FROM MASCULINE MYTHS TO GIRL POWER REALITIES: THE ATHLETIC FEMALE BODY AND THE LEGEND OF TITLE IX

BY

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DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Kinesiology in the Graduate College of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2012

Urbana, Illinois

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ABSTRACT

The last 40 years have brought dramatic changes to America’s female sporting landscape. During this time, the athletic female body, once feared and considered deviant, has emerged as a nationally celebrated and highly commodified popular icon. According to popular narratives, this change in cultural perceptions can easily be explained as the “natural” outgrowth of the second-wave feminist movement, the fitness boom, and more specifically, America’s commitment to gender equality via Title IX. However, as Foucauldian-informed feminist studies of the body have repeatedly shown, popular modes of representing bodies (like the female athlete) are, despite their “objective” appearance, historically contingent. Drawing from this theoretical and methodological assumption, my study is shaped by a desire to “write against” popular narratives, particularly the now legendary status of Title IX within the national archive, by drawing attention to the historical specificity of modern representations of athletic female body. Through the methods of conjunctural analysis I illustrate how, through a series of discursive negotiations, popular cultural fears about the physical and psychological dangers of female sport participation, have given way to “common knowledge” of female physicality as a healthy and empowering practice. Consequently, this study explores how these commonsense definitions of the athletic female body have functioned to delimit the acceptable boundaries of female athleticism, define women’s sport history, frame debates about Title IX, and shape particular categories and problems related to female subjectivity.

Specifically, this study begins in the 1970s a period popularly recognized “revolutionary” period in women’s sports, fueled largely by the passage of Title IX and subsequent dramatic increases in female sport participation. I explore how, during this
period, sport science research on the athletic female body gained cultural authority and relevance through its articulation with popular debates about the changing role of U.S. women in sport and in turn, helped to dispel popular myths (i.e., women and girls become masculine and/or homosexual through sport participation, they lack physical stamina, aggressiveness, and competitive instinct) about female sport participation. Moving to the 1980s, this study then examines the disparity between cultural notions of the female athletic body as a new standard of beauty, backlash sentiments against female sport participation, and critiques of early sport science research on the female/sport relationship. Through this analysis, I suggest that despite their apparent divergence, celebratory, backlash, and critical discourses concerning the athletic female body are articulated to postfeminist, neoliberal, and psychotherapeutic discourses in ways that serve to maintain suspicions about the athletic female body. Next, this study considers how during the 1990s and early 2000s the now popular understanding of sport as a major determinant in women’s and girls’ physical well-being and the enhancement of self-esteem inform and extend the image of the celebrity female athlete, the athletic little girl, and girl power/Ophelia discourses. Through this analysis, I contend that despite its progressive appearance, the current advocacy of sport for girls, particularly as a means of addressing social problems, also functions in oppressive ways by facilitating a politics of blame associated with lifestyle politics and self-betterment strategies. Finally, this study concludes by considering how commonsense definitions of the athletic female body as feminine, healthy, and empowered, yet biologically handicapped, continue to shape popular discourses concerning female sport participation.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project was born quite accidentally from a need to fulfill a graduate course requirement. It is through my enrollment in a course titled Kinesiology 249: Sport in Modern Society that I was first introduced to critical sport studies. It is here that I met an inspiring teacher and scholar, Dr. C.L. Cole, who encouraged me to rethink commonsense assumptions about the body and power in sport. Through her support and guidance I decided to give critical sport studies a try. Dr. Cole’s widely respected body of work has set the academic standard to which I aspire and has profoundly shaped the form this project has taken. I am particularly grateful for her ability to gently challenge students while simultaneously imbuing them with confidence. Without her advice, patience, enthusiasm, and faith in this project (over more years than I care to count), this project would not have materialized. Through the course of my graduate study I have had the extreme good fortune of benefiting from the guidance, insight, wit, and wisdom of a committee of exceptional and accomplished scholars: Wojtek Jan Chodzko-Zajko, Melissa Orlie, Synthia Sydnor, and Paula Treichler. I am grateful to the Department of Kinesiology and Community Health, the Department of Gender and Women’s Studies, and the Department of Cell and Structural Biology at the University of Illinois, Urbana for their financial support through my many years of study. Lastly, I am indebted to Ms. Tina Candler, Secretary of Graduate Studies. Thank you for helping me to navigate through the many administrative issues associated my particular project, your kindness, and always engaging personality.

I thank my parents, Richard and Yvonne Stec, and my in-laws, Burkhard and Judy Geissler for always believing in me. To my husband and best friend, Karl, thank you for
your loving affection, much needed laughter, for standing by me through this lengthy process and encouraging me to “get the paper done”. My deep personal gratitude and admiration goes to my two best teachers, my children: Alex and Jake Geissler. Thank you for helping me to stay grounded: it’s hard to take myself too seriously when there are Lego kits to be built, Wii levels to solve, and Nerf wars to be won. Lastly, above all, I am eternally indebted to my God. Thank you for Your unending faithfulness, unmerited grace, and rich blessings. May I continue to grow in partnership with You.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE: RE-THINKING THE ATHLETIC FEMALE BODY IN LATE MODERN AMERICA: MY THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK .................................................................................. 1

CHAPTER TWO: FROM SEX ROLES TO SELF-ESTEEM: SPORT SCIENCE AND POPULAR DEBATES OVER THE ATHLETIC FEMALE BODY IN THE EARLY DAYS OF TITLE IX..................................................... 44

CHAPTER THREE: “A CRITIQUE OF CRITIQUES”: FEMINIST SPORT STUDIES, TITLE IX BACKLASH, AND THE NEW ATHLETIC IDEAL OF BEAUTY ............................................................................................................. 107

CHAPTER FOUR: “IF YOU LET ME PLAY SPORTS”: EMPOWERMENT, RISK, AND THE ATHLETIC GIRL-CHILD IN 1990s AMERICA ................................................................. 173

CHAPTER FIVE: “IT’S A SKILLS THING”: BIOLOGICAL ESSENTIALISM, AND THE MARGINALIZED FEMALE ATHLETE IN THE POST-TITLE IX ERA ............................................................................................................. 232

REFERENCES .................................................................................................................................................................................. 248
CHAPTER ONE

Re-thinking the Athletic Female Body in Late Modern America: My Theoretical and Methodological Framework

On June 3rd, 2002, in a moment marked by constant news reports of terrorist threats, suicide bombings, child kidnappings, and corporate debacles, Newsweek offered the nation a temporary respite from chaos in an optimistic cover story about America’s girls. Pictured on the cover is a young white girl about fifteen, her wide smile, open relaxed posture and hand gesture suggest a carefree demeanor tempered with confidence. Drawing on popular crisis narratives about the dangerous effects of the prepubescent female psyche, the visual message is secured by the copy which reads: “In Defense of Teen Girls, They’re Not All ‘Mean Girls’ and ‘Ophelias’, How to Raise a ‘Gamma Girl’” (Meadows, 2002). Specifically, the cover story addresses cultural panics over two best-selling books, Wiseman’s (2002) chronicle of adolescent girls’ harmful preoccupations with popularity, titled Queen Bees and Wannabes and Simmons’ (2002) ominous account of an “epidemic” of bullying among teenage girls titled Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls. In an attempt quell fears the piece suggests that popular representations of girls as either shallow, cutthroat, and obsessed with popularity, or insecure and longing to be accepted, overlook well-adjusted girls who may not be concerned with the trappings of popularity. This presumably scarce breed of confident girls also known as “Gammas”, we are told, are not in short supply and welcome evidence that teenage girls can be emotionally healthy.

More specifically, the piece profiles the lives of three southern California girls identified as Gammas. Jennifer, age 15, is tall and athletic, she swims, plays golf and water polo, surfs, is a peer-counselor, school newspaper editor, and is saving sex for
marriage. Emily, a high school freshman, pictured in uniform getting ready for a soccer game, enjoys numerous sports and works-out with her dad. While 15-year-old, Reyna, we learn, placed fifth in state in girls’ wrestling and is active in her church. Through these vignettes and accompanying images the piece constructs the image of a prototypical all-American Gamma girl, athletic, independent, involved in extracurricular activities, smart, nice, and self-possessed enough to shrug off social pressures to be popular. Repeatedly defined over and against the popular “Alpha” girls and wannabe “Betas,” the optimistic promise attributed to the Gammas, is emphasized and rendered visible through the more subtle dangers contained within the category “cool”. Citing national statistics on the rise in teen drug and alcohol use, particularly among girls, as well as the prevalence of casual sex among teens, these problems are delineated as part of the price of popularity. The need for teens to “fit-in” is portrayed not only as superficial, but dangerous: unlike the unusually mature yet innocent Gammas, the popular kids are said to “grow up a little faster”, succumbing to the social pressures to experiment with sex, drugs, and alcohol. However, the article reassuringly suggests there are now more healthy alternatives on the menu of cool. Sport, depicted as the site of esteemable values – confidence, independence, self-acceptance – is the predominant feature on this agenda. For instance, the success of Title IX, is directly credited with blurring the boundaries of cool for providing more opportunities for girls to come into their own and eschew social pressures. The availability of these options, as evidenced by the sport-minded Gammas, is offered as a tangible sign that girls may be less likely to engage in unhealthy behaviors than currently thought. Turing on the rhetoric of freedom and choice, the current moment is rearticulated as a
prosperous time for adolescent girls largely due to the availability and positive influence of sport.

