



*High Jumper, Ethel Catherwood*

*Photo: Canada's Sports Hall of Fame*

# What's Sport Got To Do With It?

by Helen Jefferson Lenskyj

*La faible participation des femmes aux activités physiques a de sérieuses répercussions sur notre santé, notre bien-être, notre image de soi, notre respect de soi et ultimement sur notre pouvoir personnel et collectif. Cet article examine les raisons*

---

*The experience of physical competence that results from a physically active, well-toned body significantly enhances our self-esteem and positive body image.*

---

*de ces habitudes et propose quelques stratégies de changement.*

When I mention my research on women's recreation and leisure to feminist colleagues, I am often dismissed with the scornful comment, "What leisure?"

A recent survey conducted by the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport showed that only four Canadian universities offer a separate course on women in sport and physical activity in their physical education programs.

Based on membership in the Canadian Woman's Studies Association and the North American Association for the Sociology of Sport, an informal count reveals that only about ten per cent of women's studies programs in Canadian universities have a full-time faculty member whose major research interest is sport and physical activity.

These are some examples of the marginalization of women's sport and the problem of sport-phobia among women, even those who identify as feminists. Feminists' relative lack of interest in sport and physical activity as political issues results in the perpetuation of sport systems that are controlled by men and promote traditional male values. Feminist activists working in the chilly climate of malestream sport need active support from feminists outside sport, while feminists outside sport need to understand the important links between sport and the broader equity issues facing women in society. Equally important, feminists concerned with issues of women's physical and mental health need to recognize that women's generally low participation in regular physical activity has negative

implications for our overall health and well-being, for our body image and self esteem, and ultimately for our individual and collective empowerment.

In this discussion, the term "sport and physical activity" will be used to signify a broad range of activities, organized or informal, competitive or recreational, individual, group or team.

## What lessons are women taught about our bodies?

Despite the gains of the contemporary women's movements, girls and women continue to be socialized in ways that promote body-hating attitudes. In a culturally diverse society such as Canada, it is difficult to generalize about patterns of female socialization, but it is fair to say that by puberty most girls have learned that others evaluate them first and foremost in terms of their physicality and sexuality. A girl's personality, intellect or achievement counts for little if she does not satisfy basic standards of heterosexual attractiveness, which always include the thinness requirement.

One of the major outcomes of societal pressure to achieve a particular, socially approved body is women's problematic relationship with food, manifested in the increasing incidence of eating disorders among girls and women. When this problem first became a focus of study in the 1970s, it was occurring primarily among females of Anglo-Saxon origin, but, more recently, young women from other cultural backgrounds are showing symptoms of anorexia and bulimia.

Unease with the physical body also has implications for female involvement in sport and physical activity. From a young age, girls are taught that certain parts of their bodies must be hidden from sight. Around puberty, self-consciousness about physical and physiological changes leads many girls to avoid any sport or activity that exposes their bodies to peer scrutiny. The vast majority of girls and young women do not have "the perfect body" as measured by mainstream fashion standards—a standard that fails to take body type or ethnic origin into account. In the face of the demoralizing media messages about our alleged bodily deficiencies, it is all the more important for girls and women to have the opportunity to engage in self-enhancing physical activities. The experience of physical competence that results from a physically active, well-toned body significantly enhances our self-esteem and positive body image. Furthermore, the maintenance of stable body weight through regular exercise is a healthy alternative to dieting.

Many girls and women have not had the opportunity to develop the motor skills necessary to participate in,

and enjoy, sports and physical activities. They have not learned to perform basic bodily movements confidently, and many have not had the chance to develop skills such as throwing, catching, and hitting, either because of ineffective physical education programs, lack of parental encouragement, or cultural or societal prohibitions against strenuous physical activity. In a country that prides itself on educating the minds of young people, this "physical illiteracy" among girls and women warrants serious attention.

### **How is sport important for girls' and women's health and well-being?**

Regular physical activity has significant health benefits for both women and men, as well as some gender-specific outcomes. Exercise is important for both sexes for the prevention of coronary heart disease and high blood pressure, the maintenance of healthy body weight and composition, and improved fat and carbohydrate metabolism. Regular aerobic exercise has also been shown to alleviate anxiety and depression, and to increase self esteem and positive body image (Lenskyj 1991).

For women, research has shown that regular exercise has significant effects in relieving premenstrual and menopausal symptoms. Physiological symptoms, such as bloating or hot flashes, and psychological symptoms

such as mood swings or depression, respond to exercise (Lenskyj 1991).

