

FURTHER READINGS

CHAPTER 8

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. Cheerleaders in U.S. sports: Reproducing definitions of femininity?

Topic 2. Women's professional basketball in the United States

Topic 3. Men police gender boundaries very carefully

Topic 4. Myths about women in sports

Topic 5. "The stronger women get, the more men love football"

Topic 6. Women's bodybuilding: Pushing boundaries of femininity?

Topic 7. The girl who didn't fit

Topic 8. "Conditional permissions" for girls playing informal sports

Topic 1. Cheerleaders in U.S. sports: Reproducing definitions of femininity?*

Cheerleaders have been described as athletes, “acro-sport” athletes, tumblers, gymnasts, stunt performers, vocal pep leaders, entertainers, dancers, sex objects, and sideshows for men’s power sports. Historical and cultural factors have contributed to all these descriptions.

The very first cheerleaders in the late 1800’s were men. Sports and cheerleading were defined as “manly” activities separate from the world of the feminine, so women weren’t allowed. The first women cheerleaders were considered rebels and deviants because they invaded male space. Up through the 1940s, they received warnings from educators that cheerleading was bad for their health and overall development as women. In 1938 an educator warned that women cheerleaders “frequently became too masculine for their own good,” developed “loud and raucous voices,” and often took to using “slang and profanity” – all of which were unladylike (in Davis, 1994).

Many women ignored these warnings, and social definitions of both femininity and cheerleading continued to change. By the 1950s women dominated cheerleading, and most men dropped out because they didn’t want to be associated with what was becoming a “girls’ activity” (Davis, 1994). By the 1970s many people thought cheerleading was “naturally” suited for females, and females were “naturally” suited for cheerleading. Some people even thought cheerleading taught girls about real femininity and enabled them to be socially accepted in the highly gendered world of junior and senior high schools. How quickly things had changed!

It is difficult to make generalizations about cheerleading today. However, whenever I see the “honey shots” of the cheerleaders smiling and posing on the sidelines of NFL games, and whenever I hear NBA fans make demeaning remarks about the appearance of women on the dance team and cheerleading squad, I am reminded that many Americans still evaluate men in terms of what they do and women in terms of how they look. The bodies of women seem to be “fair game” for men who gaze at them, judge them, and then reject or accept them as unattractive or attractive according to dominant heterosexual standards.

Of course, appearance is not the only basis for evaluating cheerleaders. High schools and universities select female cheerleaders on the basis of many attributes, including character, grades, popularity, spirit, voice, and gymnastic abilities. However, physical attractiveness is seldom ignored. Those who lack “looks” sometimes are encouraged to join the pep club and sit in the stands where they can support the team without being individually seen.

If coaches used “looks” to select members of the football team, wouldn’t they be fired or defined as deviant? Listen to what people say about cheerleaders. Do their comments suggest that male athletes are the show and cheerleaders are the sideshow of sports? In my experience, this often is the case.

Some girls and women still accept this gender logic. For them, being a cheerleader is a more important basis for popularity than being an athlete. In the social world of men’s professional sports, wriggling female centerfolds still capture the attention of cameramen and leering spectators between plays and during time outs. They are showpieces who must be alluring and sensuous while at the same time they must be pure, wholesome, and selflessly dedicated to their teams. If they use their bodies to make money for themselves (by posing for certain magazines), they are fired. It seems that being alluring and sensuous in the eyes of men at a football game is wholesome, but doing so for your own financial gain is immoral.

Cheerleading also is gendered in high school and college, although there are high school cheerleading teams that now compete with other teams. At the same time, some cheerleaders

have resisted cheering for girls' teams to the point that it has created tension between cheerleaders and young women athletes in some schools. Most members of girls' high school teams want the same support received by the men, but the image of females cheering females doesn't fit with the gender logic used by many people. Many people still like to think of cheerleaders as "cute enough to date the quarterback." Gender equity in sports depends on challenging and changing this way of thinking. What do you think?

***Note:** This is a Reflect on Sports box from the 7th edition. I have used it successfully to generate discussion in the classroom.

