

Good Sports?

Despite continuing Title IX controversy, women are having a ball.

As summer ended this year, women took center stage at the U.S. Open tennis tournament; the Women's National Basketball Association crowned a new champion, the Los Angeles Sparks; and the Women's United Soccer Association (WUSA), an offspring of the spectacular success of the 1999 Women's World Cup, held its first-ever championship game, in front of a crowd more than 21,000 strong.

The popularity of women's sports is a widely hailed trend—but, like anything related to gender, it provokes controversy.

It's an article of faith among advocates of women's sports that the remarkable

more by cutting men's. (See "Title IX's Pyrrhic Victory," REASON, April.)

Even most Title IX supporters tend to agree that this less-for-everyone approach to gender equity has been a disaster, bringing the ax down on many excellent men's gymnastics, soccer, and wrestling teams. However, they make a strong case that most of the blame rests with the reluctance of college administrators to touch the bloated budgets and inflated rosters of football programs. Given the seamy side of lucrative men's scholastic sports programs—including abysmally high dropout rates and a tendency to wink at cheating and criminal behavior by

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growth in women's athletics over the past quarter century has been the fruit of Title IX, the 1972 federal law that requires parity in funding for school-based male and female sports. By the same token, critics of interventionist government often view the women's sports phenomenon as a product of statist social engineering. They too zero in on Title IX, claiming that it is the apotheosis of ideological overreach. They point to recent interpretations of Title IX that essentially mandate equal rates of athletic participation for male and female students regardless of actual interest levels—and that achieve parity less by expanding women's sports programs and

"student" athletes—seeing men's sports squeezed a bit to create opportunities for women might not be such a cause for mourning.

What's more, in some areas, particularly on the pre-college level, there remain tangible inequities in the treatment of boys' and girls' sports in such matters as locker facilities, funding for road trips and athletic equipment, and the like. Of course, these disparities largely reflect the undisputed fact that there is less interest in girls' games, but lower interest and lower investment tend to become a vicious circle. If nothing else, Title IX has clearly had an "if you build it, they will come" effect.

One may well point out that the state shouldn't be in the business of furthering cultural change in attitudes toward women's sports. But when it comes to opportunities in the public sector, such an argument is difficult to sustain, especially given the massive amount of public money spent on sports. And, sometimes, the legacy of girls' past exclusion results in fairly glaring present injustices—such as girls' softball teams being denied access to the best public playing fields because of a seniority system that gives preference to boys' baseball teams simply because they have been around longer.

It's hard to tell how much credit Title IX should actually get for the growth of women's sports. In 1971, prior to the passage of this law, girls made up about 5 percent of high school athletes. Today, they make up nearly 40 percent. But the influx of women into other formerly male bastions, such as medical and law schools, has been equally spectacular without any government mandates. Given the cultural changes of the past 30 years, the popularity of girls' and women's sports would have skyrocketed, with or without government intervention. As Fred Barnes noted in *The Weekly Standard* in 1999, when Women's World Cup mania led to endless paeans to Title IX, girls' soccer was jumpstarted in the 1970s and early '80s by private associations more than public school varsity teams. That was back in the days when Title IX was only haphazardly enforced.

A few conservatives' suspiciousness of women's sports goes beyond the issue of Title IX and intrusive government. In a 2000 *Washington Times* column, Stephen Moore voiced the opinion that top women tennis players didn't deserve to be paid as much as their male counterparts—even if the pay was based on market economics—because they couldn't compete against the men. Moore also suggested that the solution to questions of gender equity in scholastic sports was to make high school and college teams unisex and select the best talent, male or female. Interestingly, in a column two years earlier, he had griped that co-ed peewee soccer

leagues were "doing irreparable harm to the psyche of America's little boys" because at that age, girls can often beat them. Apparently, unisex sports are all right only when the outcome is that girls will not only get trounced but, in most cases, get no chance to play at all.

In a few cases, right-wing broadsides against women's sports are explicitly based on a distaste for the transgression of traditional gender roles. The most striking example is Debbie Schlusel, a Detroit attorney and a columnist for WorldNet-Daily.com, who makes no bones about her belief that women should be making money as fashion models and should leave athletics to men. Her most recent diatribe on the subject beats the drum about the allegedly high quotient of lesbians in the WNBA. (Full disclosure: After Schlusel and I clashed over women's sports two years ago, she accused me of plagiarizing from one of her columns—charges that were rejected by my editors at two newspapers and by a media critic who examined the controversy.)