Osteoporosis is a serious health concern for women, and is especially prevalent among women of Northern European origin who are menopausal or postmenopausal. There is research evidence showing that exercise, in conjunction with dietary calcium, is effective in the prevention and treatment of osteoporosis, by contributing to the building of maximum bone mass before age 35 and to its maintenance during the rest of the life cycle (Lenskyj 1991).

In addition to the health benefits, many girls and women miss out on the opportunity for empowerment that physical activity offers: the feeling of being at ease with one's body, confident in one's physical abilities and able to view one's body as an asset rather than a liability. For larger women, apart from the possibility of weight control through exercise which may be a choice for some women, there is the potential for enhanced body image and body acceptance, achieved through activities such as walking, swimming or aquatic fitness classes, or through special movement classes designed by and for larger women.

### **What are implications for women's self-defense?**

Many women are so alienated from their bodies because of traditional female socialization that they cannot take even the preliminary steps needed to defend themselves against physical or sexual assault. This statement should not be interpreted as victim-blaming. In an ideal world, women would not live under the threat of male violence and would not need to be able to defend themselves, but the threat of attack is a reality in women's everyday lives, and the capacity to defend oneself or to escape from an attacker may be a matter of life and death.

Research has shown that significant numbers of men would commit sexual assault if they believed they would not get caught (Ariere *et al.*). Hence, rapists may target women whom they consider unlikely to resist or escape. Regardless of size, women can convey by their movements, posture, and other kinds of body language that they are not as helpless as potential attackers might assume, and women's capacity to show this kind of confidence is enhanced by prior experience in sport and physical activity. Even the experience of completing a single self-defence course has enabled women to avoid rape.

Pauline Bart's research has shown when a woman is attacked, her chances of avoiding rape are higher if she resists in some way, and women with some prior experience in the rough and tumble of sports and games are often more capable of resisting or escaping from an attacker (Bart and O'Brien). Women's self-defence instructors typically advise women first to attempt to escape from potentially dangerous situations. Again, women with poor cardiovascular capacity as a result of inactivity are less likely to be able to run away.



Dita Shehu

## Why is self-care an issue for women

Regular physical activity for physical and mental health falls into the category of "self-care"—a problematic one for many women, and for many feminists. Research has shown that for many women, the socialized expectation to put others' needs before their own overrides their sense of entitlement to leisure (Henderson and Bialeschki). Self-sacrifice combined with low self-esteem may lead women to believe that their personal needs for recreation are not worth considering, or that self-care is only important insofar as it enhances the happiness of their children

---

*For women whose workdays include paid employment, childcare and domestic work, part-time study and volunteer work as a feminist activist, the idea of entitlement to leisure may seem laughable.*

---

or male partners. Media messages limit the notion of self-care to weight loss activities, and trips to beauty salons and fashion departments. On a broader scale, low self-esteem among women is hardly surprising in a society characterized by systemic sex discrimination in schools, workplaces, and communities, and the objectification of women's bodies in the entertainment, fashion, and pornography industries. And for women facing double or triple discrimination because of their race and/or social class positions, the barriers to self-care and leisure are multiplied.

Many working class women experience significant economic barriers to regular physical recreation. They may not be able to afford the costs of classes, facilities, equipment, clothing, public transport and child care. And, because of the real threat of sexual assault in urban neighbourhoods, women who do not have a car may avoid going out alone at night, and therefore have difficulty accessing community recreation programs. Even a simple and cheap outdoor activity such as walking or jogging raises safety issues for many women. For minority women, there is the additional threat of racist harassment or assault. Different cultural expectations about gender-appropriate behaviour also serve to constrain some women's leisure activities, and community recreation programs are finally addressing these issues through women-only classes and facility times, or classes geared specifically for women of a particular ethnic minority.

Women's double or triple workdays constitutes one of the primary barriers to taking up a sport or physical activity as a leisure pursuit. For example, for women whose workdays include paid employment, childcare and domestic work, part-time study and volunteer work as a feminist activist, the idea of entitlement to leisure may seem laughable.

