

CHAPTER 1

THE NEW TYPE OF ATHLETIC GIRL



In the fall of 1911 *Lippincott's Monthly* described the modern athletic woman: "She loves to walk, to row, to ride, to motor, to jump and run . . . as Man walks, jumps, rows, rides, motors, and runs."¹ To many early-twentieth-century observers, the female athlete represented the bold and energetic modern woman, breaking free from Victorian constraints, and tossing aside old-fashioned ideas about separate spheres for men and women. Popular magazines celebrated this transformation, issuing favorable notice that the "hardy sun-tanned girl" who spent the summer in outdoor games was fast replacing her predecessors, the prototypical "Lydia Languish" and the "soggy matron" of old.²

With the dawning of the new century, interest in sport had burgeoned. More and more Americans were participating as spectators or competitors in football, baseball, track and field, and a variety of other events. At the same time women were streaming into education, the paid labor force, and political reform movements in unprecedented numbers. Women's social and political activism sparked a reconsideration of their nature and place in society, voiced through vigorous debates on a wide range of issues, from the vote to skirt lengths. Popular interest in sport and concern over women's changing status converged in the growing attention paid to the "athletic girl," a striking symbol of modern womanhood.

The female athlete's entrance into a male-defined sphere made

her not only a popular figure but an ambiguous, potentially disruptive character as well. Sport had developed as a male preserve, a domain in which men expressed and cultivated masculinity through athletic competition. Yet, along with other “New Women” who demanded access to such traditional male realms as business and politics, women athletes of the early twentieth century claimed the right to share in sport. They stood on the borderline between new feminine ideals and customary notions of manly sport, symbolizing both the possibilities and the dangers of the New Woman’s daring disregard for traditional gender arrangements.³

The female athlete’s ambiguity created a dilemma for her advocates. Given women’s evident enjoyment of such “masculine” pursuits, could the “athletic girl” (and thus, the modern woman) reap the benefits of sport (and modernity) without becoming less womanly? The *Lippincott’s Monthly* article was titled “The Masculinization of Girls.” And while it concluded positively that “with muscles tense and blood aflame, she plays the manly role,” women’s assumption of “the manly role” generated deep hostility and anxiety among those who feared that women’s athletic activity would damage female reproductive capacity, promote sexual licentiousness, and blur “natural” gender differences.⁴

The perceived “mannishness” of the female athlete complicated her reception, making the “athletic girl” a cause for concern as well as celebration. Controversy did not dampen women’s enthusiasm, but it did lead some advocates of women’s sport to take a cautious approach, one designed specifically to avert charges of masculinization. Women physical educators took an especially prudent stance, articulating a unique philosophy of women’s athletics that differed substantially from popular ideals of “manly sport.”

The tension between sport and femininity led, paradoxically, to educators’ insistence on women’s equal right to sport and on inherent differences between female and male athletes. Balancing claims of equality and difference, physical educators articulated a woman-centered philosophy of sport that proposed “moderation” as the watchword of women’s physical activity. Moderation provided the critical point of difference between women’s and

men's sport, a preventive against the masculine effects of sport. It was this philosophy, with its calculated effort to resolve the issue of "mannishness," which guided the early years of twentieth-century women's athletics.



Interest in women's athletics reflected the growing popularity of sport in industrial America. In a society in which the division between leisure and labor was increasingly distinct, many Americans filled their free time with modern exercise regimens and organized sport. It was in the middle and latter decades of the nineteenth century that two pivotal traditions developed—that of "manly sport" and that of female exercise. Each would influence the turn-of-the-century boom in women's sport and shape the views of female physical educators.

Traditions of "manly sport" developed over the course of the nineteenth century as large-scale transformations in the American economy, class relations, and leisure habits helped spawn new forms of athletic culture. In an antebellum society destabilized by rapid commercialization and the first stages of industrial revolution, the emerging middle class took an inordinate interest in cultivating self-discipline and a strictly regulated body. Not only did they perceive the growing numbers of poor, immigrant, urban workers as an unruly mass in need of disciplined activity, they also worried about their own capacity to subdue momentary passions for the controlled, regulated habits of body deemed necessary for climbing the ladder of success. Exercise—as well as diet, health, and sexual reforms—offered a means to these ends.

Guided by a Victorian philosophy of "rational recreation" and a religious ideal of "muscular Christianity," male sport and exercise began to flourish in the years before the Civil War. Physical culture specialists prescribed rigorous routines designed to improve both body and mind. A strict regimen of physical exercise was expected to contain sexual energy, breed self-control, and strengthen a man's moral and religious fiber through muscular development. The physically fit Victorian man could then channel his mental and physical energies into a life of productive labor and moral rectitude.

By contrast, a much-less-respectable sporting life developed outside the middle class. Bachelor clerks, artisans, and shopkeepers joined other adventurous men in an informal sporting fraternity. They created a rich social and athletic life by organizing baseball clubs and frequenting prizefights, boat races, footraces, and gambling dens. Their ranks included men from the “lower orders” as well as men of higher social standing, who—chafing at the restrictions of polite society—enjoyed a rough-and-tumble life-style in which gambling, drinking, and hard living mixed with athletics.⁵ Together these activities made up the “sporting life.” In rejecting the dominant ethos of self-discipline and delayed gratification, it presented a rebellious underside to proper Victorian culture.

