

Anatomy of a Course

Ten Years Teaching "Women and Sport"

BY GREG MALSZECKI

There was good support in the department for a separate course on women; in fact, some colleagues thought the course was years too late.

L'auteur fait un retour sur ses dix années d'enseignement féministe sur les femmes et les sports et examine les antécédents et l'orientation de ses étudiantes en kinésiologie, le matériel enseignant et les stratégies sans oublier les défis quand elle identifie le sport comme lieu d'émancipation des femmes.

"Making every allowance for lack of practice and play traditions, [women] cannot possibly hope to do more than give a feeble imitation of what men will always do infinitely better."

—R. Tait McKenzie, *Exercise in Education and Medicine*, 1917

Who I am and why I teach this course

Fifteen years ago a number of us in my department, The School of Kinesiology and Health Science at York University, became aware of a need to hire a feminist scholar to teach a course on women and sport in the sociocultural area. The limited material in the core course, Sociology of Sport, that was relevant to women's contributions to athletics was clearly insufficient. The late seventies and the eighties had produced a number of significant critiques of the inequities facing women in sport. Canadian sports advocates like Abby Hoffman and Bruce Kidd were inspired by the 1972 Title IX Civil Rights Amendment in the USA, which was designed to equalize funding for schools (including their departments of sports and physical education) that received federal funding. There was good support in the department for a separate course on women; in fact, some colleagues thought the course was years too late. For some time (and up to the present), the department had more female students enrolled than male at the undergraduate level. We needed to better serve their needs.

On December 6, 1989 the Montreal Massacre shocked us all. This tragedy had a strong impact on schools and universities — it was seen as a crime against female students. I remember the disbelief on my students' faces that morning and for days after. Schools wanted to

respond; justice for women, especially in nontraditional academic programs, became an urgent concern. When I put forward a course proposal for "Women and Sport" in 1991, there was still strong feeling that women's rights needed to be addressed in response to the Massacre. This tragedy had a direct impact on my teaching because there was reference in the killer's suicide note to the Olympic Games as a refutation of the claims of feminists. He referred to the Games as proof of male superiority due to "natural" differences between men and women. He had been unable to qualify for admission into the engineering school, hating women who had been accepted, making fourteen his victims.

My department was expanding our graduate program in the science and health areas, therefore could not hire for sociocultural courses at that time. I was teaching social justice issues in sport and recreation as a contract lecturer for the sociology course in those years, and studying feminist theory for my Ph.D coursework at York in Social and Political Thought. My research produced a Ph.D thesis on men, women, war and sport.¹ My years in the seventies studying medieval history at the University of Toronto, M.A. and ABD Ph.D, gave me an excellent background for an understanding of the social construction of gender. I had researched the cultivation of ideals of masculinity as found in the training of young aristocrats. It turns out that chivalry as an expression of virility in knights is the root of much modern sport and its ideology of male supremacy. One of the crucial writers on chivalry was Christine de Pizan whose work inspired me to look closely at the connections between war, virility, chivalry, and women's experiences. Her opposition to misogyny set a very early frame for a critique of essentialism in gender stereotypes; her work is now understood to be a component of the foundation of feminist scholarship.

I have been able to draw on a multi-disciplinary background, and many of my personal experiences for "Women and Sport." In my Berkeley years, 1966-1969, while I pursued a psychology degree, I was also exposed to radicalizing student politics, including the Women's Liberation Movement. When working for my M.A. in English Language and Literature at Wayne State University in downtown Detroit, I taught marginalized students in the English department. At that time, I also worked in the anti-war movement and in male support groups for radical women's organizations. An education in women's

Sport in the Twentieth Century"

sport² also came out of my work as chief consultant for the "Sports science" show at the Ontario Science Centre in 1987-88, particularly research done for an exhibit comparing performances between elite male and female athletes in the same events. Women's performances have been fast converging with the men's at an increasing rate, a fascinating and provocative phenomenon that continues to disturb and excite emotions, and to challenge essentialists. The issue of biological determinism versus the social construction of bodies with respect to performance is studied in "Women and Sport in the Twentieth Century," this year my class has as a major assignment a comparative study on gender using Olympic records for timed and distance events. Many of the gold medal performances by men 30 years ago would not qualify them to compete in many women's events today.

