

# TOMBOYS, DYKES, AND GIRLY GIRLS: INTERROGATING THE SUBJECTIVITIES OF ADOLESCENT FEMALE ATHLETES

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If you really think about it there have been a lot of female athletes who have come up over the years. There was a time when we couldn't do anything and now we have lots of female athletes. There is nothing wrong with it. I LOVE being a female athlete. **Dena, track and basketball**

When I first started playing, it was to keep my grades up, and then I really started to enjoy basketball and it's like the number one thing. That's the reason why I just fell in love with sports. Running track—just anything that came towards me, I did it. **Jasmine, basketball and track**

Adrenalin rush. I just love it. Now practicing is not always so much fun, but when you're on the court and you have the clock up and the score and you're playing against people you've never played, it's just so much fun. It just brings joy to my life. **Kerry, basketball player**

With the exception of the military, sports is the most masculine, male-identified institution in the United States, and from its inception, it has been a closely cultivated arena for males to demonstrate their privilege and power. Unsurprisingly, the entrance of women into this sacred sphere has been carefully monitored and regulated (Cahn 1994; Griffin 1992; Park 1987; Sage 1990). While individual women have continuously contested their exclusion from or limited entry into the sports arena, feminists and advocates of women's rights have expressed ambivalent feelings about women's entrance into the world of sports. This ambivalence was evident in the early deliberations of many female physical educators who, on the one hand, pushed for women to be physically active

and, on the other hand, sought to remake sports into a more feminine sphere by downplaying the competitive and aggressive aspects of sports (Cahn 1994; Nelson 1994). However, by the second wave of feminism in the 1960s and 70s, the prevailing discussion among feminists in regard to sports was how to increase women's participation in sports so they could enjoy the same rights, privileges, and benefits of male athletes. Sports was seen as a critical arena for women to contest stereotypical images of the docile, passive, inert, incapable female body, thus challenging the patriarchal control and regulation of the female body. The feminist hope, as culminated in the passage of Title IX in 1972, was that if women could crack the world of sports, then patriarchy, which manifests both literally and symbolically in the sporting institution, could be dented.

Dena, Jasmine, and Kerry, the high school athletes quoted earlier, can be viewed as evidence of the challenging of this masculine stronghold.<sup>1</sup> These girls have been playing sports since they were very young, and being an athlete is central to their identity. They are quite comfortable in their athletic skins, taking pride in their sporting accomplishments and boasting of their desires to get physical, knock opponents down, and win at all costs. Perhaps this isn't surprising since these are post-Title IX girls who have grown up with the WNBA, Mia Hamm, the Williams sisters, and the 1999 U.S. women's soccer team World Cup win. Indeed, since the passage of Title IX in 1972, girls' participation in sports has increased more than 800%, and athletic high school girls are the recipients of a form of power, prestige, and status once relegated solely to cheerleaders and majorettes.

Yet, how these girls talked about themselves as female athletes and about their experiences playing sports suggests that cracking patriarchy may involve more than simply allowing girls to enter the playing field. As we listened closely to female high school athletes' stories about athleticism, power, strength, and competition, we also heard traditional feminine narratives about being attractive and exhibiting heterosexual appeal. Numerous feminist sports scholars (Krane 2001; Veri 1999) have documented how adult female athletes negotiate an athletic terrain that requires them to be "heterosexy" athletes (Griffin 1992), but as Shakib and Dunbar (2002) point out, little research has focused on "the contemporary meanings adolescents make of gender and athleticism" (354). In other words, how do adolescent female athletes negotiate the slippery discursive spaces embedded in today's discourse about sports? How are athletic

girls struggling with and participating in the social construction of masculinity and femininity? The purpose of this article is to address this absence in the literature by examining how sports at the high school level operate as a critical arena for girls to produce meaning about femininity.

