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# Building Bodies

Transnational Historical Approaches to Sport,  
Gender and Ethnicities



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English editor: Saskia Bultman.

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Contact editors: Evelien Walhout, [evelienwalhout@gmail.com](mailto:evelienwalhout@gmail.com)

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Verloren Publishers

Torenlaan 25

NL-1211 JA Hilversum

T: +31 35 6859856

E: [info@verloren.nl](mailto:info@verloren.nl)

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# Editorial

For this issue of the *Yearbook of Women's History* (Jaarboek voor Vrouwengeschiedenis) Marjet Derks was willing to be our guest editor. Derks is the first female professor of sports history in the Netherlands. She works at Radboud University Nijmegen and specializes in the social and cultural history of sports and body cultures in relation to questions of inclusion and exclusion. These days, sports are receiving an increasing amount of academic attention and much has already been written about the role of sport in our society.

In the introduction to this volume Derks presents two cultural artefacts, produced at different points in time, in which sports are discussed. One is an overview of sports in the Netherlands published in 1900, *Boek der Sporten* (Book of Sports). The other is NASA's so-called Golden Record, a collection of information about mankind that was sent into space in 1977. These two creations, far apart in time and in scope, share a specific biased view on gender in relation to sports. With this *Yearbook*, titled *Building Bodies: Transnational Historical Approaches to Sport, Gender and Ethnicities* Derks adds another book discussing the role of sports that critically focuses on the role of gender and ethnicities. This was exactly what our editorial board had envisioned when planning this volume: although sometimes the world of sport might be seen as a world apart, the reality is that sports mirror what is going on in society. Racism and gender inequalities are reflected in, and influence, the world of sports. Over the course of the twentieth century, athletes have been prepared to raise their voices to speak out on societal issues. One of the actions that has received worldwide attention was when first Colin Kaepernick and later other NFL players in the USA in 2016 decided to kneel while the national anthem was being played. Their goal was to draw attention to police violence and injustice in black America. Today sports are increasingly criticised as being a place where racism, heteronormativity and nationalism are still rife. We hope that the contributions to this *Yearbook* will inspire our readers to discuss the role that sports plays in our society.

Unfortunately we have to end this editorial on a sad note. Between the launch of our last *Yearbook* 37 and the current issue we suffered another personal loss as Ellis Jonker, a former member of the editorial board of the *Yearbook*, died unexpectedly on 28 March 2018. Ellis will remain in our thoughts as a creative, outspoken and special friend, and as a colleague who contributed greatly to our *Yearbook*. We will miss her personality and inspirational presence.

We express special thanks to Saskia Bultman for another round of careful English editing of our *Yearbook*.

*Eveline Buchheim, Saskia Bultman, Marjan Groot,  
Marleen Reichgelt, Evelien Walhout, Ingrid de Zwart*

# Building Bodies

## Transnational Historical Approaches to Sport, Gender and Ethnicities

MARJET DERKS

### *The Book of Sports and the Golden Record*

‘Boys have to have time to play; it develops their bodies, and often trains their mind far better than any lessons they are made to memorise’, a popular nineteenth-century Dutch manual said, listing a series of ball games, skating and swimming techniques and the rules of cricket and propagating these for boys’ education.<sup>1</sup> Twenty-five years later, the principle was quoted in the *Boek der sporten* (Book of sports), the first overview of sports in the Netherlands, which appeared in 1900. The well-known aristocratic sports writer and journalist Jan Feith had invited twenty (male) representatives of various sports to describe their history so far because sport had become a societal presence to be reckoned with, ‘a national thing’.<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, the book also contained a more general chapter on ‘boys’ sports’ that articulated the importance of exercise for the young masculine body, both as a counterpart for intellectual learning and as a foundation for mental toughness and their future role in sustaining the nation.<sup>3</sup> A similar chapter on ‘girls’ sports’ was not to be found in the *Boek der sporten*. An earlier guidebook for girls, rather, advised educators to let them play with dolls and regularly take fresh air, and to do some gardening and very moderate gymnastic exercises.<sup>4</sup>

