

Gender Relations and Sport History: A Decade of Changing Enquiry

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“The happiest women, like the happiest nations, have no history.”
George Eliot **The Mill on the Floss**.

Until fairly recently, sport history, or at least the sport history that was reported in sport history journals and discussed in the academic milieu tended to focus upon the history of man’s involvement in sport, paying little serious attention to women’s voices and their sporting deeds in the past. Women-centred investigators of sport history or “sport herstory,” which became popular in the 1970’s, were often exemplified by narrative-descriptive articles and anthologies of women’s participation in and administration of particular sports and physical activities. During the last decade, however, a striking change became apparent regarding the rise of gender as a category of analysis in historical inquiry. Feminists claimed that a specific focus upon women had been misplaced and that a study of gender differences needed to be integrated into the central pursuits of the social sciences and humanities. There was an emergent feminist interest in reading male texts as inscriptions of gender and renditions of sexual difference, as well as the beginning of male critics attempting to understand feminist criticism. Eventually, some male critics began to think and write about masculinity in the context of sport history. While the 1980’s was in many ways the decade of the feminists scholarship, feminist historical scholarship lagged behind, and, I would suggest, feminist sport history scholarship lagged too. It has been suggested that the reasons for this lie in the highly problematic relationship of women to history, and, one must add, of women to sport in general. Nevertheless, there has been a steady increase in the richness and variety of sport history studies focusing upon gender as a category of analysis and attempting to recapture, and at times to revision women’s sporting experiences.

This paper examines these ideas and trends in gender relations and the writing of sport history across the last decade, and attempts to engage the audience in critical debate about the role of gender in sport history.