### THE FEMALE SPORTING BODY

Feminist researchers (Bartky 1990; Bettie 2003; Bordo 1993) remind us that the body is both a “signifying and signified agent. . . it is a social entity, created through the interaction of cultural norms and sex differences and encoding historical and cultural meanings in sexually specific ways” (Castelnuovo and Guthrie 1998:10). There is nothing “natural,” apolitical, or ahistorical about the body; rather it is the cultural scripting impressed on the body that gives it particular meanings in particular cultures and in particular sociocultural contexts. Further, bodies can only be read within and against the prevailing discourses of the time. These normative discourses typically impose conformity across individuals by creating written and unwritten rules for determining who is normal and who is deviant (Veri 1999). This normalizing judgment results in the subjugation and regulation of bodies, creating what Foucault (1979) has called the docile body. As Bartky (1990) and Bordo (1993) argue the regulation of the female body is accomplished through a variety of self-regulatory mechanisms, such as the adherence to ideals of beauty that require women to maim and deface their bodies, control their food intake, and take up as little space as possible.

The cultural meaning of the female body and how it is regulated and controlled takes on a particular meaning when discussing women’s participation in sports because athletic endeavors require women to engage their bodies in practices that are typically associated with masculinity. Scholars have argued convincingly elsewhere how sports play a powerful role in the reproduction of patriarchal gender regimes. From its beginning, sports was not only dominated by males, but it was also defined by masculine traits and was explicitly discriminatory toward women (Whitson 1990). Further, sports for boys and men serve a ritualistic purpose in society in which adult men initiate boys into hegemonic masculinity (Sabo and Panepinto 1990). Throughout history women’s entrance into this masculine domain of sports has been carefully monitored by claims that the athletic female body is, in fact, a gender-deviant, freakish body (Cahn 1994).

Writing 25 years ago, Iris Young explained how dominant discourses of femininity have regulated the bodies of girls and women to construct the female body as a passive, inactive, inert body:

The norms of femininity suppress the body potential of women. We grow up learning that the feminine body is soft, not muscular, passive, incapable, vulnerable. Our parents, teachers and friends suppress our natural urges to run, jump, risk, by cries that we should not act so boldly and move so daringly. (Bartky, 35)

However, norms change, and over a period of time counterdiscourses provide openings to challenge dominant ideologies and rewrite cultural scripts. This has certainly been true of changing notions of ideal femininity. Bordo (1993) explained that today's ideal woman must assume many masculine signifiers: "self-control, determination, cool, emotional discipline, mastery, and so on" (171). Similarly, Girl Studies scholars (e.g., Adams 1999; Budgeon 1998; Inness 1998; Walkerdine 1993) have argued that new subject positions are being made available to girls that provide a counterdiscourse to the girl as victim discourse that was so publicized in the 1980s and 90s. Passivity, quietness, acquiescence, and docility no longer represent the primary markers for signifying normative girlhood.

Today 2.8 million high school girls participate in sports. The positive benefits of girls playing sports have been widely publicized: decrease in alcohol and drug use, decrease in teenage pregnancy, better grades, and increased self-confidence (Sabo et al. 1999; Savage and Holcomb 1999; Zimmerman and Reavill 1998). Yet, as feminist sports scholars (Cahn 1993; Krane 2001; Veri 1999) have pointed out, female athletes still reside outside the parameters of normative femininity, particularly those who play competitive, "male" sports or who appear to resist compulsory heterosexuality. Mainstream society continues to be troubled by the athletic, muscular, make-up-free, jewelry-free, sweaty female body.

How then do women athletes deal with the seemingly cultural contradiction between being a woman and being an athlete? Sports scholars, beginning in the 1970s, have suggested that women athletes rely on an apologetic defense, and more recently a reformed apologetic defense, to reconcile these two conflicting images. The apologetic defense says that women counter the image of female athletes as mannish by exaggerating their femininity off the playing field through assuming tradi-

tional feminine markers (e.g., long hair, makeup, frilly dresses), downplaying the competitive component of sports, and emphasizing their heterosexuality (Eitzen 1999; Festle 1996). The reformed apologetic defense suggests that women athletes no longer have to downplay the masculine, competitive components of their participation in sports. They can indeed revel in their athleticism and publicly display it as long as they continue to exude traditional notions of femininity, particularly their heterosexuality (Festle 1996). However, Malcolm (2003) asserts that these strategies may not resonate with younger athletes and that age must be taken into consideration when considering the strategies female athletes use to appear both athletic and feminine. She notes: "because society's expectations regarding what is appropriately feminine changes according to the age of the actor, girls and women of different ages experience different pressures to demonstrate appropriately feminine behavior" (1398). In the remainder of this article, we take up Malcolm's challenge to consider age as an important variable in any discussion of women and athletics by examining how adolescent girls (ages 13-21) who are known at their schools as serious athletes make sense of the discursive practices of female sports and notions of normative femininity in the twenty-first century.

