

## **Sports and Male Domination: The Female Athlete as Contested Ideological Terrain**

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This paper explores the historical and ideological meanings of organized sports for the politics of gender relations. After outlining a theory for building a historically grounded understanding of sport, culture, and ideology, the paper argues that organized sports have come to serve as a primary institutional means for bolstering a challenged and faltering ideology of male superiority in the 20th century. Increasing female athleticism represents a genuine quest by women for equality, control of their own bodies, and self-definition, and as such represents a challenge to the ideological basis of male domination. Yet this quest for equality is not without contradictions and ambiguities. The socially constructed meanings surrounding physiological differences between the sexes, the present "male" structure of organized sports, and the media framing of the female athlete all threaten to subvert any counter-hegemonic potential posed by female athletes. In short, the female athlete—and her body—has become a contested ideological terrain.

Women's quest for equality in society has had its counterpart in the sports world. Since the 1972 passage of Title IX, women in the U.S. have had a legal basis from which to push for greater equity in high school and college athletics. Although equality is still a distant goal in terms of funding, programs, facilities, and media coverage of women's sports, substantial gains have been made by female athletes in the past 10 to 15 years, indicated by increasing numerical participation as well as by expanding peer and self-acceptance of female athleticism (Hogan, 1982; Sabo, 1985; Woodward, 1985). A number of commentators have recently pointed out that the degree of difference between male and female athletic performance—the "muscle gap"—has closed considerably in recent years as female athletes have gained greater access to coaching and training facilities (Crittenden, 1979; Dyer, 1983; Ferris, 1978).

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However, optimistic predictions that women's movement into sport signals an imminent demise of inequalities between the sexes are premature. As Willis (1982, p. 120) argues, what matters most is not simply how and why the gap between male and female athletic performance is created, enlarged, or constricted; what is of more fundamental concern is "the manner in which this gap is understood and taken into the popular consciousness of our society." This paper is thus concerned with exploring the historical and ideological meaning of organized sports for the politics of gender relations. After outlining a theory for building a historically grounded understanding of sport, culture, and ideology, I will demonstrate how and why organized sports have come to serve as a primary institutional means for bolstering a challenged and faltering ideology of male superiority in the 20th century.

It will be argued that women's movement into sport represents a genuine quest by women for equality, control of their own bodies, and self-definition, and as such it represents a challenge to the ideological basis of male domination. Yet it will also be demonstrated that this quest for equality is not without contradictions and ambiguities. The social meanings surrounding the physiological differences between the sexes in the male-defined institution of organized sports and the framing of the female athlete by the sports media threaten to subvert any counter-hegemonic potential posed by women athletes. In short, the female athlete—and her body—has become a contested ideological terrain.

### **Sport, Culture, and Ideology**

Most theoretical work on sport has fallen into either of two traps: an idealist notion of sport as a realm of freedom divorced from material and historical constraints, or a materialist analysis that posits sport as a cultural mechanism through which the dominant classes control the unwitting masses. Marxists have correctly criticized idealists and functionalists for failing to understand how sport tends to reflect capitalist relations, thus serving to promote and ideologically legitimize competition, meritocracy, consumerism, militarism, and instrumental rationality, while at the same time providing spectators with escape and compensatory mechanisms for an alienated existence (Brohm, 1978; Hoch, 1972). But Marxist structuralists, with their view of sport as a superstructural expression of ideological control by the capitalist class, have themselves fallen into a simplistic and nondialectical functionalism (Gruneau, 1983; Hargreaves, 1982). Within the deterministic Marxian framework, there is no room for viewing people (athletes, spectators) as anything other than passive objects who are duped into meeting the needs of capitalism.

Neo-Marxists of the 1980s have argued for the necessity of placing an analysis of sport within a more reflexive framework, wherein culture is seen as relatively autonomous from the economy and wherein human subjectivity occurs within historical and structural limits and constraints. This theory puts people back at the center stage of history without falling into an idealistic voluntarism that ignores the importance of historically formed structural conditions, class inequalities, and unequal power relations. Further, it allows for the existence of critical thought, resistance to dominant ideologies, and change. Within a reflexive historical framework, we can begin to understand how sport (and culture in general) is a dynamic social space where dominant (class, ethnic, etc.) ideologies are perpetuated as well as challenged and contested.