I elected to begin with a summary of the *Newsweek* piece because it effectively illustrates the key discourses concerning women, girls, and sport, that provide the starting point of this project. First, the *Newsweek* piece shows the pervasiveness of discourses within 1990s and early 2000s America about the precarious social-psychological development of girls and their transition into adolescence. During this time, heightened concerns over the familiar problems facing girls – eating disorders, depression, teenage pregnancy – as well as the addition of newly formulated problems said to affect girls – substance abuse, violence, suicide – received national coverage over a range of media forms. But of all the problems said to be troubling girls, arguably none had attained the prominence of self-esteem. In a casual reference to girls as “Ophelias” the *Newsweek* story alludes to the popular metaphor proposed by Pipher (1995) in her bestselling book, *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*. Like the tragic character in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, Piper frames the various problems said to facing girls as a symptom of cultural biases that turn “normal” and “happy” adolescent girls into “miserable” teenagers with low self-esteem who engage in desperate behavior in order to fill an emotional void. Thus, according to Pipher, low self-esteem is not dangerous in itself, but rather for the fact that it places girls at an increased risk for other more serious problems such as teenage pregnancy and drug use. Through the repeated telling of this narrative by experts as well as the voice of girls themselves, in countless self-help books, widely publicized studies, and popular media reports, the problem of Opheila, as illustrated by the *Newsweek* story, had become a familiar source of national anxiety.
Secondly, the narrative strategies enacted in the *Newsweek* piece can be used to illustrate what Riordan (2001) identifies as a shift in popular discourses toward what some might consider “pro-girl’ rhetoric” (p. 279). In many ways, the anxieties invoked by the so-called “girl crisis” helped popularize the commonsense rhetoric of “girl power”, a celebration of girlhood and female empowerment defined by a take-charge attitude. The logic follows that by celebrating girlhood and encouraging girls, they in turn will feel better about themselves, achieve higher self-esteem, and avoid the pitfalls of adolescence. Part social transformation, part niche market, during the 1990s, girl power and its embodied form, the empowered female, became ubiquitous, entering mainstream cultural arenas through a diverse range of forms and contexts including among others, marketing slogans, child welfare programs, television, film, music, and mainstream magazines. In this sense, *Newsweek*’s girl-powered Gamma girl, celebrated for her “desire, determination, and confidence”, is the disparate twin to the vulnerable, voiceless, and fragile Ophelia. Bringing together popular, celebrity, and feel-good post-feminist sentiments, girl power, suggests that America’s girls need not be defined by a situation of vulnerability and risk, but rather by hope, opportunity, and health.

Lastly, and most important to this project, the *Newsweek* story exemplifies the ways in which sport has become a pervasive, familiar, and uncontested referent of girl power. Although the cover story is billed as an optimistic piece about America’s girls, it repeatedly draws upon the idea of sport as a measure and agent of adolescent girls’ social, physical, and psychological health and development. As such, the story demonstrates the pervasiveness of discourses, concomitant with the girl crisis, about the psychologically empowering effects of sport on growing-up female.
During the 1990s, the results of research indicating the benefits of girls’ participation in sport on levels of self-esteem and corresponding reduction in risky behaviors, were routinely made visible and promoted through popular media reports. For example, according to the results of the widely publicized President’s Council on Physical Fitness and Sports (1997) report titled *Physical Activity and Sports in the Lives of Girls*, female sport participation is associated with high levels of self-esteem and a corresponding reduction in the risk of teenage pregnancy, drug, alcohol, and tobacco use, depression, and eating disorders. Moreover, knowledge about the benefits of girls’ participation in sport, like that established in the President’s Council report, were extended and deployed into the areas of social policy, self-help, consumer culture, as well as feminist, youth, and sport advocacy. Some notable examples of this include the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Girl Power! campaign and the National Anti-Drug (NYAD) campaign. Other representative examples include self-help style materials aimed at adolescent girls and their parents such as Zimmerman and Reavill’s (1998) sport-themed follow-up to Pipher’s book titled *Raising Our Athletic Daughters: How Sports Can Build Self-Esteem and Save Girls’ Lives*. Drawing on the commonsense understanding of sport as a cure-all for the reported girl crisis, the authors go so far as to suggest “If Ophelia had played sports, she wouldn’t need reviving” (p. 6). One particularly memorable example of the incorporation of this knowledge into the consumer market is Nike’s publicly lauded “If You Let Me Play” campaign. Drawing on research and popular assumptions about the benefits of girls’ participation in sport, the ad, released in 1996, features a multi-cultural cast of girls making declarations about how allowing them to play sports early in life will
enhance their ability to avoid low self-esteem, breast cancer, domestic abuse, and teenage pregnancy.

On another level, the current cultural investment in advocating sport for girls stems from the popularly declared “revolution” in women’s sports. The gender equity girls of summer – the women of Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA), U.S. women’s soccer team, and the 1996 and 2000 Olympic Games – known as female sporting pioneers for forcing America to take notice of women’s athleticism, are inseparable from the message of sport-inflected girl power. As the Newsweek cover following the 1999 World Cup victory of the U.S. women’s soccer team declares – “Girls Rule!”. Within this context, high profile female athletes female were routinely praised for representing a “healthier” female embodiment and as such were regularly cast as an inspiration for women, and especially girls, to participate in sport.

The high profile of sport with regard to girls’ health and celebration of women’s athletic achievements in recent years is particularly interesting given the historical biases toward female sport participation. For example, popular cultural myths used to deny female sporting opportunities include among others, the idea that athletics are physically and psychologically bad for females, that competition may masculinize their appearance and promote homosexuality, as well as the notion that women and girls do not make good athletes because they lack physical stamina, aggressiveness, and competitive instinct.¹ As recently as the 1970s, scientific research findings suggested that female sport participation was undesirable for a number of reasons including potential damage to the reproductive organs and breasts and the risk of sex role confusion. Without question, the current sport-centered message of empowerment embodied by Newsweek’s Gamma-girl by was
unrealizable only a few decades ago. Given the historical disavowal of women’s and girls’ sporting experience, as Heywood (2000) asks, “What happened to make arguments which once fell on deaf ears suddenly register so powerfully on the national radar?” (p. 101).

According to the Newsweek piece the answer is clear, these changes can easily be explained as the “natural” outgrowth of the second-wave feminist movement, and more specifically, America’s commitment to gender equality via Title IX.

**Why Study Girl-sport-knowledge? The Politics of the Project**

To a great extent my interest in the contemporary relationship between girls and sport is largely based on my own experience. As a young athlete who clearly benefited from the early opportunities presented by Title IX, my first experience in organized sport came at the age of eight when my parents enrolled me in the local park district’s inaugural girls’ softball league. In a context still marked by the notion that little girls were to be “seen and not heard” I always felt playing softball, especially catcher – where you get to wear all kinds of equipment and get *really dirty*, was a little subversive even though I did play for a team called the Blueberry Muffins. Thinking back, I can’t help but recall my mother’s well-meaning dinnertime critique of my presumably gender-bending ways: “I never thought I’d have to tell my daughter to take off her baseball hat off at the table”.

However, despite my mother’s dismay at her tomboy daughter, she (and my family) always pleasantly marveled at my athletic interests. Indeed, it is through their encouragement and support, I found a love of sport, fitness, and bodily well-being that has transferred into adulthood. Knowing the many pleasures of sport and physical activity, I take great satisfaction in thinking about how much times have changed. And, as a self-identified feminist and feminist scholar, I find these changes promising and long overdue.
In this regard, my largely uncritical perspective parallels popular sentiments as well as that of other feminists (Halberstam, 1998; Lucas, 2000). Like queer theorist Halberstam (1998) the “revelation” that female sport participation offers physical and mental health benefits news invokes in me an admittedly “excessively unscholarly response: duh!” (p. 305).

However, as a feminist sport scholar I am also uneasy with the now commonsense understanding of sport and physical activity as an agent of women’s and girls’ health and empowerment (what I call girl-sport-knowledge), and in turn, its popularization as historically contingent upon Title IX. As the first comprehensive law to prohibit sex discrimination in federally funded educational programs, Title IX, has, without question, facilitated an unprecedented growth in female sport participation over the 40 years since its passing. It is in this sense that Title IX has become synonymous with gender equity in American sport and is popularly considered the primary agent behind changing cultural perceptions about female sport participation. To this extent, the “Title IX story” as it is repeatedly told, implies a linear cause-and-effect relationship that largely relegates earlier fears about its primary embodiment, the athletic female body, as simply outdated prejudices. From this perspective it is difficult to see the specific means through which girl-sport-knowledge has come to represent a self-evident truth about the athletic female body as well as the ways in which female athleticism continues to be called into question.

Indeed, in spite of popular praise for Title IX and its effects, over the last 40 years, the law has repeatedly been subject to formal attacks designed to weaken or block its provisions.