I am glad to tell you "Women and Sport in the Twentieth Century" has been a popular course since its inception in 1992, and a pleasure to teach even with the many challenges for any pro-feminist course in our still so status quo world. It has been cross-listed with the School of Women's Studies. Although never a core course in kinesiology, it is nevertheless positioned well for healthy enrolments as a fourth year course that students could pick up in order to graduate. Most students, however, enroll for the content. There is usually a 40/60 gender split favoring women, but I have had 50/50 and also a 60/40 male majority. This year I have a 75/25 split, 62 women and 21 men in two sections. Kinesiology and for some years both KINE and Atkinson College (running the summer programme) offered the course, usually two sections of 40-60 students each. I estimate that over 900 students have taken the course over the past ten years. I've never seen a greater number of students go through one of my non-core senior level courses.

Course materials

Over the ten years of the course, students have been introduced to excellent scholarship in the field, much of it Canadian-produced. The following are the Canadian books and journals adopted as course texts: Helen Lenskyj, *Out of Bounds: Women, Sport and Sexuality*, 1986; Margrit Eichler, *Non-Sexist Research Methods: A Practical Guide*, 1986; M. Ann Hall, *Feminism and Sporting Bodies*, 1996; Elizabeth Etue and Megan Williams, *On the Edge: Women*

Making Hockey History, 1996; Varda Burstyn, *Rites of Men: Manhood, Politics and the Culture of Sport*, 1999; Jill Le Clair, *Winners and Losers: Sport and Physical Activity in the '90s*, 1992; Nancy Mandell (Ed.), *Feminist Issues: Race, Class and Sexuality*, 2nd edition, 1998; Phil White and Kevin Young (Eds.), *Sport and Gender in Canada*, 1999; Joseph Kuypers, *Man's Will to Hurt: Investigating the Causes, Supports and Varieties of his Violence*, 1992; *Canadian Women Studies Journal: Women and Girls in Sport and Physical Activity*, Volume 15, Number 4, Fall 1995; Laura Robinson, *Black Tights: Women, Sport and Sexuality*, 2002.

My classes over the years have seen a number of Canadian-produced films dramatizing the stories and issues that rarely make the big time. NFB's *Shooting Stars* brought us the Edmonton Grads spectacular reign in basketball, 502 out of 522 games won; *Baseball Girls* (NFB) gives us the full stretch of the history of Canadian women in the game; TVOntario produced *Woman Being*, a feminist critique of stereotypes in sport; TSN made a special in 1992, which included footage from our class, called *You've Come a Long Way Baby*; History Television gave us *The Natural, Bobbie Rosenfeld*; independent film companies made films on women's rugby and women's paralympic swimming; CBC's Fifth Estate has done shows on sexual harassment of female athletes by male coaches and on sexual assault in junior hockey.

Required reading has also included Mary A. Boutilier and Lucinda San Giovanni, *The Sporting Woman*, 1983; bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre*, 1984; Don Sabo and Mike Messner (Eds.), *Sport, Men and the Gender Order: Critical Feminist Perspectives*, 1990; Mariah Burton Nelson, *Are We Winning Yet*, 1991, and *The Stronger Women Get, The More Men Love Football*, 1994; Greta Cohen (Ed.), *Women in Sports: Issues and Controversies*, 1993; Allen Guttmann, *Women's Sports: A History*, 1991; Jennifer Hargreaves, *Sporting Females: Critical Issues in the History and Sociology of Women's Sports*, 1994; Lissa Smith, *Nike is a Goddess: The History of Women in Sport*, 1998; Susan Birrell and Cheryl Cole (Eds.), *Women,*

Women's performances have been fast converging with the men's, a fascinating and provocative phenomenon that continues to challenge essentialists.

Sport and Culture, 1994; Leslie Heywood, *Bodymakers: A Cultural Anatomy of Women's Body Building*, 1998.

American-produced films include *In the Game*, featuring the Stanford Women's Basketball team; *Dare to Compete*, a comprehensive history of women's advances in sport and physical education (includes interviews with Billie Jean King, Martina Navratilova, and footage of Babe Didrickson and Wilma Rudolph, African-American Olympian sprinter, 1960); *Fit: Episodes in the History of the Human Body*, a fascinating overview of the several twentieth century movements in physical culture.

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A consistent response from students over the years to these texts and films has been the surprise registered that women have been such active athletes for generations. Women's sport, especially of the past, has such low visibility that any evidence of widespread participation is a shock, and gives lie to the notion that women's interest in sports is quite recent.