**"To Be a Good Athlete Means You're Gay": The Power of Heteronormativity in Sports**

The power of heteronormativity in sports is nothing new. Although the concern about women playing sports in the early part of the twentieth century centered around concerns that women who played sports would become less inhibited around men and their heterosexual desires would be unleashed leading to promiscuity, by the 1930s this image had changed to that of the mannish, lesbian athlete (Cahn 1993). By the 1950s the image of the female athlete as a lesbian or a social misfit kept many heterosexual women from participating in sports. At the same time, sports programs provided a safe haven for many lesbians or girls questioning their sexual identity to find a sense of community (Cahn 1994). Today the homophobic atmosphere permeating women's and girls' sports continues to regulate the behaviors of both straight and lesbian athletes. Indeed, there are few out lesbian athletes at the collegiate and professional level. Forced to abide by the "don't ask, don't tell" policy, these lesbian athletes remain silent, fearing a loss of fan base, corporate sponsorships, or a place on the team if they go public. Heterosexual

athletes are silenced as well since forming any collective response to the homophobic discourse results in serious repercussions. Today many college and high school athletic programs publicly announce their anti-lesbian policies, and in hiring practices, the heterosexualized credentials of a potential coach are scrutinized as much as their coaching experience and ability (Griffin 1992; Plymire and Forman 2001).

The interview protocol approved by the IRB for conducting research with minors did not allow us to ask our adolescent participants any questions about their personal sexual identities. Probably, a few of our interviewees were lesbians; however, all the athletes in our study are forced to spend a great deal of time and energy proving they are straight. Homophobia, as these girls' interviews revealed, envelops the world of high school sports, and all of them understood quite well the detrimental effects of heteronormativity on all female athletes:

It's like everyday I hear, "You're a dyke cause you play softball." You can't hang out with us because you play softball. You can't be friends with us because you play softball. "Why are you even playing? I've seen you play and you're no good. You suck. You've never had a boyfriend because you play softball." And I'm like, Whatever, I'm tired of your mouth, so I hit them.

**Angie, softball**

If you are a female athlete and you are on an all-female team, a lot of people will automatically classify you as a lesbian. If there is a lesbian on the team, if there is one, then the whole team must be lesbian. **Kerry, basketball**

If you play any sport, like basketball, softball, soccer, track, you got to be gay. If you're good, if you're a top athlete, you're gay. Well that's how some people perceive you. **Kelly, basketball**

Pat Griffin (1992) discusses how female athletes have long been pressured to conform to traditional notions of femininity. However, she notes that this promotion of a highly sexualized and highly heterosexualized image has become even more explicit today. One example of this is the recent move by FIFA to encourage women who play soccer to wear "skimpier shorts, to bring more attention to the game" (Millward 2004). Like all

females who play sports, the girls in our study are constantly involved in a balancing act to prove that yes, they are athletes, but they are also “girly girls.” Often, they do resort to the apologetic defense, which requires them to prove that their *gendered identity* trumps their *athletic identity*. In other words, they must “girly” their athletic image:

Like today, for example, we decided we were going to dress up for our playoffs. We want to be sure that we look nice and look girly, but once we get on the field, you know, we want to be strong and leave that girly attitude behind. **Lilly, soccer**

After a game if someone goes to celebrate, they have to get their hair done; they gotta put on makeup; they have to get cute ‘cause they don’t want a guy to be like, “Oh, she’s a tomboy, so she might not be interested in a guy.” **Jasmine, basketball and track**

On the playing field, being a girly girl is a challenge because being sweaty and physical is not typically associated with ideal femininity. Hence, feminine markers become significant in exuding femininity even while one is engaged in hitting, catching, kicking, and slam dunking. Having long hair, tying ribbons around one’s ponytail, and wearing makeup at practices and games were often-cited ways to accentuate femininity. Kelly explains the measures many of her teammates employ to look feminine on the basketball court:

Wearing lipstick, how they do their hair, how they carry themselves on the court can make them seem like they’re being a little too feminine out there. . . . We had a teammate that wore her makeup when we played big games, TV games, and she’d put a little blush on and when she’d come to the bench, she would wipe her face and all this makeup would come on the towel.