As Foucauldian-informed feminist studies of the body have repeatedly shown, scientific and popular modes of representing bodies (like girl-sport-knowledge) are, despite their “objective” appearance, an element in, and extension of, normalizing modern
epistemic regimes. In other words, “truth” claims are never innocent because they are inherently tied to social and material conditions and implicitly work to subject and control individual bodies by directing their behaviors in the name and welfare of the population. More specifically, as much important feminist scholarship has pointed out, the construction of binarisms, like the dyadic way of conceptualizing adolescent girls and their troubles (the girl power/Ophelia dyad) are normalizing practices that serve to contain cultural anxieties and contradictions by circumscribing subject positions, and by delimiting discourse. In other words, binarisms function to secure the status quo. Lastly, as sport scholars have successfully argued, because it is dominated by the body, sport constitutes a particularly powerful ideological mechanism that contributes to the illusion that sport and the body are transparent; outside of politics, culture, and economics (Cole, 1994).

Guided by these theoretical insights, the most basic aim of this project is one that seeks to intervene in commonsense assumptions about girl-sport-knowledge. That is to say, this project is shaped by a desire to provide a more nuanced history of the athletic female body, one that resists popular narratives that posit Title IX (and more broadly, the second-wave feminist movement) as the driving forces behind changing cultural attitudes towards, women, girls, sport, and physical activity. More specifically, this projects asks: How, why, and with what effects have sport and physical activity, practices once considered dangerous for women and girls become popularly recognized as healthful and desirable? What historical conditions of possibility, articulations and discursive negotiations have shaped this knowledge formation? And finally, how are these knowledges implicated in the formation of subjects, the shaping of citizens, and continued debates about the validity of female sport participation?
Situating the Project/Approaching the Problem

As demonstrated by the aforementioned questions and concerns, the theoretical assumptions organizing my study are interdisciplinary. To this end, my project is largely informed by an assortment of ideas and problematics derived from British cultural studies, Foucauldian post-structuralism, feminist theory, and critical gender studies. At its broadest level, my project employs the cultural studies method of analysis known as conjunctural analysis, or conjuncturalism. Conjunctural analyses, in the words of Grossberg, Nelson, and Treichler (1992), are “embedded, descriptive, and historically and contextually specific” (p. 8). In other words, this method of studying culture assumes that one can only understand the meanings of a cultural text or set of discourses by situating it within the specific historical, social, cultural, political, and economic conditions of its production, circulation, and/or reception. Thus, the guiding assumption of this project is that the formation of girl-sport-knowledge cannot be understood outside the broad context of late-modern America. As such, my primary methodological task is identify the kinds of data and evidence being marshaled to support particular narratives about women, girls, and sport, and to reconstruct the network of relationships into which these narratives are articulated. Specifically I seek to identify how particular discursive elements, social practices, and political interests (for example, sport science research concerning female sport participation, America’s female sport revolution(s), and Title IX), are articulated to other discursive elements and practices (such as debates about the safety of female sport participation and the limits of the athletic female body, psychotherapeutic discourses, feminist-informed notions of women’s empowerment, the fitness boom, and neoliberal ideas about female subjectivity); how particular discourses and practices are disarticulated
from one another (for instance, the widespread celebration and active promotion of women’s and girls’ sport participation is typically de-linked from attacks on Title IX); and, how these discourses and practices are rearticulated to new and different elements that comprise the conjuncture (for example, girl-target sport advocacy campaigns). In other words, my project is always moving from forms of discourse, to the conditions that produce them, to what the ensuing relationship suggests about social, economic, and political realities.

I argue that a critical contextual analysis of the array of discourses that have come to define and delimit popular definitions of the athletic female body over the last 40 years performs two related critical functions that constitute the more specific aims of my work. First, this analysis illustrates how these definitions, rather than representing a particular reality about the body, were formed through a complex and historically situated series of discursive negotiations and in turn, achieved cultural dominance. Second, this analysis provides an understanding of the material effects of knowledge production. That is to say, by revealing how girl-sport-knowledge has become “common knowledge”, contextual analysis helps us to understand how it functions very specifically to delimit the acceptable boundaries of female athleticism, define women’s sport history, frame debates about Title IX, and shape particular categories and problems related to female subjectivity (e.g., psychological and physical health, risky behavior, and empowerment).

Given that my project is contextual, my analysis of the athletic female body is limited to a particular historical moment. I elect to begin my study in the 1970s because it represents a popularly recognized “revolutionary” period in women’s sports, fueled largely by the passage of Title IX and subsequent dramatic increases in female sport participation.
As these changes challenged popular myths concerning female sport participation, debates about its limits and risks produced discontinuities and transformations in everyday definitions of the athletic female body. Covering a period of roughly 40 years, from 1970 to 2010, the “data” for this study is largely comprised of sport science research on the female-sport relationship, mass media coverage concerning women’s and girls’ participation in sport and physical activity, sport-themed print and television advertisements featuring women and girls, girl-sport-inflected public service campaigns, as well as popular self-help and advocacy texts referencing women’s and girls’ health and development.

In framing my analysis, I argue that the emergence of girl-sport-knowledge is conditioned by three key developments of the 1960s and 1970s: 1) The self-esteem movement, particularly the emergence of self-esteem as a psychological construct correlated to adolescent behavior and capable of being quantified, 2) The proliferation of the sport sciences (sport and exercise physiology, psychology, sociology) which established sport and exercise as physical, social, and psychological constructs and valid objects of scientific investigation, and 3) the emergence of neoliberalism as an economic orthodoxy, and by extension, a technology for governing subjects who are constituted as self-managing, autonomous, and enterprising. Given that these developments serve as a backdrop for my study, in the sections that follow I provide a brief review of these historical developments.

**Self-esteem and its origins.** The origins of the concept of self-esteem can be traced to the late nineteenth century and the emergence of an interest in the self within
psychology (Wells & Marwell, 1976). The first reference to self-esteem in psychology can be found in William James’ (1890/1963) *Principles of Psychology*. According to James, our self-feeling in this world depends entirely on what we *back* ourselves to be and do. It is determined by the ratio of our actualities to our supposed potentialities, a fraction of which our pretensions are the denominator and the numerator our successes: thus, self-esteem = Success/Pretensions (p. 310).

The first important thing to notice in James’ definition is that self-esteem is seen as an affective phenomenon. That is to say, he suggests it is lived as a feeling or an emotion where the individual is both an active, conscious subject who is aware of the world and an object of that consciousness. Thus, like all affective states, self-esteem is something that we find ourselves as having or lacking, whether we like it or not. The second significant point is that self-esteem is depicted as having the character of a ratio. This depiction suggests two important things about self-esteem. One is that a ratio involves a dynamic relationship: if either component changes, then the overall outcome changes. According to this view then, self-esteem can be altered by changing what occurs on either level; by either modifying a person’s aspirations or the frequency of his or her successes. Although, based on his conception of the self as made up of feelings and emotions as well as social and material elements, James argued that self-esteem was influenced by the social world, he also maintained that it was within the individual’s power to control it. As such, James maintained that a well-adjusted person was one who could successfully balance actuality with potentiality.

In addition to James, two other highly influential intellectual figures of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, sociologist Charles H. Cooley and philosopher
George H. Mead, helped to shape early ideas and beliefs about the self and self-esteem (Hewitt, 1998; Ward, 1996). Like James, Cooley, did not view the self as merely a cognitive phenomenon, but rather as an affective or emotional one. He also held that the self and its associated feelings are inherently social. According to Cooley, the “looking glass self”, which he compared to the image we see when we look in a mirror, does not arise from our direct grasp of ourselves, but depends on our imagination of the other’s judgment of us (Hewitt, 1998; Ward, 1996). Thus for Cooley, we are tied to the social world, which supplies us with images of what others are and what we should be, as well as with the opportunities for social interaction in which the looking glass self is formed (Murk, 1999). Deviating from James and Cooley, Mead argued that the self is an object of thought and action rather than emotion, and that its organization is supplied by the social world in which it participates. In other words, Mead viewed the self as a social object that lies in the field of experience (Hewitt, 1998).

Although self-esteem was not a central concern for James, Cooley, or Mead, their work helped to position the self at the center of the emerging fields of psychology and social psychology. In contrast to the emerging field of behavioral psychology, which avoided the concept of the self because of its unobservable and amorphous quality, self-psychologists openly accepted it as a key for gaining an understanding of the individual and as a central focus for the discipline of psychology. Although self-esteem and its corollaries – self-efficacy, self-concept, and self-evaluation – are now recognized psychological constructs, and have come to be viewed as something everyone has in varying degrees, during the early twentieth century, self-esteem was, at best, a peripheral concept. In this vein, James, Cooley, and Mead, supplied much of the theoretical
framework that would shape contemporary research on, and understandings of, self-esteem (Hewitt, 1998; Murk, 1999; Ward, 1996)

Theories of the self, like those of James, Cooley, and Mead have a long history in Western philosophy and the human sciences, particularly since the advent of modernity (Starker, 1989; Taylor, 1989). These theories include various reflections on how the self can improve, enhance, or sustain itself, particularly in the face of the objectifying and for some, dehumanizing forces of modern society (Starker, 1989). According to Foucault, the very existence of these theories, and their development within the “human sciences”, constitute a historical event peculiar to our society and one that must be accounted for (McHoul & Grace, 1993). In other words, the emergence of the human sciences and interest in the self is historically specific. As Foucault argues, the advent of these disciplines is complicit with a modern interest in enlightenment and advancement, as well as the emergence of modern mechanisms of power employed to manage the population and discipline individuals through strategies that sought to unearth various secrets of the self. Drawing on Foucault’s insights, early theories and definitions about the self and self-esteem do not simply reflect universal “truths” about the self, but are embedded in, and illustrative of, a historical fascination with the self, its intelligibility, and interests in its potential management.

