

COMING ON STRONG

*Gender and Sexuality in
Twentieth-Century Women's Sport*

SUSAN K. CAHN



COMING ON STRONG

GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN
TWENTIETH-CENTURY WOMEN'S SPORT

Susan K. Cahn

HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, Massachusetts
London, England

*To my parents,
Gretchen and James Cahn*

Copyright © 1994 by Susan K. Cahn
All rights reserved
Printed in the United States of America

Second printing, 2000

This Harvard University Press paperback edition is published by
arrangement with The Free Press, a division of Macmillan, Inc.

First Harvard University Press paperback edition, 1995

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Cahn, Susan K.

Coming on strong : gender and sexuality in twentieth-century
women's sport / Susan K. Cahn.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-674-14434-1 (pbk.)

1. Sports for women—history—20th century. 2. Sexual
discrimination against women—history—20th century.
3. Gender identity. I. Title.

GV709.C34 1994

796'.0194—dc20

93-29348

CIP

Preface

As a sports-minded teenager of the 1970s, I marveled at the courage and skill of the pioneer female athletes of my generation. Prompted by new federal legislation against sex discrimination and, more generally, by feminist demands for female access to traditionally male realms of society, the sports world seemed to undergo a rapid, almost instant transformation. Within a few short years, girls' and women's athletic leagues, tournaments, sports camps, and city, state, and national championships sprouted to serve women at the high school, college, and professional levels. The media took note as well, giving extensive coverage to such female tennis and gymnastic stars as Billie Jean King, Chris Evert, Kathy Rigby, and Olga Korbut. As one of the grateful beneficiaries of these changes, I eagerly joined my high school basketball team and thrilled at my good fortune—the chance to be involved in what I assumed was the first-ever interscholastic sporting opportunity for girls.

Delighting as I did in the chance to play in organized competition, I was not concerned with the blatantly second-class status of women's sport in budget matters and the media; it did not occur to me that it could be otherwise. And though I had ached to play Little League baseball as a young girl, I never wondered why baseball remained off limits to girls. My concerns were personal and immediate, mostly about jump shots and playing time. I did suffer twinges of embarrassment knowing that I still harbored a secret wish to play halfback on my high school football team. And though I suspected that what made me “right” in “jock” circles might be making me all “wrong” in the nonathletic social scene, I assumed these were the private dilemmas of a girl

born on the cusp of a new era. I had some vague images of women athletes of the past, like the amazing Babe Didrikson or the lithe Althea Gibson. But if I thought of them at all, it was as anomalies of an earlier age—athletes who had miraculously done it on their own in an age when women didn't play sports. As far as I knew, no tradition of women's competitive sport paved the way for my pioneering generation.

Years later my training in women's history and feminist studies has led me to reconsider those suppositions. I know now that histories get buried. Questions deemed insignificant may be worth asking. And interpretations oblivious to gender are most likely misguided and incomplete. As a graduate student I began to wonder about the tradition of women's athletics in the United States. Was it a linear story, a steady climb from exclusion to inclusion? Or had specific time periods, classes, or cultures supported women's athletics before the 1970s? Which women played sports, and what had doing so meant for them? If women had participated in the past, why had sports remained such a bastion of male activity and identity?

This book, which began as my Ph.D. dissertation for the University of Minnesota, addresses these and other questions designed to recover, and gain insight from, a history that for the most part has been ignored by both popular and scholarly writers. It is not a comprehensive history of women's athletics. Rather, it is a study of how gender and sexuality have been culturally constructed within and through twentieth-century U.S. women's sport. Precisely because women in sport crossed into a "male" realm, both critics and advocates articulated *their* beliefs about femininity, the female body, and the meaning of womanhood, leaving a rich body of historical evidence on how common-sense beliefs about womanhood and manhood are made and altered over time. By looking at how athletes, educators, sporting officials, promoters, and journalists have clashed and compromised over gender issues in sport, we can learn something about how ordinary and influential people create society's gender and sexual arrangements, and how their actions are conditioned by the circumstances and beliefs of their time.

As I worked on my dissertation and then this book, several institutions and many individuals provided financial, intellectual, and personal support. I am grateful to the Graduate School and the History Department of the University of Minnesota for assisting me financially at the dissertation level. A University of Minnesota dissertation fellowship, a dissertation special research grant, and a grant from the McMillan Travel fund provided extremely helpful support. Subsequently I have received financial assistance from a Clemson University Faculty Development Grant and a Julian Park Publication Fund Grant from the State University of New York at Buffalo.

