

Sport and Gender

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'Sport has become a public forum for celebrating, displaying, and reproducing masculinity.' [Polley, 1989:106]. If, as some have suggested, the dominant masculine image in the western world is of man the hunter, competitor, hero and conqueror, then it is not surprising that sport should reflect this. Undoubtedly, women are hugely under-represented in sport: in numbers playing both in professional and amateur sports; in the financial rewards; media coverage; media representation; and in sport establishments. While sport often appears as an institution created for and by men, ironically it is women who support and service this institution. There had been various explanations for this. One is that this reflects prevailing sexist attitudes in a patriarchal society. Another suggests that it is part of a capitalist economic system which is designed to keep women as a means of cheap labour who then have little time for participation in sport.

In the following sections from 'The British at Play', we trace the historical development of women and sport.

Pre-Victorian Times

Brailsford [1991:25] claims that sport is only now returning to its pre-industrial days, where family involvement is important. He blames the Puritans for forcing women out of participatory sports, saying [ibid:131] that they laid the 'stress on domestic virtues as against communal participation'. The Restoration saw a gradual relaxation of these attitudes, but the industrial revolution was just around the corner, and the effect on the working woman's leisure time was dramatic. Even on days off from the factory, food had to be bought and cooked and the children had to be looked after: this was woman's work, and left little time for anything else. In consequence, the St Monday tradition around which so much early nineteenth-century drinking and playing revolved was markedly male dominated.

When they did have the time and inclination to take exercise, women in pre-Victorian England were not afraid to show their bodies. They certainly used to be involved in pugilistic competitions where they would fight in their underclothes, [Birley: 109, & Holt, 1989: 19] and scantily-dressed women were even used as bait to attract spectators to [cricket matches](#) and festivals. This was a common practice in the eighteenth century and at the turn of the nineteenth:

...even at a time when the female breast was a much more public sight than it later became, press comment regularly mentioned the

undress of girl competitors. The advertisement for a cricket match in 1744 promised the additional attraction of a smock race between two ladies who were to run 'in drawers only' and reports of later races would refer to ladies giving 'full display of their personal charms' or exposing 'with their wonted generosity, those beauties which are easier to be imagined than described'.

[Brailsford, ibid: 134]

While on one level there seemed to be an attempt to titillate and tease the male spectator [but there were usually guards with dogs to prevent over-excitement], there was another level of entertainment which presented the young woman in a different light. At feasts and festivals around the turn of the century, it was far more usual for the organisers of running events to stipulate that the women's races were for virgins only, presumably to keep away the rougher women who would voluntarily take part in the 'bait' events. One can only suppose that when posters and fly-sheets were circulated advertising foot races for maidens 'whose characters are unsullied and persons impregnable', it was also a warning to the men that this was not an event for the rowdy, boozing crowd, but a genuine competition.

Working Class Victorian Women

But with the advent of the Victorian era, it became indecent to show one's body, and female participation declined. The increased pressure on female domestic responsibility in nineteenth-century industrial Britain only served to exacerbate a situation which saw working-class women get almost no opportunity for exercise and personal leisure. The atmosphere of the public house was becoming ever more unsavoury, especially once the 1830 Beer Act came in, when every street corner had its own drinking house: women stayed away if they cared about their reputations, so that even drinking was losing its place as a typical leisure pursuit of the working woman. Healthier recreational options invariably demanded free time, a commodity in short supply in urban Britain, and so the working-class woman's life was centred on factory and home. In fact, factory workers were relatively well off, for many women had to work at home for a pittance under what was known as the 'sweat' system: this involved doing piecework, usually sewing and dressmaking, for long hours, so the woman in this position would hardly ever have left the house and would not even have had the meagre social life afforded by contact with factory colleagues. To aggravate the misery, women had to make do with very little money, despite working long hours. Bedarida [120] sums up the situation of the working-class woman in the 1870s:

... on every side the picture was a sombre one - low wages [always far below men's wages, generally half], repetitive work without responsibility, poor qualifications, and productivity reduced by the addition of household tasks to their gainful occupation. At every level of work, in town as well as country, the economic exploitation of women aggravated the social inferiority of their sex.

