

ALLEN GUTTMANN

THE EROTIC IN SPORTS



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THE EROTIC IN SPORTS



To Steven and Gridth Ablon

OTHER BOOKS ON SPORTS BY ALLEN GUTTMANN

From Ritual to Record: The Nature of Modern Sports.

New York: Columbia University Press, 1978.

The Games Must Go On: Avery Brundage and the Olympic Movement. New York: Columbia University Press, 1984.

Sports Spectators. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986.

A Whole New Ball Game: An Interpretation of American Sports. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988.

Women's Sports: A History.

New York: Columbia University Press, 1991.

The Olympics: A History of the Modern Games.

Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992.

Games and Empires: Modern Sports and Cultural Imperialism.

New York: Columbia University Press, 1994.

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A number of paragraphs in the present work appeared, in different form, in previous books that I have published with Columbia University Press.

*Defenceless under the night
Our world in stupor lies;
Yet, dotted everywhere,
Ironic points of light
Flash out wherever the just
Exchange their messages:
May I, composed like them
Of Eros and of dust,
Beleaguered by the same
Negation and despair,
Show an affirming flame.*

W. H. AUDEN

"September 1, 1939"

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Introduction: Candor, Euphemism, and Denial

Idolatry is the mother of all games.
—NOVATIAN, "DE SPECTACULUS"

When Greek men and boys journeyed to Olympia to compete in the great panhellenic festival that honored Zeus, when Greek girls ran races at the same site for an olive branch and a portion of a sacrificial cow, everyone seems to have understood that physically trained bodies, observed in motion or at rest, can be sexually attractive. Most of the ancients acknowledged and celebrated the erotic element of sports. In modern times that same element has been observed by those who feared and deprecated it. Critics of sports have deplored their sensuality and their ability to entice, excite, and sexually arouse participants and spectators alike. In the Victorian era, a number of medical experts complained that the craze for the newly invented bicycle was a thinly disguised desire for the illicit pleasures of masturbation. It was charged that the bicycle seat induced "priapism."¹ The presidents of evangelical colleges warned ominously that football games were orgiastic affairs more fit for pagan haunts than the groves of academe. In 1892, the *Wesleyan Christian Advocate* complained that the violent game unleashed

"the lower impulses of the physical man" and allowed young males to "find their pleasure in mere sensual energy."²

When Senda Berenson introduced basketball to the young women of Smith College, in Northampton, Massachusetts, the only man allowed in the gymnasium was the president of the college, a man whose age and dignity were thought to neutralize any danger that he might be erotically aroused. When the Australian press reported positively, in October 1907, on "the brown skinned specimens of manhood" and the "bronze Venuses" that were to be seen on the beaches and in the surf, there were immediate protests against "heaps of sprawling men and lads, naked, but for a nondescript rag around the middle."³ In 1933, Sunny Lowry swam the English Channel and was berated as a "harlot" because she exposed her bare knees.⁴ A year later, Cardinal Rodrigue Villeneuve of Quebec, condemning the "pagan" cult of the body as manifested in sports, bemoaned the rampant concern for "hysterical strength, sensual pleasure, and the development of the human animal." Meanwhile, his European colleagues thundered episcopal anathemas against female gymnasts who performed before mixed audiences.⁵

In response to the recurrent charge that sports are a sensual if not a satanic indulgence, most athletes and spectators have defended their passion as if the pleasure they derived from sports had no connection whatsoever with human sexuality. As one says in today's "postmodernist discourse," eros was "erased from the athletic text." In reply to heated allegations of sensuality, ingenuous lovers of sports have offered cool denial. Whenever outraged religious traditionalists have called attention to the erotic appeal of the human body at play, high-minded progressive reformers have blandly expatiated on the benefits of sunlight, fresh air, and unencumbered movement. In 1921 the journal *Die Freie Turnerin* showed off its new logo—a youthful nude. The editors of the periodical dedicated to women's gymnastics meant her to represent "a free maiden, with a joyful sense of her strength and her trained body, whose nakedness is unashamed because it is natural."⁶ When

confronted with clerical accusations of pornographic intent, German physical educators professed injured surprise: "For us," wrote the editors of the *Arbeiter-Turnzeitung*, "nudity is beauty, joy, and purity." This kind of nudity was *not*, they emphasized, erotic.⁷ Countering similar allegations of prurience, a contributor to *Sport im Bild* announced in 1928 that sports participation actually dissipated "the mists of the erotic" that had enveloped German women. Thanks to sports, women were "cleaner, more free, fresher."⁸