In both its rough and respectable forms, male sport cultivated an ideal of virile, athletic manhood. This ideal took deeper root after the Civil War, when industrialization, urban concentration, immigrant-community formation, and the expansion of education made sport accessible to a greater number and variety of men. Organized athletics of the late nineteenth century spanned class and ethnic differences. German Turnverein gymnastic societies, Scottish Caledonian track clubs, and Irish, German, and Italian baseball clubs allowed immigrants to join the American sporting scene while cultivating ethnic solidarity. Upper-class Americans cultivated their own sporting tradition in elite, exclusive metropolitan athletic clubs like the New York Athletic Club. For recreation outside the city, they turned to country clubs that offered cricket, tennis, golf, and yachting.⁶

The expansion of higher education spurred the growth of sport on college campuses as well. By the century’s end, informal student sport had developed into highly organized collegiate athletic programs under the control of paid administrators and professional coaches. Crew, track, and football played an important role in schools’ institutional growth, generating revenue and publicity while attracting students and a loyal alumni. Competitive intercollegiate sport was complemented by physical education programs in which exercise specialists introduced young males to military drill and European systems of gymnastic exercise.⁷

By the turn of the century, the advent of commercial sport

media, especially the new sporting sections of daily newspapers, further popularized both professional and amateur athletics. The press attracted nationwide fan interest and granted a new respectability to professional prizefighting and baseball. At the amateur level the media promoted athletic contests sponsored by the newly founded Amateur Athletic Union (AAU).⁸ Press coverage also helped generate interest at the grass-roots level. Between 1900 and 1915 neighborhood and working-class associations began to form athletic clubs, industrial teams, and church-sponsored leagues, providing the first organized athletic opportunities for urban laboring men.⁹

Significantly, this apparent democratization of sport occurred at a time when the lives of impoverished workers and immigrants seemed further and further removed from the comfortable ones of white-collar workers and businessmen. The tensions spawned by class injustices and other social inequities nurtured turn-of-the-century protest movements in which industrial workers, farmers, women's rights advocates, and radicals seriously challenged the social order. Under these circumstances the dramatic increase in the popularity of men's sport coincided with a concerted effort among men of the upper ranks to protect their social position and authority.

Athletic life offered one method of reinforcement. The image of virile athletic manhood proved reassuring, especially for professionals, merchants, and white-collar workers whose work in the new corporate economy no longer required physical labor.¹⁰ Fortified by rigorous exercise, well-to-do men could cultivate their physical superiority, restore their confidence, and regain the "hard" edge required for effective leadership. Earlier, more personal Victorian concerns about individual masculine character now shaded into a public interest in restoring the collective manliness of a beleaguered Anglo-Saxon elite.

Political thinkers extended this logic to their concerns over the creation of a mighty and powerful nation. Worried that the middle- and upper-class American male was losing his virility and that the nation as a whole would soon endure the weak leadership of soft, effeminate men, turn-of-the-century politicians like Theodore Roosevelt looked to "the strenuous life" for a remedy.

Those who no longer toiled at physical labor could forge their masculinity on the ball fields and gridirons. Through arduous sport they would acquire the health benefits of vigorous exercise and, more important, valuable training for war and the moral and physical traits of commanding leadership. Faced by what they viewed as the artificiality and effete-ness of urban industrial existence, “strenuous life” devotees drew on a nostalgic image of a simpler, pastoral life of physical rigor and unchallenged male dominance that they hoped to re-create in the realm of sport.

While proponents of manly sport hoped that sport could renew middle-class manhood, Progressive Era reformers of the early 1900s argued that sport and recreation could serve as a training ground for working-class and immigrant youth as well. Reformers perceived an excess of energy in working-class boys who, left to their own devices, might turn their fervor toward sexual and criminal delinquency. Through school athletics, settlement houses, Young Men’s Christian Associations (YMCAs), church leagues, and playgrounds, welfare workers reached out to underprivileged youth through sport. They speculated that if athletic training could reinvigorate pampered boys, it could also provide safe outlets for the passions of working-class youth.¹¹

Thus, as organized sport gained in popularity, it intensified the association between athleticism and masculinity. American men confronting the changes wrought by industrialization, urbanization, and mass immigration looked to sport as a crucial avenue for defining and expressing their manhood. It is not surprising, then, that women who tried to carve out a place in the athletic world met with some resistance.



Turn-of-the-century women, when confronted with deeply entrenched notions of manly sport, turned to their own traditions of female exercise and athletic participation. Disturbed by evidence of female frailty, proponents of women’s health had begun advocating moderate exercise for women as early as the 1830s. Antebellum advice columnists, educators, feminists, and health reformers called for improved female health through “physical culture.” Subsequently members of two late nineteenth-century

professions, medicine and physical education, further developed these arguments and became strong advocates of female exercise.