Middle Class Dress Decorum

Middle-class women had no shortage of free time, and in many cases had too much of it. As far as leisure choices were concerned, the difficulty lay in deciding what was appropriate for a Victorian lady. The few public schools in existence encouraged girls to play games such as hockey and tennis [Hargeaves: 73/4] and these were both

popular. Once out of school, however, girls became women and were bound by the rigours of the Victorian dress code. Bare calves and a glimpse of knee might have been acceptable on the school hockey field, but at the local tennis club it would have been considered an outrage. Even the prestigious sporting tournaments such as Wimbledon made serious athletic endeavour next to impossible by insisting on the covering up of arms, legs [including ankles] and throats. When little Lottie Dod won at the age of fifteen, she was allowed to play in her school kit and must have run her opponents ragged, dressed as they were in long dresses and held firm by corsets.

The dress code remained one of the greatest obstacles to women's leisure until at least the 1930s. In the 1890s, some dare-devil women provoked outrage by assuming rational dress [i.e. trousers] for cycling, which was already considered a pastime of dubious propriety for women [Birley: 325]. In fact, the [Rational Dress League](#), founded in 1898, would almost certainly have been well-supported if the cost of the outfit had not been so high [Lowerson, 1995: 214]. Some thirty years previously an American by the name of Amelia Bloomer had caused some fury, and much hilarity, when introducing the latest fashion onto the London scene. Her pantaloons for women were designed to allow freedom of movement during exercise - golf, tennis, etc. - and had the added bonus of being safe in a wind. They actually started to sell quite well after a time, but only when the British had adapted them to be worn under the long dresses which decency demanded.

Although the 1930s saw some relaxation in the dress code [if Marlene Dietrich could wear trousers, then so could others], the debate on dress went on until the post-war period. Four years after the end of the Second World War, Gussie Moran famously shocked the Wimbledon hierarchy with her frilly knickers, but won lots of admiration for her daring [Walker: 261]. However, Wimbledon epitomised reactionary England, and progress had been made in most areas by this time. Hargreaves lists the changes as including, 'the shorter games skirt, the briefer bathing suit, wearing shorts and trousers, and shorter hairstyles'. Bodies were once more on show after a cover-up lasting almost exactly a century. In the roaring twenties Suzanne Lenglen first shocked and then won over the crowds at Wimbledon with her 'progressive' dress, and it only took another ten years or so before women were seen on the golf course in trousers. Fifty years earlier rational dress had caused a sensation, but the movement had been short-lived, resembling a fashion more than a progression. By the time women golfers started walking the courses in trousers, Britain had been through a World War, a general strike, and a sustained period of economic depression, had given up jurisdiction over some of her dominions, including most of Ireland, had introduced universal suffrage and had sat back and let the South Americans stage football's first World Cup. The time was right for change, and women were not about to wait another fifty years before taking the next step forward.

Questions of Health and Decency

If dress was a matter of social opinion and of the morals of the age, health was a matter of medical argument. There were those who considered that excessive exercise was bad for the female in her role as a provider of children. Lowerson [1985: 206] records the opinion of a certain Dr Cantlie, who argued as late as 1906 that sport could 'develop the shoulders rather than the breeding parts of the anatomy': he failed to suggest a satisfactory method of developing the breeding parts, however, so it would appear that his advice was simply a warning rather than a recommendation for alternative forms of exercise.

Nonetheless, Darwinists believed that sport and eugenics went hand in hand - how

could feeble women produce strong sons? - and there was prolonged debate on the benefits or dangers of exercise for women. Indeed, the German view [which was to be so crudely abused by Hitler and his medical cronies] was that eugenic theory demanded fit women, and the gymnastic movement for women was given official encouragement. This, of course, counted against the theories in the eyes of the British public - 'if the Germans are doing it, then we most certainly shan't', was an attitude which persisted at least until the First World War.

From the mid-nineteenth century, even the physical positions adopted by women could provoke scandal and the restrictions imposed were every bit as awkward as those of dress. There were perils in riding side-saddle [as the Queen still does on official occasions], and this necessitated the invention of a special saddle attachment to stop the lady rider sliding off. Even after the invention of the ladies' cycle - without the crossbar - cycling was frowned upon because it required the parting of the legs: she may have been clad in long skirts and throat-lace, but it appears that a woman on a cycle was 'no better than she should be'.

