

FROM ANTIQUITY TO THE 19TH CENTURY

It is widely believed that women did not participate in sport until the recent past, and, to some extent, this is true. With the exception of ancient Greece, sport, as it is known in contemporary societies, did not exist.¹ It is a creation of the nineteenth century, and prior to this time both women and men participated in less formal activities which can be termed physical recreation. Although women participated in these activities to a lesser extent than men, recent research has shown that they engaged in a variety of physically active pastimes, recreational activities and games, in numerous cultures from the ancient river valley civilizations (c. 5000 B.C. - 1500 B.C.) to the 19th century. Collectively, this research, which has focused on physical recreation, rather than sport, has challenged the long-held notion that women did not engage in such activities prior to the 19th century. It is principally through the arts (literary and plastic arts), philosophy, mythology, and, in some cases, legal documents that scholars have begun to uncover and write the history of the participation of women in physical recreation.

Ancient River Valley Civilizations

In ancient societies, physical recreation was intimately associated with war, religious festivals, and celebrations. Thus far, there is no written evidence of the physically recreative activities of women in the ancient river valley civilizations of Egypt, Mesopotamia, China and India. Nor do we have evidence in the plastic arts of Mesopotamia, China and India.² However, there is some evidence from ancient Egypt that sug-

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gests that women participated in a variety of activities. Egyptians created many activities which served religious, recreational, and military purposes: acrobatic and gymnastic games, tug-of-war, hoop and kicking games, stick and ball games, juggling, knife throwing, club throwing, wrestling, swimming, guessing games, games of chance, dance, and board games. It has been argued that ball games were played all over the ancient world, and the earliest historical evidence concerning ball games comes from ancient Egypt.³ Yet little is known about these games, and the extent to which women played ball games is even lesser known. However, four paintings from the tombs of Beni-Hassan, dating from the beginning of the second millennium B.C., depict a series of activities performed by women, including several performed with balls - a passing game, a juggling game, and what appears to be a team ball game, and one painting in which women are either dancing or exercising.⁴ Numerous paintings depict women dancing, playing musical instruments, and several pieces of sculpture show women swimming. There

are also many Egyptian artifacts that depict acrobats, and most appear to be women who were probably professional dancers.⁵ A painting on a limestone fragment dating from the XVII dynasty of the New Kingdom (c. 1567-1320 B.C.) depicts one of these acrobats in a 'back bend' position.

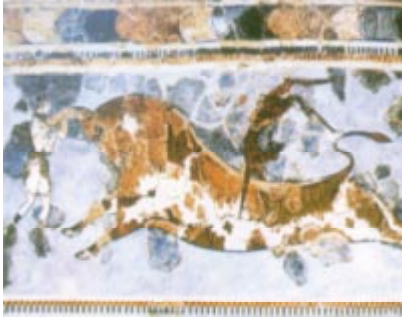


Acrobat from Egyptian Museum, Turin. Reprinted from Sally Fox, The Sporting Woman.

More has been written about the physically recreative activities of women in the Minoan Civilization of Crete (c. 3000 - 1100 B.C.) than has been written about other ancient societies. In what has been referred to as a matrilineal society in which the dominant religious figure was the goddess, women had a higher status than in the hierarchical, god-centred civilizations that followed.⁶ There are artistic depictions of a number of physically recreative activities in the culture: acrobatics, tumbling, bull grappling and the so-termed "taureador" sports, hunting and fishing, dancing, boxing, wrestling, and board games. Of these, the "taureador" sports are perhaps the most well-known, and the most famous of these was bull vaulting/leaping in which women played a major role. The "Taureador Fresco," dating from approximately 2000 B.C., depicts three acrobats (two female and one male) in the reli-



gious celebration with the sacred bull.⁷



Reprinted from Arthur Evans, *The Palace of Minos at Knossos*.