## Why is sport a feminist issue?

Women's efforts to get fair treatment in sport deserve the support of all feminists. Sex discrimination in sport, or any other domain, is a basic human rights issue. Some commentators suggest that many feminists view sport as so contaminated by masculinist values such as aggression and violence that it is beyond redemption and therefore not worthy of serious attention. During the last three decades of contemporary feminist movements, there have been a number of human rights issues around which feminists have mobilized, even though the outcome—for example, women's access to combat positions in the armed forces—is not necessarily one which warms the hearts of all feminists. It is important to recognize that the women who look for support in these kinds of struggles do not necessarily hold a feminist perspective, nor should feminists expect them to do so. Equal access to the same or equivalent sporting opportunities that are offered to boys and men is a central goal of many sport advocates; they do not necessarily want to change the sporting practices to make them more compatible with feminist principles. This does not mean that they have "sold out"; in fact, these women often pride themselves on a playing style that is distinct and different from men's.

Although the view of sport as a male-dominated activity may hold a grain of truth, it is important to understand that the history of women's sport and physical activity in North America is not linear, and not simply a mirror image of men's sport. The 1920s and 1930s have been termed the "Golden Age" for women's sport because of the dramatic increases in sporting opportunities, participation, public and media interest (Hall and Richardson). During this time, some women in sport leadership were working towards equal access to high level sporting competition, while others were focusing on mass participation for girls and women of all ability levels. Just as contemporary feminist organizing around the abortion issue stresses the importance of reproductive choice, women's advocacy initiatives in sport throughout the century have often been multi-faceted, with the goal of developing a system that offers girls and women choices rather than catering only to the gifted sportswoman or only to the recreational athlete.

There have been some periods during the last century when control of girls' and women's sport and physical activity has been in women's hands (Lenskyj 1986). In these times of relative autonomy, some women successfully challenged masculinist values such as the "win at all costs" mentality, and stressed instead that it was important for all girls and women to participate in sport and physical activity for its intrinsic benefits, such as fun and fitness, and that achievement of personal goals was more important than beating one's opponent.

This is not to suggest that every female coach or physical educator, simply by virtue of her gender, necessarily challenged the traditional male sport orientation. However, there is strong research evidence to suggest that there

are gender-related values in sport, just as there are gender-related approaches to moral issues and to ways of viewing oneself in relation to others (Lenskyj 1994). Women value the social side of sporting participation—the fun, friendship, and connection more than men, who tend to rank beating their opponent and improving their performance as their top priorities.

These woman-centred voices have been increasingly silenced in women's competitive sport in the last decade—an unanticipated outcome of equality legislation. In the United States, for example, 1970s legislation prohibited sex discrimination in state-funded educational insti-

---

*Women value the social side of sporting participation—the fun, friendship, and connection more than men, who tend to rank beating their opponent and improving their performance as their top priorities.*

---

tutions, with the result that lucrative coaching and administrative positions in women's intercollegiate sport opened up. The old boys' network operated to ensure that the majority of these positions were filled by men, and the numbers and percentages of female coaches dropped dramatically during the 1980s (Hasbrook). In Canada, too, the expansion of female sport has not seen corresponding increases in women coaches and administrators, despite the efforts of Sport Canada's affirmative action internship program, Women in Sport and Fitness Leadership, and other federal, provincial and community initiatives.

One of the results of the drop in women coaches is that female athletes' values are becoming more like those of their male coaches. One of the result of the drop in women coaches is that female athletes' values are becoming more like those of their male coaches. Whereas female athletes traditionally placed great emphasis on friendship and connection in and through sport, the current trend shows increasing preoccupation with competition and performance (Croxtton *et al.*). Furthermore, the predominance of male coaches and administrators means that women attempting to pursue careers in these fields will be under great pressure to compromise any feminist values they may have held in order to get, and keep, their jobs.

The mass media's distortion and neglect of women's sport has contributed to the negative image held by many women. Coverage of female sport lags far behind male sport, and the media fail to portray women participating in the full range of sport and physical activities, focusing instead on the spectacle of high performance athletes whose achievements go far beyond the grasp of the vast majority of women or men. The commentary accompanying this kind of media coverage is frequently patronizing and demeaning: for example, adult women are called

"girls" or "ladies," they are often referred to by their first names (this is rare for male athletes), and adjectives like "cute" predominate. At the recreational level, too, the media's preoccupation with dance exercise classes led by ultrathin instructors does little to encourage women of average size, or larger women, to join a fitness class.

### **Why do feminists tend to ignore sport as a political issue?**

Many feminists rank sport and physical activity low on their list of political priorities, and fail to see the links with key feminist issues such as health, control over one's body, equality of opportunity, male violence, and racism. Events in the early years of the contemporary feminist movements in North America contributed to these patterns. Feminists tended to focus on single political issues, and for many years sport was an issue that commanded relatively little attention. At the same time, feminists were emphasizing the commonality of women's experience and the idea of sisterhood, and were paying little attention to the differences among women based on race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, social class, (dis)ability, etc. Thus, early feminists tended to overlook the ways in which racism, sexism, classism and homophobia interacted to shape the specific situations of Black women and women of colour, lesbians, working class women, women with disabilities, and other marginalized women.

