

FURTHER READINGS

CHAPTER 3

This file contains additional readings from earlier editions of *Sports in Society: Issues and Controversies*, and some extra materials provided by Jay Coakley. These have not been included within the book as much of the content is explicitly focused on the USA, but users of the book may find these readings useful and interesting. Please feel free to send your feedback and/or suggest additional readings to us at jcoakley@uccs.edu or e.pike@chi.ac.uk.

Topic 1. The Greek games at Olympia

Topic 2. Medical myths about women in sports

Topic 3. 1920 as a historical turning point

Topic 4. Neo-liberal culture and sports

Topic 1. The Greek games at Olympia

A search for the ancient Greek Olympic games elicits thousands of websites. The online sources I've found most helpful are the following:

www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1951235 A PBS audio program, "A Look at the 'Naked Olympics'" by Neal Conan (June 9, 2004)

Abstract: The laurels of victory and the agony of defeat. Passionate fans, corruption and overpriced food. It's been 2,700 years since the first Olympic games -- some things have changed and some haven't. From naked athletes to chariot races, join NPR's Neal Conan for the true story of the ancient Olympics.

Guests:

Tony Perrottet, Author of *The Naked Olympics: The True Story of the Ancient Games*

Alexander Kitroeff, Professor of history at Haverford College in Haverford, Penn.; author of *Wrestling with the Ancients: Modern Greek Identity and the Olympics*

www.nytimes.com/2004/08/08/magazine/WLN130551.html "THE WAY WE LIVE NOW: 8-8-04; What Olympic Ideal?" Excellent essay by a scholar at Princeton University; essay puts the ancient games into a realistic historical perspective.

www.perseus.tufts.edu/Olympics/ Members of the Perseus Project created this exhibit on the ancient Olympics in 1996, as a tribute to the Centennial Olympic Games held in Atlanta, Georgia. In this exhibit, you can compare ancient and modern Olympic sports, tour the site of Olympia as it looks today, learn about the context of the Games and the Olympic spirit, or read about the Olympic athletes who were famous in ancient times. For example, the information on boxing notes that: "Ancient boxing had fewer rules than the modern sport. Boxers fought without rounds until one man was knocked out, or admitted he had been beaten. Unlike the modern sport, there was no rule against hitting an opponent when he was down. There were no weight classes within the men's and boys' divisions; opponents for a match were chosen randomly."

<http://minbar.cs.dartmouth.edu/greecom/olympics/> Sponsored and organized by faculty at Dartmouth College, this is a virtual museum for the ancient Olympic games. The site provides slide shows, video of the ruins of venues used in Olympia, and useful historical information.

www.tonyperrottet.com/nakedolympics/illustrations.htm Site maintained by Tony Perrottet, author of *The Naked Olympics: The True Story of the Ancient Games*, one of the most widely read books on the ancient Greek games.

www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/3621199/Olympics-the-naked-truth.html "Olympics: the naked truth" by Christopher Howse, *The Daily Telegraph* (July 23, 2004). A news story highlighting that the modern Olympic ideal is completely alien to the spirit of the Greek original, which despised women, slaves, and foreigners and celebrated sectarian religion, nudity, pain, and winning at any cost.

www.museum.upenn.edu/new/olympics/olympicintro.shtml The University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology provides a range of information about the ancient games in Greece.

<http://education.nmsu.edu/webquest/wq/olympics/olympicwq.html> An interactive site that takes you back to 776 B.C.

Topic 2. Medical myths about women in sports

The denial of equal opportunities to females has always been grounded in the power relationships between men and women and in complex processes of discrimination and differential treatment. These processes have been so much a part of everyday life in many societies that they have come to be seen as “natural”—as correct and moral ways to do things. In part, these processes have been maintained by belief systems or ideologies that serve to morally justify the denial of opportunities to females. In the case of sports, these beliefs have often consisted of myths about the consequences of sport participation and about the physical and social psychological characteristics of females.