Classical Antiquity

In the cultures of classical antiquity, there is more explicit evidence from literature and the plastic arts that provides information concerning the participation of women in physical recreation. The epic literature of both India and Greece suggests that women enjoyed recreational games. In *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, (written between 500 - 200 B.C.), there is mention of several minor games in which women participated.⁸ Earliest Greek literature also suggests that some women occasionally participated in recreational games. In Homer's *Odyssey*, Princess Nausisca and her maids were described as playing a simple game of ball. Following the epic age, classical societies in China, India, Greece, and Rome created a variety of physically recreative activities in which females participated. From its earliest origins in the Yellow River Valley, the Chinese enjoyed a rich sporting culture which included a variety of activities: wrestling and the martial arts, rowing, dancing, many different ball games and acrobatic performances. Later, during the Han (206 B.C.-220 A.D.) and Tang (618-907 A.D.) dynasties, generally regarded as the apex of the ancient Chinese culture, women's position was inferior to that of men and the practice of foot-binding prevented vigorous physical activities.

However, the literature suggests that women danced and some were excellent swordswomen,⁹ and sculpture depicts women dancing and playing music, while others are shown playing a game of football known as *cugiu* and polo referred to as *jiqiu*.¹⁰ Literature suggests that a game known as Ch'iu Ch'ien (much like a child's swing) became very popular among ladies of the Imperial Court during the Han Dynasty.¹¹



Young female polo player preparing to hit the ball.
Tang Dynasty 8th century
National Museum of Asian Arts,
Guimet, Paris.

In the ancient Indian civilization of the Mauryan Dynasty, which flourished from approximately 320 B.C. to 183 B.C., many physical activities were created for spiritual well-being as well as military and recreational purposes. From a book entitled *Arthashastra* (200 B.C.), we learn that both men and women played ball games. In southern India, women played a game called *Ammanai*, juggling with shells or stones that was practised predominantly by women in rural areas. And both men and women played a game known as *Pallanguzhi*, a board game using seeds or shells as coins.¹² Hunting, dancing, yoga, dicing, and a variety of children's amusements are also mentioned in the literature. Of these, dancing is the one activity for which there is evidence to suggest that women were participants. Both religious and secular dance were popular; women danced in the temples and performed at marriages and banquets.¹³

In comparison with China and India, more is known about the physically recreative activities of women in the classical societies of Greece and Rome. The legends and myths of ancient Greece describe a culture that admired physical strength and skill in females. In these stories, goddesses hunted and drove chariots, and the Amazons were reported to have been excellent riders, hunters, and archers. Numerous goddesses were associated with sport by virtue of their own physical strength and prowess or as patrons of sport.¹⁴ And the women of Sparta, who enjoyed comparatively more freedom than other Greek women, were physically trained and educated for eugenic purposes and allowed to dance at public festivals. Their activities included dancing, running, jumping, ball playing, wrestling, and throwing the javelin and discus. From Aristophanes' comedy *Lysistrata* (line 82) and a Greek lexicographer named Pollux (4.102), we know that Spartan women also engaged in an acrobatic leg exercise of jumping and kicking one's own buttocks with the heels.¹⁵ Greek historian and geographer Pausanias is the only other literary source of information concerning the physical activities of women. According to Pausanias, women were excluded from the sporting practises of ancient Greece, as they were excluded from much of public life.¹⁶

The words of Cyniska, the daughter of a Spartan king, offer further evidence of the exclusion of women. The following is inscribed on the base of a monument at Olympia, commemorates Cyniska's second victory in the *quadriga* race (a race of a four-horse chariot) in 396. B.C.

