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The "Amazon" and the American "Lady"

Sexual Fears of Women as Athletes

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> Do you blame us little animals, literally aching for the freedom of kittens, puppies, and lambs, if we demand of our teachers at least five minutes gymnastic or play-exercises at the end of every hour and a few full breaths of God's pure air? Especially when you remember that soon it will not be proper for little girls any longer to romp out of doors, with the boys; indeed it will be exceedingly unladylike; for then we must turn up our hair, lengthen our frocks, put on corsets, and 'we can't be "Tomboy" any longer'.
>
> B. F. BOLLER, 1900[1]

> No one seemed to realize that there is a time in the life of a girl when it is better for her and for the community to be something of a boy rather than too much of a girl.
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> DUDLEY A. SARGENT, 1927[2]

> Some writers have said that . . . a big change took place in me. Their idea is that I used to be all tomboy, with none of the usual girls' interests, and then all of a sudden I switched over to being feminine. Well, with almost any woman athlete, you seem to get that tomboy talk.
>
> "BABE" DIDRIKSON ZAHARIAS, 1956[3]

The Dimensions of the Problem

The unequal development of athletic opportunities for women in America during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries reflected many constraining forces, but a remarkable number of them shared the underlying component of fear. According to research undertaken in the past two decades, men feared that they might be challenged or even displaced in governance of the basic social order. They feared dislocations in the workforce and in electoral politics. Overall, they feared that they would lose control of public political, social, and

economic affairs, which they dominated as a special masculine realm. But once the association of public life and an active manner with masculinity had been made, the entry—or re-entry—of women into these areas and the style pervading them became exceedingly problematic. Indeed, any serious challenge to this differentiation into separate male and female spheres only contributed to the underlying fear that pervaded and united all the others—the fear of losing identity and purpose. This concern was made especially vivid and concrete in the realm of sport.

Although women engaged in sport, men still dominated it, especially competitive athletics. Overall, sport thus retained the aura of a male preserve. Not uncommonly, men boasted of their involvement in sport as a proof of masculinity, especially if their gender identity seemed threatened for other reasons. The composer Charles Ives, for example, is said to have feared that his musical interests made him seem effeminate and compensated by asserting his manhood through baseball. Asked in his youth what he played, Ives mentioned no musical instrument but replied instead, "Shortstop."[4] Ives was not unique. A prolific nineteenth-century writer of anti-masturbation literature, the Rev. John Todd, often separated himself from wife, family, and home in hunting trips out in the wild; his physical removal into "untamed" nature seems to have strengthened his sense of male identity.[5] In the years after the Civil War, health reformer James C. Jackson proposed that both girls and boys be encouraged to play outdoors so that exposure to Nature could develop their sense of "ideality" and their inclination toward "purity and truth." But such activities were also clearly intended as a curative against masturbation; and the purity that boys and girls would gain through natural play was expected to strengthen their distinctive identity as men and women.[6]

The fear that woman was by nature an excessively sexual being encouraged such separate behavior. For some men at least, as suggested by the experience of John Todd and others, there was an element of self-protection, seeing themselves as vulnerable to women rather than the reverse. The "weakness" of the "weaker sex" did not mean that they could not harm men; it meant rather that they were morally weak and, in that sense, out of control. Both ironically and appropriately, then, woman's role as moral guardian was elevated, at least as a goal and perhaps as an aid to social conformity. Yet it was this moral fragility that seemed to pose grave dangers for men.

Indeed, various forms of compensatory behavior and of self-protective hostility towards women appear deeply embedded in male experience in many cultures, as Wolfgang Lederer has suggested in *The Fear of Women*.[7] According to Lederer, the suppression of the "precarious oscillation between

love and fear" in men's feelings towards women has actually strengthened the impact of the fear and given rise to pathological consequences.[8] Among the destructive impulses that followed were an intense taboo of manners among men against "doing things like a woman," as well as a deep resentment against the "Amazons," whom Lederer has sharply described as "only the church militant, the shocktroops of an ancient, world-wide system of mother-right."[9] To the extent that women challenged the stereotype of a "ladylike manner" in sport and physical leisure, they fell prey to such fear, partly by appearing to encroach upon the competitive, confrontational, shameless character that men supposedly brought to sporting events by virtue of their masculinity. The real differences between sensuality and sexuality fell largely out of view, and social convention—a matter of manners—thus edged into gender identification—a matter confused with sex and sexuality.

Cultural Differentiation and the Logic of Fear

The fear experienced by men who worried over a public role for women, even if it lacked fairness, was not without a certain logic. The rationale showed itself in matters of style and manner, which were actually matters of serious substance and consequence. The focus on the manner in which men and women acted—an evident matter of style—reflected the view, as Charles Rosenberg has put it, that "control was the basic building block of personality."[10] By the later decades of the nineteenth century, the generalized care to govern "the passions"—including gluttony, envy, and other excesses—narrowed into an insistent worry over sexuality.[11] On the one hand, this clearly suggested that excess had an intrinsically sexual undercurrent; and, on the other hand, it hinted that fears born in sexuality could falsely color activities such as sport and athletics that, though intensely sensory and sensual, were not inherently sexual.

