

[front page](#)

[news](#)

[back issues](#)

[comment](#)

[letters](#)

[advertise](#)

[subscribe](#)

[about us](#)

[contact us](#)

[back page](#)

## What is the future of sport?

Professor Andy Smith and Simon Kumar of York St John University have been thinking about the future and how those involved with sport might be able to create the future they want. Here they offer four predictions for the future to provoke debate.

Perhaps the only certainty about the future is that it will be different from the predictions that have been made about it. We have therefore approached the task of predicting the future of sport with some trepidation and a lot of humility. However, despite the difficulties of attempting to forecast what will happen to Sport over the next 20 years or so, we think the task is worth attempting for a number of reasons.

First, at a time when many leaders in sport have to focus on detailed financial issues it is important to continue to foster the 'vision thing', to encourage people to look up from the accounts and gaze at the far horizon. Second, attempting to predict the future can help create those scenarios we value and avoid those we dread. Third, speculating on what the future might hold for sport can be a fun thing to do. Readers of this article may well disagree with the four predictions contained within it. If so we hope that this essay will prompt them to make their own forecasts.

If you want to make your own predictions a great starting point is to read Greenfield (2004) and Rees (2003). Other helpful methodologies include: (i) extrapolating from current trends; (ii) identifying people who are early adopters of new technology and seeing what they do; and (iii) talking to students studying sports science.

Calibrating predictions of the future by looking at the scale of change in the recent past

One way to appreciate how different things will be in the future is to think how much things have changed even in the recent past. Try this thought experiment. Think back to when you were half the age you are today. Take a few moments to recreate that time in your mind. Image where you lived. Image how you occupied yourself at that time. Image the sport you played and watched. Now think about what the things listed below were like then and what they are like now.

- How you made a phone call.
- How you accessed information and data.
- How society treated people who were different.
- How you would have responded to being called an 'amateur'.
- How sports people prepared to compete.
- What sports stadiums were like.

Hopefully this has given you a sense of how much and how fast things have and are changing.

### Four predictions for the future

The four predictions that follow cover attitudes, nanotechnology, stadiums and genetics.

**"While the future may not be predictable, we can shape and create it through our current actions and the education we provide for our children."**

The Leisure Review is supported by:



The Leisure Review is written, designed and published by:

**tlr.comms**  
TLR Communications Limited

### **Prediction 1**

Attitudes and cultural norms toward sport and exercise will change dramatically. Inclusive fitness and the Paralympics will drive innovation, inspiration and the development of new international sporting experiences. Lessons learned in the UK from inclusive fitness programmes and performance enhancement interventions for Paralympians will make the nation a world leader in the area and boost the export of inclusive attitudes, expertise and specialist equipment. As well as helping those with physical or psychological impairments have active lives, knowledge from the inclusive sector will enable the growing number of elderly people in our society to stay independent for longer and to have a better quality of life.

### **Prediction 2**

Nanotechnology will permit real-time monitoring of a sportsperson's physiological and psychological state, permitting 'in game' modification. Exquisitely tiny 'robots' will be designed that athletes will ingest before training or competition. These will collect and transmit data in real time to coaches and sport scientists. This information will be used, for example, to determine substitutions, tactics and nutritional strategies. Sports science will move out of the labs and into the bodies of the performers.

### **Prediction 3**

Non-human (artificial) intelligence will revolutionise officiating and allow athletes to compete in both smart virtual reality stadia and in enhanced reality stadia. While the current debate about technology in sport appears to be mired in consideration of 'goaline technology', the future will present far more interesting opportunities and challenges. Rather than consulting a human official in the stand perhaps the referees of the future will consult a 'computer' which has the intelligence to clarify matters of fact and to recommend what decisions and actions should be taken. Perhaps football fans of the future will complain that all the luck, chance and unpredictability of the game has been lost (be careful what you wish for). Perhaps more impressive than changes to officiating will be the stadia of the future. Perhaps some of the major sports events of the future will take place online in massive virtual reality stadia (VRS). For example, while the two contestants in a boxing match may be in the ring together, all the spectators may watch and experience the event in a VRS. That means I could experience watching a bout taking place in Las Vegas from my sport entertainment pod at home in York. This is not to say that VRS will completely replace the physical stadium. There may always be a market for those who want the visceral reality of sport experienced 'raw in tooth and claw' in the company of other sweaty spectators rather than in the company of sanitised avatars. However, even these physical stadia will be dramatically different than those that exist today. Perhaps the most obvious difference will be that they will have the technology to 'enhance reality'. This could mean that spectators can zoom in on the action, control individualised replays of incidents and, along with the coaches, access the data from the nanotechnology predicted earlier.

### **Prediction 4**

Advances in our understanding of the genetic determinants of performance and genetical testing will enable the design of tailored training programmes that will maximise individual potential. The training that works for you might not be the training that works for me. What we need is more information which is specific to the individual, information that will help us identify the right type of exercise stimuli to create a response for them. Advances in gene research may lead to dramatic breakthroughs in this regard.

### **An optimistic conclusion**

While the future may not be predictable, we can shape and create it through our current actions and the education we provide for our children. With regard to the former, coaches and sports scientists need to work together to create the future they want for sport rather than simply responding to, or ignoring, technological developments. The ethical, social and financial implications of the four predictions made above need to be considered well ahead of the time that they begin to be implemented. How different the world might have been if society had had the foresight to reflect upon the long-term implications of the mass production of the internal combustion engine.

Arguably the strongest reason we have to be optimistic for the future is 'our' children and young people. In sport we are privileged to have the opportunity to help shape the next generation but this privilege comes with great responsibility. We have an obligation to ensure that sport stays ahead of the technology curve so that youngest who have grown up in the silicon age see it as relevant to the

way they live. In addition we have an even more important duty to ensure that the next generation of sport leaders find ways to use technology to make sport even healthier, more fun and more educational.

The power of sport to entertain, educate and to promote economic growth is about to explode with new possibilities if we are bold enough to embrace science and technology.

**This essay is based on a talk given at *The Leisure Review* Coaching Insight event in December 2011**

## **References**

Greenfield, S. (2004) *Tomorrow's People*. Penguin Books.

Rees, M. (2003) *Our final century: Will civilisation survive the twenty-first century*. Arrow Books.

***The Leisure Review*, April 2012**

© Copyright of all material on this site is retained by *The Leisure Review* or the individual contributors where stated.  
Contact *The Leisure Review* for details.