*I, Cyniska, who descend from Spartan Kings,
Place this stone to mark
The race I won with my quick-footed
steeds
The only woman in all of Greece to win.*¹⁷



Pausanias also writes that Cyniska had the privilege of owning, training, and even entering horses in public festivals as long as she used male drivers.¹⁸ However, she, like all other females, was barred from attending and competing in any of the Panhellenic festivals of ancient Greece. Women were allowed to compete in their own creation, the Heraia, often referred to as the Herean Games. These Games included footraces created either by Hippodameia or a council of sixteen women of Elis who, during the 6th century B.C., undertook to bring peace to the land of the Eleans.¹⁹ Held every four years at Olympia in honor of Hera, the wife of Zeus, the Games consisted of a foot-race in which females competed in three categories: children, adolescents, and young women. These were not the only games for women in antiquity; there were others also connected with religious ceremonies in such city-states as Sparta and Cyrene.²⁰



Scene from a vase painting of a women's race, Musei Vaticani. Reprinted from Nicolaos Yalouris, *The Ancient Games in Olympic Greece*.

In comparison to Greece, women enjoyed greater economic, political, and social freedom in the Roman civilization. Paintings show Etruscan women playing music and dancing, as women had done for centuries. Later, Roman women were allowed to attend the horse and chariot races at the *Circus Maximus*, the gladiatorial events at the Colosseum, and to

bathe at the *thermae*, the public baths. It has been concluded that some women were also allowed to participate in exercises, as evidenced by the 4th century mosaic referred to as "The Bikini Girls" from Piazza Armerina in Sicily, which depicts women running, using dumbbells, playing with a ball, and throwing a discus.²¹



Mosaic from the Villa Romana de Casale, Piazza Armerina.

Other women were engaged as gladiators from the time of Nero,²² and reference to lady fencers, athletes, and gladiators is made by Satire VI of Juvenal, a well-known satirist of the first century A.D.²³

Medieval and Renaissance Europe

There is little evidence of physical recreation in the early Middle Ages in Europe, although there is some evidence to suggest that dance was a means of religious expression for women in the western world. The writings of Sedonius, a 5th century bishop and poet, also suggest that women played chess and other board games and engaged in several varieties of ball games.²⁴ Later chivalric education became the form of physical education for men. Of course, women were not physically educated, nor did they participate in the chivalric contests, although they were allowed to attend these contests just as women in the 11th century court life of Heian Japan were spectators at the polo games, horse races, and football matches of the upper-class male.²⁵

In the later Middle Ages, the sports of the upper class were altogether different from the pastimes of the peasants. The male feudal aristocracy participated in horse racing, organized hunting and hawking on horseback, billiards, and shuffleboard. In addition to dancing which was becoming widely popular, upper class women engaged in hawking and several varieties of ball games which were popular among the nobility, most notably the French game of *la soule* and *jeu de paume*.²⁶ The *pallio*, a horserace and a footrace, were the favourite sports of many medieval Italian communities, and women were known to have participated in these footraces during this time.²⁷ Peasant pastimes included football, wrestling, bowls, and stoolball, which was a game originally created and played by milkmaids. The paintings and etchings by artists of this era, most notably Dürer and Bruegel, depict a great variety of these activities, and the legal, literary and artistic evidence from this time make it apparent that women participated in archery, bathing, boating, chess, drinking, hawking, hunting, ice skating, riding, and attended fairs and other recreations.²⁸

With the rebirth of humanism in Europe came the rebirth of ideas concerning physical education and sport. Many sports were enjoyed by the nobility of Europe. Archery, cock-fighting, and bull and bear baiting were popular in England. *Jeu de paume* became the courtly game of tennis and nearly every city in France had a tennis court. An interest in fencing developed as warfare changed. And the courts of Europe enjoyed dances at lavish balls and parties. Dancing and fencing masters were employed in court schools and lavish balls, masquerades, ballets, and tournaments were fashionable. Perhaps the activities of the queens

of this time provide insight into the activities of the female nobility. The Scots loved golf and Mary, Queen of Scots, is reported to have enjoyed golf. Elizabeth I and her court enjoyed bear baiting and hunting. She was known to have been an excellent horsewoman and skilled with a cross-bow. It is likely that other upper-class women participated in tennis, archery, fencing, bowling, and hunting that were popular during this era. Outside of Renaissance Europe, paintings depict women participating in a variety of activities during the 16th century. Women of the upper class, who enjoyed considerable leisure and privilege, were able to engage in popular activities of the day in various cultures. Paintings depict Nordic women stag hunting on skis, Japanese women fishing, and Indian women playing polo.²⁹



A queen and her female slaves playing polo. Mughal Mss. *Dárábnáma*, c. 1580. By permission of the British Library, (Or 4615) London. Reprinted from Sally Fox, *The Sporting Woman*.

Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries

During this era, the earliest attempts to institutionalize sport in Europe began, however, most physically recreative activities continued to be largely informal and associated with holidays, festivals, and other celebrations.³⁰ And while the participation of women in these activities continued to be less than that of men, much evidence suggests that they continued,

as they had in previous centuries, to engage in a vast array of activities. They were spectators at horseraces, prize fights and cricket matches in England. They played bowls, billiards, shuffleboard and battledore, and occasionally played cricket. A few women were prize fighters, wrestlers, and pedestrians.³¹ Prints and paintings from several countries in Europe depict women skating, ice sledding, sleighing, dancing, riding, hunting, and playing a variety of parlour games. Paintings of upper-class women in France and Germany depict women in hot air balloons. Royal ladies in India are shown hunting wild game. And, in Japan, women of the upper class are shown playing football.³²



Girls Kicking a Football. Edo Period. By Tsuneyuki (1676-174 1). Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D. C.

Native American women danced and played ball games, and early American women engaged in physical activities as leisure permitted. They danced, played cards and board games, and were spectators at boxing matches and horseraces. Others played cricket, paddled their own canoes, and participated in horseraces. Paintings and etchings show that upper class women in the Colonies enjoyed pastimes similar to their European counterparts.³³

Conclusion

The physically recreative pastimes of women have varied considerably from the earliest cultures to the beginning of the 19th century, as they have also varied from one culture to the next. Participation was often determined by social class and the availability of leisure. In the hierarchical structure of these societies, women were often excluded from male activities, yet they nonetheless found expression and pleasure most often in dance, music, swimming, board games, and cultural rituals. A limited few, like the bull-leapers of ancient Crete, the Spartan women, and the ladies of the nobility were able to enjoy more vigorous physical activities.

The 19th century gave birth to modern sport, and, as the Modern Olympics made evident, women were excluded from male sporting practices. Many decades passed before women could enter the modern sporting world. The physically recreative pastimes of the previous centuries, however, are a part of the sporting traditions of women throughout the world.

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¹ Contemporary sport is typically defined as an institutionalized, highly-structured, rule-bound physical contest. According to Roberta J. Park ("From 'Genteel Diversions' to 'Bruising Peg': Active Pastimes, Exercise, and Sports for Females in Late 17th- and 18th - Century Europe," in Costa, D. Margaret and Guthrie, Sharon R. *Women and Sport: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. Champaign, ILL: Human Kinetics, 1994, 28), the term sport, as it was initially used, designated a variety of activities that gave enjoyment or recreation.

² It is interesting to note that a public bath or swimming pool existed at Mohenjo-daro, one of two early settlements, with evidence to suggest that this pool was for public use (K. Rajagopalan, "Early Indian Physical Education," in Earle F Zeigler, *A History of Sport and Physical Education to 1900* (Champaign, ILL: Stipes Publishing Company, 1973) 45-55.

³ Uriel Simri, "The Ball Games of Antiquity," in Zeigler, 1973, 93-99.

⁴ Maxwell L. Howell and Reet Howell. "Physical Activities and Sport in Early Societies," in Zeigler, Earle F. *History of Physical Education and Sport* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1979), 1-56.

⁵ *Ibid*, 14.

⁶ Riane Eisler, *The Chalice and the Blade* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988).

