

On Being a Feminist Sport Historian

Patricia Vertinsky

Historians construct histories that are influenced by their own perspectives and experiences, regardless of whether they realize it. This is because the past no longer exists except in the form of documents, texts, and remains and traces, all of which lack inherent meaning until the historian (or indeed anyone else) reads meaning into them. It is often a particular memory of the past, the remembered world in which we have lived our own lives so far, that forms a backdrop to what historians write about (even if we use our own memories to access, by way of analogy, periods of history much earlier than the ones we have inhabited) and enables us to enter into specific discourses and engage with knowledges that have been created and sustained by power. We tend to pose questions about the past that interest us and approach them from quite specific ideological perspectives. It is therefore no surprise that female sport historians such as myself often focus on the history of the body and the compelling and complicating issue of gender, for just as the Cartesian imperative has traditionally placed mind over body, so the hegemony of masculinity, long enshrined in the training and celebration of the athletic body, has ruled in the annals of sport history – at least until recently.

I learned early in my academic career what I knew intuitively from my student days, the credence of philosopher Richard Rorty's observation that much of what gets defined as knowledge in a society can be recognized as those beliefs and modes of practice that are successful in helping official groups do what they want to do. Sport history in the early 1980s was an oddly textured and uneven field, and it was pretty much the official history of men's involvement in sport, just as traditional historiography was most often rendered in the male voice. Bonnie Smith was forthright about this in *The Gender of History*. In relation to the profession of history, she said, "The profession's unacknowledged libidinal work – the social ideology that draws us to value male plenitude, power and self – presentation is but rarely glimpsed in the mirror of history" (239). Female sport historians – despite the growing benefits for women and sport from Title IX, the 1972 US law that prohibits any educational program or activity receiving federal financial assistance from discriminating on the basis of sex – were slower than women historians to be influenced by the ideology of feminism,

in part because of the restrictive assumptions derived from uncritically applying to the past a contemporary characterization of sport as male, modern, and athletic.

To be sure, once it had become a contested terrain of gender relations and meaning, sport could no longer remain a masculinist site in which 'hard essentialism' could be produced unambiguously. When I wrote my first critique of sport history and gender relations, I was inspired by the 1986 landmark study of historian Joan Scott, who, to the utter disdain of her male historian colleagues at Princeton, underscored how gender offered a good way to think about history. Over the years her article has become canonical, and in a recent forum of the *American Historical Review* a group of historians from different chronological and geographical orientations commented upon the staying power of her argument that the history of gender not only inhabited more historical turf than the history of women, it could also enter and remap the most resistant domains such as the history of war, politics, and even sport.

There are still many who worry that this Scottian, Derridian, or Foucauldian study of gender ignores women qua women and tends to intellectualize and abstract the inequality of the sexes, making it difficult to accommodate different points of view from the perspective of gender. Scott herself has moved in new directions, questioning the ongoing vitality of the term 'gender' once it lost its ability to startle and provoke. The word 'gender,' she thought, had crept into women's history without necessarily transforming the field, imposing a false solidity on the unstable categories of women and men. But it had started a decades' long conversation about the social and symbolic construction of sex difference, showing how the language of sex difference has historically provided a means to articulate relationships of power. In this way Scott tied gender back to other forms of difference and pushed us to challenge the metanarratives that mutually constituted various social and political hierarchies. Gender, she now insists, is not a programmatic or methodological treatise so much as an invitation to think critically about how the meanings of sexed bodies are produced, deployed, and changed. Thus, questions about gender can only be asked and answered in specific contexts because, for all its corporeality, the body is neither an originating point nor a terminus - it is a result or an effect conceived in a specific time and place.

For feminist sport historians, it is the particular conflation of feminism and postmodernism, which have a common interest in representations of the sporting body and the construction of the gendered subject, that has provided rich soil for interdisciplinary

inquiry and fresh research approaches. It is no surprise, then, that I was attracted early in my career to Foucauldian theories of and insights into the knowledge-power-body trilogy. My own research has been shaped by a commitment to focus on the social construction of the body in relation to health and gender and the ways in which the power and authority of science in Western culture has historically been brought to bear on notions about the physical and emotional capacity for work, sport, and exercise. In *The Eternally Wounded Woman*, I observed how

medicine took on the authority to label female complaints, or to declare women potentially sick even if they did not complain. The labeling of normal female functions such as menstruation and menopause as signs of illness requiring rest and medical observation did, not in itself make women sick or incapable of vigorous activity. It did, however, provide a powerful rationale to persuade them from acting in any other way. (11-12)

I then began to document the social construction of the gendered, racial, and ethnic body through the prism of the anatomy of difference to see why some biological differences (real or imagined) – the female pelvis, the Jew’s foot, and so on – have taken on an exaggerated importance at particular moments in time and been used by dominant groups as signs of difference and pathology. This led me to question how the shifting stigma of disability and aging have affected modes of self-discipline and social regulation and institutional approaches to health and body management through exercise, sport, and schooling.