Jay Coakley

Topic 2. Women's professional basketball in the United States

Before the mid-1990s, there were four attempts to establish professional women's basketball leagues in the U.S. The most successful attempt, the Women's Professional Basketball League, lasted three seasons, from 1979 to 1981. It included seven teams and highlighted well-known players such as Ann Meyers and Nancy Lieberman Cline, and a few well-known male coaches. The league enjoyed limited success, but did not make enough profits to continue past the 1981 season.

The league's failure was generally blamed on lack of interest among potential spectators. However, there may have been other more important reasons. The league was organized just like pro basketball for men. Games were played in large, high-rent facilities. All of the owners and coaches were men. Most of the coaches had annual salaries of \$50,000 or more, whereas the players made between \$5,000 and \$20,000 (in 1980 dollars). Marketing strategies emphasized the male coaches rather than the women athletes. Promotions were expensive, because they were directed at all people interested in sports rather than those with specific interests in women's basketball. Marketing emphasized the physical attractiveness of the athletes rather than their basketball skills. Taken together, all these things may have doomed the WPBL to failure, because the league never tapped into potential spectator interest among people with personal connections to girls' basketball all over the United States.

In 1984, a six-team league was established with the name Women's American Basketball Association. The WABA played twenty-two games from October to December before financial troubles caused the league to discontinue its schedule. The National Women's Basketball Association, which played games between October 1986 and February 1987, experienced a similar fate. Then in early 1991, there was an attempt to initiate the Liberty Basketball Association. The league was introduced in an exhibition in connection with an NBA game. The players were dressed in Lycra unitards and the rims of the baskets were shortened to 9'2" so the women could dunk the ball and try to mimic the way men had come to play the game. However, sponsors and investors did not feel that spectator interest was high enough for them to continue their effort to establish the league.

As the NBA Board of Governors watched attendance at NCAA Division I women's basketball games increase from 1.1 million in 1982 to over 4.1 million in 1996 they decided they would endorse a new 8-team WNBA that would play a summer schedule beginning in 1997. Television deals with NBC, ESPN, and the Lifetime channel helped to popularize the new league.

In 2000, there were 16 WNBA teams but three of them did not survive when the NBA sold WNBA teams to their NBA counterparts in 2002. Today the WNBA has 13 teams, although only 5 of the original 8 teams are still in existence.

While the WNBA has survived, other leagues have not been successful. The Women's Basketball Association, an 8-team league was founded in 1993 but lasted only two seasons. The 8-team American Basketball League (ABL) for women was established in 1996 but filed for bankruptcy in the middle of its third season (1998). The National Women's Basketball League (NWBL) was founded in 1997, became professional in 2001, and ceased operation in 2007—partly because new teams in Russia provided top players with big contracts and scheduled their season so the players could also play in the WNBA. The Women's American Basketball Association played one season in 2002 before it ceased to exist.

Despite these failures, the spectator appeal of women's sports in general and women's basketball in particular has been gradually building in the U.S. since the early 1980s. Even though it's been a struggle, the WNBA has survived 10 years. The NBA has had about sixty years to build its game, reputation, and fan base. Women's professional basketball may be on the same track a half century later than the men. The expanding flow of basketball talent through women's teams in high schools and colleges will continue to elevate the quality of women's basketball and fuel expanding spectator interest.

Jay Coakley

Topic 3. Men police gender boundaries very carefully

Each of us learns gender ideology as we grow up in our families, interact with others, observe social patterns in our experiences, and become comfortable with cultural meanings and norms presented in the media. The depth of our learning increases as we become more aware of our bodies and adopt widely accepted criteria for distinguishing sex and identifying the normative boundaries of masculinity and femininity. For example, if a first grade boy took off his sweatshirt and discovered that he had put on his sister's princess t-shirt, his six-year old peers would teach him about the boundaries of masculinity. In the process he would learn gender ideology and the pressures to use it and police its normative boundaries as he chooses his clothing and interacts with his peers.