Recent critics have called for a recasting of this reflexive theory to include gender as a centrally important process rather than as a simple effect of class dynamics (Critcher, 1986; McKay, 1986). Indeed, sport as an arena of ideological battles over gender relations has been given short shrift throughout the sociology of sport literature. This is due in part to the marginalization of feminist theory within sociology as a discipline (Stacey & Thorne, 1985) and within sport sociology in particular (Birrell, 1984; Hall, 1984). When gender has been examined by sport sociologists, it has usually been within the framework of a sex role paradigm that concerns itself largely with the effects of sport participation on an individual's sex role identity, values, and so on (Lever, 1976; Sabo & Runfola, 1980; Schafer, 1975).<sup>1</sup> Although social-psychological examinations of the sport-gender relationship are important, the sex role paradigm often used by these studies too often

ignores the extent to which our conceptions of masculinity and femininity—the content of either the male or female sex role—is relational, that is, the product of gender relations which are historically and socially conditioned. . . . The sex role paradigm also minimizes the extent to which gender relations are based on power. Not only do men as a group exert power over women as a group, but the historically derived definitions of masculinity and femininity reproduce those power relations. (Kimmel, 1986, pp. 520-521)

The 20th century has seen two periods of crisis for masculinity—each marked by drastic changes in work and family and accompanied by significant feminist movements (Kimmel, 1987). The first crisis of masculinity stretched from the turn of the century into the 1920s, and the second from the post-World War II years to the present. I will argue here, using a historical / relational conception of gender within a reflexive theory of sport, culture, and ideology, that during these two periods of crisis for masculinity, organized sport has been a crucial arena of struggle over basic social conceptions of masculinity and femininity, and as such has become a fundamental arena of ideological contest in terms of power relations between men and women.

### **Crises of Masculinity and the Rise of Organized Sports**

Reynaud (1981, p. 9) has stated that “The ABC of any patriarchal ideology is precisely to present that division [between the sexes] as being of biological, natural, or divine essence.” And, as Clarke and Clarke (1982, p. 63) have argued, because sport “appears as a sphere of activity outside society, and particularly as it appears to involve natural, physical skills and capacities, [it] presents these ideological images *as if they were natural*.” Thus, organized sport is clearly a potentially powerful cultural arena for the perpetuation of the ideology of male superiority and dominance. Yet, it has not always been of such importance.

#### *The First Crisis of Masculinity: 1890s through the 1920s*

Sport historians have pointed out that the rapid expansion of organized sport after the turn of the century into widespread “recreation for the masses” represented a cultural means of integrating immigrants and a growing industrial working class into an expanding capitalist order where work was becoming ra-

tionalized and leisure time was expanding (Brohm, 1978; Goldman, 1983/1984; Gruneau, 1983; Rigauer, 1981). However, few scholars of sport have examined how this expanding industrial capitalist order was interacting with a relatively autonomous system of gender stratification, and this severely limits their ability to understand the cultural meaning of organized sport. In fact, industrial capitalism both bolstered and undermined traditional forms of male domination.

The creation of separate (public / domestic) and unequal spheres of life for men and women created a new basis for male power and privilege (Hartmann, 1976; Zaretsky, 1973). But in an era of wage labor and increasingly concentrated ownership of productive property, fewer males owned their own businesses and farms or controlled their own labor. The breadwinner role was a more shaky foundation upon which to base male privilege than was the patriarchal legacy of property-ownership passed on from father to son (Tolson, 1977). These changes in work and family, along with the rise of female dominated public schools, urbanization, and the closing of the frontier all led to widespread fears of "social feminization" and a turn-of-the-century crisis of masculinity. Many men compensated with a defensive insecurity that manifested itself in increased preoccupation with physicality and toughness (Wilkenson, 1984), warfare (Filene, 1975), and even the creation of new organizations such as the Boy Scouts of America as a separate cultural sphere of life where "true manliness" could be instilled in boys by men (Hantover, 1978).

