

# SWOT analysis of Hubei province outdoor sports clubs in the context of the leisure era

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**Abstract:** This study employs a questionnaire survey and utilizes the SWOT analysis method to evaluate outdoor sports clubs in Hubei Province against the backdrop of the emerging leisure era. The analysis reveals that these clubs possess significant locational advantages. However, they also face challenges such as the lack of scientific planning in the development of outdoor resources and insufficient management capabilities. Additionally, while the clubs are presented with development opportunities brought about by the rise of the central region strategy, they also confront risks due to inadequate risk prevention and emergency mechanisms. Establishing an industry development association, clarifying market positioning, and providing diversified and personalized services are identified as crucial strategies for club development. Relying on local characteristics and cultural landscapes, implementing regional cooperation and cross-industry linkages, and enriching the cultural connotations of outdoor sports are effective measures for the development of outdoor sports clubs in Hubei Province.

**Keywords:** Leisure Era, Outdoor Sports, Clubs, SWOT Analysis

## 1. Introduction

With the deepening of reform and opening up and the increasing perfection of the market economy, China's economy has achieved significant growth. The improvement of public income levels and the increase in leisure time have gradually ushered China into the "leisure era." People's values have shifted from the wealth accumulation of the industrial society to self-expression in the information society [1]. The successful hosting of the Beijing Olympics and the launch of nationwide fitness initiatives have further enhanced public health awareness and leisure concepts. Additionally, environmental degradation caused by industrial civilization and urbanization has led more people to seek closeness with nature, express their individuality, and pursue self-fulfillment through outdoor sports, which have become an important way for people to engage in leisure and physical exercise. The number of participants in outdoor sports has been rising year by year, and industry insiders predict that it will create a wave of popularity in China [3].

As an important vehicle for the development of outdoor sports, outdoor sports clubs bear the important responsibility of promoting and developing these activities. Since the establishment of the "Kunming Mountaineering Tourism and Adventure Association" in 1989, China's outdoor sports clubs have grown to a certain market scale and shown a positive development trend after nearly 26 years of development. Outdoor sports clubs in Hubei Province have formed the "Hubei phenomenon," which is worth learning from in the industry, through resource sharing and cooperation [4]. However, compared with developed countries, China's outdoor sports clubs are still in the early stages of development. In 2013, a report by the Outdoor Foundation (OIF) and the Outdoor Industry Association (OIA) in the United States showed that participation in eight sports, including cycling, camping, winter sports, and hiking, reached 313 million person-times, with a total national economic contribution from outdoor sports amounting to 73 billion US dollars [5]. In Germany alone, the economic contribution of the hiking market is nearly 4 billion euros [6]. In contrast, China's domestic outdoor sports market, with a market value of 120 billion yuan and a market potential of 100 million participants, still needs another 10 years to fully realize its potential [7].

Due to the late start of development and the lack of legal regulations [8], clubs that provide outdoor sports services face issues such as incomplete organizational structures, coarse management, a shortage of

professional skilled personnel, simple marketing strategies, product homogenization, and a lack of innovation in services [9]. These issues have become bottlenecks constraining the development of China's outdoor sports clubs and are inevitable problems in the development process of these clubs. They also conflict with the new era's goals of deepening industrial restructuring and accelerating the scientific development of the tertiary sector.

Given the above situation, and against the backdrop of the emerging leisure era and the broad prospects for the development of the mass outdoor sports market, this study investigates the current development status of outdoor sports clubs in Hubei Province. By employing the SWOT strategic analysis method, it examines the internal strengths and weaknesses of these clubs, analyzes the external opportunities and threats they face, and summarizes the external environment and internal factors affecting their development. This study aims to explore development strategies for outdoor sports clubs, provide targeted suggestions, and offer constructive advice for their future development.

## **2. Research subjects and methods**

### **2.1. Research subjects**

This study selected 30 outdoor sports clubs from 12 municipalities directly under the central government, 1 autonomous prefecture, and 1 forest region in Hubei Province as the research subjects. The study investigated and interviewed these clubs regarding their organizational setup, marketing, resource development, and talent reserves. Based on this information, the study explored strategies and countermeasures for these clubs in the context of the leisure era.