Lowerson[1985: 211] refers to the opposition faced by women rowers, who were accused of a lack of dignity for allowing themselves to be seen semi-supine in public: punting was an acceptable alternative, for it was sedate and required little movement from the vertical - punting, however, tended to be an activity for mixed company, and must surely have led to more trouble than single-sex rowing crews. Such, however, was the wisdom of the age, and those who flouted the rules were social outcasts. From 1855 Oxford and Cambridge ladies teams did compete at rowing on the river Isis [Dodd: 99], but they were judged for style, not speed, thus enabling them to exert themselves to a reasonable degree without upsetting the college authorities. Even target shooting was frowned upon, requiring the adoption of the unbecoming prone position [Lowerson, *ibid*: 220], and there was really very little left which the lady could take part in without causing offence. Tennis and, to a lesser extent, golf were acceptable, if the dress restrictions were observed, and there were always house party games, like badminton and croquet. Yet participation in sport demanded courage and effort far beyond any similar demands that might be made on the men, and it is a tribute to the fortitude and willpower of many Victorian and Edwardian women that, as Britain prepared for war with Germany, the country was on the threshold of 'the golden age' of women's sport. By 1914 they had come a long way from the model woman of Tennyson's *The Princess*:

*Man with the head and woman with the heart,
Man to command and woman to obey.*

Edwardian Chauvinism & Emancipation

Sport had a role of some importance to play in the social lives of middle-class women. Sporting activity offered a rare chance to escape from the chaperoned world of drawing-rooms, house parties and afternoon tea, where the young woman would rarely be free to talk of what she wanted with whom she wanted. Games might be held within the grounds of country houses, but there was an element of escape in the fact that the young men and women were left alone to their pursuits: Lowerson [1995: 208] refers to archery as 'a pleasant way to spend a country house morning with opportunities for mutual admiration and courtship', and Hargreaves has no illusions about the role sport played in the emancipation of middle-class women. He feels that this was partially because much of the recreation - horse-riding, cycling, croquet and house tennis parties - was not primarily competitive, and male pride was not at stake

[74/5], but goes on to say:

Socialising through sport, in fact, formed part of an emergent restructuring of relationships between the sexes at this level, which was taking place outside the work sphere, in the home and at play, whereby ladies were being treated less as an appendage of or an ornament to, gentlemen, and more as a partner and companion whose wishes had to be taken into account.... Playing sport on a competitive basis and indulging in vigorous physical exercise, not only improved their health but also, being able to socialise more freely with their own and with the opposite sex through sports, widened bourgeois women's social horizons and thus gave them a significantly greater degree of independence and freedom.

As the nineteenth century became the twentieth, young women were finding that young men were treating them not quite as equals, but with a heightened awareness of their status as individuals. Yet those older men who had grown up with strictly Victorian values were not quite ready to accept the new version of the young, athletic woman, and chauvinism within the sporting hierarchy and, in sports such as golf, on the field of play, took much longer to eradicate. The journals, newspapers and sports books of the first decade of the century are littered with references to the unsuitability of women for sport, and one of the most common complaints was that they did not know how to conduct themselves in a sporting environment - that is to say, they did not always follow the rules, written and unwritten, which had been laid down by the men who formed the committees and associations which governed play.

Exclusion could also be imposed by the rule book, and this was commonly the case in golf. Women had to give way to men on the course [otherwise women would stand round idly chatting when they should have been playing and the men would have to wait for them to finish] or could only play at restricted times [i.e. when the men did not want the course, usually at lunchtime or in the late afternoon when the lure of the [nineteenth hole](#) 'was at its strongest']. Some clubhouses were segregated, with men-only drinking areas [Holt, 1989:132] to allow the serious business of the day to be discussed in peace. The golf clubhouse reflected, in effect, an extension of the after-dinner separation of the sexes which Victorian mores had demanded; the original aim would appear to have been men only clubhouses, but this was more difficult to achieve.

The extent of segregation and exclusion was the catalyst for women to set up their own golf clubs and for their insistence on separate sporting organisations in golf, tennis and athletics. This process began in the first decade of the century but was still part of a fight for recognition as late as the 1930s. The independence to run their own organisations was vital to the success, even the survival of women's sports. It was through setting up their own associations and clubs that women were first able to demonstrate their ability and achievement without being merely the second-string attraction at meetings primarily for men. Crump [63] outlines the motivations behind the setting up of the Women's Amateur Athletic Association [WAAA]:

...separation was a precondition for the rapid growth of the sport in the early days. There was a strong separatist element within women's athletics, as within the women's physical education colleges, which sought to protect the women's sport from male domination.