Within this context, organized sports became increasingly important as a "primary masculinity-validating experience" (Dubbert, 1979, p. 164). Sport was a male-created homosocial cultural sphere that provided men with psychological separation from the perceived feminization of society while also providing dramatic symbolic proof of the "natural superiority" of men over women.<sup>2</sup>

This era was also characterized by an active and visible feminist movement, which eventually focused itself on the achievement of female suffrage. These feminists challenged entrenched Victorian assumptions and prescriptions concerning femininity, and this was reflected in a first wave of athletic feminism which blossomed in the 1920s, mostly in women's colleges (Twin, 1979). Whereas sports participation for young males tended to confirm masculinity, female athleticism was viewed as conflicting with the conventional ethos of femininity, thus leading to virulent opposition to women's growing athleticism (Lefkowitz-Horowitz, 1986). A survey of physical education instructors in 1923 indicated that 93% were opposed to intercollegiate play for women (Smith, 1970). And the Women's Division of the National Amateur Athletic Foundation, led by Mrs. Herbert Hoover, opposed women's participation in the 1928 Olympics (Lefkowitz-Horowitz, 1986). Those involved in women's athletics responded to this opposition defensively (and perhaps out of a different feminine aesthetic or morality) with the establishment of an anticompetitive "feminine philosophy of sport" (Beck, 1980). This philosophy was at once responsible for the continued survival of women's athletics, as it was successfully marginalized and thus easily "ghettoized" and ignored, and it also ensured that, for the time being, the image of the female athlete would not become a major threat to the hegemonic ideology of male athleticism, virility, strength, and power.

The breakdown of Victorianism in the 1920s had a contradictory effect on the social deployment and uses of women's bodies. On the one hand, the female

body became “a marketable item, used to sell numerous products and services” (Twin, 1979, p. xxix). This obviously reflected women’s social subordination, but ironically,

The commercialization of women’s bodies provided a cultural opening for competitive athletics, as industry and ambitious individuals used women to sell sports. Leo Seltzer included women in his 1935 invention, roller derby, “with one eye to beauty and the other on gate receipts,” according to one writer. While women’s physical marketability profited industry, it also allowed females to do more with their bodies than before. (Twin, 1979, p. xxix)

Despite its limits, then, the first wave of athletic feminism, even in its more commercialized manifestations, did provide an initial challenge to men’s creation of sport as an uncontested arena of ideological legitimation for male dominance. In forcing an acknowledgment of women’s physicality, albeit in a limited way, this first wave of female athletes laid the groundwork for more fundamental challenges. While some cracks had clearly appeared in the patriarchal edifice, it would not be until the 1970s that female athletes would present a more basic challenge to predominant cultural images of women.

### *The Post World War II Masculinity Crisis and the Rise of Mass Spectator Sports*

Today, according to Naison (1980, p. 36), “The American male spends a far greater portion of his time with sports than he did 40 years ago, but the greatest proportion of that time is spent in front of a television set observing games that he will hardly ever play.” How and why have organized sports increasingly become an object of mass spectatorship? Lasch (1979) has argued that the historical transformation from entrepreneurial capitalism to corporate capitalism has seen a concomitant shift from the protestant work ethic (and industrial production) to the construction of the “docile consumer.” Within this context, sport has degenerated into a spectacle, an object of mass consumption. Similarly, Alt (1983) states that the major function of mass-produced sports is to channel the alienated emotional needs of consumers in instrumental ways. Although Lasch and Alt are partly correct in stating that the sport spectacle is largely a manipulation of alienated emotional needs toward the goal of consumption, this explanation fails to account fully for the emotional resonance of the sports spectacle for a largely male audience. I would argue, along with Sabo and Runfola (1980, p. xv) that sports in the postwar era have become increasingly important to males precisely because they link men to a more patriarchal past.

The development of capitalism after World War II saw a continued erosion of traditional means of male expression and identity, due to the continued rationalization and bureaucratization of work, the shift from industrial production and physical labor to a more service-oriented economy, and increasing levels of structural unemployment. These changes, along with women’s continued movement into public life, undermined and weakened the already shaky breadwinner role as a major basis for male power in the family (Ehrenreich, 1983; Tolson, 1977). And the declining relevance of physical strength in work and in warfare was not

accompanied by a declining psychological need for an ideology of gender difference. Symbolic representations of the male body as a symbol of strength, virility, and power have become increasingly important in popular culture as actual inequalities between the sexes are contested in all arenas of public life (Mishkind et al., 1986). The marriage of television and organized sport—especially the televised spectacle of football—has increasingly played this important ideological role. As Oriard (1981) has stated,