In the classroom

Most students have a strong personal investment in this course given their interest as majors in kinesiology in athletic training and history (I have also had a few students over the years from women's studies, geography, English, history, and other disciplines). A common orientation among students is to test their personal experience against the course. The majority are 21 to 23 years old with a variety of sports background, some of them with a major athletic career already behind them, including Olympian and international competitors. They have "retired" (a few continue to play competitively) due to a major injury, or to their studies and getting on with another phase of life, or to opting out of higher levels of competition. They can look back and think about what happened to them. Men and women tend to come to the course with different perspectives on women's athletics, validating a common perception that the genders live in parallel universes in sport. Male students know less about the history of women than the female students, although knowledge is scant for both. These third and fourth year students have already taken a number of KINE courses — they are good on anatomy, biomechanics, physiology, sport psychology, and fitness and health—but they have not yet had a formal introduction to gender theory. Once they have a few tools to work with, I find that, given their involvement in sport and training, they can quickly recognize the patterns in society that have affected their personal lives. In class discussions it comes up that a large number of the women can identify systemic discrimination in their own

lives, including differential funding, discouragement from participation in certain sports, parental disapproval, and harassment.³ As well, in every class there are usually several women who say they have had good access to their sport, and have had the fortune of escaping overt sexism. I have not noticed change in this pattern over these ten years in that I hear in about the same numbers from those who have had access problems and those who are satisfied they were well-treated, although today's greater numbers of girls in Canada in the non-traditional team sports, such as soccer and hockey, should have an effect on girls' and women's access issues and other experience. The men are generally not aware of their privileges in sport as men, nor of the extent of the injustices towards women. Nevertheless, they are gracious about the idea that men's and women's sport are not yet on a level playing field, usually approaching the problem (in discussion and assignments) as new advocates for women's rights in sport. Complicating this picture is the fact that both sexes are strongly male-identified in sport. They like male sport; the women have often played alongside the men, and many of my male students have coached women's teams. Both genders see women's sport as "naturally" second-class, though both are quick to defend and admire women's sport in all its venues. Women in my class are invariably proud of their athletics; sport also gives them a shared interest with men, and a measure of respect from men in sport.

The men in the course have a number of reactions. Some are positive converts upon discovering how far women have progressed in sport, and how much pressure is exerted on males to discount women as athletes. The majority are interested in social justice. Another group, however, is silent through the course, feeling threatened by what they are hearing and reading, reluctant to abandon their belief that males are better at sport than females, and that male sport is more important (a small minority of women may also support male sport in this way). A very small number of men over the years retrench their belief in the cult of virility. They may be taking the course just for the credit; in any case, these few men come across as quite disparaging of women's sport. At times I have separated discussion groups along gender lines on sensitive topics, usually for the sake of the women, but also to let men find out that consensus on an issue, even on women's sport, is rare. Some of my students tell me they have overheard private misogynist commentary from a few men taking the course, usually in conversation with male friends not taking the course. I estimate having had a large number of men in my classes over the years, over 300. Given their training in decorum as men speaking to male elders, I am "Sir" — they are unfailingly polite and on good terms with me, an accessible male professor, and one with whom they apparently have some comfort level while discussing the demise of male supremacy in a way that acknowledges damage also done to men by our society's dualism. I have mostly been very impressed with

the men taking this pro-feminist course. They look into the mirror of male privilege, which is hard to acknowledge and hard to give up. They also sometimes form strong bonds as allies with the women in the course. The women students in the class are shocked and dismayed at how long the struggle for female emancipation has been, and that there is still so far to go. They typically do not have a problem with the idea of being physically strong, with getting dirty, or winning, even against men. They tend to leave the course with a determination to make changes in the workplace, which for kinesiology students is education, the fitness industry, medicine and health, sports associations, or recreation.

From the beginning, I knew this course needed women talking to women; my female students have responded especially well to the five to six guest speakers each year who bring women's experience in sport into the course. I have been fortunate to have had numerous speakers over the years from F.A.M.E. (Female Athletes Motivating Excellence), as well as others. These women, athletes, coaches, sports administrators, and educators, have provided a first-hand account of the world of contemporary sport that certainly augmented my commentary and their readings. These experts, always inspiring individuals, have helped the women in the course connect with their own experience and career choices. It is interesting to me that between a good many of my guests and my students, either sex, this class has not been the place one often hears the word "feminist," (except from me and authors of their required reading), despite the fact feminist causes and critiques are usually being affirmed. Many of my guests (not all!) and most students come across as gradualists, people who are seeking change, but who are reasonably comfortable and male-positive with the world of sport. In my experience, athletes tend to be praxis-oriented people who usually see challenges, not barriers. This belief in the possibility of personal agency stems from their success in physical training in athletics. Believing in action on a scale that they personally can do something about, they are ready to do their part in improving women's sports as a part of the greater sports (male) world. Having only experienced women's sport as defined by male standards, typically they are not revolutionaries, but rather they see themselves as reformers.

