

The Emergence of Sport for Women in Queensland

Reet Howell

Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia.

Historically sport has been an integral component of Australian and Queensland culture, ingrained in the very essence and functioning of society. However, women's participation in this social institution has generally been non-existent, undervalued, minor, and only in a few exceptions has been considered worthy of limited recognition. Sport in Queensland has basically been a traditional male preserve from which women were barred, or prejudiced against, by rules, conventions and/or societal attitudes, and, as a social institution, sport has reflected the norms, values and practices prevalent in the Australian society.

Sport for women in Queensland has been principally a twentieth century phenomenon. The major sports of the nineteenth century were a masculine preserve and many of them remained so well into the twentieth century: football has never been an acceptable sport for females, except for soccer for young girls, and this only in the recent decade; cricket and athletics became acceptable in the late 1920's; rowing, although some initial forays were made in 1890s, expanded in the 1920's; boxing has never been open to women; female jockeys, except for one exception around 1920, did not become a reality until the 1980s. Competitive and recreational opportunities prevailed in the sports of tennis, swimming and golf. After 1900 other sports were introduced into the Queensland sporting milieu, and hence competitive opportunities for women expanded to include hockey, basketball, vigoro, and netball. In latter decades surfing, surf lifesaving, diving, cycling, equestrian sports, gymnastics, and indeed almost the full spectrum of sports, have become available, accessible and permissible.

The increased participatory involvement in sport has not been an isolated phenomena, as these developments have been symptomatic of the broader social and political changes that were occurring in the community. The more liberal societal attitudes towards women permitted them to explore their potentialities, express their interests and pursue athletic endeavours as suited them. Political decisions by governments at local, state and federal levels have produced quantitative changes which have provided more equal access to, and provision of, sporting facilities. Sport has assumed a new prominence in the daily life of the Queensland woman.

Many of the gains in women's sport have come slowly or begrudgingly. Government financial assistance for women's sport is scandalously below that of men's, media coverage is deplorable, and the associate membership category offered women in race clubs, bowling, cricket, and golf clubs is a violation of human rights and needs to be contested in the courts. Hegemonic control of sport has rested with men, and few women have moved up the ladder of the sport hierarchy.

In summary, the twentieth century has seen Queensland sportswomen emerge from the Dark Ages. The century has been one of progress and change that has resulted in a phenomenal growth and diffusion from a minimal level of existence in the 1890s. The pattern of sport is now one of diversity, with competitive contests at local, regional, state, national levels for the elite, and community-based programs for the recreational enthusiast.