These myths have been scientifically discredited in the United States, but they persist in other societies, especially where the literacy rate among women is low. Here are examples of the myths that still create barriers to sports participation among girls and women:

Physiological myths

Despite research in physiology and sport medicine, many people worldwide have questions about the risks associated with a female’s involvement in rigorous, competitive sports. In regions where access to education and medical information is low, there are widespread misconceptions, such as these:

1. ***Strenuous participation in sport can lead to problems in childbearing.*** However, data indicate that the physical condition of women athletes is associated with shorter and easier deliveries than other women have, and athletes experience fewer problems such as backaches and chronic fatigue after the birth of a child.
2. ***The activity in many sport events can damage the reproductive organs or the breasts of a woman.*** However, data show that the uterus is a highly shock-resistant organ, much less subject to serious injury than male genitalia. Furthermore, severe bruises in the chest are not associated with breast cancer at any stage in the life cycle.
3. ***Women have a more fragile bone structure than men, making injuries more likely.*** However, injury rates for both men and women are primarily the result of poor fitness, naive coaches, carelessness, and inadequate training care. Therefore, when male and female athletes have similar histories of physical activity and similar training, guidance, and care, injury rates are about the same for each sex in any given sport (although data on knee injuries suggest that they are more common among girls and women in sports). Additionally, regular physical exercise is beneficial to bone growth for men and women of all ages.
4. ***Intense involvement in sport causes menstrual problems.*** Unless there are prior pathological conditions, the average woman’s reproductive system readily adapts to the intense physical conditioning required in elite sports. If training leads to an extreme reduction in percent of body fat, women may experience some change in their menstrual cycles, the most common of which are secondary amenorrhea (no menses in 6 months) and oligomenorrhea (intervals of more than 35 days between periods). This is because body fat is required to facilitate production of the hormones that initiate and sustain menarche. When training intensity declines and/or body fat increases, menarche will begin or resume regularity. However, amenorrheic athletes often have low estrogen and progesterone levels, a condition that increases susceptibility to osteoporosis (decreased bone density). This issue is currently being studied under conditions where nutrition and diet is controlled so it is possible to isolate the

effects of intense exercise during amenorrhea. The fact that some coaches of women's teams in some sports are using amenorrhea as a condition of team membership (they want women to be "lean and mean") makes this a particularly serious issue.

5. ***Sport involvement leads to the development of unattractive, bulging muscles.*** Many people have believed that playing certain sports will make women physically unattractive. Even athletes have raised questions about strenuous workouts and physical appearances. However, most evidence shows that physical conditioning gives women more positive body images. The development of bulging muscles depends primarily on the existence of androgens in the body, and few women possess these hormones in the amounts necessary to produce muscular bulges that they or others might define as unattractive in U.S. culture. The popular weight training systems used by most women athletes are designed to strengthen and tone muscles, not to develop the "ripped and cut" look of bodybuilders. It takes special training systems plus androgens to achieve that look.

These five myths may be laughed at in college classrooms, but college students are often familiar with the information needed to refute them. Not everyone has had access to such information. In the minds of those still believing in these myths, existing patterns of sex discrimination continue to be morally justified and accepted as "normal." Education usually eliminates these excuses for denying opportunities to girls and women.

Performance myths

Patterns of discrimination have also been justified by arguing that because women are incapable of performing at the same levels as men, they should have fewer opportunities and fewer rewards for achievements. Many of these beliefs have been self-perpetuating: they restrict opportunities, which, in turn, prevent women from developing their abilities as athletes.

Before puberty, performance differences between boys and girls are the result of experience differences rather than physical factors or performance potential. In fact, when experiences are the same, girls have a slight advantage over boys because they mature more rapidly. However, puberty swings the advantage to males. Hormones and developmental differences lead men (on the average) to be bigger and stronger than women. Whenever a sport activity requires size or strength, the average performance capabilities of women will be lower than those of men. This may be a good reason to regulate the size of people competing with each other, but it is not a reason to deny women opportunities.

One of the classic observed performance differences people have used to dismiss females as athletes is throwing ability. "She throws like a girl" has been said numerous times by people about to advise an eager participant to give up and try some other activity. Of course, the problem is not that the participant "throws like a girl," but that she throws like someone who has had little or no experience throwing things. Throwing may look simple, but it requires considerable practice before it can be done smoothly. Many young boys have been encouraged to throw things since infancy, and their fathers may have played catch with them for countless hours. Those fathers may also have encouraged their daughters in sport, but the encouragement was more likely to take the form of purchasing them swimming or skating lessons rather than playing catch. The best way to test the effects of these differential experiences is to ask both males and females to throw a ball with their nondominant arm. Then everyone throws pretty much the same, that is, like people who have had little experience.

