



ACTIVE BODIES

**A History of Women's Physical Education
in Twentieth-Century America**

MARTHA H. VERBRUGGE

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To my siblings
Anne, Lois, and Robert

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While finishing this book, I thought about the common expression “the journey is the destination.” To be sure, this project has been an exciting intellectual journey. I studied a full century of American history, visited libraries and archives across the country, interacted with scholars from diverse fields, and navigated the twists and turns that appear during any long trip. The destination, though, is equally gratifying. Besides enjoying the completion of a major project, I welcome the chance to acknowledge the many individuals who helped along the way.

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I conceived of this project as an examination of American physical education through the lens of the history of science. My long-standing ties to historians of

science and medicine proved invaluable as I refashioned some familiar topics—such as the relationship between biomedical knowledge and everyday life, the marginalization of female experts, and the problematic history of the science of sex differences—and applied these issues to the story of a health-related profession outside our field's usual purview. Rima D. Apple deserves a special salute; with the perceptiveness (and fortitude) of a first-rate scholar, she read an early draft of the entire manuscript and offered crucial advice. I also am grateful to Naomi Rogers, Margaret Marsh, Susan Reverby, Liz Watkins, Lara Freidenfelds, and other historians of medicine for their ongoing interest and cogent questions about my work.

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Active Bodies

{Introduction}

Body, Science, and Difference in the Gym

“Gym class.” For many Americans—young and old, male and female—this phrase evokes strong images. Among teenagers, it brings to mind fitness tests, coed soccer, multicultural games, and group showers. Older generations might think back to dodge ball, sit-ups, social dance, and the humiliation of wearing ill-fitting gym suits. Regardless of age, few people forget the satisfaction of mastering a difficult skill in “PE” or the pain of being picked last for a team.

The vividness of these memories speaks to the resonance of physical education in American culture. Lessons in physical activity take place not only in schools and colleges but also in community centers, retirement homes, social service agencies, and commercial gyms and fitness clubs. Instruction can entail basic exercise, proficiency tests, recreational and competitive games, and information about health, hygiene, physiology, and sex. Physical education also conveys indelible lessons about the body and the self; it teaches discipline and spontaneity, competition and cooperation, self-esteem and embarrassment, confidence and alienation. Most Americans understand these meanings at a visceral level; other school lessons—from parsing a sentence to solving quadratic equations—are long forgotten, but we still remember how gym class both empowered and demoralized us. This paradox seems intrinsic to everyone’s experience of physical education.

Other features, however, vary by social address. Age, gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, and locality have always affected people’s experiences in gym class. During the early decades of the twentieth century, physical education gained a foothold in America’s public schools. Prior to 1915, only three states required physical education for school-aged youth; shortly after World War I the number grew to twenty-eight; in 1929 the total was forty-six.¹ Young boys and girls typically exercised together in racially segregated primary schools. In secondary schools, white boys participated in military drills and sports, while white girls practiced calisthenics; the same held true for black pupils in upper grades. At boarding schools for Native Americans, boys competed in baseball and football, and girls learned calisthenics,

recreational games, and good posture. In some rural and urban areas, white and black girls had access to more vigorous activities, both in and out of school. Physical training at colleges and universities also varied by gender, race, and class in the early 1900s. At white institutions, physical educators taught group exercise, social recreation, and low-key intramural sports to the daughters of elite and middle-class families; occasionally, gym class evolved into competitive athletics. Similar programs developed for young women at some historically black institutions, both coed and female-only. Activities for male undergraduates were strikingly different. In coed and all-male institutions, white and black, men's physical education usually took a backseat to burgeoning programs in varsity sports.

Supervised activity also occurred outside educational institutions. Under the watchful eye of recreation leaders, visitors to municipal playgrounds participated in gender-coded activities in areas divided by age and sex. The boys' section often had a jungle gym and facilities for basketball, baseball, handball, and track and field; girls played on swings and seesaws and practiced basketball, croquet, and tennis.² Voluntary organizations and settlement homes in urban neighborhoods also sponsored recreation classes. The Young Women's Hebrew Association and the racially segregated centers of the Young Women's Christian Association taught hygiene, exercise, and sports to groups organized by age, marital status, and socio-economic class.³

