
Mary Jo Festle is an historian, and, in *Playing Nice: Politics and Apologies in Women's Sports*, she has provided a fairly detailed historical account of those politics and apologies in women's sports in the United States since the 1950's. The book is divided into four parts according to time periods (the early 1950s, 1955-1967, 1968-1979, and 1980-1990). For each of the time periods, Festle examines three different sport forms for women: sport in the collegiate environment, basketball, and tennis. Through her selection of these three sport forms, Festle is able to demonstrate not only the influence of societal gender expectations related to team and individual sport, but also the influences of social class, race, and homophobia as factors impacting the involvement of women in sport.

In examining the 1950s, Festle sets up the tensions regarding women's involvement in sport. One major conflict was between the college women physical educators and the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU). The main conflict here was not so much whether or not women should participate in sport, but in which kind of sport they should participate. The AAU was advocating a competitive model similar to the model used for men's sports, while the women physical educators were advocating more of a recreational focus that would serve women through their leisure years. Beyond this philosophical difference, however, was a concern for the sphere of authority that was based upon both gender and social class. The college educated professional women (middle class) were opposed to the involvement of non-trained men (associated with the working-class AAU) in directing women's sports. An additional reason for the approach of the women physical educators towards women's sports, however, was homophobia. Women physical educators in the 1950s were clearly not your traditional women. They were college educated professionals, the majority were unmarried, and through
their involvement with sport and physical activity, they were involved in non-traditional activities for women especially for the middle class. They found it necessary to protect themselves from the labels of “mannish” and “sexually deviant” and they did this through staunchly supporting a more feminine form of sport involvement. Festle puts these attitudes into a perspective which makes the actions of these women understandable, but she is still critical of the stance for the limitations it placed on women who wanted to compete, the shame and embarrassment it may have created for those young women who wanted to compete, and for the ways in which their actions reinforced a hegemonic system regarding gender, class, race, and sexual orientation. This criticism is a consistent thread.

These themes repeat themselves throughout the book, although the instantiations change. In looking at collegiate sport in the 1970s, Festle covers Title IX in great detail complete with all the Capitol Hill politics regarding interpretations, attempts to exclude sport (or certain aspects of sports), and once again the gender-related power struggle over control of women’s sport. This time, instead of the AAU against the college women, it was the AIAW and the then-male-only NCAA. Through her detailed examination of correspondence, meeting transcripts, interviews and affidavits, Festle provides information which many will not have been aware of from other writings on the topic. These sections demonstrate how the women involved in the leadership of collegiate sport had to become far more politically astute than had been required in the past. Festle provides documentation to show the behind-the-scenes political battles involving the NCAA, AIAW, Congress, and the Department of Health, Education and Welfare. She presents the gamesmanship of the NCAA in giving lip service to opportunities for women while maneuvering to take control of women’s athletics so that it could essentially restrict the growth of women’s athletics.

A final significant point of sport at the collegiate level was the ambivalence many of the women leaders had towards these changes being brought about by Title IX. It was ambivalence based upon the principles of equality and difference. At first, there seemed to be a hope that both would be possible. Because of Title IX, equality of involvement and benefits could be attained for women, but the hope was that the equality could be manifest in a way which differed from