It does not take long for young children to learn the markers and cues that are used to make sex distinctions in their social worlds. They become very sensitive the ways of "doing" gender "correctly" as girls and boys, and they have few reservations about policing gender boundaries and holding others accountable for the appropriateness of their gender performances. Labels, such as "fag," "gay," "sissy," "girl," and "lady" are regularly applied to boys or men when their gender performances contradict dominant ideology. Girls and women are called "boys," "tomboys," "lesbians," "butch," and other terms to remind them that gender bending crosses femininity boundaries and is not in step with dominant gender ideology.

Men clearly have more resources and power than women have in society, but maintaining this hegemony requires work. Therefore, men patrol and police gender boundaries more actively than women do, and they are more apt to sanction those who violate gender norms. When boys or men violate norms and threaten hegemonic masculinity they may be called sissies, wimps, fags, gays, girls, pussies, ladies, or other terms that deny them the privileges accorded most other men.

Women, on the other hand, have less to lose and more to gain if they push and bend gender boundaries. They also have more social permission to act in masculine ways than men have to act in feminine ways. Boys who do not act masculine are mercilessly teased for being "sissies," whereas girls are praised for being tomboys, at least until they reach puberty and come to be evaluated in heterosexual terms. Men who are ballet dancers and interior designers are less likely to be accepted in many social worlds than women who are soccer players or carpenters. To test this gender pattern, ask the women in your courses if they've ever bought clothes in a men's store or a men's section of a department store and if they've ever worn clothes traditionally defined as "men's wear." Most will say that they have done these things. Then ask men if they've bought or worn "women's wear." Most will be puzzled by the questions, and they will either laugh or become defensive, because they are more likely than their female peers to police themselves to make sure they do not cross the boundaries of heterosexual masculinity.

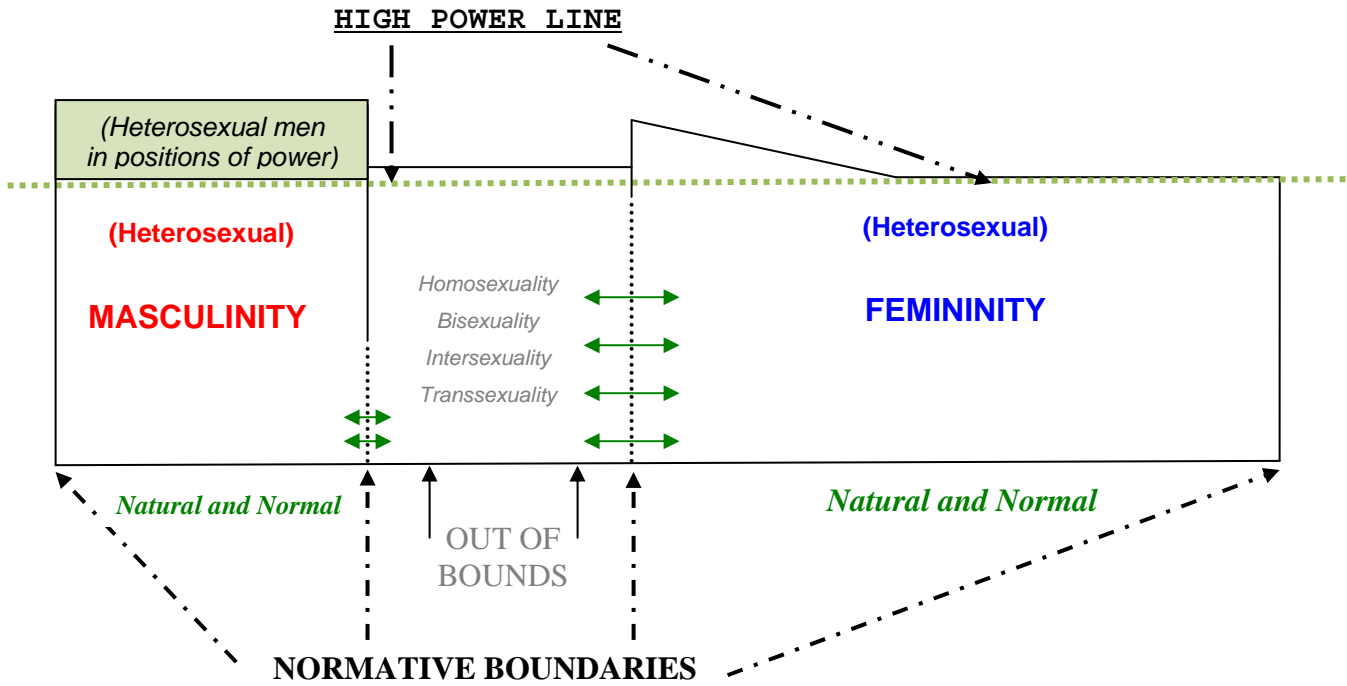
The diagram below illustrates the consequences of hegemonic gender ideology. Notice that the normative boundaries for heterosexual masculinity are narrower than those for heterosexual femininity. Because being a man increases one's odds of gaining power and influence in most social worlds, men collectively have more to lose if they do not reproduce hegemonic gender ideology and police the normative boundaries of gender. The men with the most to lose are those who hold power in politics, the economy, religion, education, law, and sports. But even men whose power is limited to the family and other local and small groups often feel that they have a stake in maintaining the ideas and beliefs that legitimize their power and enable them to hold it

