

## THE DEBATE OVER STRENUOUS SPORTS FOR GIRLS IN THE EARLY 1900s

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### Arguments for Strenuous Sports for Girls

Strenuous sports for girls were supported as a means for social advancement. Many feminists and their sympathisers promoted these sports as part of a broader movement towards an extended social role for females, which also included proposals for greater female participation in higher education and professional employment. One such advocate was *Argus* columnist 'Old Boy' who praised ladies' cricket for its contribution to the 'emancipation of woman'. Specifically, as another correspondent to the same newspaper wrote, outdoor games such as this emancipated girls by freeing them from the isolation of their homes where only physically sedate activities could be undertaken.

Another reason for the promotion of vigorous games for girls was racial superiority. Writing to the *Argus*, 'Ardent Hockeyite' contended that it was through these games that Australian girls attained physical pre-eminence on an international scale. In the same vein, a columnist for *Punch* perceived that the gradual progression of females in outdoor sports would nearly guarantee the strength and health of future Australian women. Physical culture expert Eugen Sandow also discussed the link between competitive outdoor sports and racial superiority. In a period when Australians and Britons fought together in the Boer War and became suspicious of increasing German and Japanese military power, Miss Dove, headmistress of the English girls' school Wycome Abbey, explained the penultimate reason for the Australian and British calls for female racial superiority through vigorous games. She was convinced these games were chiefly, if not totally, responsible for British global supremacy. Thus, the continuity of the British Empire was seen to depend upon vigorous games for both male and female students.

Paradoxically, these games were recommended on the grounds they would make girls both womanly and manly. Defending cricket as an activity becoming of ladies, 'Old Boy' wrote they could play it in a dignified manner. Likewise, famous Australian swimmer Annette Kellermann and a *New Idea* columnist declared that swimming was a graceful sport. The same claim was made for tennis by champion Australian player Lily Addison.

Conversely, girls were also supposed to gain manly characteristics through strenuous sports. As historian Ray Crawford states, one of these was mateship. This quality was desired by *Argus* letter-writer 'Eye Witness' and Melbourne rowing enthusiast Mrs E McGregor when they extolled strenuous games for girls as encouraging camaraderie. Mateship was also sought by Gwynneth Morris, sports mistress at Melbourne Church of England Girls' Grammar School and James Bee, Headmaster at Presbyterian Ladies' College, Melbourne, both of whom stressed that a major benefit of team games for girls was development of '*esprit de corps*'.

Another manly attribute reputedly fostered by girls playing vigorous games was courage. A *New Idea* reporter thought this trait was acquired by girls playing hockey. Likewise, in the *Argus*, 'Old Boy' commended girls' hockey for forcing its participants to be fearless by not allowing space for cowards on the field. Learning to accept defeat on the sportsfield like gentlemen was also desired for schoolgirls. Elsie Morres, headmistress of Geelong Church of England Girls' Grammar School, viewed losses at such games as valuable for teaching how to cope with failure. Similarly, a *New Idea* cartoonist depicted members of a vanquished girls' hockey team graciously cheering their conquerors showed sporting schoolgirls could be admired in defeat as well as victory.

Physiological arguments were also advanced in favour of vigorous games for girls. Hockey was praised for developing the physique of girls by a *New Idea* columnist, Gwynneth Morris and *Argus* correspondents. Some supporters of strenuous sports for young ladies went even further by providing details of physiological benefits they thought these sports would bring. Gwynneth Morris was one such advocate. She stated that hockey strengthened a girl's muscles and improved her respiration and circulation. Similarly, Annette Kellermann contended that swimming expanded a young lady's lungs and strengthened her heart.

