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INTRODUCTION

Physical Culture Practices: New Historical Work on Women and Gender

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In many ways, early historical scholarship on physical culture tended to focus upon men and strength: body building, weight training, therapeutics and purposive exercise, and pioneering developments in vaudeville and physical education. Strongmen Eugen Sandow and Bernarr Macfadden both adopted the term ‘physical culture’ for their health and fitness magazine titles at the turn of the twentieth century, and physical culture gained an ever broadening meaning to include not only strength performances and exercise routines but beliefs, knowledge and a wide range of individual and social practices related to health and physicality. Jan and Terry Todd have extended the term physical culture ‘to describe the various activities people have employed over the centuries to strengthen their bodies, enhance their physiques, increase their endurance, enhance their health, fight against aging and become better athletes’.\textsuperscript{1} In \textit{Physical Culture, Power and the Body}, Jennifer Hargreaves and Patricia Vertinsky used the term physical culture even more broadly to accommodate ‘all activities in which the body itself, its anatomy, its physicality, and most importantly its forms of movements – is the very purpose, \textit{raison d’etre} of the activity’.\textsuperscript{2} Sport sociologists were quick to pick up on this multi-perspectival view of physical culture and the active, moving gendered body, and claim physical cultural studies for their own ‘as an emergent intellectual formation and empirical field of study … an intellectual assemblage perpetually in a state of becoming’.\textsuperscript{3} Hence the 2017 Routledge Handbook of Physical Cultural Studies included contributions from well over eighty scholars in the international arena focusing upon physical culture, sorting the wide-ranging contents into ‘groundings’, ‘subjectified bodies’, ‘institutionalized bodies’, ‘ experiential bodies’, ‘bodies in space and place’, ‘methodologies’, ‘politics’ and a ‘commitment to praxis’.\textsuperscript{4}

Feminist scholarship, not surprisingly, has contributed to the deepening of this somatic turn, opening up interesting doors to the long and storied histories of women in physical culture and sport, which is the focus of this anthology. Knowledge in sport, leisure, and physical culture, argues Virginia Olesen, remains an important

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theme in feminist research, focusing upon questions such as whose knowledge do we consider; from where and from whom are our knowledges obtained; and, how will they be used. As bell hooks argued powerfully, feminism is needed to centre the lives and knowledge of females as important and valid. While admitting that there remains a lack of explicit acknowledgement concerning the impact of the political imperative of feminist scholarship on physical cultural studies, Rebecca Olive nevertheless points out that ‘the contributions of feminist scholars to ways of thinking about and knowing women’s contributions to and experiences of sport histories and organizations [has] provided an essential foundation on which subsequent research about sex/gender, sport and bodies has been built’. Indeed, feminist scholars most recently sought to build and celebrate this foundation in the Palgrave Handbook of Feminism and Sport, Leisure and Physical Education published in 2018. The Handbook was a welcome and substantive addition to the multiplicity of studies of physical culture, sport, and leisure by, for and about women and girls, and it provides a useful foundation for our collection of essays devoted to new historical work on women and physical culture practices. As a result, we have been able to compile a wide-reaching collection of methodologically sophisticated studies about female physical culture addressing lesser known accounts of women in sport and physical cultures such as jujitsu, judo, hunting and pelota. Our collection also includes micro-level analyses of professional female swimmers and their circles of family supporters and employers; the political work of a French physical educator; the early development of women’s football in Sweden; and interrogations of the sporting narratives of pre-Title IX women in the United States and their reflections concerning the impact of that legislation upon their lives in times of rapid cultural change.

The role of women in the dissemination of physical culture practices remains under-researched, but is of particular interest for an understanding of gender and the processes of globalization. As a result, it has been interesting to see that global and local as well as ‘glocal’ perspectives have been used to explore the development of physical culture practices and the role of gender in these processes. Other processes that have been under-studied in relation to sport, leisure, and gender include the role that women have played in the professionalization and commercialization of sport, leisure, and physical culture, hence we are grateful to have received essays dealing with these perspectives.

In this collection, Dave Day argues for a more nuanced approach to studying the diversity of female sporting experiences through specific case studies that illustrate how gender and class intersected at a micro level through a study of the swimming related careers of women in the second half of nineteenth-century Britain and the early years of the twentieth century. Not surprisingly, just as golf clubs and other sporting spaces remained closed or minimally available to women of most social-class backgrounds, swimming spaces also remained relatively restricted to girls and women. Days’ interest, however, is focused on those women who managed to make a living from teaching swimming in the growing number of swimming baths in Britain’s urban areas and who many times became professional swimmers able to demonstrate a range of aquatic skills to popular audiences. He thus challenges the
familiar separate spheres argument traditionally used to discuss the limited opportunities and careers of female swimmers in Britain during these years, avoiding the fissured margins surrounding class and gender by blending together different biographical methods to explore ‘layers of truth’ about female swimmers’ opportunities. He is able to show how the status of an increasing number of Victorian and Edwardian working-class women employed during the rapid spread of new public swimming baths depended upon their social connections, level of skill, and degree of longevity in their positions. Gender roles were not always constrained by stereotypical and artificially created boundaries, he demonstrates, especially among those who straddled the boundaries between working and middle classes, despite the fact that for many female swimming communities the influence of patriarchy in determining career choices may have been significant.