The financial support I received enabled me to travel in several regions of the country collecting oral histories from athletes who competed in high-level competition from as early as the 1930s and as late as the 1970s. A few of these women had been famous athletes of their day. The vast majority, however, received little recognition during their playing days and have received even less attention from historians or other scholars. I owe them a great debt for sharing their time, stories, and knowledge with me. They provided me with a level of detail about women's athletic participation that is unavailable in written sources. More important, they gave me critical insights into the experience and perspectives of women athletes, information that transformed my own thinking about women's sport history. I would like to thank them for their great intellectual contribution to this project and at the same time acknowledge that their interpretations and mine were not the same in every instance, and that my own questions and interests have taken this study in directions that may not reflect their priorities. I would also like to thank them for their hospitality and for the thoroughly enjoyable experience of getting to meet them and listen to their life stories, which collectively paved the way for athletes of my and future generations.

I am also grateful for the generous help of archivists, friends, colleagues, and editors. As I worked with a variety of historical collections, I benefited from the knowledge and assistance of archivists, especially those at the University of Wisconsin, Tennessee State University, Smith College, Radcliffe College, and

the Chicago Historical Society. My adviser at the University of Minnesota, Sara Evans, encouraged me throughout and after my years in graduate school, offering her unwavering support in all phases of the research and writing of this project. Professors Mary Jo Maynes and Janet Spector also generously shared their time and ideas and offered insightful criticisms and challenging questions as well as personal support along the way. Members of my dissertation writing group read numerous essays, conference papers, and chapter drafts from the project's inception to its completion. I would like to thank Davida Alperin, Greta Gaard, Priscilla Pratt, and Diana Swanson for their advice and comradeship. In revising the manuscript for publication, several colleagues have read chapters and made valuable suggestions. Pamela Mack, George Chauncey, Jr., Kath Weston, Don Sabo, Wanda Wakefield, Tamara Thornton, and Liz Kennedy have all given generously of their time and ideas. Cindy Himes Gissendanner and Mary Jo Festle, scholars who also study U.S. women's sport history, have been especially helpful and gracious in their willingness to share ideas and sources. Thanks also to Scott Henderson, who provided invaluable help in the final stages. Finally, I am grateful to Joyce Seltzer, my editor at The Free Press, who went to bat for this project early on and then offered her constant encouragement and support. Her high standards and excellent advice have made this a better book.

In addition numerous friends and family members read chapters and/or offered encouragement, helpful criticisms, and laughter in just the right doses. I owe many thanks to Maureen Honish, Nan Enstad, Sharon Doherty, Linda Silber, Barbara Appleby, Betsy Scholl, Robin McDuff, Elizabeth Martín-García, Lotus Cirilo, Lisa Cahn, Kathleen Duffy, Shelly, Ellen Mamer, my brothers, Steven and Peter Cahn, and my parents, Gretchen Cahn and James Cahn. Finally, I would like to thank Birgitte Soland, who doesn't even like sports. Her powerful intellect, generous heart, easy laughter, and abiding love have made this a better book and enriched my life immeasurably.

Contents

Preface	vii
Introduction	1
1. The New Type of Athletic Girl	7
2. Grass-roots Growth and Sexual Sensation in the Flapper Era	31
3. Games of Strife <i>The Battle over Women's Competitive Sport</i>	55
4. Order on the Court <i>The Campaign to Suppress Women's Basketball</i>	83
5. "Cinderellas" of Sport <i>Black Women in Track and Field</i>	110
6. No Freaks, No Amazons, No Boyish Bobs <i>The All-American Girls Baseball League</i>	140
7. Beauty and the Butch <i>The "Mannish" Athlete and the Lesbian Threat</i>	164
8. "Play It, Don't Say It" <i>Lesbian Identity and Community in Women's Sport</i>	185
9. Women Competing/Gender Contested	207
10. You've Come a Long Way, Maybe <i>A "Revolution" in Women's Sport?</i>	246
Notes	281
Index	351

INTRODUCTION

In the early 1980s a talented young Czech immigrant to the United States took the women's tennis world by storm. Martina Navratilova lost only six matches from 1982 to 1984, and by 1985 had accumulated 8.5 million dollars in winnings, more than any other player in the sport's history.¹ The refreshingly candid, lithe, muscular Navratilova symbolized the advances women had made in the athletic world and, more broadly, in traditionally male activities involving money and power. As an outspoken critic of sexual inequality in sport, she represented both the ongoing struggle and the impressive gains women had made in more than a decade of challenges to the historic barriers to women's participation in sport.

