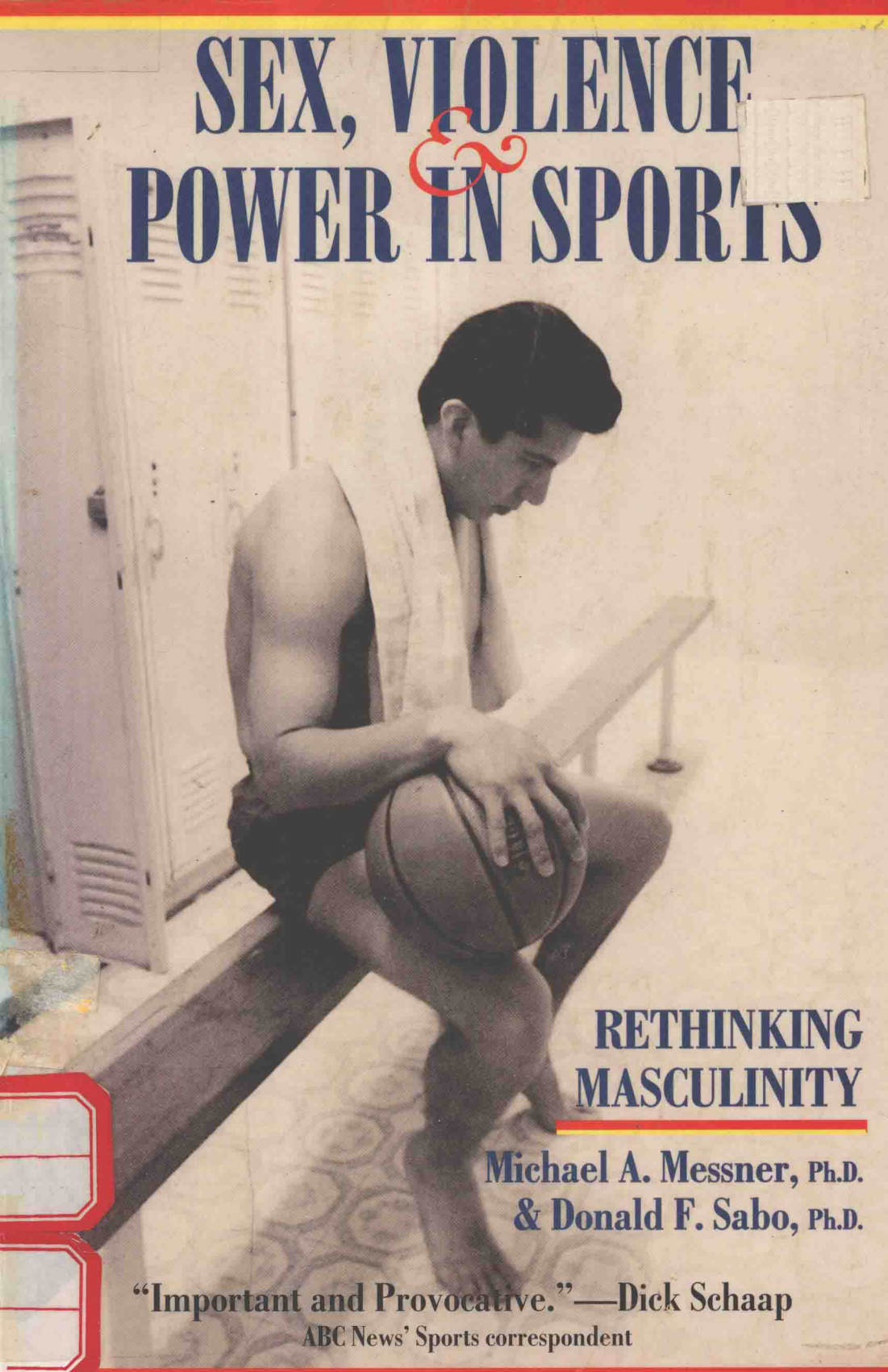


SEX, VIOLENCE & POWER IN SPORTS



RETHINKING MASCULINITY

**Michael A. Messner, Ph.D.
& Donald F. Sabo, Ph.D.**

“Important and Provocative.” —Dick Schaap
ABC News’ Sports correspondent

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IOWA ATHLETIC DEPARTMENT



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FOR
PIERRETTE HONDAGNEU-SOTELO
AND
LINDA WEISBECK SABO

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FOREWORD

You are about to read a very personal book by two sportsmen who are willing to share their intimacies about being male and being athletes. You may be shocked by the violent and insensitive reality of the locker room we have created for our sons. You will doubt whether sport is a positive learning experience. You will ask whether our current model of American sport reinforces and perpetuates social injustice and individual oppression. At the very least, you will rethink the male sport experience in our country and how it relates to violence (especially violence against women), the athlete's inability to express intimacy, and the perpetuation of gender, class and racial inequality and homophobia.

Messner and Sabo address our worst fears about male athletes. Are they more likely to be rapists? Are they celebrated for their sexual conquests and protected by the boys' club of the mass media? Are they incapable of engaging in relationships that don't have winners and losers? Have they been so brainwashed by coaches that they ignore physical pain and permanent injury in the name of upholding the image of macho athletes? Do they so dehumanize their opponents that violence and intentional maiming are accomplished with joy rather than guilt? Are they so intimidated by the prospect of rejection by their peers through accusations of homosexuality or feminization that they can no longer make ethical decisions about their actions? The answers to these questions should worry each of us.

Fortunately, Messner and Sabo are not satisfied with just being analysts and critics. They are passionate believers that sports participation can be an exhilarating, rewarding, and positive experience. So, they have given us "their best shots" regarding how we can change the sport experience for men and encourage women not to follow the male model. They show us that there are ways to recreate sport for men and women so the positive possibilities can be realized: that opponents can be friends engaged in a mutual test rather than being enemies to be

defeated; that the effort to win is as important as winning; that the spirit of sport is as important as its rules; that intentionally causing injury to another is totally unacceptable; that men and women can play with and against each other without questioning their sexual preference or to whom the fields of sport belong.