The quest for control fostered the separation of the sexes into two parallel but not identical cultures, a division that strengthened during the nineteenth century. In the twentieth century, the male solidarity that, in Lois Banner's words, "strengthened the male tendency to see woman as a chivalric object" seemed to be challenged by the women's movement; and the male's sense of identity as well as his enjoyment of social prerogatives seemed to hinge proportionally on firm reassertion of the separate cultures.[12] To the extent that it smudged the identifying line between men and women, the emergence of women to athletic excellence could be seen as a threat to social order and as a

violation of the tradition of "true womanhood." Moreover, some advocates of women's participation in sport may have been ambivalent presences. Dr. Alice B. Stockham, for example, a Chicago physician, not only praised sport and outdoor activity as a better tonic for women than medicine but also encouraged birth control and abortion.[13] This challenge to many Americans' notion of truly feminine behavior and womanly responsibility was especially troublesome because of the deeply rooted antipathy towards any suggestion of femininity in men. The late-nineteenth-century woman was said to admire in man "true *manliness*, and [she] is repelled by weakness and effeminacy. A womanish man awakens either the pity or the contempt of the fairer sex."[14] It was bad enough if a man could not manage to "behave like a man"; but his dilemma worsened if women refused to "behave like women."

Some contemporary observers regarded differentiation between men and women as inevitable in the socioeconomic circumstances of early-twentieth-century America. But its apparent causes and consequences boded ill for women's athletics. According to social scientist Anna Garlin Spencer, the "vocational divide" did not result principally from physical motherhood but from the overriding imperative, shared by men and women, that the family be sustained. In *Woman's Share in Social Culture,* first published in 1912 and reissued in 1925, Spencer said that the man's economic and professional advancement thus assumed much greater practical importance.[15] The impact on woman was to diminish her "personal achievement" and the "joy of self-expression"—hallmarks of one's commitment to sport as well as purported effects of athletic success. Apart from the fatalism that tinged Spencer's thinking, her analysis pinpointed one of the most critical distinctions—while the male's individual fulfilment was taken to further the societal interest, the female's social obligations were seen as a substitute for her individual self-expression and attainment. To the extent that such "inner-directedness" was regarded as physically inherent in women, then outer-directed activities could be regarded as deviant or suspect.

The overlays of social assumption that ultimately formed the rationale for restricting women's athletics were complex; and, although mutually supportive when seen broadly, they sometimes seemed contradictory in detail. Much of the complexity and apparent contradiction resulted from considerations of social and economic class. When commentators such as Spencer spoke of women, they most commonly meant women rather like themselves—born to some measure of comfort and to some sense of social opportunity and responsibility. In this, they resembled social commentators who spoke of sport,

such as Edwyn Sandys, or political leaders who practiced sport and worried over race improvement, such as Theodore Roosevelt. These were the well-bred women, marked by a sense of self-governance and reserve. Exuberance and physical display were far more the province of the poor, the immigrant, the working-class woman, and this tendency towards display itself was often taken as a mark of moral corruption. Inadequate self-control and incompetence in domestic management, for example, coupled with the unbridling of instincts for bodily display were though to lead to such evils as prostitution.[16] To be sure, aggressive public display by women in athletics hardly constituted prostitution; but the descent into impassioned public display was suspect nonetheless. The absence of self-control that led to sexual depravity was too easily confused with the sensual expressiveness that had its outlet in sport. Since manners were thus a key sign of morality, the manner of one's sport and athletic practice also assumed a moral intonation.

In itself, the concern over propriety in female behavior was hardly new. But the concern was especially strong to protect and enforce discipline among middle- and upper-class women rather than to "redeem" the laboring poor. Discriminatory bias against poorer women had a long history, linked to suspicion of their supposed promiscuous inclinations and depreciated moral worth, whether intrinsic or induced by poverty and deprivation. As Charles Rosenberg has observed, the very fact of overt sexuality was widely regarded at the turn of the century as inimical to middle-class values. Moreover, medical practice and certainly medical prescriptions reflected class bias.[17] In addition, some historians have suggested that a disproportionate number of poorer women were subjects—or victims—of extreme surgical procedures for removal of sexual organs as a means of governing sociosexual behavior.[18] Any departure from the most restrained and proper behavioral code could be interpreted as a start down the road to depravity. But the middle class were inclined to view the tendency to wallow in such depravity as an attribute of their socioeconomic inferiors.