Teaching strategies

I teach a student-centred course in which most of the assignments are primary research studies. In this way, students learn for themselves, drawing from their findings their own conclusions, rather than primarily adopting critique from teacher and texts. A good first assignment is to have the students find and read the sports section published in a daily newspaper of their choice the day they were born, and to compare it with the coverage on their birthday last year, noting the amount and quality of

coverage there is on women's sport. In some years I have asked them to contrast this with the coverage of female athletics on the birth date of one of their parents and also a grandparent. This is a quick introduction to the history of women and sport in the twentieth century. A second, more extensive, comparative gender media analysis early on in the course requires a close examination of sports coverage in a current daily newspaper, to be compared with television reporting on the same days. In charting the results, students do discover just how small a percentage of the sports section goes to women's sport. Pro male sports news has consistently crowded out other sports, including women's, all of these last ten years, usually with a range of zero per cent to six per cent for women's sport each day (excepting Olympic coverage). The degree of capitalism and hegemony of male sport is well understood by students coming out of this assignment. Media analysis can unveil the daily saturation of male activity, which helps to secure a condition of male supremacy in society. Most of our knowledge of sport is mediated; mass media heroizes men's sport, while it diminishes and discounts women's sport. Men are seen as having ownership of sport; women still occupy the sidelines.

The media assignment works well to engage the students in the reality of relative visibility of male and female sport, especially as most have the idea that a lot of progress has been made in their generation. A third assignment is to interview a female athlete over the age of 40 who has competed at the national or international level. The personal contact and exchange has a tremendous impact on the students. A common thread from the interviewees is the acknowledgment of restrictions in their day, especially around less funding, less access, shortened careers, and overt prejudice. However, they are eager to share their identity as competitors in their sport, that they have few regrets, and have enjoyed their sports careers despite restrictions. As their teacher, I have noticed in these write-ups the surprise and admiration from the students, that these "older" women could have had such an intensive and important engagement with sport. In most years the students are also assigned a research paper or synthesis project aimed at summarizing the course content. This year a new primary research assignment was introduced, a comparative gender study of the Olympic history and records of timed distance events such as the 100 metre sprint.

Course theory

The convergence of performances in elite sport is of

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interest to both biological determinists and social constructionists. Women's studies, kinesiology, and cultural studies are three disciplines that would do well to engage much more analysis of the multi-factorial elements of women's significant physical and performance improvements over the past century. My class studies the norms of gender performance with reference to positions taken by biological essentialists, particularly studies claiming hormone-controlled men. Do high levels of testosterone produce aggressive men? There is quite a lot of science focused on investigating biological difference at the root of female and male behaviour and power. What of the diversity within both genders? Are some men closer in body and personality to certain women than to other men? Are the categories of male and female overused to explain behaviour? Studies show, for example, that aggression can be socialized into male and female.⁴ Roughly-played sport is a typical training ground for aggressive behaviour for boys. I teach theories on the gender education of children, which include ideas about the social construction of bodies and behaviour into masculine and feminine categories. Boys, for example, are pushed to fully inhabit the body, while girls are pulled back from their bodies, having to act with more restraint. By adolescence, girls' bodies are not as active, and, in this time of first sexual self-consciousness, are also constrained under male gaze. Teenage boys expect to be powerful and strong, while teenage girls are caught up in commodified fashion that accentuates a sexual, passive body. There are today greater numbers of active girls playing soccer, hockey, rugby; however, there are still far more boys engaged in athletic play than girls.

This course explores hegemonic theory, the ideology of male supremacy, and the range of feminist theoretical perspectives through the readings. We study the historic struggle of emancipation for women in sport, and its intersections of gender with race, sexuality, ethnicity, class, and ability. Women students of colour and of minority ethnic groups have a special knowledge, bought dearly. They are acutely aware of second class status. We also discuss the dominance of heterosexism, and the uses of homophobia in sport and physical education to support gender stereotypes and to suppress minority sexualities. I teach a section on male privilege in sport, and the advantages gained thereby in wider society. Students learn to critique the systemic transition of the patriarchy from generation to generation — the business of turning boys into men.

The price of ignoring male sport dominance

By examining the marginalization of women in sport, the class debates the evidence on the reinforcement of patriarchal relations through physical performance in sport contests. We consider how men have the power to exclude women as a gender from a deep involvement in sport, power that in turn has a spread effect to society's other institutions — the family, the corporation, schools, poli-

tics, etc. The gender order of male supremacy depends upon the widespread belief that men are different, stronger, and better than women, thus deserving of respect, fear, obedience, and privilege. Because sport is so much identified with men, their claim to it justifies all kind of expenditures and priorities. In tracing the funding allocations for sport across the board, immense amounts of taxes from men and women end up financing male sport.⁵ There are injuries done in a society that expands one area, such as sport, at the expense of so many other areas, housing, community recreation programs, healthcare, the arts, etc. We can total the costs and effects of the attention, the arenas and stadiums, the scholarships and funding, the immense resources and space for male players and their market. For women, the much smaller spaces occupied in the pursuit of their sport are hard to earn, precious, sometimes dangerous, though often gender-positive, and places where so much has been achieved with so little.

