A Whole Other Ball Game: Women's Literature on Women's Sport


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While there are some excellent accounts of the history of women's sports in North America, A Whole Other Ball Game brings to readers the experiences of individual athletes, something often absent in accurate historical research. By selecting stories and poems that depict the "real individual" behind the official records of women's sport, editor Joli Sandoz attempts to present a new understanding of women's sport: "The stories and poems here tell of something new to most readers, though older than the twentieth century: women's experiences and dreams related to organized competitive athletics" (p. 14). This collection depicts how women have experienced competitive sport during the last hundred years, from the earliest piece of women's sport fiction published in the United States in 1895 to contemporary stories from the 1990s. Most of the pieces, however, have been written between 1980 and 1990. The majority of the stories center around baseball, softball, basketball, running, and swimming.

To represent women's sport experiences and dreams, Sandoz has selected only works written by women writers. The contributors include many accomplished award-winning writers and some well-known feminist sport scholars such as Nancy Boutlier, Pat Griffin, and Mariah Burton Nelson. The introduction, by Sandoz, includes a brief history of women's sports in America over the last hundred years to give a context for the literary pieces in the book.

A Whole Other Ball Game has a number of themes running through it, one of which is women's love for competitive sport. Sandoz sets up this theme strongly in her introduction. When she describes her own sporting history, she states succinctly, "I loved sport. Fiercely." (p. 11). Many of the stories portray women's love for aching muscles after a hard competition, the adrenaline surge during competition, the ability to physically excel in competition, and the self-confidence after completing a competition. In addition, characters in many of these stories are basketball stars, record-breaking swimmers, or golf champions. To balance the success stories, however, I would have liked to read more reflective stories on the downsides of...
competitive sport to evoke a discussion into why, while a great source of joy for some women, other women rather find empowerment outside of sport.

Some of the authors, though, do attempt to touch on the contradictions facing women within competitive sport. For example, in Kristen Garrett’s “Lady Lobo,” the main character Casey, a college basketball star, reflects on her “childish wants and needs and dreams” after “choking” a winning free throw for her team. In another college basketball story, Lucy Jane Bledsoe’s “Teamwork,” the main character, who competes at the collegiate level, is actually happy to sit on the bench as competition terrifies her: “I came off the bench as a guard when the game was clearly won or clearly lost. That was okay with me. Games scared me shitless. I played for the practices, the uniforms, the feeling of being on a team” (p. 174). In Pat Griffin’s humorous story, “Diamond’s Dykes, and Double Plays,” two caricatures from the lesbian community, “the sport jock” and “the intellectual vegetarian,” meet in a softball game. The main character, a sport jock, is faced with a “non-competitive” lesbian softball league that believes in one united sisterhood. While “ordinary” physically active women’s stories represent a minority in this book, they too tend to focus on the inspirational effects of competitive physical activity. For example, Celia, in Jenifer Levin’s beautifully written story, “Her Marathon,” discovers marathon running to create meaning for her otherwise bleak and empty life.

A more important theme than the experience of sport itself seems to be self-discovery through sport. As Sandoz puts it, “the sheer joy of feeling sport free[s] one’s authentic self” (p. 13). This self is something other than the one usually preserved for women; sportswomen are “real” individuals, not the “flowers” and “fairies” complying to society’s expectations. This battle between societally accepted feminine identity and athletic identity is a recurring theme in this book. Women’s sporting experience, according to Sandoz, is filled with confusion as female athletes are “caught between liberating experiences in sport and cultural messages about proper behavior” (p. 15). Many of the stories in this book depict this familiar dilemma.

Stephanie Grant, in “Posting-Up,” shows the puzzling expectations of femininity through two point guards on a high school basketball team: the tall, athletically superb but quiet and reserved Kate and the loud, social Irene who retains herself in the accepted world of make-up and Farrah Fawcett hairstyle. Ellen Cooney takes the reader into an even more culturally confusing situation, when a fifty-year-old, self-described overweight mom discovers the joys of softball. Still in the context of softball, Cynthia MacDonald’s poem tells about a star pitcher who is afraid of marriage and children, as this would mean being “put on the shelf” and an end of the enjoyment of success in sport. Elizabeth Corbett highlights the expectation that marriage and children mean the end of women’s sporting careers. Her