

A New Ball Game: Historical and Contemporary Woman-Centred Models of Sport and Physical Activity

Helen Lenskyj, Centre for Women's Studies in Education, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, Toronto, Ontario M5S 1V6

INTRODUCTION

Developments in women's sport and physical activity in the North American context in the 1970s and 1980s share some common philosophical ground with the policies and programmes for girls and women developed in the 1920s and 1930s. Not coincidentally, these periods of growth and development in

women's sport loosely correspond to the first and second waves of the contemporary feminist movement. In each era, there was a move towards developing a woman-centred model of sport, organized by women, for women. Such a move of necessity challenged traditional male sporting practices and the values and organization of male sport and physical activity.

This paper will compare the model of woman-centred sport and physical activity manifest in women's softball in the 1920s and 1930s with that of the 1970s and 1980s, and will develop an analysis of the goals, values, and assumptions of women in sport leadership during each period.

METHOD

In addition to the considerable secondary literature on both periods, sources of data on the early period will include interviews with three women who were active in Toronto softball and basketball leagues in the 1920s. Information on developments in the 1970s and 1980s will be derived from the unpublished documents of women-only clubs and leagues, from interviews with two women who have served on the collectives of a women-only softball league established in Toronto in 1984, and from my own experiences as a participant observer and player in this league.

The Liberal and Radical Models

A brief summary of the key issues for North American women in sport will provide a background for a more detailed examination of trends in women-only sport. Confronted with the pervasive problem of sex inequality in policy, programmes and funding, women have adopted two major approaches which may be termed *liberal* and *radical*. The liberal approach focuses on providing equal opportunity for both sexes in sport; in most instances, this requires either that qualified girls and women have access to existing male programmes, or that corresponding programmes are established for both sexes. Women working for change do so from within the sport system, rather than challenging the nature of existing sporting practice (e.g. Sport Canada, 1986).

In the last two decades, anti-discrimination legislation, such as Title IX in the USA, provincial human rights codes, and the Charter of Rights and Freedoms in Canada, reflect liberal strategies used in the struggle for sex equality in sport. Such legislation may permit women-only programmes, but these are usually justified as short term affirmative action steps designed to correct existing imbalances, rather than as a valid option in their own right. For example, Sport Canada's current policy proposes the elimination of women-only national sports organizations.

An alternative, radical strategy calls for the development of sporting activities organized by women, for women, outside the male-dominated sports establishment. This model problematises the practice and organization of sport, its underlying values and goals. A woman-centred club or league takes the specific circumstances of women's lives into account: their more limited financial resources, their double workday, their primary responsibility as caretakers of

young children. In this model, mass participation and personal fulfilment are valued more highly than the development of high performance athletes or winning teams, and cooperation, friendship, and fun are key concerns among participants (e.g. Birrell and Richter, 1987). Numerous empirical studies substantiate the implicit assumption of this model: that women value and social experience of sport and physical activity more than competition or achievement (e.g. Mathes and Battista, 1982; Biddle and Bailey, 1985; Knoppers, 1985; Tail and Dobash, 1986).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the early period, women in sport leadership attempted to promote a more women-centred ethos in sport, even when the programme itself was under the auspices of a school or university athletics department. Some women established relatively autonomous, women-only community clubs, funded by local commercial enterprises whose major concern was the promotion of their products. In both kinds of contexts, women challenged male definitions of sport. Although their rationales may appear reactionary to contemporary observers - propriety and decorum were among the justifications for female coaching and administration of female sport - a closer analysis reveals an attempt to develop a woman-centred philosophy in the face of a possible male takeover. This was not an unfounded fear, as recent events in US intercollegiate sport illustrate: the numbers of women in coaching and administration positions have decreased dramatically since mandatory amalgamation of university athletic departments, and many of the distinctively female values and orientations towards sport have been replaced by the traditional male focus on achievement and winning (Croxtton et al., 1987; Uhlir, 1987).

A different model of woman-centred activity, developed in the last two decades, owes much to the contemporary women's movement. For example, some of the principles of leadership for women's outdoor programmes are similar to those used in woman-centred organizations outside sport, and share considerable common ground with feminist collectives, consciousness raising and self help groups. These principles include: projecting a feeling of safety or security for participants; avoiding situations which generate unequal relationships and may sabotage the goal of cooperation; providing women with choices regarding participation; avoiding a success/failure approach to challenges; and promoting shared decision-making and collectivity (Mitten, 1985). In addition to these organizing principles, woman-centred programmes offer activities to meet the physical, social, and emotional needs of women in specific sub-groups: overweight women, female inmates, lesbian women, single mothers, disabled women, survivors of sexual assault, and so on.

A comparison of women's experience in softball during these two periods will illustrate the limits of the liberal model and the potential for the transformation of sport offered by the women-centred model.

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