A final ground for proposing energetic outdoor activities for girls was educational. Gwynneth Morris encouraged field games because she felt they had a positive influence on the minds of girls. Others elucidated upon how vigorous games would assist girls with their study. Effie Simpson was amongst their number. Founding principal of Mentone Girls' Grammar School in Melbourne, she extolled competitive games for preparing her pupils for academic rivalry. Such games for schoolgirls were also supported by Mary Morris, co-principal of Melbourne Girls' Grammar School, as she believed their 'discipline' facilitated proper study habits.

Coping with pressure was seen as another quality inherent in strenuous sports and transferable to the female academic realm. Interviewed on the benefits of hockey, Gwynneth Morris remarked hockey girls usually received the highest examination marks because they could endure long, intensive study unlike girls who did not take up the sport.

Most importantly for academic purposes, competitive sports for girls were promoted on the ground they encouraged rational thinking. Gwynneth Morris praised the scientific dimensions of schoolgirl hockey, which included various strokes and team formations, 'Old Boy' was another who lauded female hockey as a systematic game that attracted intellectual participants. Specifically, he believed it engendered thinking through requiring players to precisely judge the ball and speed of opponents,

### **Arguments against Strenuous Sports for Girls**

For each type of argument supporting vigorous games for young ladies, there was often a counter-argument. The social argument supporting female liberation through such games was rejected by patriarchal conservatives in favour

of maintenance of separate spheres for the sexes, 'One of the Old School' complained in a letter to the *Argus* about adolescent females engaging in 'rough and boyish' hockey matches and suggested they play the more lady-like game of croquet instead. Writing for the *Herald*, a like-minded fellow criticized 'woman's invasion of sport' and described women's cricket as 'female "flannelled foolishness"'. Conversely, vigorous games for girls were also criticised by some feminists who viewed such games as less important than political considerations. A visiting American feminist to Australia, Jessie Ackermann informed Australian girls that they would have to give up some of the time that they devoted to sports and redirect it towards reflection upon what their station in life should be.

Physiological damage was purported to occur to girls who took part in strenuous sports. These girls were claimed to hinder their motherhood prospects. The mother of a pupil at Melbourne Church of England Girls' Grammar School, barred her daughter from playing hockey for fear inappropriate development of abdominal muscles would cause future childbirth problems.

But, even when development of all muscles was sought, some people still deemed energetic games undesirable for girls. Eugen Sandow was a member of this group of critics. Arguing for gymnastics as the best form of female muscular development, he disparaged every type of game by stating that to exercise all four hundred muscles in their bodies, ladies would have to play all existing sports which was temporally and physically impossible. Another physical culture authority, Clarence Weber, supported him by claiming years of tennis playing would not do as much to improve female physique as three months of scientific physical culture.

Finally, all games for schoolgirls were opposed on educational grounds. As Crawford writes, a curriculum designed to develop 'the intellectual abilities' of schoolgirls accorded 'a low status' to every physical pursuit. Thus it was that a number of girls' school principals predominantly interested in the academic performance of their pupils cautioned against games. Dr Wilson, Mr McLaren and Mr Bee, all headmasters at Presbyterian Ladies College in Melbourne, issued this warning when they stated that games would remain subordinate to study at the school. In doing so, they displayed a preference for academic rivalry with boys over athletic rivalry with other girls.

### **Conclusions**

Radical and conservative arguments were presented both in support of and opposition to strenuous sports for girls in early twentieth-century Australia. Analysing supporting arguments, claims that involvement in vigorous games would lead to liberation, manliness and academic improvement for young ladies were radical whilst suggestions female participation in these games would maintain the femininity and racial superiority of Australian girls were conservative. Interestingly, these supporting radical and conservative arguments were often made by the same people. Examining opposing arguments, rejection of strenuous sports as hindering female political and scholastic progress were radical whilst dismissal of such sports for subverting the notion of

separate social spheres for the sexes and as physically unsuitable were conservative. At times, supporters and opponents of strenuous sports for young ladies had the same goal, such as retaining femininity, encouraging feminism or raising the academic level of schoolgirls, but differed on how best to achieve it.

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