Nineteenth-century medical science characterized women as the physiologically inferior sex, weakened and ruled by their reproductive systems. Given evidence of women's poor health—chronic fatigue, pain and illness, mood swings, and menstrual irregularities—experts theorized that the cyclical fluctuations of female physiology caused physical, emotional, and moral vulnerability and debilitation. Formally educated doctors eager to secure their professional status took a special interest in women's health problems. In the name of medical science, they claimed to be authorities on the female body, capable of diagnosing and treating woman's condition. One such treatment was moderate exercise, designed to strengthen and regulate the female body.¹²

Medical rationales for female exercise interested women educators, who found them useful in their efforts to justify women's pursuit of higher education. As the number of women in college jumped from 11,000 in 1870 to 85,000 in 1900, educators had to counter widespread assertions that mental strain would cause nervous disorder and reproductive dysfunction in female students.¹³ Based on "vitalist" scientific theories, which posited that bodies had a finite amount of circulating energy that was drawn to different parts of the body by activity, conservatives warned that education presented a serious danger by pulling necessary energy from the female reproductive system to the brain.¹⁴ Educators found an antidote in the claim that physical education would prevent these potential traumas. An exercise regimen would theoretically return energy to the body and strike a proper balance between physical and mental activity.

The concern over college women's health cracked open the doors of academe to women physical educators. In the 1880s physical culture specialists founded the Sargent School and Boston Normal School of Gymnastics to train women as instructors of physical education. A decade later graduates began to fan out around the country in newly established college P.E. departments. Soon these departments created degree-granting majors, so that in addition to instructing every female student in a course of mandatory physical exercise, physical educators trained the

next generation of professionals.¹⁵ Thus, buttressed by institutional support, scientific theories, and a newly formed organization of male and female professionals—the American Association for the Advancement of Physical Education (later changed to the American Physical Education Association, or APEA)—women physical educators approached the new century with optimism.¹⁶

Interest in physical education found its complement in the growing popularity of women's competitive sport inside and outside of academic institutions. While physical culture experts had been promoting controlled, regimented exercise, others had begun to encourage women to take up more active, competitive athletic games. As with men's sport, these activities split along the divide between rough and respectable.

Nineteenth-century newspapers occasionally reported on highly unconventional women ballplayers and runners who competed for prize money before a paying public. In the 1880s New Orleans promoter Harry H. Freeman put together a touring women's baseball team, which folded under rumors of illicit sexual activities.¹⁷ Other women entered the boxing or wrestling ring in events that combined spectacle, sport, and gambling. In 1876, for example, Hill's Theater in New York City featured a contest between two pugilists, Nell Saunders and Rose Harland, with the victor to receive a silver butter dish.¹⁸ These athletes violated every Victorian standard of proper feminine behavior. Brazenly to occupy male athletic space, to engage in physical competition, and to parade the female body before the public prompted not only allegations of "unladylike" behavior but charges of prostitution—the ultimate public female degradation.¹⁹

Women's sport gained credibility more readily among the wealthier classes, where it took root in an established tradition of upper-class leisure. Outdoor amusements like croquet, horseback riding, archery, swimming, golf, and tennis allowed well-to-do women of the post-Civil War era to display the latest styles in outdoor apparel along with the abundant free time of the rich. When women with money and time to spare gathered to play fashionable games, they entered a culture of conspicuous leisure that also included dining, bathing, and drinking at the nation's most exclusive resorts and clubs. For these women sport was

both a liberating, adventurous pastime and an enjoyable way to display their wealth and to strengthen elite social ties.²⁰

When clubs began opening tournament play to women in the 1870s, several sports moved beyond the recreational level to more serious levels of competition. Sporting organizations like the National Archery Association, the United States National Lawn Tennis Association, and the United States Golf Association sponsored the first women's national championships in archery, tennis and golf in 1879, 1887, and 1895 respectively.²¹ While tournament competition allowed a few athletes to train vigorously and pursue athletic excellence, most women continued to enjoy leisurely paced games played for fun and fresh air. These activities formed a socially acceptable pastime consistent with the refinement expected of "proper ladies." When Alfred B. Starey wrote that "archery, like tennis, is too refined a sport to offer any attractions to the more vulgar elements of society," he expressed a common class attitude. The notion that "refined" women played suitably "refined" games protected elite sportswomen from violating the boundary between proper womanhood and "vulgár" women of other classes.²²

The bicycle craze of the late 1880s and 1890s opened up athleticism to middle-class as well as elite women. Cycling won widespread acceptance and broke new ground for women's right to public outdoor exercise. Frances Willard, leader of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, was one of an estimated thirty thousand women who took up cycling in the 1890s. She was unusual, however, in that she learned to ride at the age of fifty-three and then proceeded to write an extended essay, "A Wheel Within a Wheel; How I Learned to Ride the Bicycle." She explained that although the first women to ride publicly were "thought by some to be a sort of semi-monster," severe criticism had abated by the 1890s, and she "could see no reason in the world why a woman should not ride the silent steed so swift and blithesome." In recommending the virtues of "the silent steed," Willard also expounded on the broad social import of women's new pursuit. The bicycle, according to Willard, was not merely a "vehicle of so much harmless pleasure." Rather, it promised to lay to rest the "old fables, myths, and follies associated with the

idea of woman's incompetence" in athletic activities, at the same time augmenting the "good fellowship and mutual understanding between men and women who take the road together . . . rejoicing in the poetry of motion."²³

However, while feminists like Willard, medical experts, and the ordinary cyclist sang the praises of cycling, critics claimed that excess riding caused women serious physiological damage. They cautioned against the risk of uterine displacement, spinal shock, pelvic damage, and hardened abdominal muscles. Avid cycling reputedly could also harden the facial muscles into a hideous "bicycle face," notable for its protruding jaw, wild staring eyes, and strained expression.²⁴ The same athletic activity that spelled liberation to women like Willard signaled danger to more conservative observers.