Rather than being the result of historical cherry picking, examples like these are quite common and general. They are abundantly present in nineteenth- and twentieth-century books, magazines, photographs and pictures. First appearing in the transatlantic world, these imaginings were then diffused on a global scale. Eventually, they even literally became universal. Because when on September 5, 1977 NASA sent Voyager 1 into space, carrying a so-called Golden Record containing information about the culture of humanity to greet extra-terrestrials, the message on sport echoed similar gender stereotypes. The picture representing sport, named ‘Olympic sprinters’, showed

four male athletes running during one of the preliminaries of the 200 metres during the Olympics in Munich, 1972, featuring muscular Soviet sprinter Valeri Borzov. The selection committee, comprising astronomer Carl Sagan and a team of scientists from Cornell University, obviously did see sport as a significant part of culture, but implicitly only perceived it as a competition between men. Instead of showing female sprinters at the 1972 Olympics, the only woman-in-movement on the Golden Record was American Cathy Rigby, performing gymnastics. Despite her being a former Olympic athlete, the multi-exposure image was not chosen as an example of sport but rather as an example of the range of human motion.<sup>5</sup> The fact that Rigby almost died because of the eating disorder she developed during her gymnastic career obviously was not sent into space. It doesn't seem too far-fetched to conclude that whether competitive sport, gymnastics, fitness or physical leisure are at stake, these all have become arenas for doing gender, making men and defining women<sup>6</sup>

Despite growing academic interest for particularly the history of competitive sport, sport is still the 'great undiscovered country of the historical world', British sports and social historian Tony Collins has recently remarked.<sup>7</sup> Although he was referring to the Anglo-Saxon world, Dutch historiography represents a similar case.<sup>8</sup> Collins argues that the study of sports can engage with two of the most important fields in the historical discipline at present: gender studies and global studies. However, mainstream studies in these fields still rarely address sports. Collins states that despite the wealth of work on gender history, outside of sports history the central role that sport has played since at least the mid-nineteenth century in shaping conceptions of masculinity and femininity has hardly been acknowledged. For example, discussions on the various 'crises of masculinity' emerging from the early 1800s onwards rarely discuss sports. In addition, the extensive literature on body history rarely discusses participation in sport.<sup>9</sup>

The same can be said regarding global studies. The cultural importance of cricket and rugby to both colonisers and the colonised is hard to ignore, as a vast amount of literature on cricket in India and Pakistan and rugby in South Africa has shown.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, the multi-volume *Oxford History of the British Empire* barely contains a word about sport, referring to it as part of a popular culture that connected the 'Old World and the New'.<sup>11</sup> Yet, looking at mega-sporting events such as the Olympics, the Paralympics and the World Cup, it is hard not to acknowledge that these are unprecedented global happenings: over 3.6 billion television watchers saw parts of the Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro, and 3.4 billion watched the 2018 World Cup. Moreover, these are also extraordinary media events, which produce images and narratives that are circulated across the globe. They involve alliances of the national state, regional politics, and the expansion of the global consumer market.<sup>12</sup> If anything, sport represents a global, even deterritorialised domain and its history should therefore be approached as transnational and interconnected.<sup>13</sup>

What, then, does the history of sport have to offer to global studies and particularly in connection to gender? To answer this question, I will first give a general overview of developments within this subdiscipline. My main focus is on English-language publications, which dominate the field, although Collins rightfully remarks that historians of sport in the Anglophone world rarely draw on the extensive literature on sport in other languages and that this national-centeredness limits the ability to offer insights into sport as a globalised culture. I will therefore include some German, French and particularly Dutch studies. Next, I will present several insights from recent studies that shed more light on the connectedness of gender and globalisation, as a prelude to the contributions in this *Yearbook* volume that zoom in on specific aspects of this relation.

For a long time, academic sport history reflected the historical perceptions of competitive sport as a male-oriented activity. Early studies either did not mention women at all or reserved a special chapter for them, but then particularly focused on sport's 'softer' sides, the social, recreational and leisurely aspects. Following general trends in the field of women's history, the 1970s and onwards saw an increased and on-going interest in 'her-stories', starting in Northern America and spreading to Western Europe. Female scholars began to chronicle the involvement of women in sport and address these as part of emancipation as such. Biographies, the legacies of female pioneers or heroines, and their battles for inclusion and self-empowering experiences featured.<sup>14</sup>