[In fact, there was a WAAA until 1989: it was only disbanded as a result of sponsorship deals and to facilitate selection, travel and finance procedures.]

After the First World War women's sport was at the peak of its 'golden age'. The 1920s had seen sporting achievement among women in France, America, Britain and other European countries reach unprecedented levels of excellence. The decade bore witness to women making the headlines of the national presses of these countries for their accomplishments in swimming, aviation, golf, tennis and athletics - in the first two, endurance records by women matched those of men. It was an inevitable outcome of such highly-publicised performances that the myth of the woman as an inferior competitor was finally laid to rest. Respect for women as athletes subtly altered other attitudes to female participation, and the further relaxation of the dress codes, in the 1930s, was just one of the ways in which women were able to proclaim that the days of male autocracy were over.

Women in Sport Today

Women Against Men?

It may be argued that women still do not compete on equal terms with men in many sports, but this is really a matter of performance rather than opportunity. This is traceable not to lack of application or unsuitability, but to physiological differences. We need to take into account that women in many sports are following rules originally designed by men to test male skills. It may be that some sports would see women emerge as more successful than men if they were played within a regulatory framework which was adapted to female strengths. This is unlikely ever to happen, because the traditions in women's sport are now so strong, but it is one more factor which has worked against women as competitors in sport. While physiological differences may have narrowed considerably in the last thirty years, they are still wide enough for almost all athletic competition to require single-gender participation. There are exceptions. Women have competed at the top level at croquet, but this is not a popular activity: the outstanding success of women in equestrian events, on the other hand, has shown that the term 'horsemanship' is not only sexist but inaccurate.

However, women do not and almost certainly will not compete with men in most sports, and, indeed, there is no reason why they should, although there is occasionally a dispute over which sports should be classed as unisex - rally driving and equestrianism are, but should sailboarding and ballet skiing be single-sex, too? Brailsford [1991: 142] compares male / female differences to divisions within sport for men, to which solutions have been found:

...and if the competition is to be separate, why should women slavishly follow game forms which were originally devised by and for men? It is the sort of issue which male sport has had to face within its own confines in the past. Early pugilism made no distinctions between large fighters and smaller ones - the classification of boxers by weight came in only gradually throughout the nineteenth century. Closer competition between racehorses was secured by handicapping. It will doubtless be left to the twenty-first century to see the emergence of a distinctive women's sporting world, equal to that of men, overlapping it, but with its own characteristic elements and offering something beyond synchronised swimming.

Taking Part and Being There

Participation levels in sport for women are now higher than ever, particularly in sports whose main aim is fitness - jogging, aerobics and swimming have traditionally been the most popular [HMSO, 1995: 2: 26], but the first of these has given way to the other two, which can be practised in the safe environment of the club or sports centre. Figures published recently by the Sports Council [1996: 29] show that only 2% of women now jog, whereas the figures for aerobics and swimming both top 15%; cycling is up to 7%. Hargreaves [103] contends that, although participation levels in some traditionally male domains - football, rugby, cricket etc - remain low, the numbers watching on television and gambling on these sports is much higher, and women bet as much as men on football results. To Hargreave's categories - which date back to the football hooligan era of the mid-eighties- can be added the new trend of widespread live attendance which has accompanied the rebuilding of football and rugby stadia. Cricket has always attracted a certain amount of support among women, apparently because of its safety and 'decorum' record, but numbers of women at football matches are currently the highest ever recorded. Significantly, it is younger women and girls who are going, suggesting that within a generation, when the older, men-only element has stopped attending, the male / female ratio will be significantly altered:

...there is no reason to suppose that the numbers will not be approximately equal within twenty years or so.

What is equally revealing is that the direct involvement of working-class women in sport has increased dramatically in the last two decades, particularly amongst Blacks. Athletes and sports stars from the USA, France, Jamaica and Britain, as well from Africa, have provided role models for young British Blacks, but working-class Whites are also seeing sport as a career option in a way which was never before feasible. This has come about partly as a result of a shift in traditional family values, which has signalled an evaporation of working-class male reluctance to accept women in 'their sphere'. More importantly, however, the relaxation of the restrictions on earnings, especially in athletics, has meant that the talented woman competitor has a realistic chance of financial reward. Until recently, the only sports which offered prize money of any significance were tennis and, to a lesser extent, golf, both of which have a middle-class tradition. Even this is changing, for tennis is now attracting working-class girls [and boys] thanks to Sports Council and Lawn Tennis Association initiatives, and Blacks in Britain are being attracted to the sport for the first time.