Despite such warnings, the bicycle merely whetted the appetite of many young women for more competitive activities. They brought their keen athletic interest to the high schools and colleges they attended in rapidly expanding numbers. Students formed baseball and crew teams and enjoyed a variety of other sports either informally or through organized intramural play. In 1891 Bryn Mawr students further formalized these arrangements by founding the first college Women's Athletic Association (WAA).²⁵ The same year the invention of basketball by YMCA worker James Naismith provided women with a game that would soon change the tenor of college women's sport. The game was instantly and immensely popular among female students. Their spirited play ushered in a new period in women's sport—years in which concerns about the masculine character of sport enlivened the debate over the healthful versus harmful effects of athletics on women.



As the United States entered the new century, women across the nation secured greater access to athletics. Concurrent developments in elite sport, school athletics, and public recreation gave female athletes a foothold in the early-twentieth-century world of sport. These advancements would gradually bring the "athletic girl" into sharper cultural focus.

Sport for wealthy women entered a new era when prominent society women founded the Chicago Women's Athletic Club in 1903. Designed as a lavish setting for exercise and leisure, the club featured a gymnasium, a swimming pool, bowling alleys, fencing rooms, a Turkish bath, and various sitting and dining rooms.²⁶ Soon thereafter, women organized a New York and an Illinois Women's Athletic Club, followed by similar ventures in major cities around the country. Like their nineteenth-century predecessors, most club members continued to participate in sport as an enjoyable and carefree form of elite sociability. Yet a smaller group of women began to assert the value of more serious athletic training. They ambitiously pursued competitive opportunities, especially through tournament play in the popular sports of golf and tennis.

Some rebels further flouted convention when they dared to pursue such "men's" sports as auto racing, polo, shooting, and long-distance walking. Eleonora Sears, a Boston Brahmin and descendant of Thomas Jefferson, made a name for herself in these sports, as well as in tennis, squash, and equestrian events. She was one of the first well-known women publicly to appear in pants and short hair, confidently donning slacks, boots, and a riding hat. As a polo player she had the audacity to ride astride and wear jodhpurs. Attending a 1909 International Women's Conference in London, Sears wandered over to the polo club, where—finding the American and English teams competing for the International Cup—she caused a public outcry by requesting (and being denied) a place on the U.S. team. Sears had not only unusual athletic ability but the privilege, the means, and the attendant confidence to ignore the constraints that confined most women to a much narrower sphere of athletic activity.²⁷

Similar opportunities did not exist for working-class girls and women, whose long workday usually precluded leisure activities beyond nighttime neighborhood strolls and occasional movies or dancing. However, as part of a broader series of "child-saving" measures being urged on the nation—reforms such as child labor laws, compulsory education, and public health regulations—middle-class urban reformers began providing recreational activities for working-class youth. The Playground Association of America

was formed in 1906 to organize play groups and athletic activities for city boys and girls. It aimed not only to provide an alternative to the dangerous life of the street but to instill physical and moral discipline, instructing poor immigrant youth in “American” concepts of cooperation, democracy, achievement, and subordination to the group.²⁸ As a result of Progressive Era activism, young working-class women obtained their first organized athletic opportunities. As schoolgirls they could take part in activities offered by settlement houses, Young Women’s Christian Associations (YWCAs), city playgrounds, and public schools.²⁹ After leaving school, women occasionally found opportunities in workplace recreation programs that offered annual outings and field days featuring games and races for female employees.³⁰

For young middle-class women college campuses provided a crucial site for athletic experimentation, a place away from home where athletic ventures were one of the numerous ways in which young women explored their independence and charted a new generational course. Student social life at some schools thrived around active women’s sport programs. In 1904 the student newspaper at the University of Minnesota extolled the “Athletic Girl” as “the truest type of all American Co-eds.”³¹ And at Radcliffe and Smith, campus life reached a pitched frenzy during the annual class basketball tournaments, which matched the best players from each year’s class in a highly ritualized, intense series of games. With songs, pranks, and banners, the entire student body turned out to exhort their classmates on to victory.³²

Tournaments and other campus-based athletic competitions were the mainstay of extensive intramural programs initiated and coordinated by students. The most avid competitors also joined intercollegiate varsity clubs, which—though fewer in number—provided athletes the additional benefits of travel, off-campus socializing, and the prestige of representing one’s school in public. To celebrate female athletic achievement, WAAs devised an elaborate system of awards, culminating in the varsity letter. College yearbooks of the time featured striking photographs of formally posed women’s varsity teams, looking proudly into the camera with college letter sweaters in full display.



With her exuberant physicality, disregard for Victorian notions of female restraint, and her intrepid incursion into a male cultural domain, the athletic woman captured the spirit of modern womanhood. But her unorthodox behavior also subverted the commonly accepted view of sport as a fundamentally masculine pursuit. The complex set of meanings surrounding women's participation in sport led observers alternately to praise and damn the "athletic girl."