When I began to explore the historical influence of the concept of normalcy on understandings of body form and function and on regimes for health, exercise, and physical culture, I turned to an examination of spaces of exclusion for different kinds of active bodies – such as the gymnasium, the exercise room, and the curriculum – and a historical critique of body measurement schemes and their gendered effects. My colleagues and I fixed our gaze on the history of my own academic home, the War Memorial Gymnasium at the University of British Columbia, using Walter Benjamin’s vision of history as “a porous surface whose holes provide windows into discarded memories.” (257). The premise of our work was to illuminate meanings and memories of the past and to elicit new understandings about the ideal modern body of architectural discourse and the education of the athletic body in

higher education in the years following the Second World War. It was clear that my own disciplinary training and personal perspectives and experiences influenced many of the stories in *Disciplining Bodies in the Gymnasium: Memory, Monument, Modernism* - a style that Douglas Booth calls reflexive contextualization. The memories I chose to record resonated with some of my own (gendered) experiences of the ways in which institutions and structures marginalize minority groups and limit their opportunities. These memories were thus imprinted on my writing (female) body too. The study, of course, reminds us of the importance of reflexivity when dealing with explicitly political issues and of our responsibilities in challenging the will to power.

I also wanted to illustrate the impact of body typologies and their underlying toxic ideologies and normalizing influences on the development of the movement and health sciences over the last century and draw attention to their continued - indeed increasing - use as predictors for how the male and female body should look and be trained. If we focus, for example, on issues around body size and the overweight body, we can see how the current health panic over obesity in North America is characterized by its historical unconsciousness, its insidious focus on the rhetoric of excess and loss of control and on the ready acceptance by the medical, health, and education professions of standardized remedies for eating controls and exercise advocacy.

Having never been either an aspiring Olympian athlete or an ardent spectator of 'the greatest show on earth,' I have not focused attention until recently on the historical gendered legacy of the Olympic Games, even though the Olympics stand out as an exemplar of power and inequality in the world of sport. There are many excellent studies of gender and sport in Olympic history. Stories and reports about the exclusion or marginalization of women from the International Olympic Committee's organizational ranks and from its sporting opportunities in both the ancient and modern games are ubiquitous as are deferential historical narratives about the trials and challenges of Olympic heroes and heroines. As watchdogs of gender equity, the Women's Sport Foundation reported recently that progress remained disappointing. In 2008 the IOC had still failed to reach its own recommended 20 percent minimum threshold for the inclusion of women in its administrative structures, the number of women on significant IOC commissions was close to zero, actual participation opportunities for female athletes in the Olympic Games lagged behind those for male

athletes, and sporting opportunities for female Paralympians were alarmingly low.

Thus, whatever one's personal level of interest or experience in the Olympic Games, it is difficult to ignore or excuse the continuing lack of parity between men's and women's opportunities to compete in the sport of their choice and the persistence of ridiculous stereotypes about appropriate and inappropriate sporting practices for women. When the IOC voted in 2006 to exclude women's ski jumping from the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Games, to be held in Vancouver and Whistler, my female colleagues and I felt compelled to look at why and how ski jumping, an Olympic event for men inaugurated in 1924 at Chamonix, France, still remains a male-only event almost a century later. The IOC's ruling in 2006 that women lacked the international spread and technical merit to participate was particularly galling given that it was the very organization that welcomed Eddie (the Eagle) Edwards, the affable short-sighted and overweight plasterer from Cheltenham, whose poor level of skill earned him a last-place finish for Great Britain at the 1988 Calgary Winter Olympic Games in the men's ski-jumping competition. And, indeed, we have found that ski jumping offers a particularly illuminating discourse in gender stereotypes and expectations, for, on the one hand, women have been prevented from taking part in major ski-jumping competitions until relatively recently; on the other hand, they have long demonstrated that they can participate at levels equal or better than men.

The continued androcentrism of the cultural order in ski jumping contradicts the stated position of the IOC Medical Commission that girls and women should not be excluded from participating in athletic activity because of their gender. Instead, androcentrism was boldly displayed by Gian Franco Kasper, head of the International Federation of Skiing (FIS), who commented not so long ago on ESPN's *Outside the Lines* that the female uterus might burst during landing from a ski jump, that, from a medical point of view, it was advisable that "ladies should not jump." He illustrated how sport is a system that continues to privilege the male body as superior by using the false assumptions that women are inferior to men, more prone to injury, and possibly immoral in their aspiration to participate in male-appropriate sporting competitions. Women's bodies in the twenty-first century are still viewed by many men of influence in international sport as properties of science and medicine, for they are tied to the idea of a fixed natural state in which sporting and exercising activities can only be understood in terms of causal biological explanations.

