

Spartan Girls, French Postcards, and the Male Gaze: Another Go at Eros and Sports

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POSTMODERNISM IS A MIXED BAG of ideas that I am tempted to define as the insights of William James and John Dewey translated from English into French and back again, much the worse for the linguistic to and fro. On the whole, I tend to be dismayed rather than delighted by postmodernist theory, but I do welcome the invitation—grandly offered by Alan Ingham and Rob Beamish—to be open and transparent about the ineluctable subjectivity of academic discourse.¹ In plainer words, I've taken this opportunity to comment not only on eros and sports but also, more importantly, about my failed attempt to stimulate a debate about the topic of eros and sports.



When I was in junior high school, I read Xenophon—in translation—and was fascinated by his account of Spartan athleticism, an athleticism that trained girls as well as boys. I didn't realize it at the time, it was, after all, 1947, but the roots of my fascination seem to have been entwined with seductive images of athletic bodies, male as well as female. When I was in college, I was involved, briefly, with an athletic young woman whom I likened—in a poem—to a Spartan girl. (It may be that the ineptitude of the poem explains the brevity of the affair.) When I was a young scholar, I visited London's National Gallery and came upon Edgar Degas' early masterpiece, *Spartan Girls Challenging the Boys to Wrestle*.²

Decades later, despite the fact that the Spartan boys and girls now strike me as too young to be sexually attractive—except, presumably, to each other—I included that sensuous rendition of adolescent sexuality as an illustration for my book on eros and sports.³ One reason for the inclusion, one motive for my decision to write the book, was a chagrined realization that my admiration of athletic women, of physically challenging women, was politically incorrect. I had unwittingly committed radical feminism's equivalent of Calvinism's Unpardonable Sin. I had subjected countless female athletes, from Pudgy Stockton at "Muscle Beach" to Ludmila Tourisheva on the gymnastic balance beam, to "the male gaze."



Ludmila Tourisheva on the balance beam, Munich, 1972. COURTESY AP/WIDE WORLD PHOTOS.

The first uncomfortable realization of incorrectness came in 1989 when Donald Kyle invited me to speak at the University of Texas in Arlington. In my talk I asserted that there is an erotic aspect to doing sports and to watching them and that this aspect should be accepted and affirmed rather than denied or condemned. I suspected that fundamentalist Christians, many of whom are known to reside in Texas, might be offended, but they—if any were present that night—were silent. The objections to my argument came from women who were concerned about what they called the "sexualization of the female athlete." They admitted that female athletes, in motion or at rest, *are* or at least *can be* sexually attractive, but they insisted that men who respond to and comment upon the erotic rather than on the athletic or the aesthetic aspect of sports trivialize female athletes and harm the cause of women's sports. (Although I spoke about eros as an aspect of men's as well as women's sports, no one at that time complained to me about the "sexualization" of the male athlete.)

I published my talk in a collection edited by Donald Kyle and Gary Stark.⁴ Its *Resonanz*, as my German colleagues say, was *gleich null*. By the time that the published version appeared, I had read an article, by Margaret Carlisle Duncan and Barry Brummett that condemned the "sexualization" of female athletes and concluded that observing an erotic aspect in women's sports "is always illicit and therefore voyeuristic."⁵ Their conclusion was so diametrically opposed to my views that I was eager to respond to it.

The opportunity came when I published my history of women's sports.⁶ Referring specifically to the accusations made by Duncan and Brummett, I concluded the book with what I intended to be a reasoned liberal-feminist argument for the acceptance rather than the denial or rejection of sport's sublimated sexuality. That section of *Women's Sports* was a conscious attempt to engage radical-feminist scholars—men like Michael Messner as well as women like Margaret Carlisle Duncan—in a serious discussion of the topic. The attempt was a failure. With very few exceptions, the scholars with whom I hoped to engage ignored the book. As Yogi Berra might have said, "You can publish a book, but if people don't want to read it you can't stop them."

Although I read a lot, I am a slow learner. My failure to elicit debate prompted me to embark on a more comprehensive treatment of the topic. Going back to the Greeks, whom Thomas Scanlon has recently studied in *Eros and Greek Athletics*,⁷ I traced the theme of eros and sports from antiquity to the present. The story that I tried to tell in that book can be simplified into a trio of phrases—pagan celebration, Christian denial, modern ambivalence. There is once again, as in pagan antiquity, widespread recognition, acceptance, and even celebration of the erotic in sports. There has also been continued criticism of the male gaze and the "sexualization" of the female athlete.