At the same time, the work of James, Cooley, and Mead mark a particular historical period of transformation with regard to views of the self and the location of these theories within emerging fields of the human sciences. As Jones and Elcock (2001) illustrate in their contextual analysis of the history of psychology, the early development of the discipline was shaped by a complex set of historical conditions surrounding its emergence
within the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. According to Jones and Elcock these conditions include the interrelated dynamics of industrialization, urbanization, immigration, problems such as poverty, disease, and social inequality, a view of national character that emphasized individual responsibility and the potential for advance by individual effort, the rise of Social Darwinism, and a strong belief in the potential and practical utility of science and technology for improving society. As such, Jones and Elcock contend that the emerging discipline of psychology and social psychology “did not start with a theoretical blank slate in trying to explain human nature, but rather with a certain set of beliefs both about human nature, and about how society should be organized” (p. 102). Indeed, the influences of these dynamics are clearly evident in the notions of pragmatism underlying James’ definition of self-esteem.

Although self-esteem was initially constructed as a peripheral concept employed by theoreticians, from the 1940s to the 1970s it was transformed into a useful analytical tool within the areas of psychology, psychotherapy, and experimental psychology (Ward, 1996). At the same time, research on self-esteem began to multiply at a rapid pace, becoming a central concept in clinical and experimental psychology as well as psychological survey and empirical studies (Ward, 1996). Through the repeated use of self-esteem scales and measures within psychological research during this time, self-esteem was operationalized and objectified into a quantifiable psychological construct within the scales and inventories of normal psychology.

The process of validating self-esteem as a psychological measure also functioned to expand and delimit the definition of self-esteem by enabling the concept to be connected to a broad array of behavioral and social phenomenon (Ward, 1996). For example, among
the first clinical studies was Maslow’s (1942) examination of self-esteem, which he identified with the notion of “dominance feeling” – a kind of sureness, pride, or sense of mastery, and women’s sexuality. Maslow connected self-esteem to a variety of issues including, “homosexual behavior”, sexual position, and marital happiness. In addition to Maslow’s work, a sampling of psychology and social psychology research conducted from the 1950s to the 1970s reveals studies linking self-esteem to a diversity of issues including schizophrenia (Rogers, 1958), ethnocentrism (Pearl, 1954), social class (Klausner, 1953), motivation (Cohen, 1954), and delinquency (Reckless, Dinitz, & Kay, 1957). During this period, the work of two social scientists, Morris Rosenberg and Stanley Coopersmith, stand out as highly influential in establishing self-esteem as an indispensable tool for doing psychological research as well as a concept with a practical significance for studying social and behavioral issues (Hewitt, 1998; Ward, 1996).

Rosenberg (1965) argued that the self-image could be studied in the same way we study the attitudes people hold to a variety of objects. In Rosenberg’s assessment, just as we hold attitudes towards movies, political parties, or other people, we hold attitudes towards ourselves. To this end, Rosenberg argued, following the analyses of James, Cooley, and Mead, that the self-image is powerfully influenced by the social world, and that people are perhaps universally motivated to hold a positive attitude toward it. Among Rosenberg’s chief contributions to the study of self-esteem are: the formulation of a readily understood definition of the nature of the individual’s self-image, the development of a widely used and imitated measure of self-esteem, and the introduction of self-esteem into areas outside psychology (Hewitt, 1998).
Rosenberg’s work is significant because of his application of his methods to the study of adolescence. Drawing on theories of adolescence as a time of “storm and stress” he argued that the period of adolescence posed particular difficulties for development of a sense of self, and therefore was an important phase in the life cycle for studying self-esteem. Among his conclusions was the idea that parenting and educational strategies were two of the most important factors influencing the development of self-esteem in adolescents.

Similar to Rosenberg, Coopersmith’s work also examined the relationship between self-esteem, childhood, adolescent development, and parenting. In his well-known book, *The Antecedents of Self-Esteem* Coopersmith (1967), helped to establish a link between parenting style and the level of self-esteem in children and adolescents. In his assessment, the “parents of children with high self-esteem are concerned and attentive toward their children, that they structure the worlds of their children along the lines they believe to be proper and appropriate, and that they permit great freedom within the structures they establish” (p. 236). Moreover, Coopersmith contended that the level of self-esteem of children and adolescents, was an important determinant of the ability of an individual to lead a successful life.

The development of self-esteem measurement tools and their implementation in psychological research retranslated and redirected self-esteem into an indispensable concept for doing the normal day-to-day science of psychology (Hewitt, 1998; Ward, 1996). Although the concept uses the word *esteem*, which carries the connotation of high worth or value, it is important to note that the combined form, self-esteem refers to the full dimension and the degree of self-esteem usually high/positive or low/negative. In this
regard, low or negative self-esteem is primarily aversive and high or positive self-esteem is thought to be important to psychological adjustment. Within the research outlined above, definitions of self-esteem are in keeping with James’ early understanding of the concept as a feeling or emotion in its definition as an attitude of self-acceptance, self-approval, or self-respect. Additionally, in this work, self-esteem is defined as both an independent and dependent variable. That is to say, self-esteem can be defined as a diagnostic tool for predicting behavior, psychological health, or social outcomes as well as a malleable psychological state that can both effect, of be effected by, the social world as well as one’s own interpretation of and/or her performance in it. In this respect, self-esteem is defined as a dynamic state that is determined by external factors (i.e., social class, education) as well as internal factors (i.e., perception of performance or feedback) that may or may or may not be changed by outside intervention or individual manipulation.

The production of new and more refined definitions of self-esteem within psychological research illustrates (as alluded to earlier) what Foucault suggests is a conjunction between the human sciences and disciplinary power. To the extent that self-esteem is defined as malleable, and levels of self-esteem are linked to particular behaviors, psychological states, and social outcomes, self-esteem is also rendered as a marker of “normalcy” by which “abnormalcy” is defined. In this regard, the validation, interpretation, and redefinition of self-esteem in psychological research also functioned to establish new bodies of knowledge and categories of classification regarding “abnormal” or “unhealthy” levels of self-esteem, and “pathological” behavior, that were then possible to control or be altered. Moreover, given the definition of self-esteem as dynamic state
controlled by external and internal factors, its alteration could be accomplished through manipulation of either factor.

The validation of self-esteem as a psychological measure and redefinition through its study in scientific research, helped it to gain acceptance as a concept that offered practical suggestions for improving society and therefore move beyond the human sciences into popular culture. As both Ward (1996) and Hewitt (1998) suggest, the period from the late 1960s to the early 1990s mark the period of transition during which the concept of self-esteem began to develop outside the human sciences. The work of Rosenberg and Coopersmith was instrumental in this transition in that theirs was the first to be incorporated into the concerns of policy makers interested in solving social problems, educators interested in increasing academic performance and discipline, and popular literature pertaining to parenting roles and obligations. To the extent that self-esteem has moved beyond the human sciences into popular discourse, it has been linked to a number of popular issues such as educational pedagogy, self-help, parenting advice, women’s issues, and therapeutic movements. Because of the explosion of popular interest in self-esteem, it has been put to a range of uses such as self-help and education where its definition has been both elaborated and delimited.5

Most important to this project is the centrality of self-esteem within parenting and advice manuals (Ward, 1996). Among the first manuals to link self-esteem to parenting style was Briggs (1970), Your Child’s Self-Esteem: A Key to His Life. Like other texts in this genre Briggs drew on the work of scientists, such as Rosenberg and Coopersmith to legitimate sweeping claims sweeping about self-esteem. For example, maintaining that she is borrowing from “mounting research” and “accumulated evidence”, Briggs offers
suggestions for parents on how to improve their child’s self-esteem and posits that a child’s self-esteem is correlated to future happiness and success in all areas of life. In addition to Briggs, other manuals made similar claims going so far as to suggest that if parents did not work on building their child’s sense of self-esteem, that child could be at risk of eventually becoming an unhappy, poorly adjusted teenager and adult (Ward, 1996). Recently, the most virulent claims of this nature have involved adolescent girls. In Eagle and Coleman’s (1993) parental advice manual All That She Can Be, they suggest that girls with low self-esteem are in danger of practicing unsafe sex, developing eating disorders, and being victim of a crime. In formulating popular advice about self-esteem, this work defines self-esteem as both a dependent variable that can be changed by altering the child’s environment and independent variable that has far-reaching influences on a child’s overall life chances. As such, low self-esteem is amenable to change while high self-esteem once achieved, does not require maintenance. To this extent, a child’s levels of self-esteem, and by extension success in life, is a matter of parental responsibility and achieved through positive reinforcement.

