
FESTLE, MARY JO. *Playing Nice: Politics and Apologies in Women's Sports*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996. Pp. xxviii, 379. Index, photos. \$29.95 cb.

Playing Nice: Politics and Apologies in Women's Sports is a meticulously researched foray into women's tempestuous relationship with collegiate and professional sports in American society since 1950. Festle has utilized the documents of the organizations that ruled women's sports and the publications that promoted their beliefs. In a sense, it is a policy history of "ruling bodies" that have governed women's sports. This is one of its main strengths. The primary theoretical question that frames *Playing Nice* involves "the dualistic trap that had forced women [athletes and administrators] to choose between either being equal to men or different from men" (p. 164). Festle answers these questions of policy and identity for women's sports by examining tennis, basketball, and college sports. Across these three areas she asks what programs and opportunities existed and who made them possible.

For each time period, Festle provides a strong cultural context in which to understand public sentiment toward women's sports. The strict sex-role duality of the 1950s and its rampant homophobia informed that era as persuasively as the women's liberation movement informed the passage of Title IX and the politicization of the once-cautious female leadership in women's sports. Hence, *Playing Nice* describes "the ways women athletes were treated and judged in the past, as well as how they reacted to those circumstances" (p. xxii). Not surprisingly, policy and "unnecessarily restrictive gender roles" have been the "biggest oppressor in women's sports" (p. xxiii).

Festle is at her best when describing the apologetic behavior adopted by women-run ruling bodies. In particular, female physical educators of the National

Section for Girls' and Women's Sports (NSGWS) of the 1950s worked from the premise that an excellent woman athlete was unappealing. This resulted in "play days" where the social values of good sportswomanship were valued over winning and individual excellence. Numerous other women-run organizations followed in this mode and perpetuated rules, clothing requirements, and explicit displays of femininity to undercut the incongruity of their athletes' sports involvement. For example, post-game teas and beauty contests (wherein a queen and her court were selected as part of the National Women's Basketball Championship) were established in order to disabuse the participating athletes of their oddity status. The brief mention of the fascinating ritualistic "proofs of femininity" leave the reader wanting both more detail and more analysis of them. While Festle is precise in her portrayal of female physical educators as violators of gender norms (since athletics was unfeminine), she at times seems hesitant to discuss or even speculate on the degree to which their own lives outside gender norms fueled their "rhetoric of normalcy." Certainly this would illuminate the cultural cross-fire physical educators who *were* lesbian experienced under the pressure to pose themselves and their athletes as heterosexual and feminine and hence "normal."

Also fascinating, though tantalizingly brief, is Festle's discussion of race-based attitudes toward women athletes. Quotations from the black press and community leaders reveal far more acceptance and heralding of the physical prowess of African American women athletes. Yet even these far-more-tolerant views had limits of acceptability. The section "Members Only" focuses on Althea Gibson's reluctant acceptance by the United States Lawn Tennis Association in 1950. Gibson certainly provides a fascinating case study, but Festle has whet our appetites for larger insights about black and white cultural attitudes toward non-elite black athletes; this is not fully explored. Despite this, Festle's contention that for black athletes the "sense of community ownership could become burdensome" (p. 62) is a compelling observation that affected not only Gibson, but contemporary African American athletes as well. Tennis, the author argues convincingly, despite Gibson's entrance, perpetuated racist, classist, and heterosexist beliefs.

The potpourri of organizations that have ruled women's sports in the modern era is dizzying. Festle clearly charts their usurpation one-by-the-other; as when the NSGWS is renamed the Division of Girls' and Women's Sports (DGWS) in 1956. In fact, there are so many name changes and subtle policy shifts that a close reading of the book creates the need for a visual chart that outlines the chronology and theoretical differences amongst these groups. There are precisely twenty-two such "ruling bodies" that are discussed throughout *Playing Nice*, and their individual machinations become blurred even to the most careful reader.

When discussing Cold War politics and the use of sports to denote political (and by inference pseudo-military) strength, Festle is brilliant. "Transitional Years" (1955–67) is one of the strongest analytical portions of the book. She demonstrates how Eastern and Western bloc female athletes were pitted against one another to define normalcy and hence cultural supremacy. Yet within this section no discussion occurs of the numerous charges of hermaphroditism—and the ensuing

exposes that rocked this debate. In this charged context, Russian women are labeled “muscle molls” and become the despised “other.” Naturally, female physical educators jumped on the government’s bandwagon for fitness, and the Commission for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (CIA/1966) managed to give new opportunities to female athletes *while perpetuating* gender conformity.