Middle- and upper-class Americans had long been suspicious of physical display, especially though not exclusively among women, from the colonial period through the nineteenth century. As the lower-class appreciation of physical display created a significant commercial market for entrepreneurs such as P. T. Barnum, female behavior again became a hotly debated issue.[19] When women had traditionally engaged in public displays, it had been crucial to preserve their image of moral uprightness. As Lois Banner has noted, Barnum had "cloaked Jenny Lind in a mantle of respectability" during her American tour in 1850. Even so, Barnum's effort to establish perhaps the first

modern beauty contest, in 1854, resulted in initial entries only from women "of questionable reputation."[20] It was precisely Barnum's difficulty in establishing such public display as an acceptable option for the middle- and upper-class American that suggests the strength of this modest reticence even into the twentieth century. Baring oneself literally and figuratively in public display became more feasible only when a social code for doing so descended from respectable authorities, as happened in sports that obtained middle- and upper-class approval. But even in these instances, women fared worse than men, and the tighter strictures affecting them in the nineteenth century lingered into the twentieth. After the turn of the century, the matter of gender distinction remained visible and powerful partly because distinctions according to class came under progressively sharper fire. But while class could be challenged as a creature of society, could gender and sex-based differences be challenged if they were the workings of nature?

The emergence of women to somewhat greater influence in public life during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries did not mean their emergence across the full range of action; nor did it eradicate the suspicion and disdain that many men and women had of the female who was physically active or "aggressive." Middle- and upper-class women who carved out places for themselves in the greater society did so in specialized areas, such as social and philanthropic work or education. Their role was therapeutic rather than self-expressive, and the justification for their engagement in the outside world was social rather than individual. For all the talk of the social value of sport, the athletic hero—or heroine—was ultimately a lone figure, pursuing actions that were essentially self-aggrandizing no matter how great the protestations of team loyalty. Women's sphere surely expanded in the early twentieth century, and it included a recreational sector—even a sporting component.[21] But the quality and dimensions of that component bore only fragile similarities to that enjoyed by men. Thus, for all the enlargement of action regarded as acceptable for women, the mantle of middle- and upper-class respectability did not fall promptly on the female athlete.

In 1934, for example, Inez Haynes Irwin published *Angels and Amazons,* offering an interpretation of the rise of women to public prominence as well as suggesting what areas genuinely constituted prominence. Irwin's book, which tellingly included an acknowledgment of Anna Garlin Spencer, listed such callings of therapeutic intervention as doctor, minister, and educator; and suitable causes included temperance and abolition. Although briefly mentioning the "athletic craze" of the latter third of the nineteenth century, Irwin's focus swiftly turned to the traditionally important fields. Despite the rising power

and scale of mass leisure culture in the decades after the First World War, serious treatment of women athletes was conspicuous by its absence.[22]

The view that the extremes of athleticism were unseemly behavior for women was reinforced by the claims of the science of the day. Amram Scheinfeld summarized the views expounded during the 1930s in *Women and Men* (1943). Scheinfeld proposed that women were clearly inferior to men in all physical regards, such as strength and endurance. Moreover, the female body was said to "set" sooner, while it was thought that "her muscular system has a more limited range for development." Scheinfeld supported his views by noting that "hens would be no match for roosters" in some blood contests. In addition, he noted that female horses scored fewer victories at the track than males. Citing reports by Dr. Calvin P. Stone of Stanford University, Scheinfeld reported that female horses won at the track at a ratio of one victory by a female to four by males. Following such evidence, Scheinfeld concluded with the "almost universal opinion of medical authorities" that equal training of females and males for athletic competition would be detrimental to the female's ability to bear children at a later time. Thus, it appeared that the "natural favor" accorded to males in athletics was justified again by "natural identity" of the female attained through selected sex-related roles.[23] Female athletic excellence was possible, but only if the woman risked being considered a freak.[24]

The potential for genuine acceptance of women as athletic stars—as physically gifted beings outside of a sexual context and as persons entitled to an open range of opportunity for self-expression and the development of personality—depended on the emergence of a strong ideology that could counter the prevalent one.

By the early part of the twentieth century, sensibilities were shifting on questions of female propriety, even while concerns for the status of men lingered. The change in progress was suggested by an abrupt reversal in the *Ladies' Home Journal's* judgment of newspaper beauty contests. As late as 1907, the magazine claimed that no woman worthy of the name would submit to sending her photograph for consideration in such a public contest undertaken by a newspaper. But by 1911, the *Journal* itself was sponsoring regional contests to find the most beautiful young women in America. Like other middle-class sponsoring agents, the *Journal* found some socially elevated pretext to lend respectability to the contest. Various newspapers claimed that they were seeking appropriate models for uplifting civic sculpture or for submissions to national and international exhibitions. In its 1911 contest, the *Journal* offered as prizes portraits by Charles Dana Gibson.[25] Thus, although opportunities for

public display broadened, significant constraints on the manner of display remained. This emphasis on *how* one engaged in public activities became a hallmark especially of women's sport in the first half of the twentieth century.

