

Lenskyj, Helen. *Out of Bounds: Women, Sport and Sexuality*. Toronto: The Women's Press, 1986. Pp. 145. Notes, selected bibliography, illustrations. \$12.95 (paper).

Canadian Helen Lenskyj concludes her introduction to *Out of Bounds: Women, Sport and Sexuality* with: "It is to be hoped that by understanding women's sporting heritage and by becoming alert to the ways in which sport has been, and continues to be, coopted for the purpose of male control over female sexuality and the female reproductive function, women will be strengthened in the struggle for autonomy in sport" (p. 14). This sentence encapsulates both the theme and the jeremiadic tone of Lenskyj's short, well-written book. As a feminist, Lenskyj finds much that must be changed in women's sport, and her discussions of the relationship between sport, femininity and sexuality are provocative.

Lenskyj's analysis of the sportswoman begins in the late nineteenth century with an examination of the influential role male physicians assumed in the debate over appropriate physical activity for women. Lenskyj argues that the Victorian medical community conspired to establish woman's intellectual and physical inferiority through their pronouncements that sport "wasted vital force, strained female bodies and fostered traits unbecoming to true womanhood" (p. 18). Lenskyj first examines the medically accepted theory of Vitalism which held that each human organism possessed a finite amount of energy or "vital force" and that women should expend these reserves only in motherhood and service to the family and community. She then moves on to the turn of the century, when the medical community began to recommend participation in certain forms of exercise as a means to improve women's health and childbearing capacities. Lenskyj argues that these concessions on the part of the medical establishment only opened the door for further male intervention in the gynecological lives of western women. The medical literature on such subjects as amenorrhea, dysmenorrhea, delayed menarche, masturbation, uterine displacement as a result of "violent" exercise (such as jumping), and the question of exercise during the menstrual period was filled with warnings. Lenskyj documents this point with older as well as more modern evidence and argues that male-dominated medicine has had a lasting and harmful effect on the full participation of women in sport.

Lenskyj next examines twentieth century developments in psychiatry and psychology, maintaining that these fields expanded the ideological ground controlled by medical professionals "as female sexuality became differentiated from the reproductive function that had formerly been the focus of medical attention" (p. 55). But when she begins her discussion of the ways in which journalists and members of the physical education community reinforced the heterosexist classification of certain sports as "feminine" and others as "masculine," she begins to go astray. For one thing, she mistakenly cites *fin de siècle* health reformer Bernarr Macfadden as "one of the few advocates of women's physical activity who did not use femininity or preparation for motherhood as

rationales" (p. 63). [In her doctoral dissertation, *The Role of Physical Education in the Socialization of Girls in Ontario, 1890-1930* (University of Toronto, 1983), Lenskyj cites the same (May, 1900) article from *Physical Culture* as evidence of Macfadden's feminist leanings.] While it is certainly true that Macfadden went farther than most of his contemporaries in arguing for strength, muscularity and exercise for women, even a cursory reading of *Physical Culture*, and Macfadden's women's magazine of the same era, *Women's Physical Development*, leaves no doubts as to the primary reason for his interest in female exercise. For many decades he argued that exercise was essential for healthy motherhood and he used his own wife, Mary, as his prime example. But even though Lenskyj's failure to know this is indicative of careless scholarship, Macfadden's *true* agenda only serves to strengthen her central arguments, which are that sport and exercise were then considered to be acceptable activities for women only under certain medically prescribed criteria and that twentieth century sportswomen who did not conform to the medical warnings and/or the heterosexual conventions of marriage and child rearing were characterized as unfeminine tomboys and possible lesbians.