Interestingly, however, most of the girls in our study, said they did not personally participate in these practices, although they cited ample evidence of other girls who did.

When they did participate, it was often as a result of their coaches or coaches’ wives pushing them to engage in these feminizing practices:

My sophomore year in volleyball, my coach made us do a cheer after every play. She said, “yall have to do cheers!” So we would have little chants and cheers after every play. It really wasn’t my style. It was more like cheerleading than it was volleyball. I didn’t see that it had any significance. **Sherry, volleyball and soccer**

Our coach’s wife, she does all this stuff like makes us matching ribbons. I guess she thinks it looks pretty. She’s like real prissy. She used to be a cheerleader. **Sierra, softball**

Our coach always loved to make people in awe. Like she’d get the spandex two inches from the crotch instead of four because she said eight inches look tacky, four is okay, but two, so that’s one of the main reasons why most people, most guys came to our games. **Marie, volleyball**

Because of their status as high school students who are compelled to follow the edicts of their adult coaches, these girls did not feel they had much recourse in resisting these attempts to “girly” their athletic images.

These feminine markers are not only significant in proving that female athletes are feminine, but these markers also signify heterosexuality. As Veri (1999) argues, “to be devoid of the traditional markers of femininity is to be an unnatural body, and this unnaturalness is most often conflated with homosexuality” (363). Central to the disciplining of the female body is to conflate gendered identity with sexual identity—to make *girl* and *woman* synonymous with *heterosexual girl* and *heterosexual woman*. Indeed, *girl*, *girly*, and *girly girl* were repeatedly used by the girls to demonstrate that “girl” in the life of high school is presumed to mean “heterosexual girl.” Even as girls entered a sphere once occupied only by males, female athletes were kept in their place through a form of self-surveillance and social practices that demand adherence to a certain narrowly defined form of normative femininity. “Normative femininity” Bartky (1992) argues, “is coming more and more to be centered on women’s body—not its duties and obligations—but its sexuality, more precisely, its presumed heterosexuality and its appearance” (116). Thus, girl athletes’ attempts to make themselves feminine are also

attempts to make themselves appear heterosexual. One of the easiest ways of doing this is to have a boyfriend, as Shannon explains:

I know one of my friends always comments when I mention a teammate that she looks like a lesbian. I know my teammates are not. It's like we want to be seen in public with a guy or something to show that we're not lesbian. **Shannon, softball**

Another strategy used by these female athletes to portray themselves as “girly girls” is to assume traditional signifiers of heterosexual femininity. Homecoming Court, cheerleader, prom queen, and beauty pageant were employed throughout our interviews to demonstrate that female athletes can easily make the transition from tennis shoes to high heels—from serious athlete to desirable heterosexual girl. Sierra, a softball player, spoke proudly of being on the Homecoming Court for two years and added that two other softball players were also members of the court. Erica, known as the best basketball player on her middle school team, won her middle school beauty pageant, and several girls revealed that they had been cheerleaders before deciding to play sports.

These girls recognize that as female athletes they are positioned differently from male athletes. Thus, emphasizing their femininity and their heterosexuality is seen as part of the territory that comes with playing the game. But we also found ample evidence in their stories to suggest that today's adolescent girl athletes are often resisting the apologetic defense and engaging in “resistant discourses which position women as active, independent and heroic rather than passive, dependent, and pretty” (Jones 1993).

### **Sports Brings Me Joy: The Empowerment of Girls Through Sports**

In experiencing the joy or “sense of awe that is associated with transcending previous boundaries” (Castelnuovo and Guthrie 1998:10), the girls in our study certainly viewed sports as key to their lives and central to their sense of self. As these female high school athletes talked about the rush they receive in competing against others, in the self-discipline they must exude to be competitive (e.g., competing with broken wrists, bandaged knees, and hurt ankles), and the sheer pleasure in bonding with other females in spaces that were once considered off limits, they do indeed seem to be interloping into spaces once reserved for males.