In essence, what took place was a change in fashion. But what made it extraordinarily important and a sensitive societal issue was that it was a change in kind—from an emphasis largely on static visual presentation to one on dynamic action in which deeds could be the measure of a woman, as they might also be of a man.

In the 1920s, a youthful appearance became fashionable for the American woman—an "athletic" image, or at least one of fitness and health, which made action itself a sort of fashion. But the emphasis on activity was ambivalent. As Lois Banner has suggested, the energy and dynamism of the "flapper" was sensual but, with bound breasts, not exactly sexual. Clara Bow's "it," or sex appeal, was a vivacity coupled with "a basic indifference to men."[26] Though stylistically different from some of the more static images of women in the nineteenth century, this new vivacity and dynamism extended the restrictive tradition of decoration rather than that of public achievement. Put crudely, women in and after the 1920s could be much more energetic, but they might face obstacles if their actions had practical public consequences. The much-vaunted liberation of women in the 1920s was, to be sure, wildly overestimated; and the actual opportunities for the sportswoman and top female athlete would depend on their hard-fought battles outside the arenas where sport was played and inside the minds and predispositions of men and women, where sport was justified.

Championship Talent as a Social Challenge

The great female athlete in America risked being considered either eccentric, anomalous, or freakish. Championship talent constituted something of a social challenge, in large measure by violating widely held notions about female "anatomy and destiny." Male athletes were also often treated as eccentrics, anomalies, and freaks, but their process of accommodation and of emergence into acceptability proceeded at a rate that greatly outpaced that of the women. Many of the adaptive devices and coping mechanisms used by men were also used by women, but genuine respectability for the outstanding woman athlete—much more than for the refined and accomplished sportswoman—remained elusive. It was all well and good to enjoy sport if one remained a lady, but being an "Amazon" was another matter entirely.

A measure of the deliberately outrageous had long been a part of sport in America, and the selling of sport as theatrical spectacle had exploited women as well as men, turning them into flamboyant market properties. One such woman, who was born in 1864 and named Ella Hattan, took the stage name Jaguarina and was even billed as "champion Amazon of the World" and "Ideal Amazon of the Age." Jaguarina established herself through skilled use of the sword from 1884 to 1900; audiences were most taken with her mounted combat with the broadsword.[27] In her career, genuine athletic talent combined with exotic costume melodrama, and allusions to paganism wedged open a special niche of tolerance beyond Victorian respectability.[28] The famous wrestler Minerva, also known as "Miss Josie" from Hoboken, New Jersey, posed in similar fashion—bold, proud, balanced, and graceful. In both cases, the image of the accomplished female athlete was inseparably tied to the specter of dominant womanhood. Minerva trounced men in some of her most popular wrestling encounters. Her status as an oddity, which helped to guard her against the general strictures of Victorianism, also gave her a tenuous exemption from gender-discriminatory male dominance. So, too, Jaguarina met—and usually defeated—a string of male opponents. On 4 July 1886, she defeated Captain J. H. Marshall in mounted combat in San Francisco, although the man prevailed in a second outing. She overcame Sergeant Owen Davis, Captain E. N. Jennings, Fred Engelhardt, and Xavier Orlofsky; and, in 1887, one of her successful meetings with *turnverein* instructor Conrad Wiedemann played before the largest crowd ever then gathered in San Diego.[29]

The challenge posed by such exceptional women to their male athletic counterparts appears to have been a key to their commerical attractiveness. Newspaper accounts of Jaguarina's efforts lavished attention on her physical features, emphasizing her grace and marking her power and force as quite unexpected. Such accounts demonstrated not only the fascination with Jaguarina but the fact that there was an ambivalence in the fascination itself, rooted in the ambiguity of Jaguarina and of her career. Praise of her beauty conformed to stereotypes of the time. But her ability to defeat men was provocative. After one match in 1887, for example, the *San Francisco Chronicle* noted that Sergeant Owen Davis, as he was losing to Jaguarina, felt that "it was bad enough to be beaten, but to be beaten by a woman was more than the Presidio champion's blood could brook." Sergeant Owen charged the referee, hurled insults, and threatened him before returning to defeat in the competition.[30] The commercial viability of the event, then, was not an endorsement of equality of access to sport and athletic competition; indeed, it may even have exploited strong reservations and discriminatory instincts. It was one thing to make money from such an oddity. But it was quite a different question how well athletically gifted women would fare when competition was more straightforward—not crossing gender barriers but allowing their exuberant athletic excellence to shine through without the protective wrapping of pagan and theatrical associations. The "Amazon" might be amusing and, perhaps, titillating as long as she remained in a realm of fantasy. But how might she be treated in the everyday world? Might not her excellence in athletics preclude her acceptance as an equal?

Recent research suggests that media accounts of prominent female athletes typically portrayed them as exceptions to the prevailing rules of femininity, regardless of the era in which they performed publicly. Eleanora Randolph Sears and Mildred "Babe" Didrikson Zaharias, for example, seemed to deviate from commonly accepted notions about the woman's role as wife and mother, her manner of dress and suitable behavior, her supposed physical limits, and the purported limits of her emotional stability.[31] There was a danger that female athletic excellence itself might be seen as a form of social and even personal deviation.

