

Toward a Usable Past: Reflections on Women's Sport History, Recent Sport Politics, and Contemporary Gender Relations in the U.S.

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This last twenty years of women's sport in the U.S. are viewed by many as years of exceptional progress. The institutional reforms mandated by the passage of Title IX sparked an array of propitious changes in women's sport, reflected today in the greater number of girls and women participating at all levels of sport, the improved media coverage of women's events, and the growing public acceptance of women's athleticism, strength, and competitiveness. Historically well-established women's sports now receive substantial funding and support, while women athletes have also broken down barriers to sports like rugby and ice hockey which previously prohibited female participation. Yet problems remain, including the declining numbers of women coaches, the media 'sexploitation' of athletes, and the continued inequitable division of resources between men's and women's sports. This paper examines the legacy of pre-Title IX sport and asks how it can help us to understand current problems. It focuses on three key areas: the historical debate over "equality" vs. "difference" strategies in women's sport; the

class and racial biases in women's sport; and the fear and silencing of lesbianism as a central dynamic of women's sport. The history of these issues in the years prior to 1970 not only influenced the direction of more recent sport history but can illuminate the particular dilemmas that women's sport advocates currently face. The paper concludes with a discussion of how contemporary developments in women's sport can be understood in the larger context of late 20th-century gender relations and ongoing feminist challenges to male dominance.