Self-esteem has also played an important role outside the human sciences as a meaningful concept within therapeutic movements, the definition of social struggles, social policy, and popular culture that have also functioned to extend and delimit the definition of self-esteem. For example, well-known author feminist author Steinem’s (1992) best-selling book, A Revolution From Within: A Book of Self-Esteem, defines self-esteem in political terms, linking the forging of self-esteem with the struggles of women, African-Americans, indigenous peoples, and other oppressed groups. Like the definitions of self-esteem within educational theory and practice, Steinem suggests high self-esteem is an
entitlement that can be damaged by external influences and recovered through self-acceptance. Self-esteem is also the founding concept behind the National Association for Self-Esteem (NASE), a social movement organization dedicated to “integrating self-esteem into the fabric of American society”. Although NASE is a politically and philosophically diverse organization that entertains a number of different views on self-esteem, the organization nevertheless appeals to a definition of self-esteem as a universal part of human experience and as a significant and necessary measure of, and influence on, the quality of life.

Through its movement outside the human sciences, self-esteem was incorporated into lay-knowledge and became a widespread truth about the nature of human experience. As illustrated by its use within the various spaces outlined above, self-esteem can be defined as just about anything. The source of self-esteem can be individual, social, or a combination of both. The rationale for acquiring high self-esteem can be seen as a desirable end in itself, or utilitarian in nature. Furthermore, the very nature of the concept itself can vary. Self-esteem can be defined as an individual’s capacity to feel good about himself, or may be defined in more conditional terms as self-respect, which is likely to be associated with personal attributes. The ambiguity of self-esteem speaks to its usefulness and ubiquity. However, these definitions are also symptomatic of the culture in which they emerge. The interesting point is not whether they are true or false, but rather what they reveal about their historical conditions of possibility.

**The Cold War, the physical fitness movement, and the sport sciences.** The era that began with the election of Dwight D. Eisenhower as president in 1952 and ended with the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963, roughly parallels what is known as the
“physical fitness movement” of the 1950s (Eisenman & Barnett, 1979). Although, in retrospect, this is thought to be perhaps the most stable time in U.S. history, it constitutes a historical moment marked by national insecurities related to the Cold War. In this context, the results of the 1953 Kraus-Weber tests, which indicated America’s youth were significantly less fit than their European counterparts, were interpreted as evidence that America might be going “soft” in the fight against communism. Moreover, these results were particularly damaging in light of similar findings that emerged from World War II, which indicated that approximately one-third of the men examined were found unfit for service (Howell & Ingham, 2001).

In response to these concerns, in 1957, President Eisenhower established the President’s Council on Youth Fitness (PCYF), a government committee designated to make youth fitness recommendations (Eisenman & Barnett, 1979). Similarly, in 1959, the American Association for Health, Physical Education, and Recreation (AAHPER) launched a massive campaign titled Operation Fitness-USA designed to stimulate fitness nationally (Howell & Ingham, 2001). This program included the Youth Fitness Testing Program, a school track and field project for 30 million youths, the Sports Skills Test Project, and an array of promotional materials such as patches, certificates, and uniforms. As a result of these developments, by the time John F. Kennedy became president in 1960, health and fitness had become strongly intertwined with national pride, democracy, and the fight against communism. Kennedy also helped to further these sentiments by giving his full personal backing to the PCYF and writing two articles for Sports Illustrated (1960) expressing his concerns over the state of the nation’s fitness. In his first article entitled “The Soft American” Kennedy reaffirmed the nationalistic goals of the fitness movement:
For the physical vigor of our citizens is one of America’s most precious resources. If we allow it to dwindle and grow soft then we will destroy much of our ability to meet the great and vital challenges, which confront our people. We will be unable to realize our full potential as a nation (p. 13).

Thus as Howell and Ingham (2001) note, due to these efforts, the decades between 1950 and 1970 witnessed the most vigorous and sustained public efforts to foster physical fitness that ever occurred in America. However, despite these efforts, physical fitness did not become a widely accepted practice by most Americans. As Eisenman and Barnett (1979) suggest, the movement was based on harsh testing and training methods, overgeneralizations, and largely unsubstantiated claims about the benefits of physical fitness.

As Richard Swanson and John Massengale (1997) explain in their history of kinesiology, the promotion of exercise through the physical fitness movement, combined with a lack of available research, criticism of physical education programs, and national emphasis on mathematics and science inspired by the Cold War, sparked a surge of research on physical activity. Although prior to the mid-1960s the study of physical education in higher education was focused exclusively on the pedagogical concerns of preparing teachers, in this context physical education was forced to scrutinize itself and join other disciplines in the academy in the quest for new knowledge through research. As such the 1960s marked the most significant time of growth for kinesiology, witnessing an expansion of research growth as well as the emergence of numerous exercise and sport science graduate programs, professional societies, and scholarly journals.
Neoliberalism. The rise of neoliberal economics in the United States is largely considered to be a response to the 1970s collapse of the nation’s post-war Fordist/Keynesian economic order (Reeves & Campbell, 1994). As Harvey (2005) explains, the restructuring of state forms and of international relations after the Second World War was designed to prevent a return to the catastrophic conditions of the Great Depression and the re-emergence of inter-state geopolitical rivalries that had led to war. In this context, U.S. economic policy took a new turn, one predicated on constructing the right blend of state, market, and democratic institutions to guarantee peace, inclusion, well-being, and stability. This new order, known as Fordist/Keynesian economics, relied on active state involvement in the economy to ensure economic growth and full employment, and if necessary, intervening or even substituting for market processes through the welfare state to achieve these ends. From 1945 to 1973 the rigidities of the system basically succeeded in stimulating heavily regulated growth to the general benefit of most U.S. workers forming the basis of America’s postwar boom.

However, as Reeves and Campbell (1994) suggest, social barriers in the workplace, the school, and the housing market still excluded many from the Fordist/Keynesian dream of upward mobility. Under this system, the labor market was divided into a heavily unionized “monopoly sector” of affluent workers, and a low-wage “competitive sector” made up of what Harrington (1963) termed the “other America”. In Harvey’s (1991) estimation, “the inequities of this divided labor market produced serious tensions and strong social movements on the part of the excluded – movements that were compounded by the way in which race, gender, and ethnicity often determined who had access to privileged employment and who did not” (p. 138). As part of the Fordist/Keynesian
ideological commitment to social programs, the government tried to contain this discontent with Great Society measures such as welfare, job training, and educational programs (Reeves & Campbell, 1994).

In the short term, the loose monetary policy of the Fordist/Keynesian order combined with the escalating wartime economy of the 1960s, allowed the state to absorb the expenses of these new social programs. However, the early 1970s shift to a peacetime economy in combination with the 1973 OPEC oil embargo drove the nation into a sharp recession (Harvey, 2005). The economic crisis that followed was marked by high unemployment, high taxes, and inflation that affected that much of the nation and in turn, generated widespread discontent with organized labor and expensive social programs. According to Harvey (2005), in economic theory, these problems were blamed on the “rigidity” of the Fordist/Keynesian order – economies were too slow and too regulated. The response was a turn to more limber policies, what Harvey (1991) calls a doctrine of “flexible accumulation,” and what is now more commonly referred to as neoliberalism.

Broadly speaking, neoliberalism is understood as a mode of political and economic rationality characterized by privatization, deregulation and a rolling back and withdrawal of the state from many areas of social provision. As Harvey (2005) puts it, neoliberalism, is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices. The state has to guarantee, for example, the quality and integrity of money. It must also set up
those military, defense, police, and legal structures and functions required to secure private property rights and to guarantee, by force if need be, the proper functioning of markets. Furthermore, if markets do not exist (in areas such as land, water, education, health care, social security, or environmental pollution) then they must be created, by state action if necessary. But beyond these tasks the state should not venture. State interventions in markets (once created) must be kept to a bare minimum because, according to the theory, the state cannot possibly possess enough information to second-guess market signals (prices) and because powerful interest groups will inevitably distort and bias state interventions (particularly in democracies) for their own benefit (p. 2).

To allow market forces to act as a self-regulating mechanism neoliberalism requires deregulation, that is, the removal of various state controls deemed as barriers to free trade, such as, tariffs, unionization of labor forces, as well as regulations and restrictions on capital flows and investment. In the name of reducing the role of government, neoliberalism also favors the privatization of public enterprise and the reduction of public expenditure for social services, such as health and education.