### **2.2. Research methods**

#### *2.2.1. Questionnaire survey method*

A questionnaire survey was conducted targeting the external environment factors affecting the development of outdoor sports clubs in Hubei Province, including political, economic, social, demographic, technological, and competitive factors. The internal environment factors, such as management, organization, sales, and human resources, were also investigated. The survey was administered to managers, operators, and participants of the 30 outdoor sports clubs.

#### *2.2.2. Literature review method*

The study reviewed literature from authoritative and important journals such as *\_China Sports Science\_*, *\_Sports Review\_*, *\_Sports and Science\_*, *\_Sports Culture Review\_*, *\_Journal of Chengdu Sport University\_*, and *\_Journal of Beijing Sport University\_*, as well as monographs on outdoor sports. Relevant literature materials were collected to support the research.

#### *2.2.3. Expert interview method*

Interviews were conducted with experts and scholars in the outdoor sports industry in Hubei Province to discuss the development status, opportunities, competitive advantages, and disadvantages of outdoor sports clubs in the context of the leisure era.

## **3. SWOT analysis of outdoor sports clubs in Hubei province**

Based on the questionnaire survey, this study comprehensively analyzed the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges of outdoor sports clubs in Hubei Province through surveys, interviews with outdoor sports experts, and discussions with practitioners from these clubs.

### **3.1. Strengths analysis**

#### *3.1.1. Abundant natural resources and cultural heritage*

Hubei Province has a diverse topography that includes mountains, hills, and plains. The western, northern, and eastern parts of the province are surrounded by mountain ranges such as the Wuling Mountains, Tong bai Mountains, Wu Shan, Qin ling Mountains, Daba Mountains, Dabie Mountains, Wu dang Mountains, Da Hong Mountains, and Mu fu Mountains, which cover approximately 55.5% of the

province's total area. Renowned tourist and cultural attractions include the world-famous Wu dang Mountain, the famous Yellow Crane Tower in the south of the Yangtze River, the mysterious natural landscape of Shen Nong jia, and the perilous Three Gorges of the Yangtze River. These abundant natural resources provide excellent natural conditions and a rich cultural environment for the development of outdoor sports.

### 3.1.2. Convenient transportation conditions

Table 1: Statistics of Transportation Conditions in Hubei Province (as of 2015)

Type	Railway	High-Speed Rail	Highway	Expressway	Airports
Mileage or Number	4500km	3000km	205000km	6500km	4

As shown in Table 1, Hubei Province, known as the "Thoroughfare of Nine Provinces," has a highly developed transportation network. The intersection of major railway lines such as the Beijing-Guangzhou, Beijing-Kowloon, and Shanghai-Chengdu, along with 3,000 kilometers of high-speed rail, forms an extensive railway network. Additionally, intercity railways like the Wuhan-Xian, Wuhan-Huang Shi, Wuhan-Shiyan, and Wuhan-Xiao Gan, as well as 10 planned intercity lines, further enhance connectivity. The province also boasts 205,000 kilometers of highways and 6,500 kilometers of expressways. The main water transport routes include the Yangtze River and the Han River. Complementing these are four airports and 104 air routes, creating an integrated transportation network that combines water, land, and air transport.

The convenient transportation conditions significantly reduce the time required for travel between regions, providing great convenience for people to engage in outdoor sports activities.

### 3.1.3. Abundant human resources

The abundance of human resources is mainly reflected in the rich consumer base and the large number of outdoor sports practitioners. Hubei Province has the highest number of university students in China and ranks second in the number of higher education institutions [10]. The advanced awareness of fitness, leisure, and consumption among high-quality talents provides a favorable demographic advantage for the development of the novel sport of outdoor activities. In October 2003, the Chinese Mountaineering Association held its first outdoor instructor training course at China University of Geosciences (Wuhan). Over the past 13 years, Hubei Province has hosted more than 30 outdoor sports instructor training sessions, cultivating a large number of outstanding practitioners for the development of outdoor sports. Since China University of Geosciences (Wuhan) established the first outdoor sports major in China in 2005, six universities in Hubei Province now offer related programs, placing the province at the forefront of outdoor sports talent cultivation nationwide.