These patterns had important implications for women's activism on sport issues, and account in part for the longstanding silence on issues such as racism and homophobia in sport. The early focus on single issues prevented many feminists, both inside and outside sport, from understanding the connections with other advocacy initiatives. Many feminists within sport were not involved in any other grassroots feminist activism. Feminists in university physical education departments and government ministries of recreation who undertook much of the early activism tended to focus on reforming existing sport and recreation systems. Their goal was to increase opportunities for girls and women to participate as athletes, coaches, and administrators in the existing sport system, rather than to critique the system itself. And, for their part, feminists working on employment issues outside of sport tended to neglect the problems of sexual, racial and homophobic discrimination and harassment, and other barriers to hiring and promotion faced by women in the male-dominated field of sport leadership.

### **How can we put sport on all feminist agendas?**

Feminists are fond of stating that "the personal is political." The following suggestions apply this principle to sport and physical activity:

- Incorporate more physical activity into your daily routine: walking part of the way to and from work; use stairs instead of elevators; buy a bicycle.

•Put exercise into the program at your next conference or workshop: fitness breaks, self-defence demonstrations, yoga classes.

•Form a group of women to go jogging, hiking, or cycling once a week.

•Find out about the women's programs at your local community recreation centre. If none of them suit your interests, suggest new programs to the centre coordinator.

•Put sport on the agenda of your next feminist conference or workshop: sport and the male culture of violence; women's lost sporting history; physical activity and women's health.

•Add sport as a topic in your women's studies courses.

•Add women's sport as a topic in your social sciences courses.

•Lobby your employer to equip a women's exercise room and showers at your workplace.

•Support feminist activists on sport-related issues.

•Read the sport pages of your newspaper and write letters of complaint to the editor (you'll find plenty to complain about!).

•Find out about girls' sport in your local school board.

*Helen Jefferson Lenskyj is the author of three books and numerous journal and magazine articles on women and sport. She teaches women's studies at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education and is a recreational athlete.*

#### References

Ariere, J. *et al.* "Self-Assured Rape Proclivity: Attitudinal and Sexual Correlates." Paper presented to the American Psychological Association Conference. August 1981.

Bart, P. and P. O'Brien. *Stopping Rape*. New York: Pergamon, 1985.

Croxton, J. *et al.* "Gender Differences in Attitudes toward Sport and Reactions to Competitive Situations." *Journal of Sport Behavior* 10(2) (1987): 167-177.

Hall, M.A. and D. Richardson. *Fair Ball: Towards Sex Equality in Canadian Sport*. Ottawa: Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women, 1982.

Hasbrook, C. "Female Coaches—Why the Declining Numbers and Percentages?" *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation and Dance* 59(6) (1988): 59-63.

Henderson, K. and M.D. Bialeschki. "A Sense of Entitlement to Leisure as Constraint and Empowerment for Women." *Leisure Studies* 13(1) (1991): 51-65.

Jenkins, M. and F. Dambrot. "The Attribution of Date Rape." *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 17(10) (1987): 975-995.

Lenskyj, H. *Out of Bounds: Women, Sport and Sexuality*. Toronto: Women's Press, 1986.

Lenskyj, H. *Women, Sport and Physical Activity: Research and Bibliography*. 2nd Ed. Ottawa: Sport Canada, 1991.

Lenskyj, H. "Girl-Friendly Sport and Female Values." *Women in Sport and Physical Activity Journal* 3(1) (1994): 35-46.

## CHRISTL VERDUYN

### Fish Stories

everyone's got one let me tell you my  
mother's  
no hooks or lines just a dare a hard  
stare and bet you can't bet I can no you  
can't yes I can  
so eat this fish raw the whole damn thing  
guts eyes fins

and she does right there and then

years later the two of you out fishing in  
the canoe  
everything still nothing biting but the little ones  
their furious flips slowing down quick in  
the warm pail water

is it out of boredom then or memory that  
she picks one out  
by the tail takes it firmly in her hand and  
with that familiar  
absent minded look bites down hard

*Christl Verduyn lives in Peterborough, Ontario, where she teaches and writes about Canadian women's writing. Her poetry appears in The Dry Wells of India, The Canadian Forum, Canadian Woman Studies, The Wascana Review, and Vintage 95.*