over time. This is why some fathers teach their daughter a form of gender ideology that will work to their disadvantage as they grow up and become women.

Questioning and trying to change gender ideology is personally risky. Research shows that people who initially question or resist widely accepted ideas and beliefs about sex and sexuality are labeled as disruptive, psychologically abnormal, deviant, criminal, or immoral. As a result, questions are usually raised first by those who are systematically disadvantaged by dominant gender ideology and have the most to gain if it is changed. For example, women lead efforts to achieve gender equity, gays and lesbians lobby for rights that are taken for granted by heterosexuals, and many transsexuals have joined intersexuals to challenge the idea that there are only two non-overlapping sexes among humans. Conversely, because heterosexual men often conclude that they have the most to lose if gender ideology changes, many of them don't question it and marginalize those who do.

Changes in gender ideology have also occurred as people have questioned a two-gender model of sexuality and argued that people with other sexualities should be accorded the same rights as heterosexual males and females. Research shows that even though the two-gender model remains hegemonic in many societies, including the United States, the normative boundaries of heterosexual masculinity and femininity have become increasingly blurred and porous. As shown in the diagram below, when people push gender boundaries the distinctions between heterosexual and homosexual, normal and abnormal, natural and unnatural become less clear in people's minds and in the organization of some social worlds. The number and positions of double arrows piercing through the two normative boundaries in the diagram show three things: (1) heterosexual women engage in more boundary pushing and gender bending than heterosexual men, (2) heterosexual and gay men have been less successful than heterosexual women and lesbians when it comes to blurring gender and sexuality distinctions at the higher levels of power in society, and (3) lesbians are less likely to be considered clearly out of normative bounds than gay men. This is because heterosexual men police their gender boundaries more actively than women, especially at the higher levels of power. But despite this, the actions of people who question and push gender boundaries have created more cultural spaces for increasingly diverse expressions of masculinity and femininity and promoted acceptance of additional forms of sexuality.

Challenging dominant gender ideology involves pushing normative boundaries that are based on the widely accepted two-category sex and gender classification model. Boys and men accept normative boundaries for masculinity that are more narrow and constraining than the normative of femininity, because maintaining hegemonic masculinity gives them greater access to social, political, and economic power.



The *High Power* line indicates that heterosexual men are more likely to occupy high power and influence positions, such as heads of state, members of the senate and congress, CEOs, and top level leaders and decision-makers in religious organizations, education, media, and sports. The high power line can also be viewed as a representation of the “glass ceiling” for women, although a few women have cracked through it in certain spheres of social life. Note: The green double-pointed arrows (\longleftrightarrow) indicate two processes: (1) movement into and out of the categories of heterosexual male and female, and (2) efforts to push normative boundaries to make more space for different expressions of masculinity and femininity, create new sexual categories, or to transcend sexual categories by making them socially irrelevant.

Jay Coakley

Topic 4: 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.