In Harvey’s (2005) view privatization is not just neoliberalism’s strategy for dealing with the public sector, but an element of its particular form of governmentality – an ethos where everything becomes privatized, institutions, structures, issues, and problems that used to constitute the public. In other words, neoliberalism sees market exchange as an ethic in itself, capable of acting as a guide to all human action, cultivating individual happiness, and the social good. In this sense, neoliberalism entails a massive de-democratization such that concepts of “public good” and forms of social solidarity are
dissolved in favor of individualism and personal responsibility. President George W. Bush’s inaugural speech to mark his second term in office neatly captured the autonomous, calculating, self-regulating subject of neoliberalism; his address was about “preparing people for the challenges of life in a free society...by making every citizen an agent of his or her own destiny” (quoted in Gill & Scharff, 2011, p. 5). According to Brown (1995), as a form of governance, the neoliberal emphasis on freedom of choice works largely through mechanisms of self-policing, where people are expected to exercise choice, particularly through practices of consumption, and become responsible for his or her risks. In a practical sense, one can survey the quotidian effects of neoliberal individualized/market based rationality through a number of practices such as corporate bailouts, the rollback of labor rights, the privatization of public assets, cuts in public services, and increased policing, surveillance and political repression of a markedly polarized population.

From a global perspective, the specific practices of neoliberalism as an economic orthodoxy regulating public policy throughout much of the advanced capitalist world diverge from this template for a variety of reasons too complex to address here. Suffice to say, the dramatic consolidation of neoliberalism set in motion during the 1970s and solidified in the 1980s and 1990s is ever expanding in its geopolitical reach. As Gill and Scharff (2011) point out, it would seem that despite the many different ways of actualizing neoliberalism all signs point to its deeper penetration over time and its intensification as a force for creating actors who are rational, calculating and self-motivating, and who are increasingly exhorted to make sense of their individual biographies in terms of discourses of freedom, autonomy and choice – no matter how constrained their lives may actually be. To this end, one of the criticisms leveled at neoliberalism is that it has become a “catch-
all” term incapable of explaining or illuminating anything (Gill & Scharff, 2001).

However, taking a cue from Gill and Scharff, rather than abandoning the term, my project is particularly concerned with the intersections between neoliberalism and postfeminism. These synergies, particularly neoliberalism and postfeminism’s appeal to the autonomous, self-regulating, self-inventing subject as well as the displacement of collective and social and political action with individual concerns, will be explained in more detail throughout the remainder of the dissertation.

As mentioned previously, my project comes largely as a response to the unprecedented visibility and celebration of the athletic female within the contemporary moment. To this end, I consider my project to be situated within the interdisciplinary field known as girls’ studies and sport studies. As such, an understanding of girl studies and critical sport studies concerning women, girls, sport, and physical activity is fundamental to my analysis of girl-sport-knowledge. Thus, in the section that follows, I situate my project in relationship to these literatures.

**Contemporary girl studies.** Given the range of scholarly literature that could be considered under the interdisciplinary banner known as “girl studies” this field is broad, multidimensional, and therefore difficult to delimit and define. The various disciplinary fields that constitute this area of study include, among others, sociology, anthropology, communications, kinesiology, women’s studies, and psychology. Moreover, the specific modes of analysis that inform this research are equally diverse and include textual, ethnographic, and social science analyses of girls’ peer group and identity formation, girls’ subcultures, media consumption by girls, and the relationship between girls and feminism. In order to provide a background for my discussion of the relationship between my
proposed dissertation and scholarly work on girl culture, I first provide a historical perspective on the area of scholarship known as girls’ studies, followed by a brief review of the literature concerning contemporary girl culture. This review is focused on the recent surge of scholarly work concerning girl culture published in the last fifteen years, and more specifically on that which is relevant to my project and definition of girl culture.

In response to new theoretical perspectives formed in the late 1960s and 1970s that challenged the notion of consumers as passive victims of false consciousness, and the exploitative relations of commodity consumption and mass culture, cultural scholars shifted their focus to consumers and the practices of consumption. Characteristic of this period in cultural studies, many early analysis of female youth culture focused on girl consumers as active cultural participants. This emphasis was tied to feminist scholars’ larger attempts to counter what was seen as a myopic, masculinist vision of youth culture within cultural studies, as well as the understanding of female consumers as uncritical dupes and victims of cultural texts that were considered oppressive to women.11 In what set the stage for what has become known as girls’ studies, McRobbie and Garber’s (1976) groundbreaking ethnographic work, Girls and Subcultures, demonstrated that girls interact among themselves and with each other to form a distinctive subculture of their own. Focusing specifically on girls’ teenybopper culture, they showed that female youth culture, unlike its male counterpart, is connected more to family, domesticity, and romance, and therefore, offers girls different possibilities of resisting social expectations. Likewise, McRobbie’s (1991) in-depth textual analyses of British youth and teen magazines were also foundational to the study of girl culture in their contention that the magazines
promoted romance as the means by which girls should interpret consumer culture and practice their sexuality.\textsuperscript{12}

Like the early work on girl culture, the recent surge in scholarly literature on contemporary girl culture has also tried to understand the complex relationship between girls, consumer culture, the mass media, and girls’ subculture. As Wald (1998) suggests, this renewed academic interest in studying the specific cultural formations and cultural practices of girls is, in part, related to popularity and visibility of the “girl” within popular youth/music cultures, combined with renewed interest in forms of violence/trauma that primarily affect girls. This recent work incorporates an analysis of a broad range of cultural texts including advertising images, fashion, popular fiction, music, sport, and consumer products. Informed by a number of different theoretical perspectives and employing a variety of methodologies, this literature addresses the messages mainstream culture gives girls about romance, sexuality, body image, and gender, as well as the ways in which girls negotiate these messages. Although these studies are numerous and diverse, this work can generally be divided among two related areas of emphasis which mirror key aspects of contemporary girl culture: one focused on girl culture’s representations of traditional femininity and the negative effects of these representations on adolescent girls’ health and agency, and a second which focuses on girls cultural production, representations which seem to break with traditional representations of women, and the positive effects of these representations in promoting girls’ empowerment and health.\textsuperscript{13}

Illustrating the first area of emphasis outlined above, is work such as Riordan’s (2001) analysis of girl culture icon \textit{The Spice Girls}, which argues that the group reproduces harmful cultural norms of female beauty and sexuality and by extension, the notion that
female power is accessed though sexuality and submission to the patriarchal gaze. Moreover, led by McRobbie’s (1991) early and influential work on teen magazines, recent work in this area has found the dominant focus of these magazines such as Seventeen, Young Miss, and Sassy, to be centered on self-improvement as defined by “fashion dressing and physical beautification” (Evans, Ruthberg, Sather, & Turner, 1991). In addition, a number of new studies examining how girl culture’s emphasis on beauty and thinness effects girls, suggest that this focus, especially within advertising, is linked to psychological problems such as eating disorders and poor body image among adolescent girls (Martin & Gentry, 1994; Martin & Kennedy, 1993).

Following the second theoretical perspective outlined above is work such as McRobbie’s (1997) more recent analysis of teen magazines. According to McRobbie, the content of these magazines is marked by the disappearance of romance and a change in the definition of girlhood from a docile sensibility to a fun seeking female subjectivity. Studies like Rand’s (1995) analysis of Barbie, contend, contrary to other analyses, that despite the doll’s representation of unrealistic and unattainable version of femininity, girls are capable of interpreting, negotiating, and subverting these meanings. Moreover, premised on the well-established critiques of traditional femininity and beauty culture as opposed to feminism, recent work in girls’ studies has emphasized the politics of empowerment associated with representations of women that seem to break with traditional norms. For example, Innes’ (1999) work on media representations of “tough girls” suggests that the increasing prevalence of independent, physically strong, and assertive women in the media reflects both a societal change in gender roles, and at the same time challenges traditional notions of femininity in potentially empowering ways.
Additionally, recent work on girl culture includes a large concentration of research focused on the cultural productions (music, zines, internet content) and politics of third-wave grassroots movement Riot Grrrl (Gottleib & Wald, 1994; Riordan, 2001; Troka, 1998; Wald, 1998). Generally speaking, this work is characterized by an examination of Riot Grrrl’s significance as a subversive “feminist” female subcultural space and site of girls’ cultural production. For example, in their work on Riot Grrrl, Gottleib and Wald (1994) demonstrate the ways in which the emphasis within Riot Grrrl music, zines, and internet sites on notions of self-acceptance, community support, girls’ own cultural production, as well as issues of misogyny, homophobia, racism, and sexism not typically offered to girls, encourage young women to take action against patriarchal institutions that may constrain them.

Despite the many theoretical and methodological differences in this work, the authors outlined above are united in their opposition to traditional femininity as a form of women’s and girls’ oppression, an overall interest and investment in the influence of cultural texts on shaping identity, and analysis of the complex relationship between feminism, consumer culture, and empowerment/agency. That is to say, this work relies on a mutually contingent opposition between conceptions of femininity associated with passivity, oppression, and victimization and femininity coupled with strength, independence, and agency.

Several feminist scholars in their analysis of girl culture have also challenged some of girl culture’s seemingly pro-girl messages. In their analyses of girl culture and sport, feminist sports scholars Lucas (2000) and LaFrance (1998) critique Nike’s seemingly pro-sport girls’ advertisements, on the grounds that they, in Lucas’ words “structure[s] girls’
entrance into sport in such a way as to disempower them”, through representations of girls as lacking agency and needing permission and guidance to play (p. 162). Although these authors engage noteworthy critiques of girl culture’s pro-girl messages, their critiques remain invested in notions of an authentic feminist agency rooted in liberal individualism that underscores a large area of girl culture scholarship.  