Some physical educators and women's advocates saw sport as an avenue toward female self-reliance and independence, applauding the aggressive, unremitting quality of play that left women "hot, breathless and disheveled" by game's end.³³ Like feminists of the time, they reasoned that crossing barriers into "male" spheres contributed to a fuller realization of womanliness, free from the debilitating, restrictive femininity of old. They argued that athletics imbued women with such "human" (rather than "feminine") attributes as loyalty, teamwork, and a democratic ethos while "allowing them to forget, for the time being, that they are girls."³⁴

Against a background of expanding consumerism, others emphasized the benefits of sport for female health and beauty. Advertisers, the popular press, and health and beauty experts increasingly characterized health by the body beautiful.³⁵ Exercise columns in popular magazines instructed women on the need to exercise, claiming that both beauty and improved health would follow. In "To Reduce Flesh" Marie Montaigne explained: "The charm of a well proportioned figure is not to be overestimated, and it is one which almost any woman can possess by the expenditure of systematic effort, acquiring incidentally good health with her good figure."³⁶ Beauty expert J. Parmley Paret echoed this reasoning, urging all women to exercise because "feminine beauty, in both face and figure, is largely dependent on it."³⁷

Some extended this argument by linking athletic beauty to evolutionary gains for the species. Dudley Sargent, founder of the prestigious Sargent School for women's physical education, claimed that both "good form in figure and good form in motion

. . . tend to inspire admiration in the opposite sex and therefore play an important part in what is termed 'sexual selection.' ”³⁸ By this reasoning the quest to continue the species would condition a man to select a fit, athletic woman as a mate.

Despite their confident claims for a new feminine beauty, sport advocates had to answer criticisms that athletics would masculinize the female body and character. They took time to assure skeptics that the modern athlete would not be “the loud, masculinely dressed, man-aping individual, but the whole-hearted, rosy-cheeked healthy girl . . . happy, smiling and simply radiating good health.”³⁹ They also cultivated allies among well-respected health officials who could help refute opponents' claims. In one show of support, the editor of *Nation's Health* dismissed fears of mannishness as a groundless absurdity: “There is no reason why in games of speed and skill girls should not be the equal of boys . . . and there is no more reason why athletics should coarsen their fibre than that equitation should make them 'horsey.’ ”⁴⁰

Try as they might, though, health and physical education experts failed to persuade the skeptics who were convinced that sport would turn the female body into a facsimile of the male. Such corporeal suspicions were often rooted in deeper concerns about the social implications of female athleticism. The female athlete kindled acute anxieties about the erosion of men's physical supremacy and the loss of distinct male and female preserves. With her physical daring and spirited temperament, she took her place alongside politically minded suffragists and feminists, young working women known for their cheap finery and bold manners, and more staid but powerful professional women. Together they formed a threatening cadre of New Women whose public presence prompted shrill calls for a return to more familiar patriarchal arrangements.⁴¹

Disturbed by the upset of a traditional gender order, conservatives voiced their fears in somatic terms as they discussed the predicted consequences of female muscular development. Even a strong supporter like Dudley Sargent admitted: “It is only by taking on masculine attributes that success in certain forms of athletics can be won.”⁴² Similarly Dr. G. L. Meylan concluded that women's small shoulders and large hips disqualified them from

gymnastic expertise. While acknowledging that gymnastic training might overcome such limitations, he nevertheless advised against it because, "of course, we should not care to see our women teachers of physical training . . . approach the masculine type."⁴³ Few observers could loose the concept of athleticism from its locus in the male body.

Critics believed that sport posed other dangers to the female body as well, predicting both reproductive damage and the loss of sexual control. The nineteenth-century medical belief in women's biological weakness and instability due to menstruation survived the turn of the century, leading many "modern" doctors and exercise specialists to reiterate earlier warnings against strenuous sport. They walked a fine line, on the one side promoting mild exercise as a way to curb mental strain and regulate the "fluctuations of the functional wave," yet at the same time prohibiting vigorous competition on the grounds that "emotional stimulation must be avoided, and decided concessions must be made to the depression, physical and psychical, the lessened inhibitions and physiological control during the fluctuations of puberty and menstruation."⁴⁴

References to psychic ailments, lessened inhibitions, and loss of control hinted at emotional and sexual dangers that awaited the overenthusiastic athlete. Medical experts and educators perceived the female psyche as naturally prone to stress and nervous illness. Many warned that the nerve-straining violence of unmodified sport was a proven cause of neurosis. Citing the sudden death of an overzealous high school ballplayer and the "uncommonly fat" condition of many retired athletes, they peppered their articles with horror stories of the harmful and "possibly fatal" consequences of unregulated physical competition.⁴⁵

In the figure of the "overzealous girl," so incited by competition that she could not stop, experts focused on the "powerful impulses" roused by competition, impulses that would cause her to all too easily succumb to the "pitfall of over-indulgence."⁴⁶ Cheered on by the "wild huzzahs," the "adoration" and "applause of the multitude," she was likely to give in to "the intoxication of outstripping her competitors."⁴⁷ The exact nature of the "powerful impulses" or "over-indulgence" remained

unstated, yet the language suggests a thinly veiled reference to female sexuality.

