

that surrounded women's sport. Lesbian athletes were forced to cope with some of the cruelest criticism. Critics of women participating in sport asserted that sport induced "mannish" behavior which "disqualified the female athlete as a candidate for heterosexual romance." But while lesbians in sport faced criticism from the outside world they also found a safe place where they were accepted within the women's sporting community. Cahn claims that lesbian athletes used the space provided in sport to create a "shared culture and affirmative identity."

Coming on Strong: Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Women's Sport is not a comprehensive study of women's athletics. It disappointingly focuses on specific sports only; however it does successfully show the connection between ideas regarding women's sexuality and their subsequent exclusion from sport.

Throughout the century women in sport have been excluded from the athletic community and have often been marginalized within the feminist community. This book helps to reinforce that sport has the ability to help equalize relations between the sexes and that the sociological study of women in sport provides an important contribution to the full understanding of women's oppression in the twentieth century.

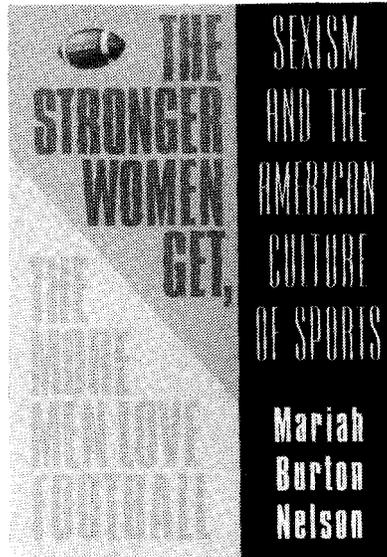
THE STRONGER WOMEN GET, THE MORE MEN LOVE FOOTBALL

Mariah Burton Nelson. New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1994.

by Helen Jefferson Lenskyj

The provocative title of this hard-hitting book is in fact its central thesis. Mariah Burton Nelson proposes that football represents, for the majority of American men, a last bastion

of patriarchy in a fast changing world. Men on the football field—already bigger than most men, and bigger than real life when they are suited up for The Game—symbolize what it means to be a real man in a society where most other definitions of maleness are facing an onslaught of challenges from women in general, and feminists in particular. In Nelson's own experience, when all else fails, men who resent her feminist views—



other sports journalists or simply the "man in the street"—comfort themselves with the statement that "women will never play in the NFL." Somehow, the fact that there is still one remaining tree house sporting the sign "No girls allowed" bolsters fragile masculine identities.

Nelson's book could be subtitled "The Slime That Men Do." After setting the stage by reviewing historical and contemporary trends in American sport, particularly on college campuses, Nelson focuses on three key male violence issues: sexual assault committed by male athletes, harassment and molestation of girls and women by their male coaches (including her own adolescent experience of this kind of abuse), and harassment of female sportswriters by male athletes. In all three areas there is virtually an epidemic of male violence, largely unchecked by the usual harassment policies, professional codes of behaviour, and em-

ployment laws that provide some measure of control in other social contexts. The book represents a first in terms of putting all this information together and therefore its impact is extremely powerful.

In the discussion of sexual assault, Nelson focuses on the gang rape of a female student by three members of a college basketball team—an all too common occurrence on American university campuses. Female readers probably do not need to know the graphic and horrendous details of this and other gang rapes committed by student athletes—a well-known example being the Glen Ridge case where a retarded girl was raped by four high school football players. However, since the book is intended for a very broad audience—and would obviously do the most good if it were required reading for all those men "who love football"—the graphic and brutal details of the gang rapes are probably necessary. Equally important, Nelson cites a variety of research studies showing that college athletes are over-represented as perpetrators of sexual assault, with fraternities and sports teams representing the most likely groups of men on campus to commit gang rapes. It appears that celebrations of masculinity and male bonding are facilitated by the creation of negative reference groups, with women and gay men serving as the key "others" for male athletes.

As an outspoken critic of mainstream sport—the author of two books and numerous articles on the subject—Nelson has been subjected to the predictable barrage of epithets, including manhating and lesbianism. In all her writing, she has directly confronted the problems of homophobia and lesbophobia in sport, providing cogent analyses of the ways in which sport serves to create a certain kind of approved heterosexual femininity that serves to perpetuate existing gender relations. She is equally strong on the issue of homophobia and the fairly obvious homoerotic subtexts in men's traditional contact sports, balanced by the unequivocally sexist and heterosexist

agenda of objectifying and brutalizing women, either symbolically, through the language of the game, or literally, through gang rapes.

