

Ellen W. Gerber, et al., *The American Woman in Sport*, Addison-Wesley, 1974.

*The American Woman in Sport* is by far the best and most definitive work yet written about a substantial athletic minority. Although it focusses on the American woman in sport from a comprehensive multi-disciplinary perspective, there is sufficient universality in the content to make it of interest, and indeed of great value, to anyone concerned with the more general topic of women in sport.

The book has been written by four authors each eminently qualified to analyze female sport involvement within the American culture from the perspective of their own sub-discipline. Ellen Gerber, an established sport historian, has contributed an historical survey of the American woman's participation in sport. In the second section Jan Felshin presents an interesting sociological analysis of the dialectic between woman and sport, and links it to a feminist oriented social commentary on the role of women in sport. Pearl Berlin, who is actively engaged in research into the motivational aspects of female athleticism, has written a comprehensive summary of what we know and do not know about sportswomen from a psychological standpoint. The last section, written by physiologist Waneen Wyrick, provides a thorough look at the bio-physical characteristics of women athletes. Concluding each section is an extensive bibliography which in most cases contains references to the many theses and dissertations now in abundance as academic interest in the sportswoman increases dramatically. Certainly one of the most useful features of the book is a very comprehensive name and

subject index, a necessity when dealing with an eclectic subject like women in sport.

Why was this book written? As the authors point out, it was written first and foremost "to answer the need for information" about sport for American women, since much of what has been written in the past has focussed on men's sport thereby providing, in their view, a distorted and incomplete understanding of athletes and sport in American society. They also argue that those involved in the decision-making processes within women's sport programmes need far more valid information than is currently available upon which to base sound judgements. To some extent, they hope their book will fill the void.

Ellen Gerber, in her section entitled "Chronicle of Participation" presents a fascinating account documenting the changing patterns of the American woman's participation in sport through three distinct time periods: the nineteenth century, the golden decade of 1925 to 1935, and the contemporary era. What is so worthwhile about this historical summary is the attempt to relate the growth of women's sport to the social and political climate of the times (for example, feminism), and to chronicle the events from several different perspectives (for example, sport costuming, sponsorship and promotion, Olympic competition, collegiate sport, and specific sport histories). Gerber's survey is not the usual boring, chronological approach to sport history; it is a superbly written, detailed narrative, laced with anecdotes and perceptive comments. There is a liberal use of figures and tables for the reader who feels more comfortable about historical statistics when they are displayed graphically. No one could read this section without recognizing that American women have a substantive sporting heritage, and it is a shame that the story of Canadian women in sport has not been documented to the same extent and in similar fashion.

Jan Felshin's section on "The Social View" was somewhat of a disappointment, less so because of the material it contained than because of the way it was written. Much of the essential meaning in the first chapter entitled "The Dialectic of Woman and Sport" is lost due to the use and misuse of sociological concepts. The reader cannot help but associate some of Felshin's terminology with what Stanislaw Andreski calls "nebulous verbosity" (*Social Sciences as Sorcery*, London: Andre Deutsch, 1972). What does Felshin actually mean; for example, when she states: Social constructs serve to summarize and explain the pervasive connotations of common agreement, and include the normative data of collective experience" (p. 179) or "The notion of the institutionalization of human activity has to do with culture as a contextual design" (page 183)? No one should be expected to read a sentence two or three times in order to grasp its meaning; this, in fact, destroys the intended meaning.

Nonetheless, the sociological analysis in *The American Woman in Sport* does contain some very important information and Felshin is at her best when she analyzes the status ascribed to women in sport within a social context, within the educational institutions, as well as individual women in sport. Her commentary abounds with examples and case

studies which makes for interesting reading. In the last chapter, Felshin turns her attention to the participation of women in sport as a social comment and here she examines the quantity and quality of women's sport coverage by the American media as well as the social significance of the images portrayed. Felshin does not try to hide her bias towards feminism and the resultant insight is refreshing.

In her section on "The Woman Athlete", Pearl Berlin is concerned primarily with the psychological make-up of women athletes: personality traits, motivational factors, attitudes, perceptions, and so on. It is an excellent, comprehensive summary of past and current psychological research into female sport involvement, but more important Berlin sets forth some viable recommendations as to future research. A thorough study of her section would be mandatory for anyone contemplating a research study in this area.

The final section on the biophysical perspectives written by Waneen Wyrick is very similar to Berlin's psychological section in that it attempts to survey the research literature, dispel the myths surrounding female performance, and seek out the factual evidence. She does an exceptional job of amassing considerable data, categorizing and synthesizing, and more important, presenting the material in a highly readable form. Even social scientists should find it fascinating and extremely pertinent to their own studies. The section is complete with attractive and meaningful illustrative material which enhances rather than complicates the text.

The book does have one serious limitation which was intentional on the part of the authors. As they point out in the Preface, their subject is the "woman" in sport, meaning females of college age or beyond, and no information has been included concerning adolescents and young girls. One certainly should not be critical of this, it merely needs to be recognized.

No doubt much in *The American Woman in Sport* will become obsolete in a matter of years as scholarly and imaginative research becomes more prevalent. It does not matter. Drs. Gerber, Felshin, Berlin and Wyrick have provided enough information, enough insight, and enough questions to keep researchers busy for years, and more important, they have set forth in rational, objective and sympathetic terms the information upon which major decisions facing women in sport today should be based. Their work is outstanding.

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