Drawing mainly on the extensive research done in the field of social psychology, I endeavored to refute the argument that a celebration of the erotic in sports demeans, degrades, or endangers male or female athletes. I admitted that the erotic element in sports is not always present, that it is difficult to separate the erotic element from the athletic and aesthetic elements, and that an obsessive focus on the erotic to the exclusion of the athletic and aesthetic is perverse. (I agree with the radical-feminist complaint that *Sports Illustrated's* annual "swimsuit issue" is a travesty.)

While I think that I was clear about (1) the existence—in some but not all sports—of an athletic subculture rife with misogynist attitudes and about (2) the criminality of sexual assault, I strongly objected to the notion that the "male gaze" is a prelude to violence against women. I cited the extensive social-psychological research demonstrating that watching violent actions of any sort, including sports events, increases aggressiveness. I also cited research indicating that watching nonviolent erotica *decreases* aggressiveness. In other words, the causal relationship between "the male gaze" and violence against women is the opposite of what Duncan *et al.* have alleged. If radical feminism's primary objective is to eliminate violence against women, one way to work toward that laudable goal is to ban football and all other violent sports and simultaneously to promote men's and women's (not children's) gymnastics, diving, synchronized swimming, and figure-skating.

I summarized my conclusion in three sentences:

The historical record, the evidence of literature and the visual arts, the results of sociological and psychological investigations, the blatant manifestations of

European and American popular culture, and the instinctive testimony of our senses all agree that men's and women's sports experiences can be and often have been suffused with a sense of erotic pleasure. The Greeks who gathered at Olympia for athletic festivals in honor of Zeus and Hera were candid about this pleasure. Perhaps, after two millennia of disavowal and denial, it is time for us to be as candid as they were.⁸

And, I should now add, high time for us to be as *positive* as they were before the fateful arrival of a not-yet-fully-departed Christian asceticism. (The German term for this asceticism is more graphic: *Leibfeindlichkeit*, "hostility to the body")



The Erotic in Sports was my third attempt to engage in serious debate with radical-feminist sports historians and sports sociologists, some of whom I have long admired, some of whom make me wonder if sports studies are about to "deconstruct" into the sorry state of contemporary literary studies. That attempt to engage in serious debate, like the others, was a failure. Here is the complete text of Brian Pronger's lapidary dismissal of my book (in a footnote): "Guttman has written a little book of historical anecdotes on coitus and sports settings, from classical Greece to the present, but does not analyze sport, sexuality, or desire."⁹ Q.E.D.

The discussion of eros and sports remains more or less where it was when I ventured to Texas in 1989. Essays deploring the "sexualization" of female athletes continue to appear, each with its thought-stopping formulaic references to "patriarchy," "hegemonic masculinity," "compulsory heterosexuality." and other all-too-handy polysyllabic abstractions. "The sexualization of female athletes in sport media," wrote Donald Sabo and Michael Messner in a typical, utterly predictable reference to Katarina Witt, "robs women of athletic legitimacy and preserves hegemonic masculinity."¹⁰ Sabo and Messner did not acknowledge that Katarina Witt *intended* to present a fusion of the athletic, the aesthetic, and the erotic, nor did they acknowledge that there was no need for the mass media to "sexualize" her dance to the music of *Carmen* because it was already sexual.



Katerina Witt skating to the music of *Carmen*, Calgary, 1988.
COURTESY NATIONALES OLYMPISCHES KOMITEE DER DDR.

Messner mentions my position in his newest book, *Taking the Field* (2002), only to dismiss it in a single sentence, writing that my views of eros and sports ignore "the *profoundly social dynamic* that underlies not only what is defined as 'sexual' but also how mass media displays of sexuality are *contextualized* in cultural discourses that are defined by, and in turn help to define, group power relations."¹¹ After this misrepresentation of my position, which *does* include a discussion of "group power relations," Messner returns to his focus, which is a critique of voyeurism and the "sexualization" of female athletes. Toby Miller's recent book, *Sportsex* (2001), is another disappointment. Miller contends, quite correctly, that there is a female gaze as well as a male gaze, and we are—on the whole—the better for it. So far, so good. Unfortunately, Miller writes as if he and his readers were opponents in a no-words-barred discursive contest. Can they decode his language, or will he successfully evade comprehension?¹² Miller's rhetoric may save him from contumely, but I doubt that *Sportsex* will provoke the reasoned dialogue that I have thus far failed to elicit.



