

# THE SPORTING WOMAN



Mary A. Boutilier and Lucinda SanGiovanni

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# **The Sporting Woman**

# About the Contributors

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Susan Greendorfer, Ph.D., is an associate professor in the Department of Physical Education at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign. An avid athlete, Dr. Greendorfer is the treasurer for the North American Society for the Sociology of Sport and has published articles in such journals as *Research Quarterly* and *Quest*.

# Preface

During the past decade or so, women's participation in sport has witnessed unprecedented growth both in its range and depth of involvement. Simultaneously, the scientific study of sport has been established as a legitimate area of inquiry in a variety of disciplines, such as history, physical education, psychology, and sociology. In addition, feminist scholars have initiated a critical evaluation of women's place in sport. We wrote *The Sporting Woman* with the intention of combining these three themes into a single work that explores women's engagement in sport from the perspectives of social science and feminism.

Over the course of researching and writing this work we spoke with hundreds of women and men who differed greatly in their interest in and involvement with sport. A few of the women were professional or Olympic athletes; many were college and high school players; and the majority were physically active women

whose range in age, social class, race, life style, and feminist commitment is considerably diverse. We also spoke with men who are professional athletes and trainers, college players and coaches, fans and recreational participants. We observed countless hours of play and athletic contests, and we ourselves remained active in sport, often as a relief from the demands of writing.

In addition to the use of intensive interviews and observation techniques, we also collected data by analyzing the contents of a wide range of written documents that derive from within the athletic and feminist communities. This book, therefore, results in an eclectic blend of new and existing data, of professional and lay literature, of scholarly theory and concrete experience.

Two central considerations are interwoven throughout *The Sporting Woman*, one that deals with the nature of social scientific inquiry, the other with the multiple approaches to feminism. We wish to speak briefly about each of these themes.

At the level of scientific scholarship, we offer a critical evaluation of the theories and research methods that presently dominate the scientific study of both sport and women's place in it. We identify what we believe to be the major weaknesses of mainstream social science—both in conceptualization and methodology—such as the insistence on value-neutrality, the functionalist assumptions of value and normative consensus, the overly determined view of individuals implied in much of social science, and the overemphasis on quantitative research techniques. We ask instead for a *humanist* sociology that combines the insights of symbolic interactionism with the contributions of conflict perspectives. Specifically, we offer a theoretical approach to sport and women's role in sport that identifies the constraints of power and social structure on women's involvement (as suggested by conflict theory) while asserting that individuals can choose to overcome these constraints (as suggested by symbolic interactionism). We also stress that such a humanist sociology is best generated by using *qualitative* research (e.g., participant observation, intensive interviews), which allows theory to emerge from the data itself rather than being imposed on it by preconceived ideas and structured techniques.

In terms of a *feminist* perspective, our book proposes a view of feminism as an overarching theoretical tree with many branches. We have used Jaggar and Struhl's (1978) classification of four models of feminism—liberal, Marxist, radical, and socialist—as a framework for our feminist analysis. Each model of feminism is developed in terms of its ability to identify, interpret, and resolve the many problems facing women as they enter into sport. We highlight the benefits and costs of adhering to different conceptions of feminism as each proposes a strategy for enhancing the capacity of sport to be a liberating experience for all women and men.

This book is organized into two parts, each consisting of four chapters. We created this division because we wanted to facilitate the difficult task of dealing simultaneously with both the theoretical problems and the more substantive issues that are involved in treatments of women's role in sport. Thus, in Part 1 we devote our attention to the philosophical, theoretical, and methodological dimensions of studying women in sport. We believe that a critical evaluation of the "conceptual maps" of a given area of inquiry—their assumptions, values, premises, concepts—is a prerequisite to the more specific treatment of a given topic.

Having explored these larger conceptual controversies and created a conceptual foundation, we proceed in Part 2 to the more substantive, concrete treatment of women's participation in sport. We pursue the implications of this framework for an understanding of how women's involvement in sport emerges and takes shape within different institutional contexts. We focus our attention here on four major social institutions—the family, the school, the mass media, and the government—which serve as dominant arenas within which women's sport is enacted.

The degree to which this book is successful in meeting its goals is due to the efforts of many individuals. A special acknowledgement must be given to the two contributors, Susan Birrell and Susan Greendorfer. Both women contributed substantially to this book in terms of expertise, energy, and empathy. Each, in her own voice, has been a source of insight and criticism and we hope that our joint venture has benefited them as well.