All of the students see for themselves in this course some part of the picture of the struggle in women's sports. Much of the discussion through the term is provocative. Students tell me that they engage their ideas and information with people in their private lives. They become far less tolerant of sexism in their lives, in their family, work, relationships, and in the media and entertainment they take in. Finishing their undergraduate years while in the course, they are face to face with the next stage in their lives, which takes them into the world where they find many opinions and lots of misinformation (plus unthinking misogyny) about this subject. They have had a vision of female empowerment through the body, and through the cultural practice of sport, given to them by their interviewees, by the life stories of the great sportswomen of the twentieth century, by the testimonials of the women visitors to the class, and by stories of fellow students, and their own stories. They begin to realize that they are agents of history, not just spectators of it, or students of it. Their beloved sport is seen as a powerful institution that has the potential to truly democratize men's and women's world, an arena to challenge and diminish patriarchy.

Conclusion

My students arrive at an interesting point in the analysis of the positioning of women's physical performance in society. Observations of male reactions to losing privilege this past century suggest that the patriarchy will be actively fortified by many in society by any means possible, particularly with the use of sport. Male sport is a vital expression of male supremacy; as such, it can only function when women are categorized, as an entire group, as having far less physical power and far less importance in their physical culture. One of the key domains of difference society gives men is their physical size, power, and aggression, which is seen as evidence of gender superiority; without this distinction, and society having already dis-

proved the idea of male superiority in intelligence and moral capacities, we would collectively have to concede an end to the historical emphasis on male and female categories. Women would still give birth, but both men and women would be seen as full participants in any sphere of life an individual wishes to join.

My students consider the idea that sport in the modern era has been a key site of resistance to full female emancipation. In the last ten years, I have observed many students come to their own conclusion through their assignments and readings that sport supports male dominance, and that this is an unfair situation, and that girls and women should be able to do anything they want in sport in any place that they choose if they are capable of the level of play. This generation of students, both male and female, seems willing to concede that we do not yet know the level of ability of women because we are still to arrive at equity. Mary Wollestonecraft figured this out in 1792:

Let us then, by being allowed to take the same exercise as boys, not only during infancy, but youth, arrive at perfection of body, that we may know how far the superiority of man extends.

—*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*

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¹The title of my Ph.D dissertation is "He Shoots! He Scores! Metaphors or War in Sport and the Political Linguistics of Virility" (1995), York University. I received the inaugural Mary McEwen award from Women's Studies for the best feminist Ph.D thesis that year.

²My education in women's sports began in my family of four sisters and three brothers, all of whom were excellent athletes. My older sister was a champion golf player, tennis player, skier, and sports car racer. Three other sisters were also active, and to some degree still are, in car racing, deep sea diving, golf, tennis, skiing, wilderness hiking, and riding. Two years after I introduced the course, my oldest sister (and first hero) died from an assault at 53 years old. She was still an active, vibrant woman, who defied the restrictions in her life as a girl and woman, and mostly succeeded. She has been one of my inspirations for this course.

³In their article on a study of 23 years of intercollegiate sport in the U.S., R. Vivian Acosta and Linda Jean Carpenter show that the increases for sport participation for women under Title IX have been accompanied by a marked decrease in the numbers of women in coaching and administration. For example, of the 534 new head coaching jobs of women's NCAA teams from 1998-2000,

women have been hired for only 107.

⁴The late Michael Smith is an early researcher on theory around training in both boys and girls for violence and aggression in sport.

⁵Laura Robinson cites in *BlackTights: Women, Sport and Sexuality* a 1994 sex-discrimination case in Coquitlam, BC, ice-time for boys was subsidized 50 per cent by the municipality, while girls' gymnastics received no such funding. In one arena 207 hours of hockey ice-time was available, with 200 going to the boys.

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REBECCA LUCE-KAPLER

This is Not Housework

—for Jodi

time shimmers in a spinning top
a long Venetian afternoon
sun slanting through blinds
rooms vaguely warm
kitchen bleeding Magritte
into halls

celery grows in her hands
mocking the garlic hung
in the window longing
to be mashed slipped
into soup to caress her lips
stove sighing for her return

storylines inside cupboards
trails ellipses onto linoleum
their open-mouthed cries
reminding the refrigerator
of tales in her footprints

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