### 3.1.4. Policy support and guidance

The Hubei Province Implementation Plan for Mass Fitness (2011–2015) emphasized the creation of mass fitness activity brands, including the development of characteristic projects such as rock climbing in Enshi Grand Canyon, to promote the growth of leisure sports. It also encouraged the organization of diverse and popular mass fitness activities, including outdoor sports. Policy documents guiding the outdoor sports industry signal Hubei Province's planning and determination to develop leisure sports. Events such as the Mulan Mountain International Mountain Climbing Festival and the Shennongjia Outdoor Sports Challenge are prime examples. Surveys have found that 75% of clubs believe that the government has provided strong support for the development of outdoor sports.

### 3.1.5. Increase in public income levels

From 2012 to 2014, Hubei Province's average annual GDP reached 2,476.19 billion yuan, with an average annual growth rate of 10.367%, which is 4.6 percentage points higher than the national average and ranks first in the central region. The province's per capita gross domestic product was 34,132 yuan, equivalent to 5,285 US dollars, also ranking first in the central region. The per capita disposable income of urban residents was 18,373.87 yuan, while the per capita net income of rural residents was 6,897.92 yuan, increasing by 14.4% and 18.3% respectively compared to the previous year. The overall consumer price level rose by 5.8%, a relatively high increase [11]. The growth in economic income provides a solid

financial foundation and sufficient consumption guarantee for the development of outdoor sports and leisure activities.

### 3.1.6. Enhanced fitness awareness and increased leisure demand

A report from the Strategy Department of the Hubei Provincial Development and Research Center indicates that between 2000 and 2020, Hubei Province's economy will grow at a rate 7.3% higher than the national average [12]. As people's sustainable income increases, disposable consumer spending rises, and marginal consumption in leisure sports increases. According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, people will pursue a higher level of spiritual and cultural life. Surveys show (as seen in Table 2) that 57% of respondents believe that fitness awareness is gradually increasing, and 53% feel that leisure demand has significantly improved. The enhanced fitness awareness and increased leisure demand can, to some extent, stimulate the development of the outdoor sports industry. The desire to go outdoors and embrace nature will continue to grow.

Table 2: Survey on Public Leisure and Fitness Awareness

	Enhanced	Neutral	Reduced
Fitness Awareness	57%	26%	17%
Leisure Demand	53%	21%	26%

## 3.2. Weaknesses analysis

### 3.2.1. Lack of legal norms, inconsistent management, and unclear responsibilities

In 1963, the U.S. government enacted the Outdoor Recreation Act. In contrast, China currently lacks relevant laws and regulations in this area. For the domestic outdoor sports industry, the formulation of laws and regulations has seriously lagged behind the current state of industry development. The China Mountaineering Association's Management Measures for Mountaineering and Outdoor Sports Clubs, which was piloted in May 2011, regulates the registration of outdoor sports clubs. However, its scope is limited mainly to high-altitude mountaineering, club star rating certification, and athlete registration. The regulatory coverage is narrow, and the system is not comprehensive. There are no clear provisions for the qualification review of practitioners in outdoor sports clubs, organizational structure, risk prevention mechanisms, outdoor early warning mechanisms, and emergency response mechanisms.

Moreover, emerging outdoor sports organizations, such as online communities, QQ groups, and WeChat groups, lack corresponding management regulations and exist in a gray area on the fringes of the law. This highlights the lag of regulations and the imperfection of the management system. Surveys show that 62% of outdoor sports clubs in provincial capitals have not been reviewed by the sports bureau, and this proportion is close to 90% in third-tier cities. Additionally, the unclear division of responsibilities among the sports bureau, the administration for industry and commerce, and the civil affairs department indirectly leads to weak market supervision in the outdoor sports industry, low entry barriers, a mix of good and bad clubs, and weak risk resistance capabilities of clubs.

### 3.2.2. Low club management level and simple marketing strategies

Compared with other sports industries, the management level of outdoor sports clubs in Hubei Province is still relatively low. In a random sample of 30 clubs (as shown in Table 3), nearly 80% of the clubs have set up marketing, finance, and sales departments. Only 9% of the clubs have a product department, 43% of the organizations have a training department, and 48% of the clubs have a customer service department. Marketing methods mainly include membership development, mall + activities, etc. Some club coaches also hold multiple positions. These situations indicate that the organizational structure of outdoor sports clubs in Hubei Province is not sound, market positioning is inaccurate, management is extensive, service awareness is poor, market segmentation is insufficient, core competitiveness is lacking, and there is a serious deficiency in the exploration, development, and accumulation of outdoor sports culture.