YMCA workers, physical educators, and coaches have gone beyond mere self-deceptive denial. In response to the critics' exasperated insistence that sports can quite obviously be an occasion for erotic play, enthusiasts have propagated the modern myth that a heated contest and a cold shower divert or diminish adolescent sexuality. At best, they may even extinguish it. In response to charges of voyeurism, spectators enamoured of sports have proclaimed their chaste appreciation of "thrills and spills" and "all the moves" (except the erotic ones). When sports historian Richard Mandell mentioned to a group of Olympic coaches that there was "a suggestion of the erotic" in men's and women's gymnastics, they became as nervous as ninth graders viewing a film on sexually transmitted diseases.⁹

Scholarly specialists in sports studies appear to have joined the fans and the coaches in a conspiracy to suppress all mention of an erotic element in sports. Numerous studies have demonstrated that exercise programs result in an improved body image, but the sexual implications of this well-established finding are seldom explored. Sharp-eyed European and American experts have identified a vast array of motivations for sports participation, including an aesthetic dimension, but most have managed to overlook the fact that "fitness" and "to be in shape" are often euphemisms for the desire to be sexually attractive. Although the study of gender seems to have become a prerequisite for academic advancement, researchers in sports psychology rarely show more than a flicker of interest in sexuality. One looks, with scarcely more success, for ref-

erences to sports in the voluminous psychological literature on sexuality. There is research indicating that men who exercise strenuously are more likely than their couch-potato peers to acknowledge a desire to date and kiss the attractive females whose photographs they are shown, but the psychologists who reported these experiments seem not to have raised questions about the erotic appeal of the exercisers.¹⁰

When an erotic element is too blatantly present to be overlooked, the customary reaction of the proponents of sports is promptly to condemn it. In an essay sharply critical of "the sexualization of female athletes in sport media," Donald Sabo and Michael Messner emphatically denied that men perceive *real* athletes—as opposed to television's fantastic fare—"in traditionally erotic terms." On the contrary. Real women

athletes are too busy competing to pose; too caught up in the physical and mental demands of the game to engage in sexual innuendo; too independent, animated, and obviously three-dimensional for men to reduce them readily to sex objects. It is simple brain work for a traditional male to sexually objectify a wiggling cheerleader; a fully extended female smashing a volleyball does not erotically compute.¹¹

Very recently, however, at least a few scholars have begun to ask some candid questions and to challenge some orthodox views. Why, wonder historians Elliott Gorn and Michael Oriard, are sports ignored in the academic debate over the history and social significance of the human body? After all, "power and eroticism meet most conspicuously in the athletic body—Florence Griffith-Joyner's, Greg Louganis's, or Michael Jordan's."¹² Why have historians "tended to retreat nervously from the erotic attractions of the male body"?¹³ Why have those who are in love with sports been reluctant to examine their passion? The answer, presumably, is that the admission of simple facts acknowledged thousands of years ago is now blocked because the topic of eros and sports is obviously, for

many if not for most modern coaches, athletes, and spectators, a taboo. To mention the topic is to cause them embarrassment. Like the timid lover in T. S. Eliot's "Love-Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," coaches, athletes, and spectators murmur, "That is not it at all, / That is not what I meant at all."

When nineteenth-century Anglicans touted "muscular Christianity," when YMCA workers invented basketball (1891) and volleyball (1895), when Pope Pius XII decided in 1945 to affirm the value of modern sports, critics became proponents, but there was no sudden acceptance of an erotic element in sports. Protestant and Catholic converts to sports seemed suddenly to become blind to the sexual dimensions that were anathema to their clerical predecessors (and to many of their contemporaries).

