
THEBERGE, NANCY. *Higher Goals: Women's Ice Hockey and the Politics of Gender*. SUNY Series on Sport, Culture, and Social Relations. Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York, 2000. Pp.iv + 182. Notes and appendices. \$14.95 pb.

Some sport historians, at first glance, might dismiss Nancy Theberge's *Higher Goals* because of its case study approach to examining fairly recent events. To do so however would be misguided. Theberge's ethnography of the Blades (a pseudonym) hockey organization of the Provincial Women's Hockey League (a pseudonym) during the 1992-93 and 1993-94 seasons has much to offer those interested in the not so new debates, issues, contradictions, and paradoxes that arise from female challenges to the male preserve of sport. The Blades' participation in a team sport at an elite level forces the ever-present tensions around femininity and athleticism to the surface. Moreover, Theberge's conclusions about the Blades prompt readers to grapple with an even larger conundrum; Is the Blades' presence in elite team sport a subversion of the dominant paradigm or a reinvigoration of it?

The book's chapters are woven around two themes, women's sports teams as communities and the Blades' attempts to challenge conventional notions of ice hockey as masculine space. The construction of the Blades' organization as community is largely the focus of the first half of the book. The notion of community is explored in the early chapters as Theberge provides a thorough account of Blades' perceptions of themselves and observations of opposing players and coaches. The Blades' fairly strict adherence to high performance standards on the ice and professional presentation off the ice, in the form of "classy" team jackets for example, provides outsiders with ammunition to both praise and condemn the organization for its firm attachment to the dominant (male) model of sport. Blades' personnel and other observers see the teams' commitment to winning, emphasis on image, and preoccupation with recruiting the best players as a standard to which all other teams should aspire if women's hockey is to grow more competitive. Critics see these actions as elitist and detrimental to the game as the Blades "worked hard for themselves and not for women's hockey" (p. 25). While outsiders hope for a politicized stance from the Blades it is not forthcoming as players see themselves within the context of being skilled performers in a sport, not necessarily agents of social change.

Of course, it could be argued simply by moving into and taking up space in the male preserve of sport women automatically defy and resist normative standards of the male model of sport and what it is to be female. However, that movement into the preserve prompts comparisons to the men's version of the game played and the suitability of women's involvement in the activity. It is at this point in *Higher Goals* that Theberge is at her best as she wrestles with the contradictions and paradoxes that emerge as the women's game is ultimately compared to men's hockey. As it has historically, this discussion of difference paints the women's game and women more generally as "other." Thus, the male version of the game and male involvement in the sport are constructed as the "real" activity against which women's involvement is compared.

Theberge makes this point using the case of body checking (or lack of) in women's hockey. She argues that "the prohibition of body checking means there are none of the full-force collisions that feature prominently in the practice of men's hockey" (p. 133). While we could make the argument that hockey is a better game without body checking that point is lost. What gets to "count" as "real" hockey is not the non-contact version of the game played by women but the very physical game played at the elite men's level, namely the National Hockey League.

In terms of construction and alternative model of sport, we can easily find historical translation in women's basketball over the course of the past century, given the development of the six-player game and in more recent time, the smaller ball. How do we negotiate the uneasy tension surrounding the creation of an alternative model of female sport without continuing to cast women's activities as different and thus inferior? The challenge, according to Theberge, is to "[define] and [implement] models that resist the problems of the dominant model while maintaining features that enable pleasure, satisfaction, and a sense of empowerment" (p. 137). Certainly this is no easy task.

Minor technical errors, namely misidentifying Mary Jo Festle as Joan Festle, should not interfere with the book's value to sport historians. The content and focus of *Higher Goals* is clearly an attempt to understand more deeply women's experiences in competitive elite team sport in the 1990s. In doing so, however, it offers up a solid location to examine the complexities of the past as they get played out on a contemporary stage.

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