Erica Munkwicz takes us to a rural environment in her discussion of female participation in fox hunting in nineteenth century Britain. Like Day, her essay is interesting and provocative as it overrides the traditional views of class, gender and sport that we are accustomed to in most discussions of women and sport in that place and time. Muncwicz provides a wealth of evidence to support her claim that on horseback women could literally ride over boundaries and into new spaces that they could not have entered or explored otherwise—a notion that, not surprisingly, ran contrary to the accepted social order. She highlights the horse as a vehicle for female emancipation, though the reader must remain acutely conscious of the extent that this claim is valid; just how many town dwellers really had the time and resources to put their horse on the back of a train and race off to participate in a local hunt with hounds in the British countryside? It is well worth considering this most interesting argument that everyone was equal on horseback, regardless of class or gender in the latter decades of the nineteenth century.

The unique paths of three women who became successfully involved in the Japanese martial arts of jujitsu and judo in early twentieth-century England are followed by Conor Heffernan, Amanda Spenn, and Mike Callan. As opposed to Day’s swimming instructors, this study shows how all three women challenged the inherent divide between the masculine and the feminine within jujitsu and judo with seemingly little or no opposition from the contemporary male establishment. The detailed and interesting case studies of Phoebe Roberts, Edith Garrud and Sarah Mayer describe the ways in which they used the Japanese martial arts to train women in self-defence techniques, as a political tool in the struggle for suffrage and also as a theatrical endeavor, collectively demonstrating and promoting judo to a new and diverse range of audiences. The combination is eerily evocative of the current ‘#metoo’ movement calling on women to take bold action by critiquing and pushing back against male dominance and sexual abuse. The collective study of Heffernan, Spenn, and Callan introduces and bridges a very interesting set of biographies to demonstrate the unique contribution of talented British women to the development and promotion of the Japanese martial arts, demonstrating how jujitsu and judo, specifically, helped to propel women into a social, and at times political limelight. Furthermore, the study helps to reveal the general history and dissemination of the art form of judo from Japan to Britain during the early twentieth century at a time
when the Anglo-Japanese alliance and victory of the Japanese in the Russo-Japanese war ensured a warm reception to all things Japanese in Britain. What is also especially interesting is the range of travel and experiences of women such as Roberts, Garrud, and Meyer whose love of physical culture and adventure took them on global jaunts to countries across the world where they could learn to hone and market the soft power of their physical culture skills with men, and for women.

Olatz Gonzalez Abriska’s study, ‘Basque Women on the Court’ takes a glocal (global as well as local) perspective. She claims that racket pelota might well be viewed as one of the first professional women’s sports in history and uses this example to explore the paradoxical connection between women and sporting success in the twentieth century. Her project nicely underscores how we must pay twin attention to both structural constraints and human agency in order to highlight those instances in which female emancipation in sport occurs in spite of unfavorable contexts. She shows how racket pelota, initiated in Madrid in 1917, became an industry in ‘fronton’ courts in Spain, Cuba, Brazil and Mexico right up to the latter decades of the twentieth century with thousands of female players earning a good living in a system dependent for survival on betting. Most of these players were trained in Basque country training schools but the shifting political climate in Spain during these decades affected their ongoing chances of success in a number of interesting, and, as Abriska claims, rather puzzling ways. Neither the Spanish Civil War nor Francisco Franco’s dictatorship were able to slow this flourishing industry supported enthusiastically by a betting public that appreciated the skillfulness of the female racket pelota players, yet their sport was not able to prevail alongside a growing democratization and feminism within Spanish society of the 1970s and 1980s. Unlike narratives elsewhere in Europe and North America, the feminist movement did not assist the female players at a moment in Spain when Basque nationalists sought to re-establish their masculine identity wounded during the Franco regime. Men took back racket pelota and the ‘raquetistas’ lost their prominence.