Physical education changed dramatically during the interwar years and even more so after mid-century. In 1954, the Supreme Court's landmark ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* directed school districts to desegregate their dual systems, including physical education and athletics. Title IX of the Educational Amendments Act of 1972 was equally transformative. Although its impact on varsity athletics is well-known, Title IX also applies to physical education, recreation, and intramural sports.⁴ To achieve gender equity, many secondary schools replaced sex-segregated instruction with coed gym class. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 mandated that schools receiving federal assistance provide individuals with disabilities "equal opportunities for comparable participation" in physical education and athletics.⁵ During the 1980s and 1990s, concern over diversity and inclusion increased; some physical educators advocated new multicultural curricula to "create a learning environment . . . that reflects and embraces the diversity of the world in which we live."⁶

Despite these sea changes, people's experiences in gym class did not become uniform or equitable after mid-century; a participant's age, gender, race, ethnicity, religion, and sexual orientation still mattered. A partial explanation might be the disparate requirements for school-based physical education. Although most states currently mandate activity classes to some extent, fewer than 10 percent of the country's schools provide daily instruction for pupils in all grades throughout the academic year. Only one-half of pupils in grades K–12 have physical education every day, including just one-third of high school

students. Exemptions are liberal, from playing in the marching band to serving as hall monitor.⁷

Even universal requirements, however, would not erase the impact of social variables on participation rates, attitudes, or experiences. Regardless of curricula and regulations, gender remains a powerful factor in physical education. Active girls and women, even proficient ones, often feel embarrassed and incompetent, especially if judgmental males are present. Young girls report that boys are “rough” and “bossy” during coed games. Many boys “think girls are just plain failures. . . . [They] always try to make the girls feel bad some way.”⁸ Fitness tests reinforce the assumption of sex-based ability. In middle schools, boys demonstrate upper-body strength by performing as many pull-ups as they can; by contrast, instructors measure girls’ hang times while their flexed arms keep their chins above the pull-up bar, after being lifted into position. This format depicts boys who “underperform” and girls who can execute “real” pull-ups as gender anomalies.⁹

Experiences also vary by race, ethnicity, religion, and sexual orientation. When researchers in the early 1990s asked urban teenagers why they liked gym class, 75 percent of Anglo-Americans identified “being with friends” as their primary reason, while nearly three-quarters of Hispanic Americans answered “becoming more fit.” Activity preferences also differed; 17 percent of Asian Americans and 12 percent of Anglo-Americans disliked basketball, whereas no African Americans did.¹⁰ Sometimes, a youngster reports that he or she does not participate in gym class “because my religion says I shouldn’t.”¹¹ Gay and lesbian youth still face painful discrimination in gym class, from jokes and slurs to physical harassment, despite teachers’ belief that their gym is a “safe space.”¹²

Economic circumstances also affect pupils’ opportunities. In affluent schools, physical education now looks “more like Cirque du Soleil than an Army boot camp.”¹³ Suburban districts have transformed their dreary old gymnasiums into high-tech health clubs, where pupils, with heart rate monitors strapped to their chests, aim for their personalized fitness zones on treadmills and stationary bikes.¹⁴ Nearly one-quarter of states permit online, self-directed physical education; after working out in any manner and at any time they choose, students transmit data from their school-issued heart rate monitors to their instructors via e-mail.¹⁵ Poor districts have no such advantages. In New York City, more than one-half of elementary schools have no playground, and 18 percent of all schools lack a gymnasium. Squeezed by annual equipment budgets as small as \$200, teachers conduct gym class in cafeterias, hallways, and lobbies.¹⁶ Along with gender, race, and sexual orientation, socio-economic class confers privileges or burdens in the gym.

The factors governing students’ experiences have affected teachers’ status as well. Throughout the profession’s development during the twentieth century, physical educators’ gender, race, and sexual orientation influenced their circumstances. In the early 1900s, the division of gym class by participants’ age, sex, and

race also configured instructors' duties: women did "women's work" and blacks did "race work." White females supervised white girls and women and, sometimes, black females and young white boys. African American men and women taught only black youngsters and adults. Although this arrangement guaranteed jobs for white and black women alike, they worked primarily with individuals whom society deemed unskilled and unworthy. Moreover, despite the common belief that teaching was a respectable occupation for women, many Americans were suspicious of those who helped other females play, sweat, and compete.