Although Nelson has a tendency to universalize the categories of "men" and "women," she does attempt to address the ways in which race differences and racism play themselves out in the sport context. This is a key consideration in reference to campus gang rapes, where Black men are overrepresented in many team sports, in the ranks of male athletes who are convicted of sexual assault, and, indeed, in the American prison population. The fact that race was a variable in the Mike Tyson case and others cited by Nelson also needs to be considered.

In other respects, too, Nelson's category of "men" is somewhat problematic. The book focuses almost exclusively on men in American sport, which has been shaped by specific historical and cultural forces not necessarily shared by Canada or other western sport contexts. It would therefore be useful to develop some possible explanations for the "resisters"—those male athletes who do not objectify or assault girls and women. Why and how are they able to resist socialization into the misogynist and homophobic value systems and practices of sport?

Nelson is convinced that all women have the potential to grow physically and psychologically through physical activity—that sporting participation is the gateway to women's empowerment. While I generally agree with this premise, I'm not so sure about her statement that women "tend to acquire strength fairly easily." Initially quoting a middle-aged woman's newfound sense of her physical power, Nelson makes this claim in several places throughout the book, using "strength" both literally and figuratively. I suspect that having a physically active girlhood makes a significant difference to the ease with which an older woman can start or resume physical activity, confident in the knowledge that training will bring about certain bodily

changes—enhanced cardiovascular capacity, muscular strength, flexibility, motor skills, etc. Many women, lacking these experiences in their youth, are, in effect, physically illiterate, and need to acquire and integrate some very fundamental physical skills before they can acquire strength. For many women, fear, self-doubt, embarrassment, and alienation from their bodies stand in the way of acquiring strength. The body represents different issues for survivors of child abuse, for women with eating disorders, for fat women, for women with disabilities, and so on.

This leads me to my final concern. Just as I have a few (small) doubts about the route to women's universal empowerment through sport, I also find the thesis about men, masculinity, violence and football (or hockey, or whatever) provocative but not totally convincing. I realize that football can usefully serve as a metaphor for a broader misogynist tradition, but I can't help thinking that gender relations in sport and elsewhere are more complex than the analogy suggests. If the issue is so simple—men's search for one of the few remaining outlets through which to celebrate misogyny and male brute force—why is the solution so elusive? For example, at the University of Toronto two years ago, the prospect of major budget cuts led the Department of Athletics and Recreation to recommend discontinuing a number of athletics programs, including football, which, as usual, commanded the lion's share of the budget. Needless to say, (male) support for football was vociferous. Wealthy male alumni formed a group known as Friends of Football (that is, Friends of Male Football) to raise the funds to reinstate the football tradition, while at the same time they threatened to withhold large donations that had already been promised to the university.

As a result of the subsequent Task Force on Gender Equity, an agreement was reached with Friends of (Men's) Football to develop a self-supporting football program by 1998. The Task Force Report (April, 1994)

expressed concerns about an outside (men's) group's capacity to "circumvent" the university's equity priorities but concluded, rather lamely, that donors had the right to choose which program they wished to fund, and that "we can only encourage more alumni and alumnae to contribute to women's sport and recreation." These events certainly support Nelson's claims for the symbolic importance of football, even for a group of well-educated, wealthy white businessmen who presumably have plenty of other avenues for accruing status and prestige. Yet, even if football had been discontinued at the University of Toronto, the values represented by its 113 year history and tradition would probably have surfaced somewhere else, perhaps in the Engineering School. This is clearly a long struggle, and Nelson's courageous book helps us to move closer to its resolution.

SHOOTING STARS

Directed by Allen Stein. National Film Board.

by Ann Peel

"Ladies first, athletes second," is what Percy Page, coach of the Edmonton Commercial Graduates Basketball Club expected of his players. Maybe that wasn't such a bad idea.

With pro basketball now in the forefront, the creed seems to be "attitude first, athletes second." Money first. Sport second.

Shooting Stars is the story of the Edmonton Grads who always put sport first. The Grads was a women's basketball club based in Edmonton which dominated the game from 1915 to 1940. The team, we are told, played 522 games. They won 502, including sixteen world championships.

Their entertainment value rested in the beauty and finesse of their