**Girl Culture, Girl Studies, and the Proposed Project**

As a brief review of recent literature on girl culture illustrates, much of the current literature on contemporary girl culture takes for granted the idea that levels of self-esteem are an integral assessment of adolescent girls health and well-being, and tries to assess how cultural messages affect these levels. Given this, I see my project as different from these studies in that my primary aim is not to analyze the content of cultural messages offered to girls, but rather to illustrate how certain knowledge or cultural messages, particularly those linking female adolescent development, sport, and health, are produced and their effects.

As such, of particular interest to my study is the critical work on sport and girl culture that troubles the articulation between women’s and girls’ empowerment and sport (Cole & Cook, 2001; Cole, Geissler, Giardina, & Metz, 2001; Cole & Hribar, 1995; Geissler, 2001; Giardina & Metz, 2005). Drawing from a Foucauldian understanding of discourse and power, and by deploying the method of conjunctural analysis, these studies provide a significantly different critique of pro-girl messages by illustrating the ways in which the articulation of self, agency, and the body facilitated through contemporary fitness culture, are an element in, and extension of, normalizing modern epistemic regimes. Likewise Heywood’s (2007) analysis of girl power and the neoliberal body, cautions against the implicit endorsement of neoliberalism and its attendant assumptions underlying
the image of the empowered athletic female body. According to Heywood this image does the cultural work of advertising equal opportunities – anyone can achieve this look if they just work hard enough (and anyone can ‘succeed’ on all levels if they just work hard enough) – that masks the growing structural inequalities characteristic of the global economy.

In a similar vein, Mastronardi’s (1998) critical analysis of girl culture, offers an examination of the relationship between girl culture’s narratives of girls in crisis and discourses of girls’ empowerment. In Mastronardi’s assessment, the popular framing of girls as psychologically troubled, functions to delimit what types of solutions to these problems is allowed. Although Mastronardi contends that the conceptualizations of girls as in trouble is not inaccurate, she suggests that the rhetoric of empowerment is problematic because it emphasizes notions of agency divorced from material circumstances in ways that reinforce conservative social arrangements. Moreover, in another noteworthy critique, Riordan (2001) suggests that despite the rhetoric of empowerment (girl power) surrounding the Spice Girls, their version of feminism is a commodified and co-opted version of the third-wave feminist politics of Riot Grrrl. This commodified version of girl power, Riordan argues, is different from third-wave feminism because it reinforces girls’ participation in passive consumption as an avenue for self-improvement, rather than an awareness and critique of the structural forces that shape and constrain women and the enactment of collective action for social change.

Also of interest to this project are several “foundational” books on the emergent field of girls’ studies. Taken together, these texts offer a nuanced and textured picture of girls’ multiple identities and their varied relationships to social, political, cultural and
power and empowerment. In *Young Femininity: Girlhood, Power and Social Change*, authors Aapola, Gonick, and Harris (2005) emphasize the interrelation of the public and private and the experiences of cross-cultural girlhoods. Comprehensive in nature, the book encompasses topics ranging from the personal – such as family, friendship, finances, sexuality, and the body – to the political – such as employment, citizenship, consumption, political choices, and social change. Although the authors stress the significance of these issues in relationship to girls’ lives, they are also careful to note who is excluded from the issues geographically and individually, making a key goal of the book to “take a critical look at prevailing discourses of girlhood” and “move the discussion about girls and girlhood beyond polarizing discourses” (Aapola, et al., 2005, pp. 10-11). Drawing from the rhetoric of Ophelia, girl power and the Riot Grrrl movement, the authors challenge “the dual representations of today’s young women as either ‘vulnerable and at-risk’ or ‘strong and powerful’” and are critical of how the girl power/Ophelia paradigm favors white middle-class girls and individualizes social problems (Aapola, et al., 2005, p.11). To this end the authors urge that we move beyond these binaries and begin to think about and study a variety of girls within a variety of contexts.

Yet another different, yet also comprehensive study of girl culture is Driscoll’s (2002) *Girls: Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture and Cultural Theory*. Drawing from an array of philosophers and contemporary theorists such as Aristotle, Freud, Lacan, Jung, Deluze and Rousseau, Driscoll presents a Foucauldian genealogy of girlhood, meaning “a history that does not look for cause or points of origin so much as map how things and ideas are possible within a given context” (p.3). Focusing on girlhood in the West and Westernized countries and engaging theories from psychoanalysis, feminism,
history, cultural studies, and sociology she analyzes how girls are articulated in specific sites to “assemble a map of the emergence of feminine adolescence as a new twentieth century category” (p. 6). Particularly relevant to this study is Driscoll’s critique of beauty cultures and lifestyle industries as they apply to girls. According to Driscoll, discourses on the virtuous healthy body directed toward girls in the late twentieth century through sport, fitness, and other health cultures “form a continuum with the dominant body-type often thought responsible for trapping girls in subordination to normative fashion and body images” (p. 253). While healthy bodies are preferable to unhealthy ones, she cautions that the healthy athletic female body can also provide a normative ideal in relation to which some girls (with different bodies) are coded as inferior, or as manifesting insufficient attention and effort concerning their body.

Lastly, girl culture theorists Harris (2004a, 2004b) and McRobbie’s (2004) insightful critiques of the empowered girl-child are of particular interest to this project. In *Future Girl: Young Women in the Twenty-First Century*, Harris (2004b) argues that since the 1990s, a convergence of neoliberal and feminist discourses has emerged to radically reshape the categories of, and social ideas about, girls. According to Harris, the convergence of the needs of the new economy (i.e. deindustrialization, decentralization, as well as the expansion of global communications, technology, and service sectors) with some of the successes of second-wave feminism (e.g. improved job opportunities and education for women) in the developed Westernized countries has resulted in discourses that construct girls in terms of a “can-do” or “girl power” model and a seemingly opposite model based on girls “at risk”. In this context, both Harris and McRobbie suggest that the girl powered “can-do” girl celebrated for her desire, determination, and confidence to take
charge of her life, seize chances, and achieve her goals represents this new and idealized form of subjectivity. While the “can-do” girl subjectivity and the goals that accompany it might sound like a positive construction, both Harris and McRobbie caution against its optimism, noting how its emphasis on individual choice and personal responsibility serves to blame girls for their own supposed failures and obscures a broader and more systemic analysis of young women’s circumstances.

My study draws upon and aims to contribute to this literature in that I seek to disrupt popular discourses that take for granted the relationship between female adolescence and self-esteem, by showing how this relationship is produced and in turn, how it effects the ways in which we understand girlhood, the problems reported to be facing girls, and their solutions. To this extent, I suggest that some of the recent scholarship on contemporary girl culture participates in the production of knowledge about female adolescence, sport, physical activity, and self-esteem that I seek to analyze.

In sum, this dissertation attempts to trace the formation of girl-sport-knowledge and representations of the athletic female body across multiple contexts and domains. The aim in doing so is not simply to detail and expose the historicity and construction of this knowledge and representations, but to examine the role of sport in shaping the ways in which we understand female adolescence, the body, and the self, and more importantly what is at stake in this formation as it has come to represent “common knowledge” about the athletic female body.

Organizational Structure

In my effort to explore America’s recent celebration of female athleticism, and mutually contingent promotion of sport for girls within the broad and complex historical
conjuncture known as “late modern America”, my study is organized as follows: Chapter Two, “From Sex Roles to Self-esteem: Sport Science and Popular Debates Over the Athletic Female Body in the Early Days of Title IX”, explores the role of sport science research in helping to negotiate anxieties and debates about the validity of popular cultural myths concerning the physical and psychological dangers of female sport participation in what was popularly identified as “revolutionary” period for female sports in America. Specifically, I examine how sport science research concerning the limits of female athletic ability, gender role orientation, the female athlete apologetic, and the influence of female sport participation on self-esteem, gained cultural authority and relevance through their articulation with popular debates about the changing nature of women’s sports in America, and interrelated concerns about the traditional gender/sexual order. I conclude by considering how the popular dissemination of sport science research helped to re-configure the athletic female body as feminine, healthy, and empowered.

Chapter Three, “‘A Critique of Critiques’: Feminist Sport Studies, Title IX Backlash, and the New Athletic Ideal of Beauty,” examines the disparity between popular notions of the female athletic body as feminine, empowered, and healthy, backlash sentiments against female sport participation, and critiques of early sport science research on the female/sport relationship. In particular I consider the lasting influence and authority of early sport science research on re-configuring the athletic female body as illustrated by America’s newfound athletic ideal of beauty of the 1980s. At the same time I explore how, amidst this celebratory moment, the forces explicitly identified (Title IX and the second-wave feminist movement) and in part, implicitly responsible (sport science research), for helping to transform the female/sport relationship were also the subject of
intense backlash and scholarly critique. By deploying the methods of conjunctural analysis, I illustrate how, despite their apparent divergence, celebratory, backlash, and critical discourses concerning the athletic female body are articulated to postfeminist, neoliberal, and psychotherapeutic discourses. To this end, I argue that in seemingly contradictory ways, these discourses served to maintain suspicions about the athletic female body and marginalize female athleticism while at the same time maintaining female sport participation as healthy and desirable practice.

