**Book Review**


I have been an avid reader of books on the topic of gender in sport for over 20 years, and it was indeed a pleasure to review this important one by Cahn. In reading *Coming On Strong,* I was reminded of my friend Lucille Kyvallos, a basketball star who played in the 1950's. During the years in which she was a physical education major at a northeastern college (where athletic activities for women were not available), she played under an assumed name in an amateur league. Forbidden to do what she loved best, she drove to a different city nearly five hours away every weekend to play basketball. Cahn's treatment of gender in sport made me understand in a new way Lucille's passion for basketball and the historical context that forced her to use a different name. Both the admiration of and the real pressures on women athletes come across loud and clear in this book.

During the past three years there have been several books published on the subject of women's sport, but Cahn puts this one above the rest. The grounding of an historical analysis is one of the important contributions Cahn makes: her thorough historical research provides more information on the participation of African American women athletes in collegiate and amateur sports than any other recent text available. Previously a critical gap had existed in that area of scholarship. Cahn also expands her analysis of women's sport to include important issues of class. Within the context of an historical analysis, Cahn contributes to the feminist literature, specifically to the debates on gender and sexuality. She also develops for the reader how well-intentioned women physical educators perpetuated gender distinctions. While women sport leaders supported women's participation in athletics, they also encouraged moderation. Similar tension between sport and femininity has also been evident in the media's descriptions of women athletes at the very top, e.g., Martina Navratilova, Babe Didrickson and Helen Mills. There is a distinct similarity among these very talented women in that all were considered exceptional in their athletic performance but were also criticized for stepping over the line of appropriate feminine behavior. By emphasizing moderation in athletic performance, women physical educators thought they could prevent the criticisms of "mannish" attributes. Cahn's history of women's sport exposes efforts to maintain on an institutional level the ideology of women's inferiority, yet on a personal level, Cahn illustrates the love and exhilaration women have felt while participating in various sports.
In the first six chapters Cahn weaves a story of the intersection of race, class and gender in the development of women's sport on the collegiate, amateur and Olympic levels. As stunning examples she provides a wonderful analysis of the history of women's basketball (Chapter 4, “Order on the Court: The Campaign to Suppress Women's Basketball”); of Black women in track and field (Chapter 5, “Cinderellas' of Sport”); and of the all-American girls baseball league (Chapter 6, “No Freaks, No Amazons, No Boyish Bobs”). What Cahn offers is a layout of the important events in the history of women's sport, e.g., the development of the National Association for Girls and Women in Sport, the creation of basketball as a woman's sport originally, and the first Olympic medal won by an African American woman. In the 1948 Olympic track and field competition, Alice Coachman claimed that medal. Cahn places such events in an historical context exposing the factors of race, class and gender, so critical to a full and accurate understanding of the development of women's sport.

What I find important to Cahn's analysis is her portrayal of women athletic leaders and physical educators who, in their criticism of men's sport, present the makings of a radical social critique. By having a distinctly conservative approach to teaching women athletes, some physical educators helped to maintain power differences between the sexes. Although these educators were opposed to the abuses becoming widely known in men's commercialized sport, they failed to examine their own racial and class-based bias. According to Cahn, "Women sport reformers acted... to defend their interests as professional, middle-class women.”

Later chapters in the book address other important aspects of the scholarly discourse centering on women's athletics. Chapter 7, “Beauty and the Butch: The 'Mannish' Athlete and the Lesbian Threat” and Chapter 8, “Play It, Don't Say It: Lesbian Identity and Community in Women's Sport,” look at the links between athleticism and lesbianism, elaborating on the discourse of female sexuality and its relationship to women's sport. More than pointing out the heterosexist bias in women's sport, Coming on Strong develops an historical perspective on the psychological literature available during the early part of this century on the subjects of female sexuality and lesbianism, and the class issues that affect them both. Cahn gives an interesting assessment of butch-femme roles and how they have operated within women's athletics. These chapters are as relevant to people studying sexual identity development as they are to those who study gender identity development and sport performance.

The last chapter describes the revolution in women's sport that occurred in the 1970s. This revolution laid the groundwork for the scholarly attention in the feminist literature—primarily in sport sociology—that is now blossoming in the 90's. Finally, Cahn gives reports from