Perceptions of sexual danger in sport were fueled by widespread societal fears about female passion, unleashed and out of control. Alarmed observers throughout the country commented on the eroticism of the New Woman. Magazine articles like the 1913 piece titled "Sex O'Clock in America" rang the death knell for the image of the passionless Victorian lady, fading quickly before the figure of the passionate, explicitly erotic modern woman.⁴⁸ Certainly by 1914 an exuberant sexual energy, clearly independent of maternal function, divorced the New Woman from nineteenth-century purity and propriety. Young working-class women who shocked observers with their colorful dress, street smarts, and audacious manners attracted the most notice. But the changing habits and sexual mores of the sports-loving middle-class female athlete also evoked concern.

Discussions about sexuality in athletics typically concentrated on the uncontrolled passions of adolescent females who competed in high school and college sport, a constituency comprised overwhelmingly of middle- and upper-middle-class girls and women.⁴⁹ Working-class women, whose sexual habits received constant attention in other realms, formed too small a constituency within women's sport to merit significant comment. By contrast, the privilege and privacy of wealth seemed to protect upper-class athletic women from sexual scrutiny. Middle-class female students, however, were already at the center of more general debates on women's education. The nervousness produced by their academic presence readily spilled over into veiled discussions of the sexual hazards of female athleticism.

Critics claimed that women students risked their modesty, mental health, and maternal capacity when they abandoned self-restraint for the exhilaration of competition. Dr. Angenette Parry advised special caution for "college girls," who "are the ones who chiefly go in for athletics in excess."⁵⁰ Even those who supported women's sport advised that because adolescent girls were "temperamentally more inclined to overdo," they required careful supervision.⁵¹ Concerned educators and medical experts painted a portrait of the frenzied coed for whom "the tempta-

tion to excess is apt to be overwhelming.”⁵² They concluded that if left unregulated, these conditions made “moderation an impossibility.”⁵³



Criticisms of the collegiate athletes’ morals and muscles posed a distinct challenge to the limited authority and marginal position of women physical educators, who were just beginning to lay claim to professional status in the academic world.⁵⁴ With a substantial increase in female college enrollment in both single-sex and coed institutions, jumping from 85,000 in 1900 to 283,000 in 1920, physical educators found a ready-made constituency for athletic training.⁵⁵ But they also faced the unenviable task of defending women’s physical activity and their own expertise in academically oriented, male-dominated schools. Confident of their abilities to instruct women in good habits of exercise but somewhat fearful of the “masculine” reputation of sporting competitions, women in P.E. tempered their support for competitive sport.

Between 1890 and World War I they gradually articulated an athletic philosophy captured in the word *moderation*. On the assumption that zealous competition threatened female health and morality, they sought to replace it with moderate competition based on “the smallest amount of exercise which will call out a vigorous response.”⁵⁶ With this approach physical educators endeavored to protect their own professional interests and shield young women from the supposed physical and moral dangers of uncontrolled “masculine” athletic games.

Intellectual guidance and confirmation were sought from the more prestigious professions of science and medicine. Since the mid-nineteenth century, physicians had championed moderate exercise as both prevention and cure for physical and mental deterioration caused by natural weakness, menstrual havoc, cultural confinement, and intellectual strain.⁵⁷ Slightly modified versions of this medical doctrine were introduced directly into the P.E. curriculum when several colleges hired women physicians to head their physical education departments. Early-twentieth-century physical training directors like Dr. Eliza Mosher at the

University of Michigan, her cousin Dr. Clelia Duel Mosher at Stanford, and Dr. J. Anna Norris at the University of Minnesota added the weight of medical authority to the fledgling field of women's P.E. Although they committed themselves to improving female health and, in some cases, to challenging the notion that menstruation was a disabling or pathological condition, they tended to abide by medical concepts of pervasive female illness and the dangers of excessive physical activity.⁵⁸

Strengthened by their intellectual and institutional ties to medical science, physical educators confidently set forth to implement their philosophy of moderation. However, they faced an obstacle in students who found "masculine" competitive sport more appealing than repetitive, formalized exercise regimens. Women educators devised a solution based in female separatism. By establishing separate women's departments that offered specially modified "female" versions of "male" games, educators differentiated women's activities from more strenuous male versions of sport. They carved out a separate realm of play in which women could gain the traditional benefits of sport—health, fun, "sportsmanship," and a cooperative ethos—without fear of sexual harm or the taint of masculinity.

The separatist strategy and cautious, protective approach to female health and sexuality were shared by a generation of women active in turn-of-the-century educational and reform circles. While not necessarily advocates of women's political rights, female physical educators often viewed their mission as consistent with a broad-based "woman movement," dedicated to raising the status of women and expanding the realm of female activity and influence. Many women active in Progressive Era reform and women's organizations accepted the prevailing view that natural differences in biology and sensibility divided men and women. They scorned "masculine" aggressiveness and competitiveness and sought to protect women from the dangers of public life as well as to empower them. They introduced protective legislation for women workers, founded women's schools and refuges, and relied on extensive female political and social networks to push their agenda.