What football is for the athletes themselves actually has little direct impact on what it means to the rest of America . . . Football projects a *myth* that speaks meaningfully to a large number of Americans far beneath the level of conscious perception . . . Football does not create a myth for all Americans; it excludes women in many highly significant ways. (pp. 33-34)

Football's mythology and symbolism are probably meaningful and salient on a number of ideological levels: Patriotism, militarism, violence, and meritocracy are all dominant themes. But I would argue that football's primary ideological salience lies in its ability, in the face of women's challenges to male dominance, to symbolically link men of diverse ages and socioeconomic backgrounds. Consider the words of a 32-year-old white professional male whom I was interviewing:<sup>3</sup> "A woman can do the same job I can do—maybe even be my boss. But I'll be *darned* if she can go out on the field and take a hit from Ronnie Lott."

The fact that this man (and perhaps 99% of all U.S. males) probably could not take a hit from the likes of pro football player Ronnie Lott and live to tell about it is really irrelevant, because football as a televised spectacle is meaningful on a more symbolic level. Here individual males are given the opportunity to identify—generically and abstractly—with all men as a superior and separate caste. Football, based as it is upon the most extreme possibilities of the male body (muscular bulk, explosive power and aggression) is a world apart from women, who are relegated to the role of cheerleader / sex objects on the sidelines rooting their men on. In contrast to the bare and vulnerable bodies of the cheerleaders, the armored male bodies of football players are elevated to mythical status, and as such give testimony to the undeniable "fact" that there is at least one place where men are clearly superior to women.

### **Women's Recent Movement Into Sport**

By the 1970s, just when symbolic representations of the athletic male body had taken on increasing ideological importance, a second wave of athletic feminism had emerged (Twin, 1979). With women's rapid postwar movement into the labor force and a revived feminist movement, what had been an easily ignorable undercurrent of female athleticism from the 1930s through the 1960s suddenly swelled into a torrent of female sports participation—and demands for equity. In the U.S., Title IX became the legal benchmark for women's push for equity with males. But due to efforts by the athletic establishment to limit the scope of Title IX, the quest for equity remained decentralized and continued to take place in the gymnasiums, athletic departments, and school boards of the nation (Beck, 1980; Hogan, 1979, 1982).

Brownmiller (1984, p. 195) has stated that the modern female athlete has placed herself "on the cutting edge of some of the most perplexing problems of gender-related biology and the feminine ideal," often resulting in the female athlete becoming ambivalent about her own image: *Can* a woman be strong, aggressive, competitive, and still be considered feminine? Rohrbaugh (1979) suggests that female athletes often develop an "apologetic" as a strategy for bridging the gap between cultural expectations of femininity and the very unfeminine requisites for athletic excellence. There has been some disagreement over whether a widespread apologetic actually exists among female athletes. Hart (1979) argues that there has never been an apologetic for black women athletes, suggesting that there are cultural differences in the construction of femininities. And a recent nationwide study indicated that 94% of the 1,682 female athletes surveyed do not regard athletic participation to be threatening to their femininity (Woodward, 1985). Yet, 57% of these same athletes did agree that society still forces a choice between being an athlete and being feminine, suggesting that there is still a dynamic tension between traditional prescriptions for femininity and the image presented by active, strong, even muscular women.

### *Femininity as Ideologically Contested Terrain*

Cultural conceptions of femininity and female beauty have more than aesthetic meanings; these images, and the meanings ascribed to them, inform and legitimize unequal power relations between the sexes (Banner, 1983; Brownmiller, 1984; Lakoff & Scherr, 1984). Attempting to be viewed as feminine involves accepting behavioral and physical restrictions that make it difficult to view one's self, much less to be viewed by others, as equal with men. But if traditional images of femininity have solidified male privilege through constructing and then naturalizing the passivity, weakness, helplessness, and dependency of women, what are we to make of the current fit, athletic, even muscular looks that are increasingly in vogue with many women? Is there a new, counter-hegemonic image of women afoot that challenges traditional conceptions of femininity? A brief examination of female bodybuilding sheds light on these questions.