⁷ Denise Palmer and Maxwell L. Howell, "Sports and Games in Early Civilizations," in Zeigler, 1973, 21-34.

⁸ Rajagopalan, 50.

⁹ Deobold B. Van Dalen and Bruce L. Bennett, *A World History of Physical Education* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1971) 14.

¹⁰ International Olympic Committee, *5000 Years of Sport in China: Art and Tradition* (Lausanne: Musée Olympique, 1999).

¹¹ Kohsuke Sasajima, "Early Chinese Physical Education and Sport," in Zeigler, 1973, 35-44.

¹² Rajagopalan, 50.

¹³ Van Dalen and Bennett, 22-23.

¹⁴ Among the more notable of these were Hera, Demeter, Artemis, and

Athena. According to Drees, L. *Olympia* (New York: Prager, 1968), there is an altar to Demeter at Olympia, but the connection between the goddess and the Olympic Games is not known. Artemis, sister of Apollo, was the goddess of all wild animals and associated with hunting. As the goddess of war and the protector of cities such as Athens, Sparta, Troy, and Argos, Athena was often celebrated at festivals and races.

¹⁵ Clarence A. Forbes, "The Spartan Agoge," in Zeigler, 1973, 134.

¹⁶ Not only were they excluded from participating in sporting activities; they were not allowed to attend the ancient Olympic Games or other sporting festivals. A legend informs us of their exclusion. Kallipateira, a mother of a young wrestler who wanted to see her son's contest, dressed as a trainer and was allowed entry into Olympia. It was discovered that she was a female when she jumped up in celebration of her son's victory. The punishment for women who came to the Games was death; however, Kallipateira was allowed to live because there had been many Olympic champions in her family.

¹⁷ Translated by Tom Dodge in *A Literature of Sports* (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Company, 1980).

¹⁸ According to Joachim Ebert, *Griechischen und Hippischen Agonen* (Berlin: Academic Verlag, 1972, 110-111), it was Cyniska who commissioned, and perhaps wrote, what Appeleas, an artist inscribed on the monument. Ebert writes that, according to Pausanias, Cyniska and her brother, Agesilaos, wanted to show the citizens of Sparta that women could own, breed, and train horses. The equestrian events displayed as well the wealth of families (Pausanias, Book III, 8, I).

¹⁹ Nicolaos Yalouris. *The Olympic Games in Ancient Greece* (Athens: Ekdotike Athenon S.A., 1976) 78.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 171.

²¹ Reet A. Howell and Maxwell L. Howell, "Women in Leisure Activities in Ancient Greece and Rome," *Medicine and Sport Science*, vol. 24, 83-100. It is important to note that the mosaic is located in a villa for the wealthy, and it is likely that only women of the upper class engaged in such exercises.

²² *Ibid*, 95.

²³ Robert J. Higgs and Neil D. Isaacs. *The Sporting Spirit: Athletes in Literature and Life* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, inc., 1977) 140.

²⁴ June Kennard and John Marshall Carter, "In the Beginning: The Ancient and Medieval Worlds," in Costa and Guthrie, 15-26.

²⁵ Lady Murasaki Shikibu, *The Tale of Genji*, trans. Arthur Waley (Cambridge: Riverside Press, n.d.).

²⁶ Kennard and Carter, 23.

²⁷ Van Dalen and Bennett, 113-115.

²⁸ Kennard and Carter, 24.

²⁹ Refer to Sally Fox, *The Sporting Woman A Book of Days* (London: Bulfinch Press, 1989) for reproductions of these paintings.

³⁰ Park, 30.

³¹ *Ibid*, 30-35.

³² Refer to Fox.

³³ For a more complete discussion of the pastimes of women in 17th and 18th century America, refer to Nancy L. Struna, "The Recreational Experiences of Early American Women", in Costa and Guthrie, pp. 45-62 and Nancy L. Struna, *People of Prowess: Sport, Leisure, and Labor in Early Anglo-America* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996).