See also: Larkin, June (with Sabrina Razack and Fiona Moola). 2007. *Gender, sport and development*. In *Sport for Development and Peace*, International Working Group (SDP/IWG), *Literature Reviews on Sport for Development and Peace* (pp. 89-123). Toronto, Ontario: University of Toronto, Faculty of Physical Education and health; online, <http://iwg.sportanddev.org/data/htmleditor/file/Lit.%20Reviews/literature%20review%20SDP.pdf> (retrieved 1/09).

Jay Coakley

Topic 5. “The stronger women get, the more men love football”

Mariah Burton Nelson is currently the Executive Director of the American Association for Physical Activity and Recreation. In the late-1980s she was a writer and public speaker who focused her attention on women and sports. As a former athlete at Stanford and a professional basketball player, her voice was widely respected in discussions about Title IX and why it was resisted so vehemently by many men. At the same time her voice was seen by many as contentious and radical.

In 1994, Nelson published a book titled, *The stronger women get, the more men love football*. Her thesis was that as women graduated from college and entered the workforce in record numbers, took jobs previously held by men, and brought home paychecks that gave them independence and power, men experienced a “crisis of masculinity.” She noted that as some men slowly adjusted to this, others retreated to realms where traditional masculinity was safe from the emerging power and influence of women. And the safest place many men could find was football—an activity that they could use as a weapon in the struggle to maintain male power and privilege.

Many people thought that Nelson’s hypothesis about football was pure feminist folly. However, it led others to think about the role of football in the changing gender order of the 1990s. In fact, as I looked at data on the popularity of football in 2006, I wondered if the data between 1989 and 2006 would support her hypothesis.

A comparison of the 1989 and 2006 data strongly support her hypothesis. Of course, NFL attendance is related to many factors and we cannot tell the extent to which gender dynamics are at work. But I’d say that Nelson’s critics have some explaining to do.

2006	1989
Number of teams -----28	32
League revenue -----\$975 million	\$5.7 billion
Overall attendance -----13.6 million	22.1 million
Ave game attendance -----60,829	66,455
Ave player salary -----\$344,000	\$1.4 million
Salary cap/team -----\$34.6 million (1994)	\$102.5 million
Guaranteed TV money -----\$468 million	\$3.7 billion
Consumer product sales -----\$2 billion	\$3.2 billion
Super Bowl 30-second ad ---- \$675,000	\$2.5 million

Topic 6. Women's bodybuilding: Pushing boundaries of femininity?

“Muscles are a ‘man thing.’” This belief was widely held prior to the 1990s. Consequently, few women worked out in the weight rooms. When women did lift weights, their goal was to tone muscles, not to build them. Women bodybuilders emphasized graceful poses and smooth body lines. Bodybuilders with muscles that were ripped and cut were seen by many people to be unnatural and repulsive.

Bodies are more than a matter of biology. They also have a social side. People give meanings to physical characteristics, including muscles. Those meanings are important as we use and evaluate our bodies and evaluate the bodies of others.

The social landscape of fitness centers has changed as ideas about women, health, and strength have changed. Today some women go to weight rooms. Their workouts include lifting. They have discovered that they can and do build muscles despite old myths about women lacking hormones needed to become physically strong. The meanings given to women's bodies have changed as well. But the specter of those old myths still haunts the weight room as women wonder: How strong is too strong? How big is too big? When does the tight, toned body become too big, ripped, or cut?

Women athletes and other women with strong bodies have pushed the boundaries of what is socially acceptable. But do limits remain? Are they different than limits related to men's bodies? If limits exist, are women aware of them as they work out? If they are, what does this tell us about the social construction of gender and the body in social worlds?

These were the research questions that Shari Dworkin asked as she planned an investigation that would be the basis for her Ph.D dissertation in the Sociology Department at the University of Southern California. Dworkin was not a stranger to gyms. She had worked out with weights for 14 years, through high school track, college, and post-college years. But her research now demanded that she see gyms in a new light and use them as sites for collecting data and answering research questions.

Instead of doing a survey Dworkin decided that the best way to collect data was by doing an ethnography. She became a participant observer in fitness centers and conducted in-depth interviews with women who worked out there. She spent two years, four days a week, and two to six hours a day as an ethnographer.

