

MESSNER, MICHAEL A. *Taking the Field: Women, Men, and Sports*. Sport and Culture Series. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002. Pp. xxii+166. Notes, index, illustrations. \$19.95 pb.

In *Taking the Field*, sport sociologist Michael A. Messner examines gender dynamics at the cultural and institutional "center" of sport. The center, Messner argues, "is a position occupied by the biggest, wealthiest, and most visible sports programs and athletes" (p. xviii). Though marginal and "alternative" sports continually contest the hegemony of this center, sport remains a site of male power and privilege. One of the biggest challenges to the dominance of this core has been the increased number of female sports participants in the decades since the passage of *Title IX*. With such increases, the gender regime of sport has been transformed from one that simply excluded female athletes, to a more subtle and complicated process of gender differentiation. Messner proposes that the center of sport is constructed on three inextricably linked levels: social interaction, structural context, and cultural symbol. While Messner cautions that the separation of these levels can only occur theoretically, in order to understand each one he teases them apart into separate chapters.

At the level of social interaction, Messner argues, males and females perform or "do" gender for particular audiences. Two group-based interactions, the suppression of empathy and misogynist and homophobic talk, contribute to the "triad of men's violence in sport" (p. 60). The triad of men's violence, referring to men's violence against women, against other men, and against themselves, is advocated and reinforced in the center of sport and becomes one way in which athletes might perform hegemonic masculinity. Although gender is performed, it is not always performed under conditions of one's own making. Individuals must negotiate these performances within structural contexts, such as *Title IX* legislation and the "sport-media-commercial complex," that both enable and constrain social agency. Finally, at the level of cultural symbol, one must consider how groups and individuals negotiate the meanings of images and signs, particularly messages about gender received through the sports-media-commercial complex. Certainly audience members receive and interpret mediated messages in different ways; however, patterns and trends in the dominant sport media tend to marginalize and trivialize women's sports and non-central men's sports. This, in turn, contributes to the maintenance of male power and privilege at the center of sport. According to Messner, the three levels of social interaction, structural context, and cultural symbol work together to create and maintain the gender regime at the continually contested center of sport.

*Taking the Field* is both academic and activist in scope. It is both a scholarly analysis of power at the center of sport and a call for action. Messner proposes that the "social justice model" may be the most constructive approach to address the current gender regime of sport since it includes a quest for gender equity along with critical work that seeks to transform the center of men's sports. Ultimately, he concludes, everyone must join in the "feminist project of levelling the playing field and simultaneously changing

the rules of the game to make the world more just, equitable, and healthy for all" (p. 166).

Informed by feminist theory and approaching this subject from a feminist perspective, Messner draws from a wide range of gender research, including work from scholars of sport, sociology, media studies, and cultural studies. Contemporary issues, such as the Columbine shootings and the 1999 Women's World Cup, complement and are complemented by these scholarly works. In addition, Messner's discussions about his own experiences as an athlete and his involvement with his children's athletics blend well with scholarship. *Taking the Field* is thoroughly researched and clearly and insightfully written, making it both accessible and important to upper level undergraduate students, graduate students, and sport scholars. Though based on contemporary issues in sport, this work may also prove a valuable resource to sport historians, particularly those who agree with Joan Wallach Scott's assertion that gender is indeed a useful category of historical analysis.

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