Lakoff and Scherr (1984, p. 110) state that "Female bodybuilding has become the first female-identified standard of beauty." Certainly the image of a muscular—even toned—woman runs counter to traditional prescriptions for female passivity and weakness. But it's not that simple. In the film "Pumping Iron II: The Women," the tension between traditional prescriptions for femininity and the new muscularity of female bodybuilders is the major story line. It is obvious that the new image of women being forged by female bodybuilders is itself fraught with contradiction and ambiguity as women contestants and judges constantly discuss and argue emotionally over the meaning of femininity. Should contestants be judged simply according to how well-muscled they are (as male bodybuilders are judged), or also by a separate and traditionally feminine aesthetic? The consensus among the female bodybuilders, and especially among the predominantly male judges, appears to be the latter. In the words of one judge, "If they go to extremes and start looking like men, that's not what we're looking for in a woman. It's the winner of the contest who will set the standard of femininity." And of course, since this official is judging the contestants according to his own (traditional) standard of femininity, it should come as no surprise that the eventual winners are not the most well-muscled women.

Women's bodybuilding magazines also reflect this ambiguity: "Strong is Sexy," reads the cover of the August 1986 issue of *Shape* magazine, and this caption accompanies a photo of a slightly muscled young bathing-suited woman wielding a seductive smile and a not-too-heavy dumbbell. And the lead editorial in the September 1986 *Muscle and Beauty* magazine reminds readers that "in this post-feminist age of enlightenment . . . each woman must select the degree of muscularity she wants to achieve" (p. 6). The editor skirts the issue of defining femininity by stressing individual choice and self-definition, but she also emphasizes the fact that muscular women can indeed be beautiful and can also "make babies." Clearly, this emergent tendency of women attempting to control and define their own lives and bodies is being shaped within the existing hegemonic definitions of femininity.

And these magazines, full as they are with advertisements for a huge assortment of products for fat reduction, muscle building (e.g., "Anabolic Mega-Paks"), tanning formulas, and so on suggest that even if bodybuilding does represent an attempt by some women to control and define their own bodies, it is also being expressed in a distorted manner that threatens to replicate many of the more commercialized, narcissistic, and physically unhealthy aspects of men's athletics. Hargreaves (1986, p. 117) explains the contradictory meaning of women's movement into athletic activities such as bodybuilding, boxing, rugby, and soccer:

This trend represents an active threat to popular assumptions about sport and its unifying principle appears as a shift in male hegemony. However, it also shows up the contradiction that women are being incorporated into models of male sports which are characterized by fierce competition and aggression and should, therefore, be resisted. Instead of a redefinition of masculinity occurring, this trend highlights the complex ways male hegemony works in sport and ways in which women actively collude in its reproduction.

It is crucial to examine the role that the mass sports media play in contributing to this shift in male hegemony, and it is to this topic that I will turn my attention next.

### *Female Athletes and the Sports Media*

A person viewing an athletic event on television has the illusory impression of immediacy—of being there as it is happening. But as Clarke and Clarke (1982, p. 73) point out,

The immediacy is, in fact, *mediated*—between us and the event stand the cameras, camera angles, producers' choice of shots, and commentators' interpretations—the whole invisible apparatus of media presentation. We can never see the whole event, we see those parts which are filtered through this process to us. . . . Rather than immediacy, our real relation to sports on television is one of distance—we are observers, recipients of a media event.

The choices, the filtering, the entire mediation of the sporting event, is based upon invisible, taken-for-granted assumptions and values of dominant so-



cial groups, and as such the presentation of the event tends to support corporate, white, and male-dominant ideologies. But as Gitlin (1980) has demonstrated, the media is more than a simple conduit for the transmission of dominant ideologies. If it were simply that, then the propaganda function of television would be transparent for all to see, stripping the medium of its veneer of objectivity and thus reducing its legitimacy. Rather, T.V. provides frameworks of meaning which, in effect, selectively interpret not only the athletic events themselves but also the controversies and problems surrounding the events. Since sport has been a primary arena of ideological legitimation for male superiority, it is crucial to examine the frameworks of meaning that the sports media have employed to portray the emergence of the female athlete.