Ironically, once the mainstream churches took to celebrations of the joy of sports, to the construction of basketball courts, and to the establishment of church-related sports leagues, a number of secular critics, mostly neo-Marxists, began to deplore the "sexualization" of sports by capitalist society. Some of the more ascetic critics seem to have resurrected Tertullian's indictments of the Roman arena as the site of idolatry and perversion. Drawing on Freud as well as Marx, they blame sports, defined as "the capitalistically deformed form of play,"¹⁴ for the psychological "castration" of the male athlete and for the deflection of his sexuality into sadism, masochism, narcissism, exhibitionism, and homosexuality. Critics have also condemned sports because they enhance a female athlete's heterosexual attractiveness and thus increase her "erotic exchange-value."¹⁵ (The greater the value in the sexual marketplace, the more extreme the exploitation.) A number of radical feminists have added their charges to the indictment. While admitting that some women have benefited from sports and from the fitness fad, Nancy Theberge nonetheless alleges that programs promising enhanced attractiveness represent "not the liberation of women in sport, but their continued oppression through the sexualization of physical activity."¹⁶ For Theberge as for Sabo and Messner (for

whom female athletes did not "erotically compute"), the assumption behind the charge of sexualization is that the physical activity in question is not inherently sexual.

The reticulation of assertion and denial has recently become even more bizarrely tangled as Brian Pronger, Birgit Palzkill, and a number of other homosexual writers have decided to come out of the closet and head for the locker room. The International Gay Games celebrated in New York in 1994 must have caused cognitive dissonance in the ranks of two normally antagonistic groups: those on the political right who see athletes as the paladins of "family values" and those on the left who condemn athletes as the shock troops of "compulsory heterosexuality."

In short, the more or less unproblematic recognition of athletic eroticism by the pagan cultures of classical antiquity stands in sharp contrast to the hostile comments, the "erasure," and the confused obfuscation that have characterized most modern discussions of the phenomenon. Why has this been so? Why has this topic been a taboo among lovers of sports? Whatever may have been the case two hundred years ago, when industrialization imposed a new spatial and temporal discipline upon factory workers, I doubt that modern hypocrisy about human sexuality is the result of capitalism's alleged need continually to repress, sublimate, and exploit the instinctual self. The contrast between ancient openness and modern reticence has much more to do with the Protestant ethic than with the spirit of capitalism. As Pierre de Coubertin pointed out in an essay entitled "*De la volupté sportive*" (1913), "It is infinitely probable that the animosity the early Christians unleashed against athleticism was due precisely to the fleshly satisfaction which sport represented as well as that 'pride in life' pursued by sportsmen and denounced by the Holy Writ."¹⁷ A moment's thought should convince anyone that Coubertin was correct. Today's emergent realization of an erotic element in sports is related to twentieth-century Christianity's relative loss of cultural influence rather than to a faltering in the expansion of the multinational corporation. If capitalism *were* the

explanation for the suppression of eros, as Herbert Marcuse averred in *Eros and Civilization* (1955), we should now feel the taboo more intensely than ever. In fact, what we have witnessed in the last quarter century is capitalism's eager exploitation of the economic potential of eros in sports as in every other sector of our increasingly hedonistic culture. As Alphonso Lingis remarks in *Foreign Bodies* (1994), late capitalism depends on bodies "whose cupidity is heated up by advertising [to] serve as the pyres upon which an excess production of industrial commodities is destroyed."¹⁸

All this is most emphatically *not* to say that every sports performance has an erotic element or that all athletes are sexually attractive or that eros is the most important aspect of any particular sport. Obviously, not everyone finds athletes physically attractive. Indeed, there are undoubtedly athletes whom almost no one finds physically attractive. Mere physical attractiveness is certainly not the main reason why most spectators admire their athletic heroes and heroines. The heady rediscovery of an erotic component in sports need not impel one to assert that the "presentation of female athletes is . . . always eroticized by the fact that . . . any movement of the female body is erotic."¹⁹ The sad truth is that some men and women will consider some male and female athletes, whether observed in motion or at rest, to be unattractive or even repulsive. *Chacun a son gout*.

Consider, for a moment, Western civilization in the late nineteenth century. There were young men who were excited by the prospect of the "Gibson Girl," tennis racquet in one hand, bicycle gripped in the other, and there were portly Victorian entrepreneurs who were sexually aroused by the thought of female invalidism. Some turn-of-the-century women swooned, literally, at the sight of Eugen Sandow's amazingly muscular body while the *beau idéal* of others was the decadent poet of the *rive gauche*, whose most strenuous activity was to lift not barbells but glasses of absinthe. Extreme cases, no doubt, but all of them have their counterparts in the gamut of actuality.