Training programs for prospective teachers, male and female, increased during the early decades of the twentieth century, but opportunities were more plentiful for young whites than young blacks. Once employed, female personnel faced discrimination. In many coeducational colleges and universities, men's departments (usually synonymous with varsity athletics) had more visibility and clout than did women's separate programs of general instruction and intramural games. Before mid-century, segregation and racism limited the resources of black staff at African American schools, YWCAs, and other institutions. Although professional societies for white teachers usually welcomed female members, white women formed many independent organizations to better serve their unique interests. Because white groups typically excluded African Americans or, at best, marginalized them, black physical educators established their own professional societies, both single-sex and mixed. Overall, male instructors, coaches, administrators, and professional leaders—especially white men—benefited in the early 1900s from the field's partitioning by sex and race. Although female professionals objected to second-class treatment in a male-dominated field, they welcomed the authority that sex segregation seemed to confer. In this respect, the work of women physical educators, white and black, was simultaneously constrained and empowered.

The transformation of American physical education during the second half of the twentieth century had far-reaching implications for teachers. Higher professional standards made formal training a necessity. Women's share of undergraduate degrees in physical education almost doubled between 1950 and 1974 and then stabilized.¹⁷ The scarcity of African Americans earning undergraduate and advanced degrees, however, raised the prospect that black physical educators were an "endangered species."¹⁸ Job discrimination heightened this concern. When dual school systems desegregated in the 1950s and 1960s, many white-dominated districts demoted or fired their black male coaches, gym teachers, and administrators, while retaining white employees, irrespective of ability or seniority.¹⁹ In the decades following the passage of Title IX, professional opportunities for white and black women fell sharply, even as female participation in recreation and athletics soared. When the number of school-based gym teachers plunged between the late 1970s and early 1990s, the teaching corps in grades K–12 became increasingly male, especially in high schools.²⁰ The number of female head coaches, sports officials, athletic trainers,

equipment managers, and athletic administrators in secondary schools also shrank.²¹ At the collegiate level, women bore the brunt of the consolidation of men's and women's departments in coed institutions as well as the shift from mandatory physical education to recreational services and varsity athletics. Increasingly, female personnel, especially African Americans, were concentrated in the lower echelons of college programs and underrepresented in high-status administrative and coaching positions.²² Whatever their rank, women contended with pervasive heterosexism in their field and American society. Every female physical educator and coach, regardless of sexual orientation, lived under a cloud of suspicion that could sidetrack, even terminate her career.²³ Male/female, white/black, and straight/gay constituted hierarchical relationships that privileged some teachers and disadvantaged others.

Binary structures also dominated teachers' ideas about physical activity in the twentieth century. The logic seemed simple: Bodies differ, people differ, therefore activities must differ. From skill training and fitness tests to recreation and sports, the argument ran, activities should suit an individual's physical and personal makeup, present and future. Accepting age, sex, and race as meaningful, even self-evident categories in biology and society, many physical educators believed that male/female and other presumed dualities were free of ambiguity or overlap. Considerations of age emerged early in the field's history. Which activities, teachers asked, are appropriate and beneficial for various age groups, especially children and older youth? Concepts of sex differences proved especially durable.²⁴ Whenever teachers devised instructional methods, in-class activities, or fitness tests, many confidently assumed that boys differed from girls as did men from women. Physical educators whose interests lay more in research than teaching also took sex differences for granted; investigations of physical activity in relation to biomechanics, physiology, or psychology typically featured only one sex or contrasted male and female characteristics.

Until the late twentieth century, however, few physical educators, white or black, openly discussed how sexual orientation and gym class might intersect. Instead, most teachers used well-understood codes to stigmatize homosexuality—from favoring “feminine” sports before mid-century to tolerating pupils' homophobia in recent decades.²⁵ Although white instructors were equally silent on racial issues, classroom activities loudly proclaimed their prejudice. During the interwar years, for example, white female teachers organized historical pageants and clog dances that romanticized daily life on slave plantations, where supposedly happy, innately rhythmic blacks enjoyed singing and dancing after working in the fields.²⁶ Research studies also naturalized racial difference by claiming that being black or white affected motor skill and development.²⁷

Teachers' interpretations of biology and behavior reflected those of modern science and culture. Between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries, Western scientists formulated a distinctive paradigm of difference. It represented the human body as a stable mechanism whose innate properties transcended time

and place. It posited that nature's tidy dualities mapped directly onto everyday life and society. Applied to sex and gender, the standard view asserted a biological binary of male and female, male superiority and female deficiency, and an automatic linkage between female (sex) and femininity (gender).²⁸ Similar discourses developed around race, sexuality, and other presumed dualities.²⁹