This book is the right stuff for the television and radio talk show circuit. The ideas presented here deserve popular and critical academic review. It will be interesting to see if the male sport culture and those who support it are willing to take a close and unbecoming look at themselves.

Donna Lopiano, Ph.D.
Executive Director
Women's Sports Foundation
East Meadow, New York

INTRODUCTION

MIKE MESSNER AND DON SABO

The stories and essays in this book are part of an effort to change the patriarchal status quo and, with feminist theory, to forge new understandings of the old relationship between men and sports. Sports are central to many men's lives, and even men who don't like to play or follow sports are affected by them. Hence, feminist-inspired reflection on the personal and political dimensions of sports can give us insights into ourselves and the larger system of gender relations.

As boys, we were initiated into the world of sports by men and into the world of men through sports. For both of us, sports have had a joyous upside and a very limiting, often painful downside. Mike has always known an existential high in shooting a basketball through a hoop. From an early age he found that sports participation was the key to his relationship with his father and eventually with his peers. But as he passed through adolescence into adulthood he became increasingly aware of how the athletic role, with its narrow definition of success and failure, limited the foundation upon which his self-image was constructed. Though sports formed a basis for relationships with some males, he also became aware of how the competition, homophobia, and misogyny in the sports world limited his ability to develop intimate relationships with women and other men.

Like Mike's, Don's athletic experiences have shifted between joy and misery, healthful release and personal harm. Having discovered football as a fourth grader in western Pennsylvania, he went on to play and love the game throughout his college years. Football was a way to make friendships and build self-confidence. Ultimately it became a ticket out of the steel mills and into a university. The patriarchal piper demanded his pay, however, and the hypermasculine, physically brutal aspects of the game took their toll. Six years of chronic back pain and surgery prompted Don to rethink the beliefs and practices that informed his involvement in traditional men's sports.

GETTING OUR FEMINIST VISION

Our critical perception of sports took many years to develop. Change flowed slowly; we did not wake up one day and see sports in utterly new ways. Our most crucial source of critical illumination was the women's movement of the late 1960s and 1970s. Feminist women created new frameworks of meaning through which we could examine our experiences. Had the women's movement and feminist theory not developed in the seventies, we are certain that we, as men and as former athletes, would not be examining the masculinity-sports relationship. To do so would never have crossed our minds.

