

# Beyond the Ivy-Clad Walls: Observations on the Study of Women and “Sport”

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In 1977, June Kennard published “The History of Physical Education” in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*. Kennard’s piece was aptly titled, for studies related to the history of women and sport up to that time had primarily centered on the development of “institutional” physical education. Kennard analyzed the three major historical forms employed by women’s sport historians at that time—biography, institutional studies, and analyses of the role of physical education in sport and society. It is understandable that Kennard’s essay is a historiography of *physical education*, not sport. Like their male counterparts, most of the early historians of women’s sport were trained in the discipline of physical education—not history proper, and so it is not surprising that their early efforts as “historians” were attempts to illuminate the professional world they had chosen.

In 1984, Nancy Struna published “Beyond Mapping Experience: The Need for Understanding in the History of American Sporting Women.” Struna’s examination of the published works on the history of women and sport is based on what she considers to be the central question regarding the discipline of women’s sport history: “Has our literature moved beyond the parochial to the universal questions which historians ask; has it begun to suggest what ‘ultimate difference’ women’s sporting experiences make in our ‘total understanding of the human experience?’” Struna concludes her analysis with a call for a holistic approach to women’s studies. Historians of women’s sport, she argues, must “broaden their evidential base, seek records other than those of popular journals,” and further, must abandon the patriarchal model of sport as male, modern and competitive. In short, she argues that women’s sport scholars need to become better historians to fully understand the context of their studies.

In light of subsequent historiographical studies and recent discussions at NASSH regarding the status of women’s sport history, this essay attempted to do three things. First, it examined the published record of books and journal articles related to the history of women’s sport and physical education as well as the oral presentations made each year at NASSH and The History Academy of AAHPERD. Based on an analysis of these documents, this paper secondly described the significant trends in women’s sport history as they evolved over the past two decades.

Finally, this essay argued for a broader interpretation and a new direction for “women’s sport history.” It is the author’s belief that for the vast majority of North American women, purposive exercise and noncompetitive play have enjoyed more important roles in the lives of women than has competitive sport. The author suggested new archival sources for the study of women’s exercise and discussed recent scholarship in sociology and women’s studies in which the appearance and fitness of the female body has been shown to be central to the lives of North American women.