Even with equal experience some men will throw a ball further and faster than most women, although they will use the same motion. On average, the men have more muscle, longer arms,

and more body weight. The longer arm generates more hand speed and the muscles and body weight work together to maximize the force behind the ball; but the experienced, strong woman with a long arm will be able to throw a ball faster than most men.

As experiences and opportunities become equal to those of males, females gradually close the gender performance gap in many sports. The gap will never be completely closed in the majority of sport activities, but the differences will more closely correspond to male-female differences in average size and muscle mass. In some sports, such as those requiring flexibility rather than strength, or those requiring long-term endurance rather than size, women may surpass the achievements of men. If this happens, it would not make sense to deny men opportunities or rewards in these activities. Likewise, it does not make sense to deny women opportunities in other activities because some men may be able to outperform them.

Social psychological myths

There have also been myths about the social psychological dynamics and consequences of women's involvement. For example, some people have believed that women's participation in sports undermines femininity, and that playing with or against males threatens the masculinity of boys and men. Not wanting to interfere with what they see as normal development, these people recommend restrictions in the sport participation of girls and women.

However, ideas about femininity and masculinity are based on prevailing social definitions rather than biological destiny. These ideas are learned through socialization. To the extent that socialization differs from one individual to the next, so do ideas about femininity and masculinity. In fact, all such definitions are needlessly restrictive because they deny the members of both sexes valuable human experience.

Women who participate in sport are not likely to see their involvement as a threat to their self-conception as females. This is either because the prevailing definitions of femininity are irrelevant in their lives or because they see their sport behavior as compatible with their own ways of viewing themselves and their connections to the rest of the world. If women athletes did not think in these ways, they would probably drop out or avoid sport altogether or emphasize stereotyped feminine characteristics in their presentation of self and play down the seriousness of their identities as athletes.

The men threatened in sport competition with women are those whose masculinity is based on their ability to dominate others, especially women, and those who define sports as essentially masculine activities through which manhood is achieved.

Jay Coakley

Topic 3. 1920 as a historical turning point

By the 1920s major cultural links had been established between sports and American society. The desire to make or raise money had given rise to the creation and marketing of spectator sports on the professional and intercollegiate levels. Entertainment had become at least as important as the development of moral character in the sponsorship of sports. The most heavily promoted sports were football, baseball, and basketball. Each was native to the United States; each celebrated a form of masculinity emphasizing aggression, domination, and emotional control; and each was used to generate profits, patriotism, and national loyalties. Commercial interests had heavily promoted an emphasis on competition, winning, and record setting.

Basic organizational structures for professional sports had also been established. Colleges had formed athletic conferences and a national association to govern intercollegiate sports. There were numerous other national associations connected with a wide variety of amateur and professional sports, and the Olympics had been revived and held on six different occasions: once in Greece, four times in Western Europe, and once in the United States.

By the 1920s there already had been investigations of problems in intercollegiate sports, and some had accused college football of being too violent, too professionalized, and unrelated to educational goals. The injury rates and the number of deaths in college football were alarmingly high. Powerful economic and political interests controlled major league baseball. In fact, baseball had already had serious labor problems, gambling scandals, regular displays of violence on the field and in the stands, blatant racism and segregation, and problems related to alcoholism and off-the-field criminal behavior among players. Athletes explored the performance enhancing benefits of various drugs and drug combinations, and a few died in the process.

Universities and local governments had constructed lavish stadiums and fieldhouses for the purpose of showcasing their men's teams. Newspapers promoted and sensationalized sport events to boost their circulation, and radio broadcasts brought sports into people's homes and maintained spectator interest in both urban and rural areas.

High school and college athletes had become a primary focus of attention within many schools, and the "dumb athlete" stereotype had become popular in many colleges and universities. Interscholastic teams were elitist and sexist. Schools generally ignored the participation interests of female students, providing them with sport "field days" at best. Some women struggled to make changes in these highly gendered traditions, but they had limited success. In fact, those who resisted dominant norms often faced questions about their sexuality and morality. With rare exceptions, sports at all levels of participation were racially segregated. However, blacks had formed and sponsored their own teams in different sports in many communities. Black athletes received widespread attention only when it was in the financial interests of whites to provide coverage.

