Working Class Women and Sport:
An Untold Story

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The emergence of feminist scholarship over the past two decades has challenged the gender hierarchy, altered our perceptions of society, and energized academic debate. Researchers of historical studies have provided great insight into the development and repercussions of male dominated cultures; but such scholars too often exhibit their own particular biases. This is particularly true in the realm of sport studies. While much has been learned about the development of women’s sporting practices and leisure activities, women are often portrayed as a homologous group without regard to sexual orientation, ethnic, class, racial, or religious differences. In portraying and analyzing leisure from the perspective of the white, liberal, middle class, heterosexual, and Christian feminist viewpoint such variables become clouded (McCone, 1988; Vamplew, 1989; Parratt, 1989).

Social historians are unraveling the web of myriad variables that constitute women’s experiences; sport historians continue to focus primarily on the middle class woman (Kennedy, 1979; Hooks, 1990; Messner and Sabo, 1990). Analyses of the roots of physical education for women, Victorian ideals of femininity, collegiate athletics, women’s reform movements, and the battles against male hegemony are most often grounded in middle-class experiences. While truly important in their necessity and findings, such writers neglect the bulk of female experience — that of the working class. We still know relatively little about how these women spent their leisure; we too often assume that they had none. Being less literate than their middle-class sisters, we know even less about how they viewed their world, and what part sporting practices may have played in their lives. In this work I attempt a preliminary investigation into such questions by surveying primary sources of working class women’s sport experiences, which included yearbooks and newspapers, parish histories, ethnic athletic club publications, and industrial recreation programs in Chicago, from 1881-

As part of the emerging research that is critical of the traditional liberal feminist literature I present a more radical approach. Drawing upon the hegemony theory of Antonio Gramsci I examine not only the dominance of the patriarchal structure, but a dual layer of hegemony imposed on working class women by their middle-class sisters (Hoare & Smith, 1971). While all women suffered under the male governing bodies that regulated sporting practices, the emergence of the "new women," who advocated separate spheres of play and a particular image of femininity, also inhibited female athletes by excluding the socially inferior and those who lacked sufficient economic means. I determined that for the working class such middle-class concepts proved prohibitive, and any potential solidarity in the women's sport movement fractured along class or racial lines. I limited my examination in this study to white women, for women of color often met with exclusion or segregated sport experiences that differed from the majority. Even within that majority, sport became a battleground where middle-class women sought liberation from the largely male constructs of womanhood; while working-class athletes, often of European ethnic origin, eschewed the middle-class leadership in expressing their own concept of femininity that allowed for commercialized competitive ventures (Hult & Trekell, 1991; Vandenberg-Daves, 1992; Vertinsky, 1987; Dosch, 1991).

While great diversity transcends any arbitrarily drawn boundaries, for the purposes of this study working class women are defined as those who engaged in industrial occupations, manual labor, or practiced domestic roles within blue collar households. The emerging ranks of middle-class women were often college educated and held positions as professionals, while the less educated held non-manual administrative or clerical jobs.

Sport and the Question of Femininity

Sparhawk has recently stated that "Before 1887, the participation of women in sports was restricted to noncompetitive recreational activities . . ." (Sparhawk, 1989). Contrary to such pronouncements, Nancy Struna and Linda Borish, historians of the colonial and antebellum periods respectively, have found that women did compete in their chores, such as butter churning or spinning contests (Struna, 1987; 1991; Borish, 1991). Such studies beg for a redefinition of sport pertinent to all women.

During the nineteenth century middle-class women began to participate in genteel sports, such as croquet, archery, and tennis; while