Why has the discussion of eros and sports been limited, for the most part, to the dreary assembly of prefabricated concepts? The answer is embarrassingly simple: sexual politics. What else but politics can impel a distinguished historian—M. Ann Hall—to declare that "journals must no longer publish sexist research"?¹³ What else but politics drives an acute sociologist like Cheryl Cole to write that sport is "an ensemble of knowledges that disciplines, conditions, reshapes, and inscribes the body through the terms and needs of a patriarchal, racist capitalism"?¹⁴ (Ironically, this assertion appears in an essay entitled "Resisting the Canon," as if versions of Cole's position were not articulated in every issue of the *Sociology of Sport Journal*, the *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, and the *International Review of the Sociology of Sport*.)

My conviction about the role of politics is corroborated by the fact that lesbian scholars have affirmed and celebrated the pleasures of the female gaze as it contemplates the marriage of eros and athleticism. In her detailed study of nineteen lesbian athletes, Birgit Palzkill cites and clearly endorses the athletes' acknowledgment of the erotic aspect of sports. One of the athletes comments, "I always found muscles attractive, I thought it was super to have a tight body, abdominal muscles, not to have a rear that drooped behind me, skinny arms, no strength at all." Another athlete recalled, "When I was fifteen or sixteen, I was thrilled by another swimmer, by her wide shoulders and narrow hips."¹⁵ Palzkill's book is a powerful assertion of a lesbian athlete's right to feel what she feels about herself and about other women, an assertion that I fully support.

Pat Griffin, whose study of *Strong Women, Deep Closets* (1998) has become a lesbian classic, acknowledges that sports have been "a . . . haven for lesbians." She speaks with understandable enthusiasm about the fourteen to sixteen lesbian softball teams in the Amherst-Northampton area, one of which was known as the "Hot Flashes." Griffin also describes the way the swimmers she coached "were secretly very proud of their hard-earned muscles and strong appearance. They liked looking at themselves and each other, but they were uncomfortable acknowledging their pride in their own bodies or noticing other women's bodies." Griffin admits that there was, perhaps, "a sexual aspect of this admiration for some women."¹⁶ And Griffin approves.

Helen Jefferson Lenskyj is even more outspoken. Writing about Toronto's Notso Amazons Softball League, she reveals her delight in sexually explicit team names—the "Lickety Splits" and the "Dykes on Spikes." Allusions to isolated parts of a female athlete's body are usually considered evidence of misogynist attitudes, but Lenskyj mentions the cropped photographs of the Notso calendar and insists that "it is possible to view the woman's muscular forearms . . . and leg . . . as a celebration of women's strength and beauty." Lenskyj quotes a female umpire who says, "It's been a pleasure perusing your strike zone." This bit of sexual whimsy she describes as a "nonexploitative celebration . . . of women's bodies from a lesbian perspective."¹⁷ In short, the lesbian gaze is acceptable where the male gaze is not because the lesbian gaze is not motivated by what Caroline Fusco calls "heteronormativity."¹⁸

In support of this assertion that politics have acted to foreclose serious debate I can point to radical-feminist complaints about men who avert their gaze from the erotic aspect in women's sports. In an essay on media misrepresentations of the Paralympics, Lea Ann Schell and Stephanie Rodriguez blast away at CBS-TV for portraying a disabled female athlete as if she were asexual. "The averted gaze of sport media," they charge, "serves to de-eroticize [Hope] Lewellen and to elide her identity as a sexual and a social being."¹⁹ Gina Daddario has a similar lament. While Margaret Carlisle Duncan castigates the male-dominated media for the "sexualization" of young female Olympians,²⁰ Gina Daddario castigates the male-dominated media for their refusal to acknowledge the sexuality of young female Olympians. The media, she writes, "diminished the sexuality of some [female] athletes by reducing them to adolescent, often prepubescent status despite the fact that some of the athletes were in their mid- and late twenties."²¹ In other words, the male-dominated media are damned if they do and damned if they don't.

