

Guttman, Allen. *Women's Sports: A History*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1992. Pp. x, 339. Photos. notes, bibliographical note, index. \$29.95, \$13.95 paperback.

The first scholarly survey of the history of women's sport in the western world, Allen Guttman's book is a landmark study. At a key moment in the development of the field of women's sport history, Guttman has written a

valuable synthesis which both draws together and draws upon the literature of the past 20 or so years. Conceptually and politically it also marks the point from which much of the research of the future is likely to diverge. Given the impact that feminist and gender studies have had in recent years, it is difficult to conceive that the author of any such future study will give as short shrift as the Guttman does to the power dynamics of gender, sexuality, and women's sport.

The book is divided into two parts. In the first, Guttman assiduously details the range of sporting endeavors in which women of various cultures and different periods of history have engaged. In so doing, he taps into a wealth of scholarship by European historians and thus adds considerably to the Anglo-American fund of knowledge on women's sport history. The survey begins with ancient Egypt and Etruria and ends with the Olympics of the mid 1970s. As the author is at some pains to point out in his introduction, and as he documents in his first six chapters, the historical record of women's sport did not begin with the nineteenth century. Nonetheless, it has to be said that before the nineteenth century, that record is somewhat sketchy. Guttman himself acknowledges that many gaps remain—for instance, his discussion of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is restricted to England. This incompleteness reflects in large part the state of the secondary literature upon which Guttman has relied to write his survey. Most historians of women's sport have concentrated their attention on the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and, therefore, it is not surprising to find that the most substantive chapters in *Women's Sports* deal with those periods.

Guttman positions himself contrary to most of the recent scholarship on the Victorian period. He has little time for the “conventional wisdom[s]” of revisionist (that is, feminist) historians who have argued that Victorian women's bodies and physicality were subject to patriarchal controls. He rejects what he terms the “social control” interpretations of Helen Lenskyj, Jennifer Hargreaves, and Patricia Vertinsky, arguing that these are implausible because they are used to explain such very diverse behaviors as mid-nineteenth-century prescriptions against female activity and late-nineteenth-century advocacy of the same. He has less difficulty accepting the idea that during the nineteenth century, ideologies of domesticity and separate spheres converged with Social Darwinist theories to provide a rationale for constrained and controlled physical activity for women in order that they might be better wives and mothers. This, surely, is the central thrust of the feminist scholarship that he dismisses and that he rather unfairly characterises as reductionist. Vertinsky, certainly, and several others have emphasized the complex and contradictory nature of the debate surrounding Victorian women's sport and while the theme of male control of female physicality, sexuality, and reproduction is a dominant one in their work, it is by no means presented as the sole determinant. Equally, and in keeping with their attention to women's agency, the theoretical stance taken by these scholars inclines more to cultural hegemony than social control. I would

concur with Guttmann that there are grounds for questioning the degree to which gender ideologies such as the cult of debility constrained women's behavior, but I would also like to see him enter into a fuller debate with feminist scholars who are attempting to theorize such issues.

In the second, and briefer, part of the book, Guttmann examines the "revolutionary" nature of change in women's sport since the 1970s and what he identifies as three contemporary controversies: the relative performances of female and male athletes, drug-enhanced performances and the "masculinization" of women athletes, and the erotic aspects of sport. It is in his discussion of this final topic that Guttmann addresses most directly a theme that runs throughout the book: the connection between women, sport, and sexual attractiveness. Here he is prepared to accord feminist critiques of contemporary sport some credibility, agreeing that female athletes are objectified when men eroticise them; that promoters and advertisers use sexually attractive female athletes to sell their products and services; and that the media unduly emphasize sportswomen's appearance and trivialise their performance. These concerns notwithstanding, Guttmann remains largely unsympathetic to feminist analyses which go beyond surface criticism and attempt to connect issues in women's sport with broader, enduring patterns of male hegemony. He insists that eroticism is an essential aspect of sport and counters claims that it is an aspect which might contribute to the exploitation and oppression of women by arguing that "there does seem to be some biological justification for mutual attraction between men and women" (p. 263). Recognizing this need not, Guttmann continues, "be tantamount to 'compulsory heterosexuality' if we are ready also to recognize . . . that men and women can also be moved, stirred, excited, and sometimes erotically attracted by athletes of their own sex." The points are well taken but must be qualified by noting two salient facts: firstly, that mutuality may not enter at all into the relationship between a person and the object of that person's eros, and, secondly, that the gender and sexual politics of our culture being what they are, homoeroticism and homosexuality are not accorded the same legitimacy as heterosexuality. In each case, some consideration really must be given to the issue of power.

To paraphrase Guttmann, what one makes of *Women's Sports* depends very much on one's philosophical and political stance. Feminists, particularly those of a more radical stripe, are likely to find it contentious—but that is one of the book's great virtues. It is also thoroughly researched and documented, finely crafted and written; in short, as I have already intimated, a major contribution to the scholarship in this field.

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