Table 3: Departmental Structure of Outdoor Sports Clubs in Hubei Province

Department	Sales	Finance	R&D	Customer Service	Training	Marketing
Percentage (%)	100	82	9	48	43	78

### 3.2.3. *Imbalanced regional development*

In 2013, the per capita expenditure on education, culture, and entertainment in Hubei Province reached 1,923 yuan, a year-on-year increase of 16.4%. However, influenced by educational and consumption concepts, the proportion of spending on residents' physical health and leisure entertainment is relatively small. There is a significant disparity between provincial capitals, prefecture-level cities, urban areas, and rural areas, leading to an irrational consumer structure among residents. Additionally, affected by the overall development level of outdoor sports and residents' leisure preferences, the management level, scale, and safety standards of outdoor sports clubs in provincial capitals are higher than those in prefecture-level cities. The imbalanced development of outdoor sports across regions severely restricts the growth of the outdoor sports industry.

### 3.2.4. *Service quality of practitioners needs improvement*

Surveys indicate that 44% of practitioners hold certificates issued by the Chinese Mountaineering Association, while less than 20% of practitioners have graduated from outdoor sports programs. Outdoor sports clubs involve highly specialized tasks such as management, technical services, route development, event planning, logistical support, and emergency accident handling. The shortage of highly skilled professionals to some extent hampers the development of outdoor sports. Moreover, product and service homogenization, financial constraints, the encroachment of low-price strategy clubs, reduced human resource training, and the decline in professional practitioners all affect the improvement of service quality in outdoor sports clubs and contribute to the potential breakdown of the "Hubei phenomenon."

### 3.2.5. *Lack of risk prevention mechanisms*

High risk is an inherent attribute of outdoor sports. Standard outdoor sports clubs should normally develop emergency response plans for activities. However, surveys show that 87.3% of outdoor sports clubs either do not have or have not considered developing emergency response plans. Coupled with the weak outdoor sports rescue system currently in place in China, if an accident occurs during outdoor sports activities, the operation of the club may become unsustainable. The absence of a risk prevention mechanism is a significant disadvantage for outdoor sports clubs.

### 3.2.6. *Unregulated development and inaccurate positioning*

Surveys reveal that 68% of outdoor sports clubs in Hubei Province have developed their own outdoor sports bases. Some of these bases are located within 40 kilometers of each other. For example, the three adventure training bases in Qian Mountain, Jinguilake, and Xingxing Bamboo Sea in Xian ning are all less than 30 kilometers apart. Unplanned and blind investment, unregulated development, homogeneous services, and fierce competition have led to the long-term neglect of these bases, with an annual utilization rate of less than 30%. This highlights the inaccurate market segmentation, brand positioning, and service positioning of outdoor sports clubs in Hubei Province.

## 3.3. Opportunities analysis

### 3.3.1. *Transition from a sports powerhouse to a sports superpower*

After the Beijing Olympics, the sports system, which was previously dominated by competitive sports, shifted its focus to enhancing public health and developing mass and social sports. The "13th Five-Year Plan" also emphasized "developing the sports cause, promoting nationwide fitness, and strengthening people's physique." Outdoor sports, which advocate "going into nature and engaging in outdoor activities," attract urban dwellers who love life and nature with their fitness, challenging, entertaining, innovative, and cultural aspects. For outdoor sports clubs, this undoubtedly presents a developmental opportunity.

### 3.3.2. *Opportunities brought by the rise of the central region*

As one of the six provinces in the central region, Hubei Province enjoys a unique geographical advantage as the "heart of the central region," with the "golden waterway" running through it. The comprehensive transportation hub of water, land, and air forms an "international gateway." Additionally, the national strategies of "resource-conserving and environmentally friendly society" and "independent innovation demonstration" have been implemented in Hubei. The province is facing unprecedented development opportunities. Industrial restructuring, the advocacy of independent innovation, and the development of emerging strategic industries will attract more talent and job opportunities. The development of tourism industries containing outdoor sports projects, such as the "Hubei Province Sports Tourism Economic Circle," the "Special Plan for the Development of Huanggang Dabie Mountain Tourism," and the "Western Hubei Ecological Tourism and Cultural Circle" [13], provides a favorable development environment, survival space, and customer resources for outdoor sports clubs.