What is a heterosexual man supposed to do? Look with admiration at athletic women and be unmasked as a voyeur and as a potential rapist? Avert his eyes and be accused—in the jargon of the day—of elision, erasure, and symbolic annihilation? My solution is to continue my quixotic endeavor. What has inspired such foolishness?—images of French postcards that Thierry Terret screened and analyzed in a paper presented at the annual conference of the North American Society for Sport History in 2002.²² Many of these erotic postcards showed young women posed as athletes. Terret saw the photographed women as degraded victims of male voyeurism. I wondered—in my role as moderator—if the association of eros and sports might have been seen more positively by the men (and women?) who purchased the postcards. Did the cards reveal a covert *fin-de-siècle* admiration for athletic women in a culture whose overt eulogies were reserved for what Patricia Vertinsky has called the "eternally wounded woman"?²³ The lively discussion provoked by Terret's oral presentation may have been a signal that we have finally reached the point where reasoned debate is possible.



¹Alan G. Ingham and Rob Beamish, "Didn't Cyclops Lose His Vision?" *Sociology of Sport Journal* 14 (1997): 160-186.

²For a colored reproduction, see Daniel Catton Rich, *Edgar-Hilarie-Germain Degas* (New York: Abrams, 1969), 35.

³Allen Guttman, *The Erotic in Sports* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

- ⁴Allen Guttman, "Eros and Sport," in *Essays on Sport History and Sport Mythology*, eds. Donald G. Kyle and Gary D. Stark (College Station: Texas A&M Press, 1990), 138-154.
- ⁵Margaret Carlisle Duncan and Barry Brummett, "Types and Sources of Spectating Pleasure in Televised Sports," *Sociology of Sport Journal* 6 (1989): 204.
- ⁶Allen Guttman, *Women's Sports: A History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).
- ⁷Thomas F. Scanlon, *Eros and Greek Athletics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).
- ⁸Guttman, *The Erotic in Sports*, 172.
- ⁹Brian Pronger, "Outta My Endzone: Sport and the Territorial Anus," *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 23 (1999): 387.
- ¹⁰Donald Sabo and Michael A. Messner, "Whose Body Is This?: Women's Sport and Sexual Politics," in *Women in Sport*, ed. Greta L. Cohen (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage, 1993), 18.
- ¹¹Michael A. Messner, *Taking the Field: Women, Men, and Sports* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 100.
- ¹²One example of Miller's prose should suffice: The "visual economy of public and private sites . . . came into being at the uneasy nineteenth-century encounter of industrial modernity, auto- and homoeroticism and sociality, and pastoral nostalgia, a space where a capitalist division of labor and new technology meet, and science, myth, and religion pronounced upon the sexed sports body." Toby Miller, *Sportsex* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 18.
- ¹³M. Ann Hall, "The Discourse of Gender and Sport: From Femininity to Feminism," *Sociology of Sport Journal* 5 (1988): 337.
- ¹⁴Cheryl L. Cole, "Resisting the Canon: Feminist Cultural Studies, Sport and Technologies of the Body," in *Women, Sport, and Culture*, eds. Susan Birrell and Cheryl L. Cole (Champaign, Ill.: Human Kinetics, 1994), 15.
- ¹⁵Birgit Palzkill, *Zwischen Turnschuh und Stöckelschuh* (Bielefeld, Nordrhein-Westfalen: AJZ Verlag, 1990), 93-94.
- ¹⁶Pat Griffin, *Strong Women, Deep Closets: Lesbians and Homophobia in Sport* (Champaign, Ill.: Human Kinetics, 1998), 183, 196.
- ¹⁷Helen Jefferson Lenskyj, "Sexuality and Femininity in Sport Contexts: Issues and Alternatives," *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 18 (1994): 357, 367.
- ¹⁸Caroline Fusco, "Lesbians and Locker Rooms: The Subjective Experiences of Lesbians in Sport," in *Sport and Postmodern Times*, ed. Genevieve Rail (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 112.
- ¹⁹Lea Ann Schell and Stephanie Rodriguez, "Subverting Bodies/Ambivalent Representations," *Sociology of Sport Journal* 18 (2001): 133.
- ²⁰Margaret Carlisle Duncan, "Sports Photographs and Sexual Difference," *Sociology of Sport Journal* 7 (1990): 22-43.
- ²¹Gina Daddario, "Chilly Scenes of the 1992 Winter Games: The Mass Media and the Marginalization of the Female Athlete," *Sociology of Sport Journal* 11 (1994): 281.
- ²²The presentation has since been published as "Sports and Erotica: Erotic Postcards of Sports-women during Frances *Années Folles*," *Journal of Sport History* 29 (2002): 271-287.
- ²³Patricia Vertinsky, *The Eternally Wounded Woman: Women, Doctors, and Exercise in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Manchester, U.K.: University of Manchester Press, 1990).