As Navratilova and other female athletes gained celebrity status, many observers heralded their accomplishments as proof that modern women had finally cast off the physical and psychological shackles of past centuries. Yet others looked less favorably on these developments, perceiving women's entrance into sport as an unsettling and unwelcome intrusion into the realm of masculinity. In the tennis world Navratilova's mounting victory toll invited subtle condemnation and not-so-subtle ridicule from tennis experts, fans, and the press.

Some wondered whether Navratilova even belonged on the women's tour anymore, given her apparent invincibility. Noting her high-tech, precision-oriented training methods, they characterized her as a "bionic sci-fi creation" of her training team—a kind of unnatural, even monstrous "Amazon" who "has the women's game pinned to the mat."² Rather than bask in hard-earned glory, therefore, Navratilova felt continually pressed to

counter her public image as some kind of hulking predator who kept "beating up all those innocent girls."³ This image, reflected in media comments like "She's simply *too good*," placed her at odds with, and not within, the women's tennis circuit.⁴

By implication these representations also suggested that she was at odds with her sex; "the bleached blonde Czech bisexual defector" who "bludgeoned" and "teased" her hopelessly inferior opponents appeared to be something other than a "natural" female.⁵ One of her frustrated "victims" suggested to a reporter that for Navratilova to play that well, she "must have a chromosomal screw loose somewhere."⁶ Navratilova's stunning accomplishments could have been construed as an example of one athlete's successful attempt to use her natural talents, hard work, and state-of-the-art training regimen to reach new levels of athletic excellence.⁷ Yet many Americans simply could not separate the concept of athletic superiority from its cultural affiliation with masculine sport and the male body. Her startlingly "masculine" accomplishments generated farfetched explanations; contemporaries portrayed her as an extraordinary product of science, technology, or—worse—chromosomal defect.

Martina Navratilova's tarnished reputation suggests that even in this age of apparent progress, the historic association between athletic prowess and masculinity has endured. Highly skilled female athletes continue to meet with profound skepticism. At times, not only their femininity but their biological sex comes into question. Several enthusiastic young athletes from Lewisville, Texas, found this out during a girls' soccer match in the fall of 1990. On watching their daughters' team go down to defeat, two irate fathers stomped onto the field and demanded that the opposing side send its three best players to the bathroom so that an officially designated parent could verify their sex. These men could not fathom the fact that girls were capable of such talented play. After the game one of the aggrieved fathers belligerently "complimented" the winning team's nine-year-old star, goalie Natasha Dennis, by saying "Nice game, boy!" and "Good game, son." Nonplussed by the implication that her athletic ability derived from what might be between her legs, Dennis pluckily

suggested that someone should instead take her accusers “and check and see if they have anything between their ears.”⁸

Experiences like those of Martina Navratilova and Natasha Dennis are as old as women’s attempts to break into the male sporting tradition. Athletics have long been the province of men. In the Western world, not only have men dominated the playing fields, but athletic qualities such as aggression, competitiveness, strength, speed, power, and teamwork have been associated with masculinity. For many men sport has provided an arena in which to cultivate masculinity and achieve manhood.

Consequently women’s very participation in sport has posed a conundrum that Americans have grappled with for more than a century. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, American women made determined collective efforts to break down the barriers to female athletic involvement. They claimed sport as a right, a joy, and a signal aspect of women’s emancipation. These attempts elicited both approval and scorn, generating a series of controversies that spanned the century. The matter went far beyond the issue of decorum—which kinds of behavior were deemed appropriate for the female sex. The controversies surrounding female athleticism broached fundamental questions about the content and definition of American woman- and manhood. Would women engaging in a traditionally male activity become more manlike? What exactly were “manly” and “womanly” qualities, and did they have to be limited to men and women, respectively? And if athleticism was not *essentially* masculine, did this mean that all gender differences were mutable and not ordained by, and permanently ensconced in, nature?

When women athletes insisted on their right to sport, alarmed and intrigued observers wrestled publicly with these very questions. In 1912 the *Ladies Home Journal* published an article titled “Are Athletics Making Girls Masculine?” Author Dudley Sargent, prominent physical educator and director of Harvard University’s Hemenway Gymnasium, wondered along with many of his contemporaries whether female athleticism would make women into masculine facsimiles of the “opposite” sex.⁹ Or, conversely, they worried that women could “feminize” sport, dilut-

ing its masculine content and eroding the boundary between male and female spheres of activity.