Many of the girls said that the biggest compliment they can receive about their athletic ability is “hey, girl, you play like a dude.” Sports for these girls provides a space for them to challenge stereotypes of the female body as weak, fragile, and delicate—an image that has continuously been used to oppress women both mentally and physically. These girls see sports as empowering both physically in pushing their bodies in strenuous ways and mentally through the positive recognition they receive as serious athletes:

I was going to shoot a jumper because they had the lane packed in, so I’m dribbling and dribbling and I pulled up and shot the jumper and when I shot the jumper, she smacks me in the face at the same time. So I just pulled it. I don’t know if it goes in or not. I fall to the ground, and when I fall on the ground, I seen the ball go in the rim. I get up and I’m just running like it’s the all-star game. **Kelly, basketball**

We played sectional tournaments and we played five games and I pitched like two or three games. It was our last game. I was so tired but I just threw that pitch and I struck the girl out. I was dead and my arm was killing me but we won. **Renee, softball and basketball**

They also want to be taken seriously as athletes whose first and foremost goal is to win, as further explained by Jasmine and Kelly:

It’s like, for me, there’s so much competition in the world ‘cause you’re a girl, and if you go to the [local YMCA gym] and you start playing basketball and then someone sees that you’re short and so they challenge you by your height or what you look like you can do. And then they’ll play you one on one and you beat them. It just gives you so much competition and so much power.

When I was young, it was just for fun and games. Then I got older, you know, I wanted to win. I always wanted to win a championship. They say you can’t be a great player until you have some type of ring. . . I’ll probably play on one of those elder leagues. I’m not quitting until I get a ring. I don’t care if it’s a nursing home trophy, I’m winning a championship.

Certainly, one could argue that these girls are maintaining the social superiority of hegemonic masculinity by focusing on competition, power, strength, and winning above all else. However, we contend that, like all individuals, adolescent girls who play sports are complex entities and are constantly engaged in reinterpreting their world and the social practices that make it up. Hence, in our readings of these girls' struggles in negotiating a gendered identity with a sexual identity with an athletic identity, we looked for what Kenway et al. (1994) have called "weak points, contradictions, ruptures, discontinuities, and cracks in systems of representation" with the purpose of "converting them into moments of negotiation and possibility through the use of what ever resources are available" (199). We believe that the world of high school sports provides a critical arena for these girls to begin cracking the masculinist, heterosexist institution of sports and dominant ideology that positions femininity and athleticism as dichotomous.

As mentioned earlier, although these girls recognized the power of ribbons to convey certain meanings about femininity, most of these girls personally resisted attempts to make them look feminine on the field. They understand that these markers trivialize all women athletes, and to be taken seriously, female sports players must critique those practices and resist attempts to minimize them as competitive athletes. Kelly cogently offered this analysis:

When you watch the WNBA games you see Lisa Leslie or Tina Thompson wearing their lipstick, and that's the reason why we don't get taken seriously out there on the court. We're out there playing just as hard as the men but you don't see no men out there wearing no cologne. The main problem is lipstick.

Often these girls decided as a team to engage in a form of collective resistance to assuming feminine markers that diminish them as athletes. They refuse to wear anything pink ("that's too girly girl"). They will not yell cheers at games and admonish the younger girls who carry that tradition from middle school ("once you get into high school, you just don't do those little sing song cheers"); they establish a rule of "no ribbons" ("we considered ribbons prissy and no one wore them"). As Karen asserts, "the impression we want to make on the field is a very tough, solid competitive team."