### *3.3.3. Rapid development of information technology*

With the development and improvement of information technology, since the establishment of the first outdoor website by San fu in 1999, the promotion platforms for outdoor sports have been increasing continuously. Various platforms such as travel forums, QQ groups, 8264 (China Outdoor Information Network), outdoor sports equipment websites, club websites, Weibo, and WeChat official platforms have emerged, providing a vast amount of information. Surveys show that 95% of outdoor sports clubs in Hubei Province have their own information dissemination platforms, covering content such as activity organization, sharing, display, and experience summarization. Together with the official website of the Hubei Provincial Mountaineering Association, a powerful outdoor sports publicity platform has been formed, which plays a positive role in promoting outdoor sports projects and enhancing people's participation interest.

### *3.3.4. Changes in people's leisure patterns*

As people's income levels increase and material life becomes more abundant, spiritual life gradually enriches, and leisure needs continue to rise. The "13th Five-Year Plan" pointed out the need to expand residents' consumption and guide the public towards green, safe, and healthy consumption [14]. Expanding service consumption and upgrading consumption structures have a positive stimulating effect on personalized, diversified experiential consumption and participatory sports consumption. The long-standing Chinese leisure culture of "harmony between man and nature" and "effortless action," coupled with the popular and easy-to-implement sports projects organized by Hubei Province for mass fitness, such as Mo Hill climbing and Mulan Mountain Climbing Festival, provide a good development opportunity for people to participate in outdoor activities and promote the development of outdoor sports clubs.

## **3.4. Threats analysis**

### *3.4.1. Impact of substitute products and services*

In recent years, with the increasing demand for public leisure, various experience-based leisure industries such as tourism, countryside inns, pick-your-own gardens, and farms have become very popular, making the competition in the leisure market increasingly fierce. In comparison, outdoor sports are in a relatively weaker position. Firstly, other industries have sound regulations and well-established systems, such as the Tourism Law. Secondly, they generate substantial revenue; for example, tourism income in 2013 and 2014 was 320.561 billion yuan and 375.286 billion yuan, respectively. Thirdly, they have a wide range of platforms; Hubei Province currently has over 900 travel agencies, 11 5A-level scenic spots, and 60 4A-level scenic spots. Combined with leisure farms, these industries present the characteristics of a large promotional platform and a complete service organization. Fourthly, some travel companies and countryside inns have begun to offer products and services related to outdoor sports, such as adventure tourism, cultural tours, industrial tours, and wellness tours, which greatly threaten the survival space of outdoor sports clubs.

### *3.4.2. Misleading by online media*

With the rise of outdoor sports and the increasing number of participants, websites, forums, and QQ groups for organizing outdoor activities have emerged in large numbers. Given the short development time

of outdoor sports, the lack of sound legal regulations, inadequate supervision, and the public's lack of safety awareness regarding outdoor sports, any accidents in outdoor sports can lead to widespread fear among the public. Moreover, information technology is a double-edged sword. Some online media distort facts and provide biased reports, and misinformation spreads rapidly on the internet, causing people to hesitate at the threshold of engaging in outdoor activities.

#### *3.4.3. Impact of International and domestic markets*

For China, with its large population base, the future is a promising period for the development of outdoor sports. An increasing number of international outdoor sports companies and out-of-province outdoor sports clubs are entering the Hubei market with their avant-garde products and services, substantial financial support, advanced business models, sound management systems, and excellent outdoor sports practitioners. For example, the Korean KOLON Mountaineering School, the French Climbing Club, and the Changsha Ling ying Outdoor Sports Club have all made their presence felt. These companies not only impact the market share of local outdoor sports clubs but also lead to a reshuffling of outdoor sports clubs in Hubei Province.

#### *3.4.4. Insufficiency of risk management and emergency mechanisms*

The inherent risks of outdoor sports projects, coupled with the lack of relevant national laws and regulations for outdoor sports, mean that there are no successful cases to refer to in the event of accidental injuries during outdoor sports. In the case of an accident, the current risk early warning system, intervention, rescue system, accountability, and customer interests are all difficult to ensure.