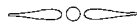
Sargent gave voice to the central, underlying tension in American women's sport—the contradictory relationship between athleticism and womanhood. In subsequent years others examined the same question, often in a harsher light than the relatively sympathetic Sargent. Journalists responded to Mildred (“Babe”) Didrikson Zaharias’s stunning athletic accomplishments of the 1930s through the 1950s by mocking her “mannish” appearance. They described her face as hawkish and hairy, her body as a whipcord, and her personality as a “conqueror type” that included “an unusual amount of male dominance.”¹⁰ Under the weight of such allegations, even supporters of women's sport felt pressed to concede that some female athletes excelled because of their genetically constituted “android tendencies.”¹¹

The apprehensions of skeptics did not go unanswered. Over the course of the century, advocates of women's sport developed numerous and often competing strategies to cope with the dissonance between masculine sport and feminine womanhood. The boldest among them accepted the charge of masculinization but claimed its positive value. They contended that women's athleticism would indeed endow women with masculine attributes, but that these qualities would benefit women as well as men, contributing to female emancipation and eliminating needless sexual distinctions.

Female physical educators responded more cautiously. Several generations of professionals sought to protect the reputation and health of female athletes by devising separate, less physically taxing versions of women's sport. In effect educators created a respectable “feminine” brand of athletics designed to maximize female participation while averting controversy. By contrast, popular promoters of community and commercial sport attempted to feminize the athlete more than the activity. They touted the feminine and sexual charms of female competitors, making sporting events into combination beauty-athletic contests. These and other sport advocates engaged in protracted battles for the control of women's sport, each side promising that under its authority women's athletics would gain respect and acceptance.

Individual athletes developed personal strategies to resolve the tension between their love of sport and the cultural condemnation of “mannish” or “tomboyish” athletes. Some made special efforts to demonstrate femininity through their dress, demeanor, and off-field interests. Other, more defiant types refused the compromise. With their “tough” manners and aggressive play, they embraced a style that critics called “mannish” but that they themselves saw as perfectly consistent with womanhood. Still others opted for a middle course, claiming allegiance to conventional definitions of femininity while at the same time trying to stretch their boundaries to include athletic activities.

Ironically, many of the collective and individual strategies athletes and their advocates employed to defuse the tension between sport and womanhood actually deepened the gender divide in athletic culture. Efforts to create a separate, distinct women’s brand of sport effectively defined “feminine” sport as a lesser version of male sport: less competitive, less demanding, and less skillful. Commercial promoters were far more willing to commend top-notch athletes for their “masculine” excellence. But by going to great lengths to highlight the feminine attractiveness and sexual charms of female competitors, promoters implied that by itself, athleticism remained a manly trait, one that must be compensated for by proof of femininity.



Forced to deal with a constant barrage of criticism from diehard defenders of a male sporting tradition, generations of twentieth-century female athletes and their advocates successfully carved a niche for women in a sporting culture whose deep identification with masculinity nevertheless remained unyielding. With “real” sport and “real” athletes defined as masculine, women of this century have occupied only a marginal space in the sports world and an even more tenuous position in athletic governance.

Consequently many, perhaps even most, women have until recently been profoundly alienated from sport, and thus from the physical competence, confidence, and pleasures that sport makes available. However, those women who persisted in athletics found in sport a positive, even life-transforming experience. While dis-

missing, defying, or simply putting up with the societal hostility toward women athletes, they created a vibrant female sporting tradition. Generations of women athletes have promoted physical competence, celebrated the joy of play, developed a deep appreciation for athletic competition and excellence, and forged loving, supportive bonds among women in a nontraditional setting.

The persistent but unsteady tension between female athleticism and male-defined sport forms a central thread in the history of women's sport, illuminating not only women's complicated standing in the athletic world but the vital interplay between sport and the surrounding culture. From early-twentieth-century controversies over the intrepid "athletic girl," to midcentury racial politics surrounding African American women track stars, to more recent legislative struggles over gender equity in school athletics, women's athletic history offers a lens through which to understand both the complicated gender dynamics of sport and the social experience of women athletes. A century of women's efforts to obtain a meaningful place in the sporting world provides critical insights into the history of gender relations in American society.