Obviously, it takes a certain type of publisher to produce a book of this nature—someone whose concern extends beyond "the bottom line" of profit. A book with an unknown market, an unorthodox approach, and an avowed ideology cannot give much comfort to a publisher. Rainer Martens and his associate editor Margery Brandfon accepted these challenges with enthusiastic courage, extending us a freedom seldom given to authors today.

Many others also deserve our gratitude. A special recognition goes to those who read our work or in other ways shared their ideas, especially Richard Adinero, Sue Dilley, Bonnie Slatton, and Nancy Theberge. We also want to thank our playmates and friends who helped us enjoy the very experiences of which we are writing: Jo-Ann, Judy, Patsy and Muff, the Nutley Sun, Ro, Wessel, Marie, Kar, Meb, and Phil.

In terms of a unique form of spiritual support, we wish to recognize the part played in our lives by Maryann Gorman, Martha Courtot, Mark R. Mankoff, Sara A. Vogel, and Francine E. San Giovanni.

No book ever evolves without the dedication and effort of extraordinary women, women who type and retype, who collate, who correct, who counsel, who reassure. To Lucy Miller, Pat Parry, and Doris



Sura we say thank you while knowing that these words barely recognize your contribution.

Finally, we wish to thank the Research Council of Seton Hall University for a 1979 summer stipend granted to L. San Giovanni.

# Prologue



Many people have asked us why we want to write a book about women and sport. As we answered this question posed by family, friends, colleagues, and editors, we were reminded of the feminist dictum that "the personal is political," that our private experience has public consequence, that the unique twists in our biographies shape our roles as citizens and professionals. Scholars have been able, and indeed encouraged, to hide themselves behind the veil of the disembodied, impersonal, "objective," and rational canons of science. While it is a safe place, it is also a false and dangerous place. It provides the illusion that our ideas, research emphases, and theories have no connection to our private world of feelings, experiences, and values. In speaking of the changing role of the sociologist, Alvin W. Gouldner (1971, p. 57) called for an increased awareness of who and what we are as members of a particular society at a specific time, and of

how our social roles and personal life influence our professional work. We want to heed this call by sharing our motives in writing this book and some of the personal forces behind them.

Our wish to write about women and sport historically is anchored in our love of play and sport that began for one of us on the streets and alleys of an Italian-American community in Newark, New Jersey, for the other on a makeshift ballfield of a backyard in Houlton, Maine. As little girls, we perfected our skills at stickball, punchball, O-U-T, football, ice hockey, and baseball. We formed passionate allegiances to the Yankees and Dodgers. We honed our entrepreneurial talents collecting and trading baseball cards. We absorbed our scrapes and sprains with equanimity and pleaded with our parents to buy us that vital piece of sports equipment that would be the envy of our friends and the solution to our deficient performance.

We were vaguely aware of the fact that games and sports were for boys. Most of the time we were the only girls playing. We dismissed this with the rationalization that the rest of the girls just were not interested or talented enough while simultaneously we glowed with pride when the boys chose us among the first players to be on "their" teams.

It was as adolescents that we, like countless other "tomboys," were taught that the sweaty, vigorous, competitive world of sports had to be abandoned in order for us to lay claim to a "feminine identity." Despising the terms of this trade-off, we tried to forge a shaky compromise for ourselves and for others by shuttling between the roles of "young lady" and "jock," alternately feeling bewildered, frustrated, devious, and triumphant.

By the end of high school, we had created an acceptable resolution of the supposed duality of being female and being athletic, aided in large measure by our decision to pursue vigorous academic careers. The demands of college and the lure of social lives meant that sport would assume a more limited, but still passionate, place in our daily round. As graduate students we were absorbed in the intellectual controversies of the protest movements of the sixties, which gave us a language and an orientation that could inform our social activism. Out of this societal turmoil the women's movement surfaced again, and we quickly saw its power to describe and explain our seemingly private struggle to juggle the "contradictions" of being women, scholars, and athletes.

Our first years as university instructors were exhilarating, frightening, exhausting. We were finishing our dissertations, learning the art of college teaching, helping to form the first women's rights groups on campus, and playing on opposing teams in the women students' intramural program. It was on the playing fields of those games that we first met. One of us played on a team of militant, counter-culture, radical feminists whose high level of activists skills existed uneasily with meager levels of

athletic skill and with an open disdain for even the rudimentary structure and goals of intramural competition. The other played on a departmentally based team of women students whose approach to feminism was a moderate, "equal rights" liberalism and whose skillful athleticism earned them first-place T-shirts and a reputation to be reckoned with. In our progression through seasonal intramural competition in different sports, we met teams composed of sorority members, commuters, dormitory mates, black women, and former high school varsity athletes. The intellectual and ideological issues of feminist athleticism were emerging in loosely formed and vaguely stated observations and complaints:

- Why did the jocks have to play so roughly, take the rules and score so seriously, and look so "butch"?
- Why did the sorority "sisters" play so indifferently, act so silly, and have male students to coach them?
- Why did the women's winning team only get T-shirts while the men got trophies, T-shirts, better playing fields, and coverage in the school paper?
- Why did the radical feminists see sexism *everywhere*? Why were they so angry, so unorganized, and so often the team with the most forfeits?
- Why did the black women stress racism as their major social problem, rather than joining the new "sisterhood" of oppressed women?
- Why did it take so long for all of us to meet each other, to celebrate our bodies and our games, and to begin to ask these questions?