The importance of micro-studies is emphasised by Daniel Svensson’s and Florence Oppenheim’s exploration of a small rural village in Sweden. In their essay they examine the remarkable rise to fame in that environment of a woman’s football team, the Öxabäcks IF, in the last three decades of the twentieth century. Swedish women (and women from other Western countries) have played football since the early years of the twentieth century, though their efforts have been relatively isolated according to the authors. What was so remarkable about the Öxabäcks were the ‘sportification’ strategies used by the founders of the team to generate material support as well as contesting all too familiar gender boundaries in football. As well, the rural setting of the team and the relaxed gender views of farming families provided a strong organizational and strategic base for development. More difficult were efforts to break into regional, national and international football associations, though the Öxabäcks delivered a remarkable set of victories for over two decades until the initial advantages and competitive edge of a small rural location were turned on their head. The social communities that had supplied the players and support for local clubs no longer played an important role in a sport, which was now (well) funded and organized at a regional and national level.
In her essay, Jane Hunt introduces memory work through an analysis of dual memoirs which document the reflections of two American sports women concerning their sporting experiences before and after Title IX—the important 1972 federal law requiring gender equality in American educational institutions. How, asks Hunt, did American sportswomen Celeste Callahan and Dottie Dorion reflect upon their role in the world of change brought about by Title IX and what were their views concerning their insertion into the long-term goal of sporting equality for women? By focusing upon the processes of selective remembering and forgetting apparent in the memoirs of these two women, Hunt suggests that Title IX was not so much a significant signpost of change in the lives of sporting women, as the reflection of a continuing series of everyday personal choices and experiences in an ever-varying sporting landscape. She wonders whether and to what extent existent histories tend to enshrine gendered versions of the past, highlighting narratives of group progress and muting or silencing alternative voices and individual actors in the pursuit of equality. Taken further, the question becomes whether the simple addition of more stories about sporting women in history is sufficient to transform the meanings assigned to sex. When confronted with questions about the themes of inclusion and empowerment entwined within Title IX, Callahan poignantly remarks: ‘we did not have the opportunity to be bigger than we were. And so we weren’t’. She was not necessarily empowered by inclusion; and aging remained a structural barrier in carrying the torch of female equality in sport. In a way, then, through the two memoirs, we see a vacillation between a celebratory history (the perceived and real benefits of Title IX) and a loss narrative (where its personal benefits have proved less than obvious or non-existent in many aspects of life). Thus, the dual narratives of Dorion and Callahan highlight the ways they slid between past and present in their thoughts as each sifted through recollections of their sporting experiences – selecting some, leaving others behind – while periodically musing upon the extent of their achievements and level of empowerment. Indeed, as Lynn Abrams has observed, the burgeoning fields of memory studies and narrative studies are examples of theories that originated elsewhere—in cognitive psychology and psychoanalysis, and literature and linguistics respectively but which have become an intrinsic part of the oral historian’s toolbox.9 Thus, Hunt’s study points to the importance of seeing memories as constructed in a specific situation and possibly as a way of building a persona. Life writing, while inevitably subjective and incomplete, holds a particular relevance for the study of sporting women and their struggles for equality.

Cecilia Ottogalli-Mazzacavallo and Loïc Szerdahelyi also use a biographical perspective to explore the political and cultural dimensions of gender inequality in twentieth-century French physical education. They focus their argument around Annick Davisse, a physical education teacher and then Regional Teaching Inspector who waged a long and multi-focused attack on gender inequality in French schools, and attempted to fuel educational and gender innovation. Confronted with a European Union law requiring co-educational physical education, Davisse had to deal with her own lack of appropriate training as well as a complex and multifaceted political system with contradictory views on gender mixing. Throughout her forty-year career she stood apart in national French discussions of education as she
defended girls’ rights and combated gender inequality in physical education while also maintaining her own view on gender parity. The dialectical rationale she had built up over the course of her career came to the fore in 2010 in an article published in the periodical Revue française de pédagogie: ‘Filles et garçons en EPS: différents et ensemble?’ (Girls and boys in PE: different and together?). The title is evocative of Davisse’s life journey, her educational proposals and her distinct position on feminism. She came to distance herself from the founding theories of the feminist movement, fighting on behalf of women and for women without wanting to systematically question male domination. As she put it in a speech to the French Communist Party in 1981, we feminist communist activists stand against a strand of feminist terrorism that monitors every detail of our private lives. In physical education this meant respecting differences, of course, but Davisse was also clear that such differences need not be permanent and that individuals should not be confined to using their body as their category dictated. Thus, while committed to the cause of women, she deconstructed the universalist doxa without yielding to differentialist thinking and, conversely, considered cultural differences an essential starting point, without yielding to the universalist ideal.

What we had hoped for but did not fully accomplish with this collection was a more global historical study of female sport and physical culture designed to deconstruct Western dualisms and bodies of knowledge, a broader historical range beyond the more familiar nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and a greater span of new and challenging historical methodologies despite the excellent and innovative contributions discussed here. We were especially sensitive to the fact that language remains a critical issue for international historians wishing to publish in English-language books and journals, limiting the reach of their interesting stories around physical culture. In an article on the movement of feminist research and gender history in educational research, Julie McLeod stresses the importance of situated knowledge, and the significance of recognizing that a furthering of feminist knowledge and theory is contextual.10 This is true for the study of leisure, sport, and physical culture too and leads us to the belief that ‘we must continue to reflect on how and in what ways our methodologies, analyses, and accounts foster new ways to disrupt and challenge the “truths” of gender’ – as well as reflecting on the ways in which our research practices are complicit in re-establishing gendered boundaries and hierarchies and indeed geographical and linguistic boundaries.11

Notes
4. Hargreaves and Vertinsky (eds), Physical Culture, Power and the Body.


Notes on contributors

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