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## **Football, Feminism and the Affirmation of Patriarchy**

After briefly reviewing the history of feminism in the United States, this study examines and analyzes the relationship of feminism with the growth and development of football. Utilizing a cultural studies approach, it explores several questions. Why did football experience such explosive growth during the 1890s? What were the cultural values and symbols of football? What was the reaction and response of women, particularly feminists, to the growth of football? How did football become entrenched in American culture? How did/does football help to maintain hierarchical gender relations? In order to evaluate such questions the study provides a descriptive historical context of the feminization of American culture throughout the nineteenth century. Primary sources, gleaned from college archives, indicate the fears that such feminization produced among American middle class males.

Football served to assuage masculine fears by reasserting a traditional pattern of male dominance. The values and symbolism men found in football were primary means of countering effeminacy. Moreover, by restricting females' involvement in the game, and by controlling the oppositional views of both women and other men, proponents of football reinforced their own belief in a hegemony of gender. This process of cultural negotiation was hardly a compliant, passive development but there was no concerted feminist opposition to football. The study poses alternative reasons, in addition to the male control of the media, for this and the success of football as a cultural symbol. Class and religious factionalism in the feminist movement were central to precluding any uniform response from women. The study concludes that football served a reactionary and compensatory function for males, who were faced with a growing feminist presence and pressure. The lack of concerted opposition by women allowed men to restrict and

exclude them, and to silence female voices. By so doing, men overcame opposition to the game, inculcated particular cultural symbols and values within it, and maintained their leadership roles in an aggressive, commercial, and patriarchal society. This study focuses on a general topic (football) little studied by sport historians. More importantly, it addresses an unknown area: feminists' response to the game during a period in which its values became inculcated in American culture. It provides us with a greater understanding of who we are, how we came to be, and why gender inequality persists in our society.