## **4. Development strategies for Hubei outdoor sports clubs**

### **4.1. Resource integration and optimization, regulating the outdoor sports market order**

Leverage the industrial restructuring during the "13th Five-Year Plan" period and the rise of the central region strategy in Hubei Province. Collaborate with the Hubei Provincial Sports Bureau, the Mountaineering Sports Management Center, and the Administration for Industry and Commerce to establish an industry association for outdoor sports clubs. Plan the development and layout of outdoor sports bases rationally to avoid repetitive construction and unregulated development. Develop practical industry management standards, strictly review the qualifications of outdoor sports clubs, regulate the market, and resolutely crack down on those who disrupt market order, pass off inferior products as good ones, and engage in fraudulent activities. Create a healthy and orderly outdoor sports market environment.

### **4.2. Develop local outdoor sports to boost competitiveness**

Hubei Province's outdoor sports clubs need to fully utilize the rich geographical, natural, and cultural resources of the region. Guided by public consumption trends and leisure demands, and in combination with local realities, they should conduct comprehensive research and exploration. This includes developing outdoor sports with local characteristics such as cultural outdoor activities, hot spring outdoor activities, family-oriented outdoor activities, red tourism (revolutionary-themed) outdoor activities, grassland outdoor activities, adventure outdoor activities, and ecological outdoor activities. By doing so, they can expand the breadth and depth of club activities, enrich the content of outdoor sports, and enhance market competitiveness.

### **4.3. Leverage human resources to enhance R&D and service quality**

Utilize the rich higher education resources in Hubei Province to establish strategic cooperative relationships with relevant colleges and universities that offer specialized programs. Implement talent cultivation measures such as school-enterprise cooperation, targeted training, and joint training to enhance the development of outdoor sports projects, route exploration, and product innovation and improvement. Increase the integration of outdoor sports with leisure sports to enrich the business content of outdoor sports clubs. Establish a stable and long-term team of outdoor sports coaches and a talent reserve pool to improve the comprehensive service level of clubs.

#### 4.4. Implement modern enterprise management systems to enhance competitiveness

Guided by modern business concepts and market orientation, and focusing on consumer needs, develop standardized enterprise management systems. Improve the internal structure of outdoor sports clubs, formulate effective business and development strategies, increase the intensity of human resource training, and enhance corporate innovation capabilities. Analyze the club's strengths and weaknesses in combination with internal conditions and external environment, segment the outdoor sports market, and conduct targeted brand and service positioning to enhance corporate competitiveness.

#### 4.5. Strengthen publicity and guide the public to correctly understand outdoor sports

Outdoor sports clubs should fully utilize the promotional role of online media platforms, such as newspapers, magazines, radio, television, QQ, WeChat, Weibo, websites, forums, and other information technology platforms. Objectively and fairly promote outdoor sports knowledge, tips, and activities. Report on outdoor sports accidents truthfully and transparently without avoidance, concealment, or distortion. Create a genuine and credible atmosphere for outdoor sports, allowing the public to gain an objective and scientific understanding of outdoor sports and thereby improve their awareness of outdoor sports safety.

#### 4.6. Inter-Industry linkage and complementing strengths

Strengthen inter-industry linkage, connection, and cooperation with the tourism industry, countryside inns, and sports equipment businesses. Utilize their resource and platform advantages to develop outdoor sports clubs. Collaborate on route development and base establishment to reduce club operational risks. Integrate outdoor sports projects into mass leisure activities to enrich content and expand the business space for outdoor sports. Summarize and learn from the strengths of other leisure industries to avoid weaknesses and risks associated with outdoor sports clubs, thereby enhancing their market competitiveness.

### 5. Conclusion

In the face of the leisure era, outdoor sports clubs in Hubei Province should focus on the present while keeping an eye on the future. With safety, science, and environmental protection as the foundation, they should implement modern enterprise management systems, increase efforts in talent reserves and training, enhance service quality, and develop diversified, humanized, and personalized products and services. By improving their hardware facilities, service capabilities, and cultural depth, and strengthening regional cooperation and inter-industry linkages, these clubs can achieve growth and expansion.

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