Adopting this system of binaries, physical educators taught twentieth-century Americans how "to do" masculinity or femininity, whiteness or blackness, and other identities that biology supposedly encoded. Rehearsing difference in the gym, however, entailed more than socialization into prescribed roles or the transmission of a hidden curriculum of accepted values, attitudes, and behaviors. By privileging some groups and marginalizing others, physical education helped constitute and maintain social inequities.³⁰ When a schoolboy in the early 1900s participated in military drills and his sister practiced calisthenics, both performed a gender system that associated power and status with manhood. When white-dominated school districts showered resources on white pupils and shortchanged black programs, physical educators and their pupils experienced racial privilege and subordination. In contemporary gyms, pupils' jokes about "picking the 'faggot' last" as a team member and teachers' failure to cite gay role models represent homosexuals as inept and gay athletes as non-existent. These practices reward heterosexual males and marginalize gay and lesbian youth as well as any skilled girl or unskilled boy.³¹

Physical education's complicity in discrimination may seem unremarkable—comprising simply one more site where social hierarchies were produced in twentieth-century America. The "fleshing out" of difference also occurred in workplaces, hospitals, stores, churches, and private homes.³² The articulation between gym class and social inequity, though, was significant for two reasons: Physical education located difference directly in the body, and it privileged scientific discourse.

There is nothing abstract about gym class; the quality of one's performance seems concrete and incontrovertible. Fitness tests, supervised workouts, and athletic contests reveal, often quantitatively, the body's supposedly native abilities and deficiencies. Speed and distance can be measured; aerobic power and body composition tested; laps and pull-ups counted; scores kept and winners announced. Numbers alone seem to express "how good we are"—a phrase that conflates skill and self-worth. *Who* we are seems equally apparent in the gym. Imagine that the final score of an intercollegiate basketball game was 41–40. If the players were male, most spectators would call the "close contest" a "tight defensive game." If the players were female, fans might "attribute the low score to poor playing skills."³³ Although this example comes from 1981, the explanations might still sound credible. Some Americans continue to believe that sex and race determine skill and, conversely, that performance gaps reveal innate differences rather than inequities in opportunities and resources. This naturalization of difference becomes self-perpetuating; once displayed for all to

see, apparent disparities are then inscribed directly on the body. By practicing difference in the gym, people embody powerful lessons of body, self, and inequity—in literal as well as symbolic ways.³⁴

Such lessons are even more compelling when buttressed by science. During the twentieth century, some leading physical educators urged their colleagues to produce original knowledge about the human body. Most teachers replied that the goals of training good instructors and refining classroom methods were more important. Despite the continual tension between research and pedagogy in American physical education, no one doubted that enlisting science would benefit the field.³⁵

When physical education developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it faced problems common to all nascent professions.³⁶ Some aims were practical: secure an occupational niche, build an infrastructure, and train practitioners. More broadly, leaders had to unite the field around a cohesive identity, articulate its purpose, and earn respect. Physical education's credibility gap was large, since many citizens and academic leaders wondered if training the body was as critical as training the mind. These challenges occupied physical educators for decades, prompting one leader to diagnose the field "a hapless neurotic" beset by insecurity.³⁷ To solidify the profession, physical educators associated their work with up-to-date pedagogical theories and methods, aligned gym class with popular notions of health, morality, and citizenship, and borrowed concepts and prestige from scientific disciplines.

Given science's rising cultural authority, physical education legitimized its core ideas and practices (and still does) by drawing on expert knowledge of the human body. Although gym teachers have always been concerned with the cognitive and psychosocial aspects of activity, their work necessarily begins and ends with the material body—its structure and movement, limits and potential, problems and improvement. Effective instruction is essentially applied science: based on available theories and research, which individuals can engage in which activities and for what purpose?

Physical educators tapped many scientific fields. At the turn of the twentieth century, professional leaders and rank-and-file teachers thought about health and fitness in both mechanistic and moral terms. Focusing on structure and performance, they adopted anthropometry (which assessed people's size and strength) as well as physiological principles related to health and personal development.³⁸ Between the 1910s and 1930s, the field's emphasis on educating the whole individual—body, mind, and spirit—through physical activity made the social sciences seem increasingly relevant; nevertheless, teachers did not abandon biomechanical and physiological perspectives.³⁹ During the second half of the century, America's preoccupation with fitness steadily pulled physical education toward biomedicine and public health. Amid these broad changes, however, two premises remained constant in American physical education: the centrality of difference and the reliability of scientific knowledge.