A potentially counter-hegemonic image can be dealt with in a number of ways by the media. An initial strategy is to marginalize something that is too big to simply ignore. The 1986 Gay Games in the San Francisco Bay Area are a good example of this. The Games explicitly advocate a value system (equality between women and men, for instance) which runs counter to that of the existing sports establishment (Messner, 1984). Despite the fact that the Games were arguably the Bay Area's largest athletic event of the summer, and that several events in the Games were internationally sanctioned, the paltry amount of coverage given to the Games did *not*, for the most part, appear on the sports pages or during the sports segment of the T.V. news. The event was presented in the media not as a legitimate sports event but as a cultural or lifestyle event. The media's framing of the Games invalidated its claim as a sporting event, thus marginalizing any ideological threat that the Games might have posed to the dominant value system.

Until fairly recently, marginalization was the predominant media strategy in portraying female athletes. Graydon (1983) states that 90% of sports reporting still covers male sports. And when female athletes are covered—by a predominantly male media—they are described either in terms of their physical desirability to men (“pert and pretty”) or in their domestic roles as wives and mothers. Patronizing or trivializing female athletes is sometimes not enough to marginalize them ideologically: Top-notch female athletes have often been subjected to overt hostility intended to cast doubts upon their true sex. To say “she plays like a man” is a double-edged sword—it is, on the surface, a compliment to an individual woman's skills, but it also suggests that since she is so good, she must not be a true woman after all. The outstanding female athlete is portrayed as an exception that proves the rule, thus reinforcing traditional stereotypes about femininity. Hormonal and chromosomal femininity tests for female (but no masculinity tests for male) athletes are a logical result of these ideological assumptions about male-female biology (Leskyj, 1986).

I would speculate that we are now moving into an era in which female athletes have worked hard enough to attain a certain level of legitimacy that makes simple media marginalization and trivialization of female athletes appear transparently unfair and prejudicial. The framing of female athletes as sex objects or as sexual deviants is no longer a tenable strategy if the media are to maintain their own legitimacy. As Gitlin (1980) pointed out in reference to the media's treatment of the student antiwar movement in the late 1960s, when a movement's values become entrenched in a large enough proportion of the population, the

media maintains its veneer of objectivity and fairness by incorporating a watered-down version of the values of the oppositional group. In so doing, the ideological hegemony of the dominant group shifts but is essentially maintained. I would argue that this is precisely what is happening today with women and sport in the media. Women athletes are increasingly being covered by “objective” reports that do not trivialize their performances, make references to a woman’s attractiveness, or posit the superior female athlete as a sex deviant. The attitude now seems to be, “They want to be treated equally with men? Well, let’s see what they can do.”

What is conveniently ignored by today’s sportscasters—and liberal feminists, intent on gaining equal opportunities for female athletes, sometimes collude in this—is that male and female bodies do differ in terms of their potential for physical strength, endurance, agility, and grace. Despite considerable overlap, the average adult male is about 5 inches taller than the average female. Can women really hope to compete at the highest levels with men in basketball or volleyball? The average male has a larger and more powerful body. Males average 40% muscle and 15% body fat, while females average 23% muscle and 25% body fat. Can women possibly compete at the highest levels with men in football, track and field, hockey, or baseball? Women do have some physical differences from men that could be translated into athletic superiority. Different skeletal structures and greater flexibility make for superior performances on a balance beam, for instance. And women’s higher body fat ratio gives them greater buoyancy in water and greater insulation from heat loss, which has translated into women’s best time in swimming the English Channel both ways being considerably faster than the best times recorded by men. But the fact is, the major sports (especially the “money” sports) are defined largely according to the most extreme possibilities of the male body. If cross-sex competition is truly on the agenda, women are going to be competing at a decided disadvantage, “fighting biology all the way” (Brownmiller, 1984, p. 32), on male-defined turf.

Given these physiological differences between the sexes and the fact that major sports are organized around the most extreme potentialities of the male body, “equal opportunity” as the sports media’s dominant framework of meaning for presenting the athletic performances of women athletes is likely to become a new means of solidifying the ideological hegemony of male superiority. With women competing in male-defined sports, the sports media can employ statistics as objective measures of performance. Equal opportunity within this system provides support for the ideology of meritocracy while at the same time offering incontrovertible evidence of the “natural” differences between males and females. And male reporters can simply smile and shrug: “We just call ‘em as we see ‘em.”

