels for their constituents, it was still a small group of gentlemen farmers who organized and benefited most from the events. Few