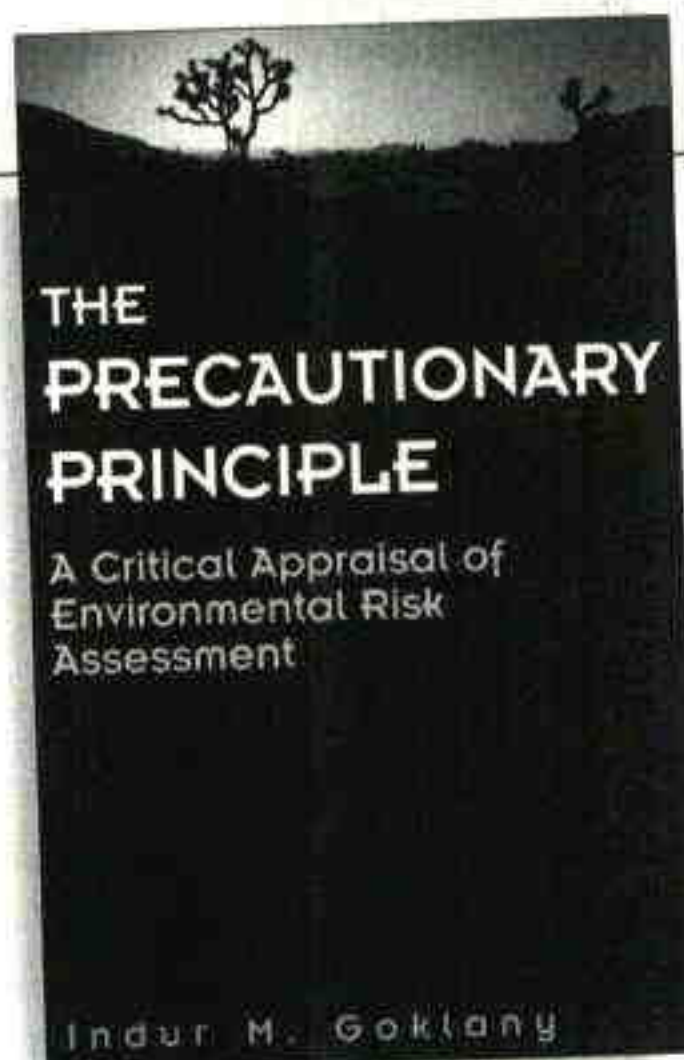
Women's sports do have revolutionary cultural implications. This isn't just about equity for little girls but about a vision of womanhood that includes sweat and strength, competitiveness and even ferocity. One could say that this is feminism at its best—it revels in female power and accomplishment, instead of wallowing in victimhood.

But the rise of women's athletics is rife with paradoxes that plague feminists as well. The conquest of this male bastion can take place only in an all-female environment (Stephen Moore does have a point here). With a few exceptions—equestrian sports or sharpshooting—sports are virtually the only remaining sex-segregated activity.

In last year's book *The Frailty Myth: Women Competing for Physical Equality*, journalist Colette Dowling argues that physical ability is the last frontier in women's pursuit of full equality with men, and that the patriarchy has discouraged women from fulfilling their athletic potential because of a "hidden agenda of keeping women in their place by keeping them believing in their weakness." Writes Dowling, "If women should ever demonstrate that they're just as strong, agile, and

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enduring as men, the whole game would be up.”

But, of course, women simply aren't as strong or as fast as men: In a unisex competition, track superstar Marion Jones would not have won an Olympic medal; indeed, she wouldn't even have made the finals. The centerpiece of Dowling's argument is that women can perform just as well when adjustments are made for differences in body size. Even if that assertion is true—and many experts dispute it—those size differences would still leave women unable to hold their own in direct competition with men. (Dowling is cagey on whether she wants to do away with sex segregation in sports.) Despite the hype about the closing gap between the records of male and female runners—which, actually, has widened again in recent years—the female winners of the New York City Marathon invariably come in behind more than 40 men.

Luckily, the women's game can be enjoyed on its own terms. Even if Venus Williams wouldn't last long against Andre Agassi, women's tennis matches now often outdo the men's in attendance and television ratings; in a recent *USA Today* poll, 75 percent of tennis fans said they preferred the women's game. (Moore blames the fact that “high-tech titanium rackets are ruining the men's game”; obviously, it couldn't have anything to do with the women's skill and flair.) Many male soccer fans are greatly impressed by the skill, finesse, and aggressiveness of women players. The popularity of women's college basketball is still nowhere near the men's game, but it has been steadily growing in attendance and television ratings, too.

Still, if nothing else, women's sports are clearly incompatible with the notion, popular with some academic feminists, that the two sexes are not distinct biological categories but points on a “continuum.” (On a continuum for athletic ability, women will be stuck at the lower end.) One might also detect hypocrisy on the part of feminists who endorse gender segregation in sports but downplay the sex differential in strength when it comes to the military or to professions like firefighting.

There are other paradoxical intersec-

tions between sports and feminism. In sports such as basketball, where women are still battling for a place in the sun, long-term success requires often grating compromises. The WNBA keeps salaries relatively paltry in order to focus on marketing and plays a truncated summer season, but has access to the deep pockets, the arenas, and the other resources of the NBA. Its erstwhile rival, the American Basketball League, which chose to play in the same season as men—albeit in smaller arenas—and to pay the players relatively high (though hardly NBA-range) salaries, went bankrupt in its third season in 1998.

And then there's the issue of sexuality. During the Women's World Cup of 1999, U.S. soccer star Brandi Chastain drew some flak for having posed nude, albeit in a discreet posture, in *Gear* magazine. Some feminists, such as writer and former basketball player Mariah Burton Nelson, have accused the WNBA of hyping attractive and heterosexual players with “their fingernails, their makeup, their boyfriends [and] their babies” while downplaying the presence of lesbians.

If lesbian athletes are kept in the closet, that's a legitimate gripe. But is it really a bad thing to highlight the fact that some WNBA players are mothers, or that a few of them are gorgeous—such as this year's Most Valuable Player and part-time model Lisa Leslie—and that most of the rest look unmistakably female? Unfortunately, the perception of athleticism as not quite feminine still lingers—and, fortunately (in my opinion, anyway), most women will always want to be appealing to men. If Leslie or Chastain can reassure both women and men that women can be no less feminine for being strong and athletic, good for them, and for the rest of us.

Will girls' interest in sports some day reach the same levels as boys', making the wrangling over the meaning of parity and equity unnecessary? Will women's basketball and soccer replicate the success of women's tennis? All that remains to be seen. For now, the good news is that millions of Americans of all ages and both sexes watched the girls of summer without giving a thought to gender politics. ♦

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