Both centers were located on the West Side of Los Angeles. She referred to one as “Elite Gym” because it had a membership fee of \$1300 per year. Most members were white and most were wealthy as evidenced by the cars they drove, the clothes they wore, and the gear they used in their workouts. The other fitness center was “Mid-Gym.” Its annual membership fee was \$300. Members generally had typical middle- and working-class jobs although some were unemployed and a few were professionals. Half the members were white and half were people of color from diverse backgrounds, mostly African American, Asian, and Latina. Both gyms had a range of activities and fully equipped weight rooms.

As Dworkin collected data she found that 25% of the women at both gyms lifted no weights during their workouts. Seventy percent of the women at Elite Gym and 60% at Mid-Gym did light to moderate lifting. Only a small proportion of women were heavy lifters – 5% at Elite Gym and 15% at Mid-Gym. As Dworkin conducted interviews she found that women's workouts were governed not only by biology but also by prevailing ideas about femininity in U.S. culture.

The non-lifters told Dworkin that they avoided working out with weights because they did not want to “be unfeminine,” or “look masculine,” or cease to “have curves and be soft.” Light to moderate lifters often described their workouts in terms like this:

Well, cardiovascular work helps me to lose weight . . . and I do many sets of the same weight and don't increase it because I don't want to be like some women who are losing their femininity, you know, their curves. I don't want to be like a female bodybuilder (p. 341).

Heavy lifters were rare, and most of them had jobs that required strong bodies (firefighter, police officers, landscapers), and they usually weren't concerned about becoming too strong, ripped, or cut. Unlike the other women, they used women bodybuilders as models. But even the heavy lifters were aware of prevailing ideas about femininity and body size, and a few did adjust their workouts to control the size of their chests and backs—body parts that they defined as masculine.

Muscles, in the minds of all but the heavy lifters, were defined as masculine. Many of the women wanted to be strong but they feared becoming big. They worked out to be slim and toned but not too buff. They wanted to be firm but not too “jock-like.” Therefore, the non-lifters avoided the weight room and most of the light to moderate lifters backed off or stopped lifting as they came close to bumping the glass ceiling of social acceptability related to building muscles. Three-fourths of the women had clear ideas about limits on muscular size and strength. This glass ceiling, Dworkin explained, was a product of the meanings that the women gave to muscles, not the limits of their biology. Conversations between women at the gyms reaffirmed these limits, although they were also aware that women could build and have built muscles that surpassed the limits set by their definitions of femininity.

Many of the men at both gyms worked to “max out” their weight lifting routines and sometimes took supplements to become bigger. But nearly all the women stayed beneath the acknowledged ceiling of size and strength. Although the limits of acceptability were more loosely defined at Mid-Gym than at Elite Gym, the ceiling existed in both fitness centers.

Dworkin concludes that the ceiling of acceptability related to size and strength is a cultural phenomenon. Its height shifts with changes in ideas and the meanings given to bodies. Most women carefully avoid bumping or breaking the glass ceiling, but when a woman breaks it, other women notice and talk. For the most part, this talk reaffirmed prevailing definitions of femininity and ideas about women's bodies. But it also made people aware of possibilities related to building muscles and strength. This awareness, according to Dworkin, is a prerequisite for changing the meanings that people give to women's bodies, pushing the boundaries of acceptability, and expanding popular definitions of femininity.

Dworkin's study highlights processes through which people create and change social worlds. Think about these processes the next time you go to the gym or talk with others who work out, especially in weight rooms. Consider these questions:

- Have they seen the ceiling that Dworkin saw through the eyes of women at Elite Gym and Mid-Gym?
- If the ceiling doesn't exist in your gym or others you know, what's different about those gyms?
- Why might ceilings be different from one gym to another or vary over time in a gym?
- Do these meanings apply to bodies outside the gym and do they vary from one group to another in a single gym?