Physical educators expressed a similar commitment to building

female networks and protecting vulnerable women. They viewed sport positively but feared the possible exploitation of women athletes who competed without benefit of trained female supervision. In particular, female professionals worried that male promoters would make a sexual spectacle of the female athlete, forcing her to reveal and overexert her body in the interest of commercial profit and male entertainment. Their suspicions were not unfounded. The media frequently reduced the young female athlete or sports fan to no more than her sexual attributes. Two stanzas—whose double entendre metaphors can't have been lost on contemporary male readers—of a poem by prominent sportswriter Grantland Rice (an advocate of women's sport) on the woman baseball fan capture the lurid aura surrounding women's appearance on the sporting scene:

The type of girl which keeps each head cavorting in a whirl,
Is the nectarine of nature which we dub "The Baseball Girl."

She's got "proper curves," you know, well rounded out and neat,
She has the "speed"—nor do we refer unto her feet.
She always "makes a hit" to boot, and, what is very nice,
She's ready at the proper time to "make a sacrifice."⁵⁹

This type of treatment appalled physical educators. They, too, celebrated women's physical freedom and athletic enjoyment. But their interest went hand in hand with a commitment to improve women's health, to preserve gender differences, and to protect a female sexual sensibility believed to be more delicate and vulnerable than men's.

Motivated by these concerns, women educators took aggressive steps to institutionalize their belief in moderation and to extend their professional control. Within the APEA concerns about unregulated female competition led to the formation of the National Women's Basketball Committee (which became the Committee on Women's Athletics, or CWA, in 1917). College P.E. directors formed regional organizations and later a national association, the National Society for College Directors of Physical Education for Women (later the National Association of Physical Education for College Women, or NAPECW).⁶⁰ With a

unified voice, these regional and national networks affirmed the importance of moderation in extracurricular sport and in the core curriculum.

Based in a view of women as naturally inferior and weak, the P.E. curriculum became a mechanism for monitoring and guiding student physical performance and well-being. Aimed at strengthening the vulnerable female body, health exams; follow-up consultations; lectures on “parenthood training”; posture inspections; special classes for the “defective student”; and hygiene cards on which students reported on their daily diet, exercise, sleep, and dress habits became the norm on many campuses.⁶¹ Through such techniques of measurement, supervised training, and inspection, well-intentioned physical educators developed a regime of student surveillance. Even as they worked to free their female charges from the corsets and imposed frailty of an earlier time, these women helped to create new forms of discipline and control for the modern female body.⁶²

Beyond overseeing the curriculum, women physical educators took command of student athletic life, making the prohibition of varsity sports a central item on their professional agenda. Because of the perceived health dangers of aggressive competition, professional leaders urged P.E. staff members to monitor student-run Women’s Athletic Associations (WAAs) and set strict policies on competition.⁶³ The question of competition remained open to debate, but by 1920 the tide of opinion had swung decisively against varsity intercollegiate competition for women. Educators restricted competition to on-campus, intramural activities designed to limit physical strain, competitive zeal, and public spectatorship while appealing to students of all ability levels and not just a talented few.

Students did not necessarily agree with these policies and persisted in questioning the ban on intercollegiate sport.⁶⁴ Yet in the end they had little choice but to comply. The most fervent athletes were often physical education majors who were under additional pressure to accept the status quo. The instructors who laid down the law against competition were their teachers, mentors, and future employers. Students respected professors’ opinions, or, if not, could oppose them only at their own risk. They never

mounted a serious protest, especially since thriving intramural programs offered substantial athletic opportunities that seemed to satisfy the majority of interested students.



The P.E. profession's commitment to athletic moderation reflected not only a shared female perspective but a particular set of class values. The medical notion of the frail, nonphysical female with a delicate sensibility could only describe middle- and upper-class women who did not have to work at hard physical labor or contend with the harsh life of the streets.⁶⁵ Physical educators took leisure time and advanced schooling for granted. Their protective creed of moderation emerged out of middle-class institutions and affected primarily middle-class women.

Exercise specialists made their class assumptions explicit when they advanced the idea that athletics substituted for the physical labor of earlier housewives. Writing for *Good Housekeeping*, Sarah Comstock advocated sport as a “substitute for those invigorating forms of work and play that filled the days of primitive women.” Because the contemporary woman envisioned by Comstock no longer toiled over the wash, she needed “some outdoor sport that will make up for the exhilaration she misses by sending that blouse to the laundry. It isn't fair that the laundress should monopolize the benefits.”⁶⁶

In concentrating on the leisured modern housewife or, more typically, her school-age daughter, physical educators idealized an image of womanliness rooted in notions of refinement, self-restraint, and efficiency—core attributes of “respectable” middle-class culture. Smith College P.E. Director Dorothy Ainsworth impressed on her students an ideal of “greater womanliness, fair play and self control.” And Wisconsin's Blanche Trilling expressed a similar belief that athletic training would contribute to American womanhood “not only in building up sound bodies, but also in bringing the girls to a realization of true dignity in manners.”⁶⁷

Aiming for the “best type of well-developed, controlled and efficient womanhood” did not absolutely exclude the poor, immigrants, or women of color.⁶⁸ But calls for self-restraint, refine-

ment, and efficiency celebrated a “womanliness” rooted in the privileged position of the “lady.” It depended for contrast on a view of women of color and the working class as robust, unruly, insensitive to pain or exhaustion, and rough in manners.⁶⁹