Coaching had emerged as a specialized, technical profession, and coaches were hired to supervise teams and maintain winning records. The control of teams had shifted from the players to coaches, managers, owners, and top administrative staff. These professionals used principles of scientific management to teach strategies and train athletes. Some athletes even took herbs and other substances they thought would enhance their performance. There was a heavy emphasis on obedience to authority, on and off the field. Control over the lives of athletes had become an important issue because of the commercial and reputational consequences of athletes' actions—generally it was easier to sell and make profits with events and athletes perceived to be "clean."

Rules in the major spectator sports had become standardized on a national level, so that commercially attractive intersectional competitions could be held. Sponsoring organizations kept records and statistics, which were frequently publishing in newspapers and discussed in radio broadcasts. The broadcasters used flair and exaggeration to dramatize events and enhance their own images and reputations as on-air personalities.

Sports in the 1920s contained the cultural seeds of today's sports. Of course, there were fewer teams and leagues. There was no television or revenues from the sale of TV rights, no instant replays, no domed stadiums or artificial turf, no corporate ownership of professional teams, no agents bargaining for bigger player contracts, no Web sites for teams and athletes, and no XGames on ESPN. There have been changes over the past eighty years, and sports are more visible and culturally influential than in the past. But sports continue to be socially constructed as various individuals and groups try to play sports on their own terms and integrate them into their lives in ways that meet their interests.

Sports today remain organized and competitive, strongly linked to commercial interests, and closely tied to an ideology in which toughness, aggression, individualism, and success are highly valued. At the same time, sports also continue to be contested activities, and people struggle over how sports could and should be defined, organized, and played. Some people want their activities and teams to be more organized and competitive while others want to eliminate formal structure and competition. Some people want women's sports to resemble men's sports while others want to develop new sport forms that emphasize partnership rather than domination. Many people struggle as they continue to face barriers based on skin color, ethnicity, social class, sexuality, and disability. Gay and lesbian athletes face homophobia and struggle over issues of identity disclosure as they play sports. Professional athletes organize themselves into unions and even call strikes to gain more control of the conditions of their own sport involvement, and owners lock players out and collude with one another to maintain their power.

These things all happen in social, political, and economic contexts that influence the range of alternatives and choices that are available to different individuals and groups. But this was the case in 1920 and remains so today.

Jay Coakley

Topic 4. Neo-liberal culture and sports

Sport is often discussed in essentialist terms, as if it is a fixed or innate expression of human impulses and the quest for individual physical perfection. Therefore, people seldom subject sports to critical scrutiny or thoroughly investigate widely accepted beliefs about the developmental consequences of sports and sport participation. In the absence of a critical analysis of sports, powerful global actors have used them—in the form of organized, competitive, physical contests and games—to foster global consensus around a neoliberal ideology that promotes and preserves their interests.

Neoliberal ideology consists of a web of ideas and beliefs that extol individualism, consumption, and global capitalist expansion without the constraints of state regulation. In line with this ideology, the dominant form of sport in the world today is represented through the media to (1) reaffirm the primacy of competition in the quest for individual survival and rewards, and (2) legitimize a form of “moral Darwinism” around which individual relationships and social institutions have been organized. As a result, sports have been important parts of hegemonic processes that supported the global expansion of corporate capitalism during much of the 20th century and legitimized a neo-liberal version of capitalism that stressed individualism as a moral value and endless consumption as an indication of progress.

In neoliberal societies, sports become tools for generating capital that benefits a small segment of the population. For example, a common neoliberal strategy for urban redevelopment involves building large sport venues, usually with public money, and hosting mega-events such as the Super Bowl, The Men’s World Cup (in soccer), and the Olympic games. Those who promote this strategy use the power of the state (national, state, or local governmental authority) to facilitate capital construction or to police the mega-event with the goal being to stimulate mass consumption under conditions of maximum surveillance. In this way, the state becomes a tool of capital interests.

Neoliberalism also involves a political project in which public programs are reduced to bare bones levels. This usually involves cutting publicly funded sport programs for people of all ages. In their place, private programs become major sport providers and the cost of sport participation increases significantly. This creates a sense of seriousness in connection with sport participation to the point that it is viewed by many as an investment—an investment in their children’s future, in their own health and well-being, and in their communities. This change is represented in the “clubification” of youth sports to the point that they require vast amounts of family resources and become the central focus of family schedules, conversations, and budgets.

In these ways, neoliberalism has changed sports and supported elite competitive, commercial sports as the dominant sport form in the world today.

Jay Coakley