Most of these girls have played sports since they were young, often under the tutelage of their fathers, brothers, and uncles. Further, they have come of age in the midst of the Girl Power movement that tells them they can be whoever they want to be. They do not believe that being a girl means other choices are eliminated. They simply have not lived a life in which female and athlete are necessarily dichotomous. Hence, their imaginings of what an athlete looks like can be read as a more open inviting space for a variety of ways of presenting a gendered identity on the field:

There are athletes that play sports and look like girls. Then there's people like me. I don't go out there and try to look like a girl. I just put my hair in a ponytail and go. I don't really care. Then there's girls like this catcher from Hilltown. She wears a buttload of makeup and she can hit the ball to the fence, so who cares if she has on makeup. She can play ball and that's all that really matters. It's not bad if you have athletes that are nice looking people, but you can't just get people that look nice to play; you have to have people who want to compete. That's the main thing. **Rence, softball and basketball**

She plays first base like a girl, nothing gets by her. You know how people like to get dirty. In softball you are in the dirt and mud. You are supposed to get down and dirty. I have never seen her, not once, dive for a ball. But, she always catches it. She stays clean, but she always gets the ball. We had white pants last year and her white pants were white until the end. **Keisha, softball**

Although Keisha acknowledges that her friend plays like a girl, she is adamant, as were the other girls in our study, that girl athletes must be serious competitors, have recognizable athletic ability, and convey a dedication to their sport as explained by Keisha in response to our question "how would people at your high school describe female athletes?"

Depends on the girl. For example, Lakendra is looked at as one of the most respected athletes at our school. And Jasmine and Shanell—they are pretty well respected. But like this girl on our softball team, she's not very good; therefore nobody cares.

It depends on if the girl can play. People that know how I can play softball look at me and are like, “yeah, you’re good.” She can be nice, but when it comes to her sports, she must be serious. Don’t mess with her and her sport ‘cause she’ll get mad. Once she walks on that field it would be all dedication to that sport. **Kiesha, softball**

These girl athletes believe femininity today allows a space for girls to position themselves as athletes and as normatively gendered beings. What they struggle with is finding a term that describes that space. Although many view “playing like a dude” a compliment to their physical prowess, they do not want to be a dude. Nor do they want to be a girly girl. So if one is not a dude or a girly girl, what identity can one assume? Interestingly, a few of the girls claimed “tomboy” as a way to navigate the terrain between dude, girly girl, and dyke. Tomboy is typically used to refer to preadolescent girls who enjoy climbing trees, playing with frogs, being best friends with boys, and playing boys at their own games. Yet, a few of the girls in this study reappropriated tomboy, a much more ambiguous term, as a way to resist both the “girly girl” image and the “dyke” image. Tomboys can play sports, have a boyfriend or not, resist girly markers like makeup and ribbons, skirt questions about sexual identity, and still find acceptance with their peers. Erica, the youngest participant in our study, explained how the ambiguity of tomboy supported how she understood herself as a gendered being:

I mean I care what I look like but I don’t care all the time. I mean sometimes I get to school like with no makeup on and like a t-shirt and sweatpants. It’s just one of those days. I don’t feel like getting ready. I don’t think you need to dress up all the time. I don’t really like to do all that girly stuff. I like to be nice and stuff like certain times but I don’t have to be always prissy or whatever. I think a tomboy is more like a person who doesn’t really have the desire to be Ms. Everything. I am not really cocky about myself, but I don’t feel like I have to be somebody that I am really not.

Further, Sierra and Karen noted that tomboy is not synonymous with butch, gay, or dyke; thus, tomboy is a much easier descriptor to

embrace, as explained by Sierra: “A tomboy is someone who just wears t-shirts and jeans and don’t really care. But a gay person, that’s totally different.” Similarly, Malcolm (2003) found that the majority of early adolescent female athletes she interviewed appropriated the term “tomboy” to describe themselves in a positive way.

Another empowering possibility in how these girls talked about sports is evidenced in their discussions about the egregious examples of discrimination between male and female sports at their high schools. A few of the girls believed that playing sports had given them the confidence to voice publicly their concerns, hence politicizing the discriminatory practices associated with sports at their schools. Kelly explains:

The boys would get their lockers decorated and when I see theirs, I say “hey, cheerleaders, you gotta decorate my locker in here too.” I started speaking up. I would go talk to the cheerleading coach. “Why we didn’t get our lockers decorated? Why can’t y’all come cheer at our games at least once?” I spoke up and a little bit things started to change for my junior year. That’s when the cheerleaders cheered at two games in our season. So I guess, it’s just how you gotta voice yourself. If you don’t say anything, they’re just gonna walk over you.