At first we each questioned and struggled alone. Few men embraced feminist vision in the early seventies. There were books, conferences, and consciousness-raising groups for women, but not many liberative resources explicitly for men. The few men who publicly declared their commitment to feminism usually faced justifiable caution from women and blank stares or jeers from other men. Among the few profeminist men we knew, discussions of sports were usually limited to hasty condemnations. Many of these men had, as boys, been hurt—physically and emotionally—by their inability or unwillingness to “measure up” in Little League baseball or other competitive sports organized by men for boys. Their dismissal of sports was understandable, and we profeminist jocks, feeling somewhat guilty about our continued ambivalence about sports, entered into a tacit agreement not to discuss them. The unwillingness to talk about an activity that was so important to us contributed to our feelings of isolation in profeminist groups and organizations.

Liberation is a road seldom traveled alone, and our personal and scholarly investigations of sports and gender took a quantum leap forward when we discovered each other's ideas. While Mike had been writing about men's lives in sports on the West Coast, Don was researching men and masculinity on the East Coast. We met through a 1982 book review that Mike wrote of Don's and Ross Runfolo's book *Jock: Sports and Male Identity*. We wrote to each other, and when we realized that we had similar political views, our friendship quickly deepened, along with our analysis of sports, masculinity, and sexism. We

helped each other locate other profeminists who shared our analytical obsession with sports and gender. In the process we constructed a network of soul mates. In short, our personal and intellectual quest took nurture from—and at the same time contributed to—a growing array of progressive social movements, ideas, and political networks. We want to discuss some of these larger historical processes as we now see them.

FEMINIST VIEWS OF SPORTS

The feminist analysis of sports has a very short history. Before the 1980s, sex and gender issues in sports were hardly mentioned in mainstream feminist literature. Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1952), Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1971), Juliet Mitchell's *Women's Estate* (1973), Susan Brownmiller's *Against Our Will* (1975), Mary Daly's *GynEcology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (1978), and Betty Friedan's *The Second Stage* (1981) all lack any substantive treatment of sports.

Despite the lack of attention the wider women's movement gave to sports, by the late seventies feminists in academia began to develop a critique of sports as a fundamentally male-dominated, sexist institution. Feminist analyses uncovered the hidden history of female athletics, examined sex differences in patterns of athletic socialization, and showed how dominant institutional forms of sport have made men's power and privilege over women seem natural. Sports, especially as they are presented by the mass media, help to uphold an otherwise faltering ideology of male superiority. The language of sports is the language of domination, and it permeates the nation's discourse in politics, education, and the boardroom.

MEN'S STUDIES OF SPORT

During the 1960s most men were only vaguely aware that important connections exist between themselves, sports, and inequality. In keeping with the mainly masculine agenda of the New Left, emerging critical commentary on sports and sexism was superficially subsumed into radical rhetoric on class and race inequality.

The earliest feminist critiques of sports and patriarchy in the 1970s led some men to reflect on their relationships to sports. A number of radical critics of sports included some treatment of gender issues in their overall class or racial analyses. Paul Hoch (1972) labeled sports a “school for sexism;” Mark Naison (1972) saw sports as an institutional source of the “ideology of male domination.” The writings of Jack Scott (1971) and Harry Edwards (1973) not only unraveled the links between sports ideology, class relations, and race inequality, but they also discussed sex segregation and inequality in sports. Other writers, inspired by the mid-1970s “men’s liberation movement,” contributed to the discussion. Warren Farrell (1974), Marc Fasteau (1974), and Robert Townshend (1977) focused on the cultural significance of sports and the emotional harm caused by athletic training for aggression and extreme competitiveness.

Sabo and Runfola’s 1980 book *Jock*, a consciously profeminist analysis of sports, attempted to prompt men to understand themselves as individual victims of sexual inequality without losing sight of the fact that they are the collective oppressors of women. This represented a departure from the analyses presented both by the radical critics, who tended to collapse gender issues into a race or class dynamic, and by men’s liberationists, who tended to focus on how narrow definitions of masculinity hurt men while downplaying or ignoring how sports help establish and legitimate male privilege.

