

Teaching Sport History from a Gender Perspective

Deborah L. Correa-González

Ohio State University

Teaching sport history from a gender perspective recognizes the gendered nature of sport and the role of sport in the construction of gender. As an activity which has often been divided along gender lines and which has been imbued with an ideology about its significance for gender roles, sport is a particularly good subject to teach from a gender perspective. This approach is distinct from integrating gender into traditional methods of teaching sport history. Rather, the gender approach places gender and gender relations as the focal point of the whole course.

Teaching sport history from a gender perspective requires consideration of the gendered nature of men's sport as well as women's. It encourages students to see differences between the experiences of men and women as socially constructed rather than biologically determined. Students come to see sport as a product and process of unequal power relations. The concept of gender, as developed in feminist analysis and women's history, is a dynamic process of social construction through personal relations and is shaped by experiences of race, class, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, region, and age. Teaching sport history from a gender perspective allows for incorporation of the scholarly work now being done on gender and gender relations as well as on the social construction of the physical body.

An instructor may encounter resistance to implementing this course because of the perception that it is not real history but biased, special-interest history. Alternative approaches to the traditional way of teaching sport history can reveal how any one approach values certain types of analysis and relationships over others. A gender approach recognizes that gender has been underexamined in sport history and deserves attention.

Another difficulty in such an approach is overcoming the limitations of the existing scholarship. While some of the work on women in sport has addressed gender relations, little of the work on men has done so. This requires that the instructor continually ask gender questions of material which does not directly address gender.

In constructing such a course, the theme for one week could be the development of the separate spheres ideology of the 19th century and its influence on sport practices. Included in this theme is the 19th-century interest in biology and the body and the interaction between ideas of biology and those of gender roles. This week's discussion and readings would show how the middle-class concern for physical vigor was manifested in gender-specific propositions for fitness and exercise. Another week could examine the development of baseball as a man's game. Included in this theme is the process of institutionalization in creating baseball as a legitimate, manly sport and the relationship of softball, baseball, and gender construction. Other topics in sport history can similarly be examined from a gender perspective.