Within the context of gender studies in the 1980s, academic interest shifted from empirical research towards a more conceptual approach that included a cultural critique of sport as a thoroughly gendered arena. Inspired by the cultural turn, scholars began to analyse sports as cultural texts, discourses through which meanings and alleged 'truths' were made. Sport thus became a central field where constructions and representations of femininity, masculinity and gender boundaries were both made and negotiated.<sup>15</sup> Through sports magazines, newspapers and sport fiction gender representations circulated and, through a looping effect of media and published stories, became categories by which men and women were 'made up'.<sup>16</sup> A spatial turn led to a focus specifically on the gendered and class divided nature of space, while a visual turn led to analyses of the representation of subjects through photography, film and other media.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, we have gained thorough insight into the gendered nature of modern sport and the ideologies of masculinity that it produced and transferred across national boundaries. Modern sport echoed the nineteenth-century gendered white bourgeois culture of its country of origin, Great Britain. The athletic experience in particular was something that seemed reserved for boys only. It echoed the innate characteristics of boys' schools, became part of their fantasies through a growing corpus of boys' literature and was recommended in guidebooks for their education. Historians of sport have even typified nineteenth- and early twentieth-century sport as a modern revolt within the male realm. Presenting themselves as entrepreneurial and athletic and adopting an internationally transferred discourse of games, goals and records, boys and young men

rebelled against the traditional bourgeois lifestyle of their fathers and teachers. They thus fostered a new ideal of masculinity and created new hierarchies that disqualified both intellectual and less robust men.<sup>18</sup>

Apart from being a male activity, sport also embodied values and characteristics that were perceived as masculine, such as physical strength, speed, endurance and competitiveness. Particularly team sports and competitive athletics not only aimed at improving physical robustness but were also supposed to develop discipline, self-sacrifice, leadership and stoicism. These well-trained male bodies could also express national strength or reveal national weakness, in physical terms, and sport was explicitly framed as a process to reform or preserve national bodies, literally as well as figurative.<sup>19</sup>

From the late nineteenth century onwards, this sport culture began to 'travel' transnationally and influenced issues relevant to such dynamics as colonialism and globalisation. Modern sport can only be understood within the context of British imperialism and industrialisation. These allowed the English to dictate the diffusion of sports and the British model of voluntary associations ('the club' as the basis of organised sports), as well as Victorian gentlemanly values like fair play and muscular Christianity throughout the European mainland, the United States and the British colonies. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, sport became rhetorically and practically imbued with a spirit of cultural nationalism and martial imperialism. It thus became instrumental in enforcing a culture of white Britishness throughout the Empire.<sup>20</sup>

Transferred to the U.S., the social and political possibilities of sport fuelled imaginings of revitalisation. A strong tradition of forceful male sports developed, such as American football and boxing. The invention of basketball within the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) was the take-off of American sporting imperialism. In addition, the association of the U.S. with the modern Olympic Games from the first edition of the event in 1896 onwards has played an enormous role in propelling American culture and the American way of life throughout the world.<sup>21</sup> This sports culture has been producing, organising and glorifying winning, conquering and success as a masculinised *lingua franca* that some researchers even typify as 'an obsession'.<sup>22</sup>

Consequently, at the core of modern sport lay an invented 'sporting Republic', a domain that was overall anti-feminine and anti-gay masculinity, and drenched in Western notions of civilisation, male vitality and being 'the right stuff'.<sup>23</sup> Public sweating, panting and swearing may have been the quintessence of male perseverance in sport, but when it came to women, such qualities invoked rather the opposite response. Consequently, the category of the sporting female was contested in dominant Western ideology. Strenuous competition was seen as damaging for women, both physically and mentally, and criteria for women's physical movement were hygienic and aesthetic rather than athletic. Brochures, guidebooks and educational articles pointing at swimming and gymnastics as appropriate activities, particularly for giving birth to healthy children, are a case in point.

Apart from some minor representational variations, educational, medical and religious discourses in general disputed and chastised the participation of women

in competitive sports. In daily press and sporting magazines, male journalists either marginalised, trivialised or ridiculed them, mediating an image of masculine women transgressing boundaries. This resulted in constructions depicting women athletes as unnatural athletes or athletes as unnatural women.<sup>24</sup> In addition, both local, national and international organisations were traditionally dominated by a sporting boys' network of board members and coaches that cultivated sports, sporting knowledge and matches as a male culture. Their exclusionary discourse was a mixture of glorifying male athleticism as the embodiment of national strength and honour on the one hand and paternalistic concern for women's health and reproductive organs on the other. Pierre de Coubertin, founding father of the modern Olympics, clearly stated that the Olympic Games were established to exalt the individual male athlete. Only men could represent a nation, '[...] the ruggedness of male exertion [...] is achieved physically only when nerves are stretched beyond their normal capacity and morally only when the most precious feminine characteristics are nullified', he wrote as late as in 1928.<sup>25</sup> Like many of his contemporaries, De Coubertin's successor Henri de Baillet-Latour only accepted women's participation in feminine sports like swimming, fencing and tennis. Sports like these were acceptable for social reasons, particularly as a means of class-specific sociability through which women could meet suitable future partners.