These and other issues became more salient and consequential with the elaboration, in the early seventies, of feminist critiques of patriarchal culture and society.

Virtually every social institution was under attack. Sport would be no exception. Two events, one political and the other athletic, are often identified as originating forces that brought to public consciousness the debate over women's place in sport. We remember both of them clearly. In 1972, Congress passed the Higher Education Act, with its controversial Title IX provision. As members of the Title IX committee commissioned to study our university's compliance with the provisions of the act, we soon recognized that one of the prime areas of inequality was in the athletic programs of the university.

On September 20, 1973, Billy Jean King defeated Bobby Riggs in front of 30,000 spectators and millions of television viewers; we scrawled the score in chalk on our blackboards at our next class meetings. The ensuing classroom debate underscored the profound challenge to cherished myths, fears, and assumptions that the match uncovered. While each of us may have a private encounter that made a greater impact, there is no

doubt that these events were catalysts for ripples of feminist consciousness and action that have spread across the entire range of sport in our society.

We have pinpointed 1975 as a critical year for us because it was on a cold, damp March afternoon of that year that almost 40 undergraduate women had gathered on a rocky field for their first meeting of the newly formed softball club at Seton Hall University. We had volunteered to coach the club and to prepare for its development as a varsity sport the following year. As we greeted these student-athletes, we brought with us at least two discernible goals. One was professional. Given access to the research role of participant-observer, we could use this opportunity to gather data, explore concepts, and develop suggestive interpretations about women and sport. Here was a chance to confront the study of this topic with an experiential directness usually denied to social scientists and to those like us whose sport background was informal, avocational, and lacking credentials.

Our second goal was more personal. As women, we were at the edge of "SportsWorld," that "amorphous infrastructure" identified by journalist Robert Lipsyte (1975, p. ix) that "helps contain our energies, shape our ethical values, and ultimately, socialize us for work, or war or depression." We did not want to prepare these women to enter SportsWorld, nor to accept the status of the "truncated males" of philosopher Paul Weiss's (1969, p. 215) uninformed and condescending vision of women. But could we put into practice a feminist framework around softball, and if so, which one of the many emerging approaches to feminism were we to use?

How could we, in a single season, begin to experiment with new modes of sport participation that would avoid the limitations of SportsWorld and sexism; meet the divergent needs and interests of the softball club members; be true to our own, and often conflicting, understandings of what it meant to be feminist and athletes; and still establish a team that would be ready for varsity competition the following season? It was an outrageously impossible task and we embraced it with the freedom of knowing we had much to learn and only our "egos" to lose! The events of that club season forced us to experience once again many of the dilemmas that we had known as young girls, later as intramural participants, and now as "coaches." What was new about this venture was that we approached these dilemmas with an informed, critical, and more clearly differentiated vision of their origins. But dilemmas they remained. Indeed, they established some of the prominent themes of this book. We would like to share a few of these with you.

## **Institutional Accommodation vs. Institutional Transformation**

Because sport had always been a male domain, it had developed male-centered games, styles, values, jargon, rituals, and interpersonal relations that can be summed up briefly by references to "locker-room" culture and "jock" roles. Most of the softball club players, especially the more skilled ones, had thoroughly absorbed these elements of sport as played by men. For example, they called each other "guys," teased those who threw and ran "like girls," derided the opposition, and planned tactics to intimidate umpires and "psych out" competitors. We discussed with them the limits and dangers of mimicking male sports models. We suggested that we could take our games and infuse them with different styles, postures, goals—ones that reflected a more humanistic approach and a feminist consciousness that would help us define ourselves and alter our sporting experience.

