

Book Reviews

WOMEN, MEDIA AND SPORT: CHALLENGING GENDER VALUES

Pamela J. Creedon, ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1994.

by Margaret MacNeill

This collection is the first book to forge a bridge between sport studies, media theory and women's studies. Editor Pamela Creedon sets out to accomplish two goals: to extend sport studies by demonstrating how sport operates as metaphor for gender values, and to examine the role of the media in framing these values. Creedon acknowledges the disagreement between feminist scholars about the nature of the media's oppression of women and about whether the media need to be reformed or transformed.

Part I examines the "mediated" contexts of gender values in sport. Creedon's opening chapter argues the media create and reflect gender values in society. Super Bowl coverage is one illustration of how football is embedded with values that sanction aggression and reproduce masculine privilege by assuming women to be "less qualified, powerful or physical than men." The chapter traces the historical development of media effects research from (1) the "all-powerful effects" tradition of the 1930s assuming audiences passively received messages, to (2) the 1940s emergence of a "limited effects" tradition to (3) the "powerful but contingent" approach claiming audiences have particular "uses and gratifications" which are limited by media gatekeepers, to (4) the "powerful, contingent and contextual effects" approach. This overview offers an interesting survey of

communication perspectives; however, three problems are evident. First, feminist and cultural studies (the fourth approach) emerged in response to, rather than as a development of, effects research. The other two shortcomings are the curious absence of methodological discussion and of feminist advocacy.

M.J. Kane and Susan Greendorfer analyze the active role of the media in constructing stereotyped images of female athletes in chapter 2. They argue that socially constructed gender differences are translated into gender hierarchy by the media. For example, Chris Evert's tennis career was diminished by a Sports Illustrated headline, "I'm going to be a full time wife". This hierarchy, they suggest, is bolstered by trivializing females in sexualized caricatures and by the "symbolic annihilation" of female athletes from the sportspages.

Chapters 3 to 5 reclaim the herstory of female athletes and journalists in the United States. Linda Williams analyzes the status of Afro-America females in the Negro Press of the 1920s to 1940s and concludes that the disregard of these women by the white press constituted a "paradox of visibility" for black women because they were recognized and celebrated within their own press. Williams is correct in predicting that increasing the visibility of athletes of colour in the media will not rectify marginalization if the representation is framed in a racist manner. In chapters 4 and 5, Creedon goes on to claim that "contributory" (descriptive) history uses a "penile yardstick" to judge pioneering contributions. Moreover, she warns that female media workers of the past and present do not necessarily challenge the media system or present sport differently. Sportsradio host Nanci Donnellan, "The Fantastic Sports Babe," is a poignant example of this. This section

serves as a reminder to Canadian scholars that the history of female athletic heroes and journalists, such as Globe and Mail columnist/athlete Fanny Rosenfeld, await recovery.

Interviews with female sports media are presented in chapter 6 by Judith Cramer. This window into media labour reveals the pressures of traditional sport media agendas, the challenges of living "vagabond" lifestyles, and how reporters deal with sexual harassment. Cramer, along with Pamela Creedon and Elizabeth Granz, address the political economy of promotional sports "hype" in chapter 7 and how females struggle between the "empowerment" of making a living and "pandering" to sexist promotions.

Part II examines the cultural contexts for gender values. Susan Birrell and Cheryl Cole employ post-modern theories of the body in chapter 8 to analyze media reconstructions of tennis player Renee Richards after s/he had a sex change. They offer valuable insights about how the athletic body is immersed in a political field and how the sportmedia reproduce a "logic of differentiation" between males and females. Chapter 9 by Karlene Ferrante suggests that baseball films are central sites for the "renewal of a masculine ideology of individual competition." Sports spectating by women and the limitations of the notion of leisure time are examined in Chapter 10 by Anne Cooper-Chen. Unfortunately, because ethnographic audience research is not pursued in this section, the cultural contexts of gender values are not actually presented.

Part III attempts to present a new model for sport. Chapters 11 by Creedon and 12 by Molly Merryman trace the strong woman archetype of Artemis in film. Creedon argues that "re-visioning the archetype could

cause a rupture in cultural values" that currently assume females to be inferior.