When another prominent IOC-president, American Avery Brundage, in the 1930s dismissed female athletes as women whose charms sank 'to less than zero' and who were compromising the traditionally accepted gender order,<sup>26</sup> he was reacting to the fact that sport and physical culture were gaining momentum as female territories, too. French tennis player Suzanne Lenglen was the first of a long line of female athletes, many of them swimmers, to become cultural icons, trading on their femininity and marketing fashion. An international Fédération Sportive Féminine Internationale, initiated by French Alice Milliat, began lobbying for women's competitive sport by starting Women's Olympic Games that included a much wider range of sports than the restricted number allowed in the official Olympics. Furthermore, a generation of young women began to appropriate sport and fitness activities as part of a new identity of being 'modern'. Embracing the exciting but uncertain possibilities of the modern world, sport and being fit became desirable cultural ideals.<sup>27</sup>

The inter-war years saw a growing importance of sport as an imagined community in which international competitions like the Olympics and the World Cup in football penetrated and shaped the growing importance of sport, while nations like the U.S., Nazi Germany but also Japan rivalled each other for dominance. As building bodies increasingly became part of building nations and cultural chauvinism, sporting females became part of politicised physical movements throughout Europe and later in Asia.<sup>28</sup>

After the Second World War, initiatives and gradually organised movements arose that strived for women's equal opportunities in sports and athletic programs. Women began to enter international competitions in an increasing number of sports. Issues of gender and sexuality nevertheless persisted, especially in the media and within international governing bodies. This became particularly apparent during the Cold War, when the Soviet Union and Eastern European states began to instrumentalise sport

as a means of soft power. They promoted egalitarian athletic programs that encouraged mass participation of both men and women, thus aspiring to develop talents that would win gold medals at international tournaments.<sup>29</sup> Within the context of growing international competitiveness in sport, up to the point of a global medal race in which different countries focus on the development of their elite athletes, gender played a specific part.<sup>30</sup> The stream of successes by muscular Soviet and Eastern German women particularly spurred western male dominated sports organisations' ongoing fears and anxieties about the blurring of gender boundaries. In 1968, the IOC implemented sex testing for female athletes, a practice that had occasionally already been adopted in the 1930s. When testing regimes could not delineate a sex divide, the IOC began to test for gender, in order to control the very idea of womanhood (which was built upon binary suppositions). Research into the history of gender verification has led to insights into the deployment of this instrument as a way to maintain western femininity and manage the successive 'otherness' of first Soviet and Eastern European athletes, and then Asian and African athletes onto whom anxieties were transferred from the 1990s onwards.<sup>31</sup>

### *Sport, ethnicity and intersectionality*

From the late 1990s onwards, gender scholars within sport history have begun to question the universal and uniform assumptions of gender, arguing that it has never been monolithic but rather a changing social construct that demonstrates fluidity and multiplicity. These scholars were inspired by the conceptualisation of gender as a performance by Judith Butler.<sup>32</sup> This can be applied pre-eminently to the corporeal practices within sport and their cultural production of meanings and sexual politics. Also, critical race scholars' work on gender and intersectionality has become influential, or as sport sociologist Ben Carrington has stated regarding research into race/ethnicity: 'sport matters'.<sup>33</sup> To understand the role of gender we need to be aware of the ways it intersects with a number of other dimensions of identity, such as ethnicity, class, religion, sexual orientation, age and ability. This implies the importance of contextualised, multiple and transnational meanings and leads to a discernment of (plural) femininities, masculinities, and looking beyond binary oppositions between the two as well. Furthermore, this approach highlights the role of the individual in actively engaging and negotiating in constructing gender relations.

Within sport history, this has firstly produced a broader scope of research themes, addressing the workings of gender combined with other categories of differences. Studies question intersected structural, cultural and representational forms of gender segregation, i.e. for black men and women, Muslims, a broad variety of ethnic minorities like Aboriginals, homosexuality and ability, together with a focus on transnational discourses, representations and practices.<sup>34</sup> Older themes have been reconceptualised and new themes have come to the fore, like the role of colonialism and neo-colonialism in women's international sport movements, homophobia and hetero-