- What role do personal trainers, relations with peers, family, and lovers play in reinforcing or challenging the glass ceiling on women's strength?
- Are there connections between what happens in gyms and the rest of women's lives?
- Are there similar glass ceilings in families, schools, media programming, workplaces, and sports?

Asking these questions will sharpen your sociological imagination and make you more aware of how the meanings given to bodies influence your actions and relationships. And it might also give you a good topic for your next research paper.

Jay Coakley

Topic 7. The girl who didn't fit

Physical educator Helen Lenskyj recounts a story told by a woman as she described memories of her gym class in school:

*Gym classes were segregated ... I would play with the girls and they always said that I played "too rough." They said I could play with the girls with my left hand only, or play with the boys. So, of course, I decided to play with the boys ... So we were in the gym one day and all the girls were lined up against the wall and there I was along with the boys playing [dodge ball]. The girls were really cheering for me and I had this really mixed thing that has stayed with me ever since. I wanted to wipe out every boy in that group and I did, by the way, I won. I was the last person standing. I wanted to win for them, for the girls, for them to see that it could be done. At the same time, what was mixed up with this was this incredible contempt for the girls because they were all in their little dresses and little shoes sitting passively on the side, cheering for me, and I didn't want to be one of them and yet I knew I was one of them.**

This story portrays the feelings experienced by a lesbian who was lost between mutually exclusive categories of gender as gender is defined in terms of the two-category classification system. Interestingly, her sense of herself was more "natural" than the definition of femininity that held the girls in the class on the sidelines. If girls and women are going to feel good about being involved in all types of sports, there is a need for new forms of femininity that recognize diversity as natural.

*The story appeared in H. Lenskyj. 1994. Sexuality and femininity in sport contexts: Issues and alternatives. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 18, 4, pp. 356–376.

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Topic 8. “Conditional permission” for girls playing informal sports

In most North American families, young girls are not discouraged from playing sports, but some girls may be treated differently than their brothers in at least three respects.

First, some girls are less likely to learn that physical activities and achievements in sport can or should be uniquely important sources of rewards in their lives.

Second, some fathers spend considerably less time in shared physical exercises and activities with daughters than with sons.

Third, the play of some girls is more likely to be regulated and controlled by parents. For example, when a young girl asks one of her parents for permission to go and play, she often hears something like this: “It’s okay for you to go play as long as you . . .

“stay in the house”

“don’t leave the yard”

“don’t go far away from the house”

“go with a friend”

“play with children I know”

“get back home at exactly 4 o’clock-no later!”

“don’t do anything dangerous”

“keep your clothes clean”

“don’t play rough or get hurt”

“don’t get in fights or arguments with your friends”

“get back in time to set the table”

“take your little brother (or sister) with you”

This “conditional permission,” even when it is justified by parental fears for the safety of their daughters, is an outgrowth of a traditional definition of femininity. It can subvert opportunities and motivation to play or organize complex competitive games involving physical skills. Such games require going outside the house, leaving the family yard, playing with large groups (including some children unknown to parents), getting dirty, having arguments and fights now and then, playing rough, and sometimes getting hurt. Furthermore, it is impossible to do these things when curfews are inflexible and younger brothers or sisters have to be watched.

It is no wonder that many girls end up playing different kinds of games than those that their brothers play. Boys do not have nearly as many parental constraints limiting their activities. This is one of the things enabling many of them to move quickly beyond their sisters in the development of sport skills.

Fathers may reinforce these “femininity restrictions” when they treat their daughters as “Daddy’s little girls.” This protectiveness is well-intentioned, but it often constrains the play activities of girls and focuses girls’ attention on catering to the needs of their fathers, an orientation that precludes the development of social independence. Mothers may reinforce these femininity restrictions when they treat their daughters as “Mommy’s little helpers.” Of course, girls (and boys) should support and assist their parents. But when girls get locked into care-taking and nurturing roles and overly dependent relationships with either of their parents, they seldom have opportunities to develop competence in physical activities and sports. Alternative definitions of femininity have helped to alert parents and others to the problems that may continue to exist because of traditional femininity restrictions.

Do girls today continue to face “conditional permissions” when it comes to participation in certain physical activities? I think this question requires regular discussion.

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