The female ski jumpers and their supporters thought that the law might change the IOC's mind about their participation in the 2010 Winter Olympics and that revelations about how inappropriate stereotypes had justified their historical exclusion from jumping might sway more enlightened minds in the court. Certainly, in the United States, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 has had a major (albeit uneven) influence by freeing girls and women from discrimination in sport in educational arenas and changing societal attitudes toward women and sport. Yet the intimate relationship between law, history, and social change continues to be worked out on the playing field and, as Nancy Hogshead-Makar and Andrew Zimbalist point out, gains on behalf of women might easily be relinquished to the forces of resistance that continue to circulate on these issues.

In their effort to use the law to gain equality with men, a group of female ski jumpers, their supporters, and a host of reporters filled the British Columbia Supreme Court in Vancouver for a week between 20 and 24 April 2009 to hear lengthy and complex arguments for and against their discrimination claim. Columnists at the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Washington Post*, and leading Canadian newspapers and television networks all provided extensive coverage. The battery of lawyers working for the Vancouver Organizing Committee (VANOC) insisted that the discrimination claim was misguided because the power to dictate events at the Olympics was controlled not by VANOC but by the IOC, which is not bound by Canadian law. The lawyers for the plaintiffs presented a solid moral argument about female discrimination, though it was clear that the legal challenge was more complex. The ski jumpers needed to prove that VANOC was controlled by the government and thus subject to the Charter and/or that putting on the Olympics was carrying out a government function and thus subject to the Charter. Journalists at the *New York Times* conjectured that it was a long-shot constitutional case, and they were right.

As it turns out, the law could not move the sport along. On 10 July 2009, BC Supreme Court Judge Lauri Ann Fenlon ruled against the women ski jumpers. She agreed that their exclusion from the games was discriminatory, noting that many of the female ski jumpers were training against and competing against (and beating) men who would be Olympians in the coming year and that the women were being excluded for no other reason than their sex. But she concluded that VANOC was not in breach of the Canadian Charter because the IOC has sole control over which events can be held and

is not subject to the Charter. “This is the outcome I must reach because the discrimination the plaintiffs are experiencing is the result of the actions of a non-party (the IOC) which is neither subjected to the jurisdiction of this court nor governed by the Charter.” “So much for Canadian values and promises that the 2010 Winter Olympics will showcase the best of Canada,” commented journalist Daphne Bramham. “We get law not justice in the exclusion of women’s ski jumping.”

As sport historians, we could point out that the IOC has been pressed successfully in the past – by men – to change its rules of exclusion regarding female athletes. In 1932 Gustavus Kirby, president of the Amateur Athletic Union in the United States and the American representative to the International Amateur Athletic Association, threatened a boycott of men’s track and field at the 1932 Olympics in Los Angeles if the IOC refused to reverse its earlier decision to deny women’s participation in the track and field events. Yet we noticed that the judge in the recent BC case placed little weight on the historical evidence that we had provided to the lawyers of the plaintiffs – the rigorous analysis of documents, texts, and traces that we had assembled and reflected upon to document a century of discrimination against female ski jumpers in Europe and North America. Douglas Booth is quite right to point out how “seemingly straightforward evidence and decisions and judgments historians make about what is relevant evidence and the ways they present that evidence have consequences for how historians and their readers understand the past, the present and the relationship between the two” (3). In the case of the ski jumpers, I believe that our analysis lost much of its power in the process of being organized by legal assistants into an affidavit of ‘facts’ and ‘truths’ – into a laundry list of speech acts and organizational events that might have been necessary but was in no way sufficient to determine an interpretation.

In any case, a further appeal to the BC Court of Appeal was denied some months later, eradicating any hope that the women ski jumpers might have held for competing in the 2010 Winter Olympics. Canada’s IOC member, Dick Pound, had already complained that, should the appeal be upheld, the IOC would neither recognize such an event nor look favorably on the possibility of Canada ever hosting another Olympics. It was a futile effort, he said, made all the more annoying given the IOC’s long tradition of trying to improve equality for women in sport.

Clearly, there is plenty of scope for feminist sport historians to deconstruct such hyperbole in pursuit of gender justice and to

continue to articulate the myriad ways in which sport – a system that still privileges the male body as superior – does not reflect social and gender realities but rather plays a key role in constructing them. It reminds us once again that the notion of embodiment is crucial to the feminist enterprise, and it reminds me that the active body is far too important a subject for historians and sociologists to leave to the natural sciences.

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