During the 1980s, feminists recognized the need for the development of a more relational theory of gender, one that would include a critical examination of both femininity and masculinity, as they develop in relation to each other within a system of structured social inequality. Recently, feminist scholarship has germinated what some are calling a “new men’s studies.” Men’s studies scholars see in feminism a perspective that holds the potential of liberating men as well as women from the limitations of sexism.

The feminist vision of sports and gender came of age in the 1980s. Male analysts openly expressed their debt to the feminist paradigm. Theories became more exact and lucid, research mushroomed, and the subfield of “Sport and Gender Studies” became grafted to the intellec-

tual and political agenda of women's studies and men's studies. Though still on the margins of mainline social science, the gender issue in sports could no longer be denied. Women and men dialogued and collaborated with one another, and an international network of individuals struggling for gender justice in athletics took shape.

In the midst of these developments, between 1980 and 1994, we wrote the stories and essays that appear in this book. Fifteen of the twenty-four works in this book were originally published in *Changing Men* (originally *M*) magazine; four were previously published elsewhere; and five are original works, written for this book. Ranging from personal stories from our own athletic careers to political commentary on contemporary athletic controversies and research on current issues in sports, this collection illustrates the feminist observation that our personal experiences often reflect much larger social and political patterns. We offer this collection not only as a reflection on our own experiences as jocks, but as a contribution to a clearer understanding of men's relationship with sports, in the hope that women, men, and sports will change in more humane and egalitarian directions.

For more than a century, feminists have challenged us to look critically at gender issues and eliminate some of the injustices that attend sex inequality. Feminists have often indicted men for their sexist behavior and chauvinistic attitudes. Some men have reacted defensively to these charges; some have gotten angry; many have been confused. Others, though, have been able to hear women's angry protests, political and cultural dreams, and messages from the heart, and have viewed feminism as an opportunity to rethink and remake their personal, sexual, and social lives. Especially in recent years, some men have begun to think about, feel about, and talk about themselves in new ways.

We men who think of ourselves as profeminists have learned that feminist visions and values can help us make our way through life. We seek not only to end sexist oppression of women, but also, along with other men, to change some of the destructive aspects of our own lives and identities. We are convinced that feminist perspectives on sports can help men to rethink and redefine manhood and society in ways that bolster rather than erode our capabilities to love and to survive.

Today much of the athletic experience is distorted or muted by sexism, homophobia, and aggressive domination thinly disguised as “healthy competition.” The life-affirming dimensions of sports, however, are waiting to be drawn forth and nurtured. A feminist transformation of sports can help us realize this potential.

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Part I

OUR STORIES

As boys, we loved sports. We *lived* sports. In the pre-cable TV era in which we grew up, our favorite television show was “The Wide World of Sports.” The opening of the show is indelibly etched in our memories: An enthusiastic and authoritative male announcer invites the viewers to share in “the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat,” as a rapid succession of images of male athletes at glorious pinnacles of their careers (George Forman throwing kisses to a frenzied crowd, for instance, after seizing the heavyweight championship of the world) are counterposed with images of spectacular failures (a skier crashing and plunging off the end of the ski jump).

As boys eager to become men, we wanted to experience the “thrill of victory” ourselves, and to share in the glory and public adulation enjoyed by our heroes, Willie Mays, Jim Ryun, Oscar Robertson, Dick Butkus, and Big Daddy Liscomb. But we were also well aware of the other side of sports. One athlete’s thrilling victory is inevitably another’s agonizing defeat. One champion’s glorious moment is another’s moment of loss, even humiliation. One famous athlete’s storied career is another’s attempt fallen short. But there were always ready explanations for the failed jock: Perhaps he didn’t practice hard enough. Perhaps he “had a bad attitude.” Perhaps he just wasn’t good enough.

We practiced hard. We had the attitude that our coaches loved. And yet our athletic accomplishments usually fell far short of our dreams. Perhaps, we had to finally admit to ourselves, we just weren’t good enough. Oh, we each had a few fleeting moments of glory, moments in which years of practicing and visualizing success translated for Mike into a perfect give-and-go play with a basketball teammate, or for Don a perfect defensive read and solo tackle on the gridiron. But given the growing prevalence of the Lombardian Ethic, the belief that “winning