### *Male Responses to Female Athleticism*

How people receive and interpret the complex and sometimes contradictory ideological messages they receive through the media is an important issue that deserves more analytic attention than can be offered here (Dunn, 1986). I would like to make a tentative speculation here that the emerging images of femininity being forged by women athletes and framed by the media are grudgingly becoming accepted by the majority of males. Although there is clearly some resistance—even outright hostility—toward female athleticism expressed by a small minority

of the men I have interviewed, the following statement by a 33-year-old blue collar man is typical of the majority:

I really enjoy the progress they [female athletes] are making now, having bobby-sox baseball and flag football for little girls. And in high school they have whole leagues now like for the boys. I think that's great. You used to watch women's games in the 60s and in the 70s even, and you could watch all these mistakes—errors on routine grounders, things like that. But now they're really sharp—I mean, they can play a man's game as far as mental sharpness. But I think physically they're limited to their own sex. There is still the male part of the game. That is, males have better physical equipment for sports, as for what they can do and what they can't do.

This man's statement expresses many of the basic ambiguities of male consciousness under liberal capitalism in the "postfeminist" 1980s: Imbedded in the liberal ideal of equal opportunity is a strong belief that inequality is part of the natural order. Thus, it's only fair that women get an equal shot to compete, but it's really such a relief to find that, once given the opportunity, they just don't have the "physical equipment" to measure up with men. "They're [still] limited to their own sex."

### Conclusion

I have discounted the simplistic notion that women's increasing athleticism unambiguously signals increased freedom and equality for women with the argument that "equal opportunity" for female athletes may actually mark a shift in the ideological hegemony of male dominance and superiority. But it would be a mistake to conclude from this that women's movement into sport is simply having a reactionary effect in terms of the politics of gender relations. It should not be lost on us that the statement made by the above-mentioned man, even as it expresses a continued need to stress the ways that women are different and inferior to men, also involves a historically unprecedented acknowledgment of women's physicality and "mental sharpness."

It has been argued here that gender relations, along with their concomitant images of masculinity and femininity, change and develop historically as a result of interactions between men and women within socially structured limits and constraints. We can see how the first wave of athletic feminism in the 1920s signaled an active challenge to Victorian constraints on women, and we can see that the way this challenge was resisted and eventually marginalized reflected the limits imposed upon women's quest for equality by an emerging industrial capitalism and a crumbling, but still resilient, patriarchy. Similarly, the current wave of women's athleticism expresses a genuine quest by women for equality, control of their own bodies, and self-definition, but within historical limits and constraints imposed by a consumption-oriented corporate capitalism and men's continued attempts to retain power and privilege over women. As Connell (1987, p. 251) has pointed out, "In sexual ideology generally, ascendant definitions of reality must be seen as accomplishments that are always partial and always to some extent contested. Indeed we must see them as partly defined by the alternatives against which they are asserted."

Organized sport, as a cultural sphere defined largely by patriarchal priorities, will continue to be an important arena in which emerging images of active, fit, and muscular women are forged, interpreted, contested, and incorporated. The larger socioeconomic and political context will continue to shape and constrain the extent to which women can wage fundamental challenges to the ways that organized sports continue providing ideological legitimation for male dominance. And the media's framing of male and female athletes will continue to present major obstacles for any fundamental challenge to the present commercialized and male-dominant structure of organized athletics. It remains for a critical feminist theory to recognize the emergent contradictions in this system in order to inform a liberating social practice.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup>While this criticism is generally true of U.S. sport sociology, an international group of scholars has recently made important strides toward the development of a more critical and reflexive feminist analysis of sport. For an excellent collection of articles, see Hall (1987).

<sup>2</sup>The discussion here is concerned mainly with sports and the ideology of gender relations. It is also important to employ a social-psychological perspective to examine the meaning of sports participation in the development of gender identity among female athletes (Duquin, 1984) and male athletes (Messner, 1985, 1987).

<sup>3</sup>Interviews referred to here were conducted in 1983–84 with 30 male former athletes of diverse socioeconomic backgrounds and ages. Since the sample does not include nonathletes, the data should be considered suggestive, but not representative of a more general male population.

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