Media Representations

There is still a degree of sexism in women's sport, and there is no doubt that physical attractiveness is a factor in terms of media exposure. [It is becoming increasingly relevant in respect of men, too, now that advertising and sponsorship are such an important financial element.] Crump [62] cites the case of Mary Slaney, who received the wholesale attention of the Western media in the mid-eighties; her Czech contemporary, Ludmilla Kratochvilova was more successful on the track but her perceived lack of photogenic appeal meant that she was almost disregarded by television and press. The same might be said of sponsorship, but the position is somewhat different: if it *is* sexist to advertise through glamour, then it is in response to market forces, for the advertisers' principal concern is profitable business, not political correctness. The media have no such excuse, and as long as female competitors are referred to in respect of their physical attributes rather than their skill or performance, then we can consider that there is still some way to go before sport

in Britain is truly devoid of gender bias.

Barriers Broken

Such criticisms are relatively minor, however, in the light of all that has been achieved in women's sport. We live in an age not only where men and women jockeys ride together, but where women train and own champion racehorses [Vamplew: 1989: 239]. Women have taken over new roles [the managing director of Birmingham City Football Club is a young woman whose business sense - rather than nepotism or publicity-seeking on the part of the club- got her the job] and are entering fields of activity which would have been closed to them just a generation ago: there are a number of women football commentators working for the BBC, and women are producing more sports programmes for radio and television: Karen Buchanan is founding editor of the football magazine *Four-Four-Two*, which is highly regarded by players and fans. The trend of the nineties is one of female involvement in leadership and organisation. It is an area which still needs development, for there can only be genuine equality if administrators and decision makers come from both the male and female sectors. Gone for good, however, are the days when a concern over the 'breeding parts of the anatomy' could impede the involvement of women in sport, and we are unlikely to see women banned from the golf course for an inability to keep still and quiet.

Looking to the Future

Finally, let us consider some of the aspects of women's sport which might conceivably change with the advent of the new millennium, in the global, as well as the British context.

- Will women be on the major international sporting boards such as the International Olympic Committee and FIFA?
- Will women be competing alongside men in sports which do not rely on speed and strength alone? [Shooting, archery, gymnastics, etc.]
- Will women and men be paid the same even when they do not compete together? [In some sports, this already happens.]
- Will provision be made for ethnic minorities in schools so that Asian women can pursue ethnic dance and other recreational activities which are culturally important?
- Will the increase in live attendance mean the emergence of female football hooligans?
- Will there be so much affirmative action that we have to consider creating opportunities for men?
- Will girls be allowed to compete with boys in school sports such as football? [There have been recent attempts at this which have met with some resistance because of a reported lack of proper changing facilities for girls - hardly an insurmountable problem.]

Some of these will changes will happen, sooner rather than later, and we may even have synchronised swimming for men at the Olympic Games.

Glossary of Terms

1. INTERNATIONAL CRICKET CONFERENCE

The ICC is the 'second division' of international cricket, comprising those teams who play to a high standard and who are invited to the preliminary, knockout stages of the World Cup, but who are not recognised as 'test' teams. Among the stronger teams in the ICC are Kenya, Bangladesh, Holland, Denmark, Canada, The United Arab Emirates and The United States. Kenya qualified for the last World Cup, along with Holland and the UAE, and caused a sensation when they beat the West Indies in a preliminary group match.

2. THE NINETEENTH HOLE

The traditional name for the pub at the end of the golf course or for the clubhouse bar. There are eighteen holes on a golf course, and it is traditional to go for a drink at the end of the three hours or so that it takes to finish a game. Puns and jokes abound over the nineteenth hole tradition, including 'I only took four shots at the fifteenth hole, but I needed six at the nineteenth'. ['Shots' = measures of alcohol.]

3. THE RATIONAL DRESS LEAGUE

Formed in 1898, the League achieved short-lived notoriety for its efforts to persuade women to adopt rational dress - trousers and slacks - for activities such as golf and cycling. The most commonly-cited reasons for its failure are, firstly, the fact that the clothes were expensive and, secondly, that the movement was of French origin, arousing the antipathies of British middle-class women, many of whom considered their French counterparts flighty and coquettish.

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http://elt.britcoun.org.pl/s_gender.htm