One of the most interesting, albeit unconvincing, aspects of Lenskyj's analysis is her discussion of the role played by drug and sex testing in stigmatizing elite female athletes. Lenskyj contends that the sex and chromosome tests adopted by the IOC and other sporting organizations to ensure that women athletes compete only against other women have a hidden agenda—the belief that “athletic achievement is not a characteristic of ‘real women.’” Therefore, she argues, “. . . the sexual identity of successful female athletes is automatically suspect” (p. 87). On the question of drug testing for anabolic steroids (male hormones) Lenskyj reasons that female offenders are more often subjected to ridicule and censure because of the virilizing effects of the drugs, which pose a threat to male sensibilities. She suggests, in fact, that “. . . the introduction of sex and drug testing failed to alleviate the problems of the female athlete.” One of the limitations of some feminist rhetoric is that it can put the jackboot to the rights of the majority. For instance, Lenskyj argues that the advent of both chromosome tests and steroid tests should primarily be seen as examples of male preference for “feminine” women and a means of maintaining male hegemony in sport as well as society. However, while there is no doubt that to some extent this is true, Lenskyj was apparently unaware of the fact that many sports governing bodies (largely composed of males) were reluctant to begin steroid testing until they were forced to do so by the continued, vociferous demands of non-steroid-using females for the right to fair, healthy competition. Had Lenskyj interviewed women, or read the popular literature, in sports such as bodybuilding and powerlifting, in which anabolic steroid testing was imposed only after considerable lobbying on the part of the non-steroid-using female competitors, she would, or should, have reached a different conclusion.

Lenskyj closes her book with a look at the modern fitness movement, observing that although “. . . most women probably experienced some health benefits from regular exercise, its liberating potential was marred by con-

servatism on the question of femininity and sexuality” (p. 127). Lenskyj faults the aerobic dance movement in particular for becoming yet another arena in which “women had to compete for male attention . . . dance exercise produced more prescriptions for heterosexual appeal” (p.129). She also dismisses women’s bodybuilding—seemingly the antithesis of the “feminine ideal”—as essentially non-feminist. Her discussion of women’s bodybuilding is the weakest part of her book. She chides bodybuilding author Charles Gaines for using descriptive terms such as “veiny,” “ridged,” “rippled,” and “vein-splayed” (although the same terms are often used by Gaines and others to describe male bodybuilding competitors), yet she seems to come down in favor of Gaines’ conclusion that the best path for women’s bodybuilding is to aim toward the “. . . unhindered development and competition of female muscle’ that the trend toward so-called masculine muscles represented” (p. 136). It is unfortunate that Lenskyj fails to follow up this discussion with an examination of the two most important cultural documents yet produced regarding women’s bodybuilding—Charles Gaines’ and George Butler’s *Pumping Iron II: The Unprecedented Woman* (New York, Simon and Schuster), which appeared in 1984, and the pseudodocumentary film of the same name released by the same authors the following year. In these works, Gaines and Butler argue eloquently for a “new breed” of woman bodybuilder—a large, broad-shouldered, narrow-hipped superwoman with each muscle group “. . . developed to its maximum potential, beyond any development we have ever seen on a woman” (Gaines and Butler, *Pumping Iron II*, p. 179). But there is a problem with this position, as there is with Lenskyj’s implicit support of it. The problem is that it posits an ideal—along with photos of a very heavily developed woman who most closely approaches that ideal—which perhaps only one in a million non-steroid-using women could ever hope to achieve. The fact is that bodybuilding does firm and change the physique, but without hormonal intervention the result of such training will be bodies more like the “smooth, sleek, well-toned and with sufficient body fat to ensure conventional shapeliness” (p. 136) bodies which Lenskyj denigrates as further evidence of the male cooption of women’s sport. She seems somehow to resent the fact that there are dramatic, non-cultural differences between men and women with respect to skeletal size and relative hormonal levels and what that size and those levels mean in terms of the potential men and women have for physical development and strength.

The issue of the aesthetic ideal in women’s bodybuilding is central to questions of feminism in the 1980s and Lenskyj should have devoted more space—and thought—to her analysis of the one sporting activity whose aim is to create a new aesthetic. It is crucial that sport theorists, especially feminists, not blindly champion an aesthetic ideal—as Gaines and Lenskyj have—which is beyond the reach of women who are unwilling to take male hormones to reach their “full potential.” The irony of having to take a male hormone to be a physically ideal woman is so overwhelming that it is surprising how many feminists—including Gloria Steinem—have been seduced by Gaines’ sophistry,

On balance, *Out of Bounds* is an interesting contribution to the field of feminist sport scholarship. Lenskyj is at her best when she discusses the dominating influence the medical establishment, the media, modern psychiatry and psychology have had on women's sporting lives. As an historian, however, she can be criticized because of her nearly total use of secondary source material and because of her lack of understanding of some of the secondary material she does examine. *Out of Bounds* is just that, an outsider's look over the boundary line of women's sport.

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