Sears shocked officials who picked her up for speeding, not only because she was driving the car but also because she wore masculine clothing. At sport, too, she sometimes adopted the masculine style. On 14 August 1910, reports were published that Sears rode astride while playing against men in a polo game. Also, descriptions of her play in the National Tennis Doubles Championships in the second decade of the century used adjectives stereotyped as male such as "hard." In the 1920s, Sears walked from Providence, Rhode Island, to Boston in 11 hours and 5 minutes. In a story in the *New York Times* on 15 December 1925, she was portrayed as superior to men. Along the way, her two male escorts began "to feel the strain. Both Cutler and Hinckley, instead of setting the pace, lagged persistently, and Miss Sears with a grin looked over her shoulders and called: 'Snap into it, boys! You offered to pace me, not chase me.' "[32] For a fragile male ego, Sears could surely be something of a test.

It may have been inevitable that some would see a connection, if not an equation, between sport and masculinity and thus look askance at those women who engaged in sport with special skill and success. Athletic clothing for women in the first decades of the century has been described by one observer as "masculinized," at least in some sports, possibly because the women "were entering the male domain—the sports world."[33] Meanwhile, the bloomer costume increasingly fell into disrepute. Advanced as a compromise between the demands of health and the strictures of Victorian social custom,

the bloomer and its derivatives faltered before the "mannish" simplicity of dress for riding and before functionally determined clothing such as women's one-piece bathing suits.[34] In the latter case, dedication to athletic excellence and internalized commitment hinted at male gender identification; in the former a similar effect followed from the imitation of external style.

The social origins of those women athletes who were prominent in the first decades of the century further suggest that public excellence in women's sport lay uncomfortably on the edge of middle-class respectability. Upper-class women typically excelled in sports where the clientele was more restrictive and exclusive, such as tennis and golf. At the same time, the working class tended to provide players for games such as basketball.[35] In either case, the taste and customs of the middle class were skirted.[36]

Cases were varied. Track star Eleanor Egg, who competed in every Women's National AAU Track and Field Championship from 1923 to 1932 and set numerous track-and-field records, started as an acrobat in her parents' vaudeville act. She had already crossed the border into public entertainment long before setting foot on the cinders.[37]

But perhaps "Babe" Didrikson proved to be among the most troubling—and troublesome—cases for those who believed women to be psychologically and physiologically weaker than men and so saw highly competitive sport to be properly restricted to males. Didrikson was born on 26 June 1911, into a culture that at once boosted commercialized sport but prized the amateur ethic, especially for women. The underlying reasons for this distinctive approach towards women's sport remain the subject of debate. But it would appear that amateurism took on a powerful romantic aura, even though public attention was drawn to professional sport. At the same time, the old consensus among various elites that amateur sport genuinely transformed personal character fell into some disrepair. Didrikson broke the mold of the idealized woman amateur—not so much by actual violation of amateur rules but by a lack of concern to seem to be a part of the system. Although Didrikson defended herself against charges that she had permitted her name and photograph to be used in automobile advertisements, and forced the AAU to restore the amateur eligibility they had stripped from her, she refused reinstatement. Quoted in the *New York Times* on 6 December 1932, she said that she had preferred to make "a few playful, and I think justified, comments on the inordinate lengths and multiplicity of their rules and regulations."[38]

This was hardly the way to cultivate the fondness of men and women who thought female athleticism must be tightly circumscribed. Avery Brundage, for one, responded by saying "the Greeks were right" in barring women from

sport. The problem—in a societal sense—was that Didrikson did not seem to care. Such independence conflicted with the commercial promoter's desire to exert control, with the traditionalist's gender-discriminatory limitation of women's proper sphere, and with the widely held equation of female identity with marriage and motherhood. Didrikson practiced sports that many educators in the 1920s and 1930s still believed interfered with successful pregnancy—shot put, javelin, and high jump—by supposedly making the chest "inflexible." Concerns over Didrikson's sexual identity showed themselves in frequent description of her as a "tomboy." Until her marriage to George Zaharias, the questions persisted, inspiring her to tell a reporter in January 1933: "Don't ask me whether or not I'm going to get married. That is the first question women reporters ask. And that is why I hate those darn old women reporters."[39]

Even marriage would not necessarily establish suitable sex-role identification for the woman athlete. In "Babe" Didrikson's case, the problem may have been complicated by marriage, on 23 December 1938, to a "fringe" sports entertainer, the wrestler George Zaharias. It was a moot point how much respectability Didrikson could win from a marital match with "The Weeping Greek," who played a cowardly villain in the ring.