But what do these lofty ideas mean at the concrete level? After years of socialization that prepare both sexes to accommodate themselves to existing institutions that "were created by men without regard for the experience of women" (Christ & Plaskow, 1979, p. 7), we stood at a social frontier that required self-examination, critical evaluation, and repeated experimentation. By the end of the season the club was developing a style and tone that differed substantially from many of the teams we played, a fact that was devious to all club members, but not always welcomed by them. At least half of the time we called each other women—not girls, ladies, or guys. We cheered well-executed plays by competing teams; we encouraged aggressive play but did not tolerate verbal and physical intimidation. The players themselves took control over the flow and strategy of the game-in-progress. We tried to avoid mediating or arbitrating personality clashes and encouraged direct discussion by parties to any problem. In these and more subtle ways we began to learn how difficult and how liberating was the choice to alter our sporting experience.

## **Hierarchical vs. Participatory Sport**

By assuming the role of coaches we were immediately confronted with the realization that inequities in power can lead to corruption of social relations and an estrangement of the less powerful from the meanings and enjoyment of the activities they pursue. Efforts were made to democratize the running of the club. Players were asked to participate in

the decision to choose practice times, playing positions, batting orders, game strategies, and the like. We also asked the women to determine what, if any, negative sanctions should follow violations of agreed-upon rules, such as attending practice, late arrivals for games, or improper social conduct on the field.

The results were mixed, producing the usual complexities that accompany democratic efforts. Many members expressed little desire to make choices, preferring to yield to their coaches or to their more vocal peers. Other members were highly opinionated and unwilling to compromise their strong preferences. For our part, we were pleased by the sharing of suggestions but bristled at, and resisted, those that did not conform to our "more informed" opinions! We resented the enormous consumption of time required for democratic decision making. Dictates, orders, and pronouncements seemed ever so more efficient. Nor were we clear ourselves about how to balance the wishes of the majority and the minority. The cohesion of the club often paled by comparison to the highly disciplined, well oiled teams coached by field generals whose command was never in doubt. We tempered our occasional envy by recalling that democratic conflict is as important as hierarchically achieved unity.

### Winning vs. Everyone Plays

The edge of this dilemma was made very sharp by the wide range of talent and motives on the club. There were women who could play every position and there were others who literally had never played the game. For example, as part of our "coaching" strategy, we once attempted to discover which players would be our "speed on the basepaths." Each player was told to start on the word "go" and we would clock them as they ran around and touched each base. Little did we suspect that one woman would take us so literally and be so unaware of the jargon as to circle the bases and *touch* each one with her *hand*.

The interest in winning as contrasted with "just" learning, was always there. How could it not be? Even the novices placed a great value on winning. We also wondered if the club's success would be judged not by the fact that 40 women came out for the sport, remained with the team, and improved their skills, but by whether we had a "respectable" won-loss record. Without that record the varsity status for the next year might be jeopardized.

We remained loyal to the club ideal of "everyone plays," however. We spent more time during practice with less talented and knowledgeable players. We avoided the structure of first-string lineups and deliberately gave more playing time to those whose showed greater interest and effort

during practice sessions. We lost our first game 28-0! The "star players" were frustrated and confused but eager for the next contest. Those of more modest talent were ambivalent, enjoying the chance to play but aware that their participation contributed to the "Charlie Brown" defeat.

The temptations to abandon the "everybody plays" approach for that important first victory mounted as loss followed loss, but we remained loyal to our desire to avoid a first string structure. We were aware that the team's status as a club sport, and our temporary positions as volunteer coaches made this decision an easier and less costly one for us. But even at this level of sport, playing everyone resulted in the dropping out of some of the better players. The irony of this situation did not escape us. If the better players "cut" themselves this season, then the next season the "real coach" of the "real" varsity team would "cut" the majority of the players who had remained loyal to the club and its commitment that all should play. Although we continued to lose each successive game, albeit by closer scores, most of the players had managed by the end of the season to place an equal value on the process of the games themselves as well as on the end product. Victories came to be measured not simply by the final score but by how much improvement was made by the individuals and the team, by how much fun they had, by how much they learned, and by how hard they tried.

On the personal level, the end of the softball experience left us brimming with ambitious goals to initiate a series of research projects and scholarly analyses of women and sport. During the fall of 1975 we conducted a survey of women's sport participation and began preliminary analysis. However, as is often the case in academe, by the following semester we became absorbed by other scholarly demands. We developed and revised our courses on the Sociology of Sport, the Sociology of Women, and Women and Politics. We each wrote a book on selected aspects of role change that focused on women and that used a feminist context as a frame of reference (Kelly & Boutilier, 1978; SanGiovanni, 1978). We continued to play sports and monitor the new research and writing on women in sport. Our ideas about women and about sport progressively evolved as new approaches to the study of sport and of women's place in society were emerging. In the pages that follow, we wish to highlight the major themes of these new developments and to indicate how they can advance our understanding of the sporting woman.



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