A Game for Rough Girls? A History of Women’s Football in Britain


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A Game for Rough Girls? analyzes historical and contemporary aspects of women’s participation in football and advocates transformational changes. Connecting themes throughout the book are the contemptuous attitude toward female players that has long prevailed, the persistent idea of gender division on which this attitude is based, the construction of football to protect male dominance, and women’s own failure to contest systematically their marginalization.

The book is divided into two parts and five chapters that are bracketed by an introduction and conclusion. Part I examines women’s football from the 1880s at the local, regional, and national level, within the context of the development of the game of football, women’s sport, and social change. Williams traces the evolution of the women’s game from a largely voluntary, autonomous, and spectator-supported enterprise into one that is more widely participatory and bureaucratically and externally (meaning male) controlled. She goes on to examine the construction of private and public memory in women’s football, as well as the structural, organizational, attitudinal, and media constraints that have shaped and devalued women’s involvement and produced a striking lack of awareness of, or interest in, the early history of the women’s game.

In Part II Williams focuses on the rise of women’s football in a global and professional era, and she explores relevant political, economic, regional, cultural, racial, and sexual developments inside and outside both football and England. She discusses the direct and indirect effects of equal opportunities legislation and football’s growth into a huge international business, comparing developments affecting women in countries such as Norway, Namibia, and the United States, as well as in major international sports competitions such as the Olympic Games and the Women’s World Cup.

Among the book’s strengths is its raising of fundamental questions about how gender and sexual-role stereotypes and divisions in football have been constructed and perpetuated, how they relate to and reinforce broader patterns and practices, how they affect the development of women’s football at all levels, particularly the most competitive, and how they urgently need changing in order for the women’s game to advance. Williams is deliberately provocative in challenging long-standing traditions and perceived wisdom in order to shake up the football establishment and to inspire people to think about and then alter restrictive attitudes and practices. She strongly advocates specific changes that she regards as essential to the achievement of women’s basic human rights in football and in sport more broadly. Damning the “equal but different” theory and practice that underlie women’s football, Williams
says it is unjust to place a structural ceiling on individuals’ opportunities because of gender, in particular a ceiling that defends and privileges masculinity. She is strongly in favor of mixed, competitive football for all ages and at all levels despite striking differences of opinion about its desirability among women players and the general public, and she demands an end to protected employment opportunities for male players, coaches, and administrators.

Williams condemns the increasing bureaucratization of women’s sport as militating against women’s interests, criticizing the ways in which practices in women’s football are shaped by large, conservative, and male-dominated sporting organizations. Pointed, too, are her revelations about football’s imperviousness to feminist appeals for change, the lack of concerted and organized demands for control by and on behalf of women players, the means by which a few women have negotiated access to careers and positions of power in football, and the reasons why such women tend to support a basically sexist and exclusionary system.

The author challenges the widespread view that increasing commercialism, consumerism, professionalism, and strategies of integration are inevitable and desirable in women’s football, arguing that dominant structures are exclusionary by design, privileging men, and perpetuating women’s inferiority. Many of her female readers will emit silent cheers when reading her critique of the mixed-message delivered when elite-level female players are presented to audiences in a highly sexual manner.

Williams’ most important contribution to scholarship lies in her raising more questions than she answers and revealing women’s football to be a complex subject that has only begun to be explored. Scholars in search of research subjects should take notice of her identification of numerous topics in need of much more exploration, topics such as the male and female separate spheres; the role of religion, class, ethnicity, and sexuality; the history of women’s clubs and their expression of memory, community, and autonomous traditions; the role of football in the leisure of women; the playing careers of individuals and the roles of women as coaches, managers, and administrators; the relationship of the mass of female players to the few at elite levels; the importance of male voluntary support; the roles of educational institutions and of works and regional teams in facilitating women’s play; the correlation between sports participation and academic achievement; the way women players are mediated and represented; the extent of female competitive networks at the participatory and professional levels; regional diversity within nations and across cultures; the continental European and wider international dimension; and the complexities of international governing bodies’ views of women players.

Unfortunately, the book has a number of weaknesses. The title notwithstanding, it is overwhelmingly about England not Britain, and is much less a history than a critique of the contemporary condition of women’s football. Further, the lack of any case studies of women’s football clubs, such as the very successful Dick, Kerr Ladies’ AFC, Preston, leaves readers longing for more specific and thus clarifying and substantiating information. At least brief comparisons of women’s football with the female forms of other iconic team sports such as cricket would also have been helpful, as would more photographs, in particular action shots and pictures taken before 1914 and after 1949.

Further, although enjoyment was and is women’s primary motivation for playing football, enjoyment is an experience that will escape many of Williams’ readers.