Didrikson's manner and tone as well as her actual accomplishments in sport continued to moot her gender identification. A notable instance came in an intended boxing match with Babe Ruth. "I never met the Babe," she was quoted as saying, "but, gee, I'd like to put the gloves on with him for a while." Suggesting that she might prepare in earnest and showing no apprehension at all, she added: "Boy, how I can punch that bag." How the two contestants might have fared and whether the event would have become an incident of the "great male hope" will never be known. Ruth canceled. In a charity golf match with Didrikson, comedian Bob Hope playfully added to the portrayal of her in masculine terms. "I hit the ball like a girl," Hope said, "and she hits it like a man." As Karen Epstein has observed, Didrikson was commonly referred to as an "athlete" rather than a "girl athlete" or "lady athlete" and seemed to stand apart from other women intentionally.[40]

And Didrikson was no isolated case. The popular tennis star Helen Wills, much acclaimed for her 1924 match with Suzanne Lenglen of France, advocated shortened skirts, sleeveless blouses, and bare legs as imperative in improving the women's game. In 1928, Gertrude Ederle received a rousing ticker-tape reception in New York after swimming the English Channel, breaking the previous records of male swimmers. And Eleanor Holm was praised by sportswriter Paul Gallico as a better swimmer-athlete than any of her male counterparts. Such famous sportswomen were on the cutting edge

of change, along with actresses such as Joan Crawford, Marlene Dietrich, and Katharine Hepburn, whom historian Lois Banner has called "tough" and "resilient."[41] The adoption of "masculine" dress and behavioral style widened the options for women, but it could not cancel out all the fears that females would themselves become "masculinized" and demeaned.

Although Didrikson's case was highly visible given her athletic excellence and her considerable self-possession, it still suggested the dilemma that faced women athletes more generally through much of the twentieth century. They entered a sporting world riddled with stereotypical images of female athletes and restrictive assumptions about women's physical and emotional limits. Seen one way, women's ability to perform effectively in defiance of the prevailing stereotypes should have been sufficient reason to question the stereotypes. Yet, as the treatment of Didrikson suggests, it was equally possible to question the gender identity and even the sexual character of those athletes tainted by excellence. It may be argued that, great as Didrikson's athletic achievements were, her final social acceptance came only when she had passed beyond athletic success and emerged as a *mater dolorosa* and moral paragon during her fight with cancer. Although not literally a mother, she had become the "mother of us all."

Residual Fears and Growing Opportunity

In the years after the Second World War and especially from the 1960s onward, women won broader opportunities for their self-expression and for personal and professional fulfillment. That problems remained betrayed a drag-anchor of residual fears, as well as the simple fact that perfect freedom and perfect fulfilment are overambitious aims irrespective of gender. But in one area especially, strides were made that had special and powerful significance for the reception accorded women athletes—the realm of sexual liberation. By exploring male and female sexuality, one could not only discern prejudice and bias but also discriminate between sex and gender. As a result, some diminution of the traditional bias against women athletes rooted in sex roles and in sex-related physiology proved possible.

Possible—but neither automatic nor inevitable. Often changes in views came only after a long fight. And so it was no cause for wonder that athletes sometimes felt compelled to draw attention to emblems of the prevalent mainstream notion of femininity. Even in 1961, Wilma Rudolph emphasized

that, although she had occasionally played basketball with her ten brothers, "it doesn't mean that I'm a tomboy." As recorded in a *New York Times* article, she added to her affirmation of traditional femininity by "[pointing] to her bright plaid skirt for emphasis and then fingered the delicate gold buttons on her purple bodice." She "glanced apologetically" at the black slippers she wore instead of high heels, which she insisted she preferred except that "my legs get too tired if I wear them before a race."[42]

But by the end of the 1960s and certainly in the 1970s, much had been accomplished, notably by outstanding individuals such as Billie Jean King. Such persons not only proved that women could be excellent athletes but also showed themselves to be able entrepreneurs. By developing magazines devoted to women's sport, moreover, and by similar business moves, they suggested the worthiness, if not the exact parity, of women's sport applying the full apparatus of men's sport to women's. Since sport itself had achieved recognition as serious business, moreover, it could piggyback on the general ideology of women's liberation and thus avoid being boxed off as a marginal amusement, as had happened at the turn of the century.

Billie Jean King's ability to avoid total disaster upon disclosure of her lesbian relationship while maintaining a non-traditional marriage with her husband, Larry King, suggested that sexual fears concerning women athletes had been muted somewhat by the beginning of the 1980s. Meanwhile, Dr. Renee Richards overcame the initial scramble to mesh the rules of sport with the capabilities of modern medicine—for example, was a transsexual, now female, to be bound by prior experience and record in men's tennis? Relatively soon (and once it sank in that a sex-change operation was not likely to become a standard means for a mediocre male player to become a superior female athlete), Richards became widely recognized as an effective coach, associated with Martina Navratilova, and was often caught in close-up shots by television cameramen covering major tennis tournaments. Although it risks irony to say it of Richards, it was clearly true of King that she forced re-examination of what it meant to be female—and specifically what it meant to be a female and an athlete. Her aggressive style of play, still somewhat regrettably dubbed "masculine" and "a man's game," nonetheless became a model for other talented women, spreading a new definition of what a woman could be in the world of sport. The *New York Times* commented on King in this light on 15 May 1981, saying: "By her brash aggressiveness, she made it more acceptable for women to push themselves."[43] Even so, it is crucial to note that one of King's champion successors, Chris Evert Lloyd, was portrayed in the tradition

of ladylike reserve and personal discipline. No single model for the woman athlete sufficed.