CHAPTER 1

THE NEW TYPE OF ATHLETIC GIRL



In the fall of 1911 *Lippincott's Monthly* described the modern athletic woman: "She loves to walk, to row, to ride, to motor, to jump and run . . . as Man walks, jumps, rows, rides, motors, and runs."¹ To many early-twentieth-century observers, the female athlete represented the bold and energetic modern woman, breaking free from Victorian constraints, and tossing aside old-fashioned ideas about separate spheres for men and women. Popular magazines celebrated this transformation, issuing favorable notice that the "hardy sun-tanned girl" who spent the summer in outdoor games was fast replacing her predecessors, the prototypical "Lydia Languish" and the "soggy matron" of old.²

With the dawning of the new century, interest in sport had burgeoned. More and more Americans were participating as spectators or competitors in football, baseball, track and field, and a variety of other events. At the same time women were streaming into education, the paid labor force, and political reform movements in unprecedented numbers. Women's social and political activism sparked a reconsideration of their nature and place in society, voiced through vigorous debates on a wide range of issues, from the vote to skirt lengths. Popular interest in sport and concern over women's changing status converged in the growing attention paid to the "athletic girl," a striking symbol of modern womanhood.

The female athlete's entrance into a male-defined sphere made

her not only a popular figure but an ambiguous, potentially disruptive character as well. Sport had developed as a male preserve, a domain in which men expressed and cultivated masculinity through athletic competition. Yet, along with other "New Women" who demanded access to such traditional male realms as business and politics, women athletes of the early twentieth century claimed the right to share in sport. They stood on the borderline between new feminine ideals and customary notions of manly sport, symbolizing both the possibilities and the dangers of the New Woman's daring disregard for traditional gender arrangements.³

The female athlete's ambiguity created a dilemma for her advocates. Given women's evident enjoyment of such "masculine" pursuits, could the "athletic girl" (and thus, the modern woman) reap the benefits of sport (and modernity) without becoming less womanly? The *Lippincott's Monthly* article was titled "The Masculinization of Girls." And while it concluded positively that "with muscles tense and blood aflame, she plays the manly role," women's assumption of "the manly role" generated deep hostility and anxiety among those who feared that women's athletic activity would damage female reproductive capacity, promote sexual licentiousness, and blur "natural" gender differences.⁴

The perceived "mannishness" of the female athlete complicated her reception, making the "athletic girl" a cause for concern as well as celebration. Controversy did not dampen women's enthusiasm, but it did lead some advocates of women's sport to take a cautious approach, one designed specifically to avert charges of masculinization. Women physical educators took an especially prudent stance, articulating a unique philosophy of women's athletics that differed substantially from popular ideals of "manly sport."

The tension between sport and femininity led, paradoxically, to educators' insistence on women's equal right to sport and on inherent differences between female and male athletes. Balancing claims of equality and difference, physical educators articulated a woman-centered philosophy of sport that proposed "moderation" as the watchword of women's physical activity. Moderation provided the critical point of difference between women's and

men's sport, a preventive against the masculine effects of sport. It was this philosophy, with its calculated effort to resolve the issue of "mannishness," which guided the early years of twentieth-century women's athletics.



Interest in women's athletics reflected the growing popularity of sport in industrial America. In a society in which the division between leisure and labor was increasingly distinct, many Americans filled their free time with modern exercise regimens and organized sport. It was in the middle and latter decades of the nineteenth century that two pivotal traditions developed—that of "manly sport" and that of female exercise. Each would influence the turn-of-the-century boom in women's sport and shape the views of female physical educators.

Traditions of "manly sport" developed over the course of the nineteenth century as large-scale transformations in the American economy, class relations, and leisure habits helped spawn new forms of athletic culture. In an antebellum society destabilized by rapid commercialization and the first stages of industrial revolution, the emerging middle class took an inordinate interest in cultivating self-discipline and a strictly regulated body. Not only did they perceive the growing numbers of poor, immigrant, urban workers as an unruly mass in need of disciplined activity, they also worried about their own capacity to subdue momentary passions for the controlled, regulated habits of body deemed necessary for climbing the ladder of success. Exercise—as well as diet, health, and sexual reforms—offered a means to these ends.

Guided by a Victorian philosophy of "rational recreation" and a religious ideal of "muscular Christianity," male sport and exercise began to flourish in the years before the Civil War. Physical culture specialists prescribed rigorous routines designed to improve both body and mind. A strict regimen of physical exercise was expected to contain sexual energy, breed self-control, and strengthen a man's moral and religious fiber through muscular development. The physically fit Victorian man could then channel his mental and physical energies into a life of productive labor and moral rectitude.