Karen also noted the discrimination between boys and girls sports; however, she viewed her all-female sports world as having different empowering possibilities. The isolated, private world of girls’ sports was a safe haven for girls to develop a healthy, vibrant sense of self away from the gaze of males:

Sports is great to be involved with. Especially when you’re growing up and trying to find out who you are and boys are just coming into the picture. It keeps you grounded, gives you a lot of good girlfriends to support you, something to be independent with. You know, something to do on your own. Boys are not even involved; they don’t even participate and this gives girls a lot of good camaraderie and gives them a better self-image.

Although Karen didn’t use the “f” word, she saw the feminist possibilities of sports in a way closely resembling early women physical educa-

tors and the founders of the Association of Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (AIAW) who sought to remake sports based on a more feminine model of cooperation, teamwork, love of the game, and bonding with other females.

### **Rupturing the World of Sports**

As illuminated in these high school girls' accounts of their experiences playing sports, they understood the world of sports as one of the main vehicles by which they have attained confidence, independence, assertiveness, and joy in the physicality of the body. These are the qualities that Girls Studies scholars have argued are sorely lacking in most adolescent girls. We wondered then why so few accounts of girls and girl culture have attended to the feminist possibilities of sports. Most accounts of girls and their world still position girls as victims, as girls in despair, and as girls consumed with diet, beauty, and makeup, in other words as girls victimized by a consumer culture. However, the girls in this study were not spending time poring over fashion magazines, obsessing over weight, or investing huge amounts of money and psychic energy to achieve the ideal female body and appearance. Instead, they were running, jumping, taking risks, and moving boldly. This is not to suggest that they are immune to the larger political, social, cultural, and economic structures that continue to define femininity in limited ways. As demonstrated earlier, the girls do spend time and effort conveying a feminine heterosexual athletic image that does not trouble mainstream society. However, we found enough examples of how girls are rupturing the typical representation of sports, athletes, and female athletes to be convinced of the liberatory possibility of sports.

Castelnuovo and Guthrie (1998) assert that for too long feminists have focused on the empowerment of women through feminist consciousness raising (i.e., mental empowerment). What has been missing, they argue, is the acknowledgment that the oppression of women is also a body/physical experience. Hence, they charge feminist scholars to conduct research and develop projects that examine "mind-body practices that radically contest women's oppression and involving diverse groups of women (i.e., groups formulated on the basis of factors such as class, race, age, ethnicity, disability, and sexual orientation" (28). The arena of high school sports seems a ripe location to take up Castelnuovo and Guthrie's charge. But to do so requires concerted efforts not only

from feminist scholars but from coaches (both male and female), athletes, and parents to recognize the political possibilities of sports in helping girls to achieve a healthy, vibrant sense of self (in both mind and body) and the confidence and skills to address unjust practices, policies, and ways of thinking that continue to subjugate and objectify the female body. Such efforts require us to think of sports as a space for girls to continue experiencing the joy and exuberance in the physicality of their bodies while simultaneously turning the masculinist, heterosexist institution of sports on its head by allowing girls who play sports to develop a sense of self that breaks away from outdated, stereotypical notions of ideal femininity and masculinity.

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## NOTES

- i Data for this study were derived from semistructured interviews with 24 female athletes ranging in age from 13 to 21. Participants attended middle school and high school in various settings (rural, suburban, urban) in North America; however, the South is more predominantly represented. Seven of the participants were African-American; sixteen were Caucasian; one girl was biracial. All of the girls participated in at least one sport at their high school and had received various forms of recognition for their athletic ability. Each interview lasted one to two hours. An interview protocol was followed that included questions about positive and negative aspects of being a female athlete, knowledge of Title IX,

race and sports, sexual orientation and sports, their future as athletes, adult influences on their decision to play sports, and perceptions of male and female coaches. Interviews were transcribed verbatim. Each researcher individually read and coded all interviews. Then, collectively, we conducted a comparative analysis of themes and created a coding scheme that included the categories developed for this paper.

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