To be sure, the combination of women's athletic excellence and their growing activism in social, economic, and political affairs did much to expand the opportunities available to the outstanding female athlete. So, too, the legitimation of sport as a component of mass entertainment and mass culture blunted the old charges of eccentricity or freakishness. But the reduction in the sex-related fears among both men and women was at least as crucial; and this required not merely a tactical victory over male social authority but, more significantly, a substantial redirection of thinking. The "millennium" had not arrived with the likes of Billie Jean King and Martina Navratilova. But at least the residue of fear had fallen low enough so athletic excellence could hold its own against private life.

Notes

1. B. F. Boller, "Physical Training," *Mind and Body* 7 (April 1900), 25–26. The male adult Boller here was writing in the guise of an imaginary little girl eager for physical education and play outdoors.

2. Dudley Allen Sargent, *An Autobiography* (Philadelphia, 1927), p. 36. Physical educator Sargent specifically suggested that the girls' efforts in play and sport would make them less of a sexual threat to the coeval boys who would not as yet be able to resist curious advances from too-dominating females.

3. Mildred "Babe" Didrikson Zaharias, *This Life I've Lived* (London, 1956), p. 103. She also noted that Mary Lena Falk was known as "the tomboy from Thomasville, Georgia" and Patsy Berg as "the Minnesota Tomboy."

4. Frank R. Rossiter, *Charles Ives and His America* (New York, 1975), pp. 31–32.

5. A useful study of John Todd appears in G. J. Barker-Benfield, *The Horrors of the Half-Known Life: Male Attitudes Toward Women and Sexuality in Nineteenth Century America* (New York, 1976). An extended speculation on the relationship of such thinking to the gender-typing of public action and to male dominance in sport appears in Donald J. Mrozek, *Sport and American Mentality* (Knoxville, 1983), pp. 232–33.

6. James H. Jackson, *The Sexual Organism and Its Healthful Management* (Boston, 1861; reprint, New York, 1974), especially pp. 54–55 concerning play. It must be emphasized, however, that Jackson's primary remedy for masturbation was not exercise but diet, including the avoidance of horseradish and spices, which he thought confirmed the practice of "secret vice." Concerning such remedies to masturbation, see Jackson's chapter, innocently entitled, "Masturbation, How It Arises, How It Is Kept Up," pp. 60–86.

7. Wolfgang Lederer, *The Fear of Women* (New York, 1968).

8. Ibid., pp. vii–viii.

9. Lederer, *The Fear of Women*, pp. 36, 105.

10. Charles Rosenberg, "Sexuality, Class and Role," in *No Other Gods: On Science and American Social Thought* (Baltimore, 1961, 1962, 1976), p. 75.

11. Ibid.

12. Lois W. Banner, *American Beauty* (New York, 1983), p. 244.

13. Alice B. Stockham, *Tokology: A Book for Every Woman* (Chicago, 1886). Also see Stockham, *Karezza, Ethics of Marriage* (Chicago, 1896).

14. Rosenberg, *No Other Gods*, p. 79.

15. Anna Garlin Spencer, *Woman's Share in Social Culture* (Philadelphia, 1912), pp. 149–51. It should be noted that Spencer adopted a strongly accommodationist or "conservative" viewpoint; and, although she recognized the "spinster" as demonstrating female equality with men in some "specialized" tasks, she clearly agreed with the view that the mother and housewife "did something far more vital for race development" (p. 150).

16. Ibid., p. 115.

17. Rosenberg, *No Other Gods*, pp. 54–70, 80.

18. See, for example, Barker-Benfield, *The Horrors of the Half-Known Life.*

19. See, for example, Banner, *American Beauty*, pp. 254–55. It is worth noting, also, that Barnum was a key promoter of wrestling events. In making no distinction between salable sport and other commercially viable forms of entertainment, Barnum was both out of step with the sport "reformers" of the last third of the nineteenth century and a harbinger of a crucial—perhaps even predominant—thrust in sport and entertainment during the twentieth century.

20. Banner, *American Beauty*, p. 255.

21. Concerning the reluctance of prominent women to support strong athletic competition for women and girls, see Banner, *American Beauty*, pp. 286–87.