The class contrast was especially evident when physical educators commented on the few working women who came under their purview in industrial training schools or business recreation programs. They suspected the working girl of poor hygiene and unseemly interests fostered by the pernicious amusements and nightlife of the modern city. The physical training director of the Manhattan Trade School for Girls described her wish “to create a love for simple, wholesome pleasures that will take the place of the strenuous and unwise recreations that are so alluring to the young business girl.” Once involved in “joyous, active exercise,” the working girl would develop “judgment, accuracy, self-control, and harmonious working with others.”⁷⁰

Such lofty ambitions formed a veneer over more coercive methods and objectives. Trade-school recreational instructors used physical exams and strictly supervised exercise routines to inspect students for physical, mental, or moral defects that could then be “checked or forcefully corrected” through alterations in dress, posture, hygiene, and comportment.⁷¹ They aimed to inculcate habits of “bodily efficiency” and “hygienic living” that would enable young women “to adjust themselves to their new environment of the work room.”⁷²

While using supervised exercise to adjust the shopgirl to her work environment and prepare the female collegian for her role as a proper bourgeois woman, physical educators also attempted to strengthen educated women for motherhood. By the early twentieth century, decades of declining birthrates and poor health among middle- and upper-class white women caused serious alarm among wealthy Americans of Anglo-Saxon Protestant descent. With cries of “Race Suicide,” they predicted that immigrant populations and the “prolific poor” would soon overwhelm white, native-born “racial stock.” Fears of population decline among the “better classes” called attention to the low maternity rates of educated women. While many scientists continued to dwell on the dangers athleticism posed to the female

reproductive system, some eugenicists looked to sport as a way to increase the fertility and improve the physical vigor of middle- and upper-class American women. A reinvigorated motherhood would allow the “fittest” race to expunge weaker strains and take its natural place atop the social order.

Under the banner of eugenics, physical educators negotiated the tension between fit motherhood and masculine athleticism. While they warned that lack of exercise left women unfit for motherhood, they also counseled that overexertion would dissipate female reproductive resources and, as a result, the race.⁷³ Arabella Kenealy, a British doctor widely read in the United States, claimed that women who acquired masculine attributes through competitive sport purchased them at the cost of a future generation’s manhood: “A woman who wins golf and hockey matches may be said . . . to energize her muscles with the potential manhood of possible sons . . . since over-strenuous pursuits [could] sterilize women as regards male offspring.”⁷⁴ Under a program of supervised moderate exercise, however, physical educators championed the abilities of fit women to produce strong, healthy sons, and thus a mighty nation.

In their formulation of policies and philosophies, physical educators held to a definition of womanhood particular to their late-Victorian middle-class upbringings. Because of the biases they themselves encountered as women in male-dominated schools, they deemed it specially important to project the dominant image of “respectable” womanhood. Strict adherence to middle-class standards of feminine behavior would smooth the road to a secure position within academe, at the same time producing a generation of physically fit, socially acceptable young women who had been spared the harmful effects of masculine sport.



Between 1900 and 1920 women’s sporting pursuits accounted for only a tiny fraction of all athletic opportunities. Yet, in the context of the growing popularity of sport, athletic women of every class confronted the contradiction inherent in being both “woman” and “athlete.” For them the gender tension proved both limiting and fruitful. It cast suspicion on the femininity of

women in sport, yet it also contributed to the dynamic image of the “athletic girl” who refused to be excluded from a domain of masculine privilege and pleasure. The female athlete embodied the New Woman, in bold motion, treading fearlessly into forbidden realms and discovering her unique character. Noting that “no sport is too reckless, too daring, or too strenuous” for the experienced female athlete, author and amateur athlete Anna de Koven pronounced that the tomboy had moved from disgrace to honor as the symbol of a “new type of American girl, new not only physically, but mentally and morally.”⁷⁵

This image of the modern female athlete embraced women of all classes, but assumed different meanings in different settings. Physical educators successfully limited competition for middle-class college students while providing a significant degree of athletic opportunity through intramural sport programs founded on the principle of moderation. Women active in exclusive sports like golf, tennis, and equestrianism participated with fewer restrictions. Insulated from public reproach by wealth and status, they competed vigorously in private athletic and country clubs. The freedom from scrutiny that elite women gained from privilege, working-class women derived from neglect. Before 1920 only a smattering of neighborhood athletic clubs and social welfare institutions offered athletic programs for women. However, the few organized activities open to working-class girls and women rarely insisted on modified rules or restricted competition.

Until World War I these class-specific sport milieus coexisted peacefully, encouraged by the growing popularity of sport and the mixed but often warm reception accorded the modern woman’s athletic interest. The “athletic girl” won acceptance in part because she seemed to epitomize the spirit of New Womanhood, but also because as long as the numbers of women participating in sport remained small, the female athlete did not yet jeopardize men’s actual control of the sporting world. This situation was a temporary one, however. The expansion of women’s sport in the late teens and early 1920s fostered a highly competitive style of play that threatened many men’s sense of superiority and clashed head-on with physical educators’ carefully constructed philosophy of moderation.