Finally, Chapter 13 is disappointing because it neither focuses on the media, nor serves as a springboard for future research. P.S. Highlen's analysis of the "co-essence" model offers an athlete-centred challenge to mainstream sport; however, this model appears to be steeped in an essentialist position that assumes a co-essence (a transcendental soul) can be achieved. This contradicts the book's focus on how sport and media images are socially constructed expressions of gender values. Granted, sporting activities serve as the raw material for media, and therefore suggestions about how to change sport are warranted, but the collection ends without a comprehensive evaluation of media research presented in the text.

Overall, the book is written in an accessible manner and it provides feminist and media communities with a valuable resource to open up a hybrid field of feminist sportmedia studies.

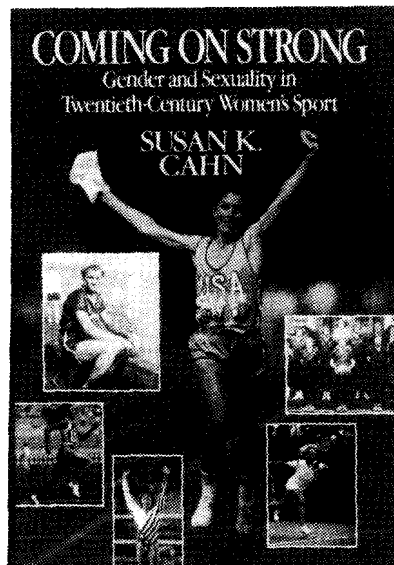
COMING ON STRONG: GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY WOMEN'S SPORT

Susan K. Cahn. New York: The Free Press, 1994.

by *Christina Batty*

Many women participating in sport today are unaware that their presence in the sporting arena has been granted to them, not because it is their right to participate, but because women athletes of previous decades have

struggled long and hard against the exclusion of women from sport. Many have not considered or challenged the ideology that sport is a male domain. In *Coming on Strong: Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Women's Sport*, Susan Cahn studies how gender and sexuality have been culturally constructed through the twentieth century in the United States and how these issues have been used to prevent women's inclusion in sport. Her study



is carried out by examining how educators, athletes, officials, promoters and journalists have influenced and affected women's development in sport.

Her study illustrates that cultural definitions of masculinity and femininity have been reinforced through sport. Women's participation in sporting activities challenged the existing social order of men and women. Throughout the century various theories were developed by the medical establishment and educational institutions—ranging from the vitalist theory to the idea that sport promoted lesbianism—to prevent women from becoming too involved. Certain sports became "feminized" and athletic events were turned into beauty contests to detract from the competitive nature of the event. The female athlete, unlike the male athlete, was judged on her appearance and not her skill. It was believed that competitive sport created hysteria in women, therefore par-

ticipation was only acceptable when it was done at a moderate level to promote beauty, health and an improved ability to be a good wife and mother.

Cahn's study also examines how male coaches and promoters as well as the media appropriated women's sport in an attempt to control it and perpetuate ideas about women's inferior ability and strength. Coaches and officials altered rules and created a woman's version of games such as basketball and baseball. Boundary lines were shortened and playing time was reduced to create a game which took up less time and space. Promoters appropriated sport in an effort to make money and maintain the femininity of the female sporting population. Cahn shows how the media played a very important role in distinguishing between the acceptable and the unacceptable female athlete. Rarely was her acceptance dependent on her skill but rather her ability to remain feminine and graceful. Because athletic involvement represented masculine power, it therefore also represented failed femininity, but to the women athlete it provided an opportunity to combine traditional "masculine" qualities of strength with conventional "feminine" attributes of nurturance.

The way in which gender, class and race were connected to define what activities were acceptable for women is also examined. Upper class women often remained outside the stream of criticism and were permitted to enjoy activities such as equestrian riding, golf and tennis. Lower and working class athletes participated primarily in baseball and basketball and faced a constant barrage of criticism for their "mannish" demeanor. African American athletes faced a deeply entrenched racial bias as well as the gender bias. Their success in track and field was often dismissed due to the belief that they possessed a "natural" masculine ability.

The assumption that "mannish" athleticism was connected to lesbianism created a homosexual stigma