22. Inez Haynes Irwin, *Angels and Amazons: A Hundred Years of American Women* (Garden City, N.Y., 1934). Also see Margaret W. Rossiter, *Women Scientists in America: Struggles and Strategies to 1940* (Baltimore, 1982). The difficulty of pursuing "the possibilities of independence" is a theme in Peter Gabriel Filene, *Him/Her/Self: Sex Roles in Modern America* (New York, 1974), p. 52 and passim.

23. Amram Scheinfeld, *Women and Men* (New York, 1943), pp. 274–80.

24. Scheinfeld also said that menstruation severely inhibited athletic participation, and noted that the promoters of the "Aquacade" at the New York World's Fair had kept extra swimmers ready so that women could be kept out of the pool for four days during their menstrual cycles but that some women still seemed oblivious to the "fact" that they were supposed to perform badly at such times and managed somehow to overcome their purported debility. Scheinfeld, *Women and Men*, p. 281.

25. Banner, *American Beauty*, pp. 257–58.

26. Ibid., p. 278.

27. Lynn Emery, "World Renowned Champion Amazon: Jaguarina" (paper presented at the 11th annual conference of the North American Society for Sport History, Mont Alto, Pa., May 1983).

28. The use of pagan imagery as a means of exempting oneself from the strictures of Victorian culture is discussed in Mrozek, *Sport and American Mentality*, pp. 212–13.

29. Emery, "World Renowned Champion Amazon."

30. Ibid., 8.

31. See, for example, Karen V. Epstein, "Social Perceptions of Four Prominent Female Athletes during the Twentieth Century in the United States" (paper presented at the 11th annual conference of the North American Society for Sport History, Mont Alto, Pa., May 1983).

32. Ibid.

33. See Emelia-Louis Kilby, "Changing Clothes in Women's Sports: 1895–1940" (paper presented at the 11th annual conference of the North American society for Sport History, Mont Alto, Pa., May 1983).

34. Ibid.

35. See, for example, Epstein, "Social Perceptions of Four Prominent Female Athletes."

36. As Lois Banner has suggested, it was possible to stage a female beauty pageant in Rehoboth Beach, Maryland, as early as 1880 without scandal or interference, largely because it was a working-class resort. In Atlantic City, however, it took much effort and a considerable length of time before a format could be developed that fused the lower-class "carnival" and the upper-class "festival" and added the overlay of health consciousness. See Banner, *American Beauty*, especially pp. 266–67.

37. See J. Thomas Jable, "The Acrobat on the Athletic Field: Eleanor Egg, New Jersey Early Track and Field Champion and Record Holder" (paper presented at the 11th annual conference of the North American Society for Sport History, Mont Alto, Pa., May 1983).

38. See Epstein, "Social Perceptions of Four Prominent Female Athletes." Also concerning her career, see Zaharias, *This Life I've Lived;* William Oscar Johnson and Nancy P. Williamson, *Whatta-Girl: The Babe Didrikson Story* (Boston, 1975).

39. Quoted in Epstein, "Social Perceptions of Four Prominent Female Athletes."

40. Ibid.

41. Banner, *American Beauty*, pp. 275–76.

42. Quoted in Epstein, "Social Perceptions of Four Prominent Female Athletes."

43. Quoted in ibid.

8

Sports and Eros

ALLEN GUTTMANN

When Athenian youths ran races or hurled the discus, when Spartan girls wrestled one another by the banks of the Eurotas, everyone seems to have understood that physically trained bodies, in motion or at rest, can be sexually attractive. The erotic aspects of sports, welcomed by most of the ancients, have always been obvious to the *critics* of sports, then and now. Tertullian's complaints, uttered in the second century A.D., were echoed in 1934 by Cardinal Rodrigue Villeneuve of Quebec. He condemned the "pagan" cult of the body as manifested in sports and deprecated the rampant concern for "hysterical strength, sensual pleasure, and the development of the human animal." For centuries, however, lovers of sports, spectators as well as athletes, have discussed their passion as if the sensual pleasure in sports had no connection whatsoever with human sexuality. They have denied rather than defended the association of eros and sports. Whenever, for instance, outraged religious traditionalists have called attention to the erotic appeal of the female body at play, progressive reformers have blandly explained that sunlight, fresh air, and unencumbered movement were their only motives. No wonder that the interminable debates over sportswear for women left both sides frustrated and unhappy.[1]

When Protestant clergymen invented "Muscular Christianity" in the mid–nineteenth century, when Pope Pius XII decided in 1945 to affirm the value of modern sports, there was no sudden acceptance of what had been condemned, no reconsideration of the erotic element in sports. Quite the contrary. Christian propagandists for sports seemed to become blind to the sexual dimensions that had been anathema to their clerical predecessors. Ironically, once the mainstream churches took to celebrations of the joy of sports, a number of secular critics, mostly Marxists, began to deplore the "sexualization" of women's (but not of men's) sports. We seem now to be in the midst of what Margaret Hunt has aptly termed "the de-eroticization of women's liberation."[2]