Title IX is aptly dubbed “the biggest thing to happen to sports since the invention of the whistle” (p. 133) by one clever observer. Festle traces the interplay between political feminism as espoused by the women’s liberation movement and the ways in which female sports administrators embraced, utilized, benefitted from, and promoted ideas of *separate* female athletic opportunity. Festle chronicles the National Collegiate Athletic Association’s (NCAA) change from blast disinterest to its blatant attempts to oust the female administrators of women’s sports. While doing so, she succeeds admirably in describing a gender-distinct view of sports for women that physical educators hoped to maintain. The Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (AIAW), a female-run “ruling body,” struggled mightily with the male-run NCAA for control of women’s sports and policy (e.g., scholarships, recruitment, and “female sensibility”). The attempted take-over by the NCAA’s Women’s Division strongly politicized female sports leaders to fight for administrative self-determination. Again, Festle excels at describing these inter-agency political wrestlings.

Somewhat less successful is her treatment of lesbianism and internalized homophobia. When discussing physical educators, Festle refers to their “subculture,” but we are given no glimpse of this beyond the professional level. Similarly, “Rebellion: Women’s Pro Tennis, 1968–1975” chronicles the bitter feuding between the United States Lawn Tennis Association and the “Slimsees” (Virginia Slims sponsored) renegades who formed their own autonomous, better-paying tour. Festle places the leadership and courage of Billie Jean King firmly in the center of this tumult through 1976. But the discussion of King’s “mistaken” lesbian affair, Martina Navratilova’s self-avowed lesbianism, and the toll these “exposés” took on women’s pro tennis is postponed for another eighty pages. This dislocation of homophobia from the fortunes of women’s tennis seems ahistorical and evasive.

Festle concludes by tracing the ongoing battles between the AIAW, the NCAA, Title IX, and college sports since the late 1970s. The determination and vision of its women administrators meant the AIAW “provided an alternative philosophy of sports and dedicated itself primarily to women” (p. 203). The AIAW strove for equality with, and *difference* from, male programs. Yet by 1985, the AIAW had ceased to exist and gone with it was its student-centered critique of the win-at-any-cost approach. Ultimately, the male model of winning, economic rewards, and athletics over scholastics won out. In fact, Festle argues, female athletes were allowed to share *resources*, but not *power* in setting the future course of athletics, an excellent distinction that she ably proves.

Women’s tennis in the 1980s continued the apologetic behavior its players and sponsors deemed necessary after the King and Navratilova revelations. Particularly interesting is Festle’s discussion of how the press used certain players—most notably Chris Evert—against the “more masculine” players to bolster the

appeal of women's tennis. This theme of divide and conquer—pitting women athletes against each other as normal vs. abnormal—resonates throughout this book. Yet tennis served as a beacon of success compared to the Women's Basketball League (WBL) of the 1980s, which failed due to gender-related attitudes, poor management, and, once again, the athletes' apologetic stance. The league's failure, Festle argues, "confirmed—along with the decline of the AIAW and the weakening of Title IX—that the movement for women's sports had stalled" (p. 264).

Festle's observations of women's sports in the 1990s is solid and at times distressing: homophobia and the ensuing self-imposed closeting by lesbian athletes and coaches abounds; misogynist attitudes about the abnormality of elite female athletes continue; some female athletes impose unrealistic and damaging body-image ideals buoyed by eating disorders in their quest to win; and controlling parents and coaches threaten the mental stability and health of some aspiring tennis proteges. Professional opportunities outside of tennis continue to be very few, women's basketball leagues have thudded to the ground repeatedly. Most disturbingly, coaching and administration has become male-dominated so that even the ethos of women's sport has been largely usurped by men. As one athletic director noted, "women's programs received about one-third of men's benefits and their female leaders steadily lost power" (p. 285). Equality, ultimately, meant sameness and lack of parity with men.

Festle's *Playing Nice* is a valuable, finely researched history of policy and identity for women's sports and its athletes. While I have suggested areas that would benefit from more interpretation or greater depth, it is nonetheless a tireless and comprehensive effort to recapture a distinct female vision of sports. It is valuable to scholars in the field and prompts sober realization of the difficulties women athletes face as we enter the next century.

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