Chapter Four: “‘If You Let Me Play Sports’: Empowerment, Risk, and the Athletic Girl-Child in 1990s America,” examines the high profile and affective purchase of sport-inflected girl power over the last two decades. To this end, I trace the emergence of two mutually contingent and high-profile images, the female athlete, and her imagined successor, the athletic little girl. Specifically, I examine how these images and their articulation to the multi-stranded discourses of girl power and Ophelia inform popular knowledges concerning girls, social problems, and their solutions through a critical analysis of the HHS Girl Power! campaign and the NYAD campaign. This chapter concludes by considering how, despite its progressive appearance, the current advocacy of sport for girls, particularly as a means of addressing social problems, also functions in oppressive ways by facilitating a politics of blame associated with lifestyle politics and self-betterment strategies.

Chapter Five, “‘It’s a Skills Thing’: Biological Essentialism, and the Marginalized Female Athlete in the Post-Title IX Era”, the concluding chapter reviews the major arguments of the study and points to some further lines of inquiry that have emerged in the research and writing process. In particular this chapter considers how in the face of
America’s recent acceptance and advocacy of women’s and girl’s sport, definitions of the athletic female body as biologically inferior to men’s serve to sustain a masculine hegemony of sport. Specifically, I examine how this definition informs the recent surge in hostility toward Title IX as well as the commercial image of the female athlete as martyr as illustrated by the Nike “ATHLETE” campaign.

1 As Cahn (1994) notes in her history of women’s sport in the United States, the “mannish” female sexuality associated with vigorous sports participation was thought to produce unbridled heterosexual desire among White women of the middle classes in the early part of the twentieth century. It was only in the 1930s that mannishness came to connote failed heterosexuality and thus lesbianism, at which these women exited sports such as track and field in huge numbers, thus making way for middle- and working-class African American women who were subject to different norms.

2 For historical analyses of the female/sport relationship prior to the 1973 passing of Title IX see (Mangan, & Vertinsky, 2009; Verbrugge, 1988; Vertinsky, 1994).

3 As Rose (1990) illustrates, this period of psychology was characterized by the development of new languages of subjectivity, as well as techniques for inscribing, measuring, and acting upon the self. In his analysis of this period Rose shows how these techniques were developed in relationship to war, work, and the family.

4 This was made possible by the production of a variety of self-esteem scales and measures and their incorporation into psychological research. As Wells and Marwell (1976) illustrate in their extensive review of scholarly literature on self-esteem, this period was characterized by numerous debates over which measurement tools were the most effective or had the greatest degree of external and internal validity. As a result of these debates, several standardized scales and inventories for measuring self-esteem emerged. Some of the measurement tools established during this period include: The Twenty Statements, Sherwood’s Self-Concept Inventory, The Tennessee Self-Concept Scale, The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, and the Inferred Self-Concept Scale (Robinson & Shaver, 1973).

5 Following the adoption of Rosenberg’s (1965) work into education, the view that self-esteem was crucial to learning also came to lie at the center of much educational thinking. Indeed, education is perhaps the arena where self-esteem has found its most prominent place outside the human sciences. The ways in which self-esteem is articulated in educational theory and practice suggest several things about the definition of self-esteem. The emphasis on self-esteem as an entitlement and that high self-esteem can be taught, and needs to be because of a prevalence of low self-esteem among children, frequently leads to an emphasis on group identity as a source of individual self-esteem. Because accounts of the pervasiveness of low self-esteem in children are often grounded in theories of racism,
sexism, or classism, there is considerable emphasis within education to try to counter these forces. One exercise recommended in the popular book, *100 Ways to Enhance Self-Concept in the Classroom* (Canfield & Wells, 1976), encourages children to express love for themselves. In the view of the authors, “acceptance by ourselves of ourselves as we are, with all our failings, warts, occasional stupid behaviors, and faults, is the first step toward good mental health” (p. 15).

6 For example, self-esteem has become attached to a number of therapeutic movements such as co-dependency, adult children of alcoholics, and drug addiction and recovery.

7 For a comprehensive history of the emergence of the discipline see Massengale & Swanson (1997).

8 For a more detailed account of the global reach of neoliberalism and its local specificities see Harvey (2005).

9 Although national in scope, this economic crisis was perhaps felt most strongly by American males (especially young, white, and middle-class), who had experienced an unprecedented loss in earning power, and for those in urban areas caught between a declining manufacturing base, corporate downsizing, and the rise of a service economy. These conditions in conjunction with the mass radicalization of blacks and women in the 1960s and 1970s helped to fuel extreme economic and by extension, national anxieties that extended political hostility toward anyone or anything that was apparently contributing to the devastation of the state/empire (Reeves & Campbell, 1994).

10 For Harvey (2005), the ascendancy of neoliberal thought in the United States during the 1970s was achieved in part, through its co-optation of the liberal values of individual freedom. During the late 1960s, liberal ideas gained fresh traction as popular social movements leveraged them to demand greater personal freedoms, including freedom of speech, freedom of sexual expression, women’s liberation, civil rights for minorities, abolition of the draft, and so on. The desire for individual freedom that motivated these movements, Harvey suggests, was co-opted by neoliberal ideologues looking for ways to justify radical market liberalization and the destruction of “stifling” state regulations. The outcome was a divide within the left between traditional, class-based approaches to social justice (which proffered a direct critique of capitalism), and the new wave of “identity politics” (which is often celebrated within neoliberal discourse).

11 The early work of the Birmingham school on youth and youth culture was almost exclusively focused on boys and young men. For example work on youth culture such as Willis’ (1977) *Learning to Labour*, and Hebdige’s (1979) *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, was largely focused on young men and their ability to resist social expectations. Although girls were present in their analysis, they remained only peripheral figures and were represented as passive objects of male consumption.
As Carter (1984) argues, since girls have traditionally been presented with different options for cultural and social activity than boys, scholars wanting to analyze the specific nature of female youth culture, have repeatedly placed their attention on the commonalties which pattern the fabric of girls’ lives such as “advertising images, fashionable clothes, mass magazines, [and] popular fiction” (p. 188). Thus in contrast to many Scholars of male youth who demonstrated a distaste for mass culture by focusing predominantly on male youth subculture, feminist scholars have focused on girls’ interactions with mass-produced commodities and mainstream culture industries.

I use the terms agency and empowerment interchangeably, for a discussion of the similarities and differences between these terms see Riordan (2001).

For a critique of girl power discourse and its investment in feminist agency and liberal individualism see Cole (2000) and Mastronardi (1998).

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CHAPTER TWO
From Sex Roles to Self-Esteem: Sport Science and Popular Debates Over the Athletic Female Body in the Early Days of Title IX

According to popular media reports and scholarly histories, the 1970s witnessed a “revolution” in women’s and girls’ sport (Cahn, 1994; Guttmann, 1991). Defined over and against a history of nationally sanctioned limits upon female athletics, the so-called revolution was marked by numerous changes in America’s sporting landscape. Iconic marker’s of the revolution included among others: the passage of Title IX, dramatic increases in female sport participation, the legally sanctioned admission of girls into Little League Baseball, and Billie Jean King’s symbolic victory against sexism in the infamous “Battle of the Sexes” (Cahn, 1994; Guttmann, 1991). As outlined in a Time magazine cover story aptly titled “Comes the Revolution” (1978) these changes appeared to mark a new era of excitement and genuine possibility for female athletics:

On athletic fields and in parks and gymnasiums across the country, a new player has joined the grand game that is sporting competition, and she’s a girl. As the long summer begins, not only is she learning to hit a two-fisted backhand like Chris Evert’s and turn a back flip like Olga Korbut’s she is also learning to jam a hitter with a fastball. Season, by season, whether aged six, 60 or beyond, she is running, jumping, hitting, and throwing as U.S. women have never done before. She is trying everything from jogging to ice hockey, lacrosse and rugby, and in the process acquiring a new sense of self, and of self-confidence in her physical abilities and her potential. She is leading a revolution that is one of the most exciting and one of the most important in the history of sport (p. 54).
Indeed, seemingly in no other era had so many women participated in so many sports, at so many levels of organization, with such widespread societal acquiescence and approval.

Situated within the broader history of discrimination against female sport participation, the female sport revolution, and particularly its primary protagonist, the athletic female body, also provoked intense debate as they challenged the validity of popular cultural “myths” historically used to dissuade female sport participation. These myths, included among others, the idea that athletics are physically and psychologically harmful, would masculinize women’s and girls’ physical appearance, promote homosexuality, and the idea that females lack the physical stamina, aggressiveness, and competitive instinct necessary for sport competition. To a great extent, the primary source used to assess the validity of these arguments was an emerging body of sport science research examining the female/sport relationship. Although academic interest in this area was relatively new, it became highly influential outside its disciplinary boundaries as popular print media accounts routinely appropriated the expertise of the sport sciences to provide an objective and authoritative appraisal about the changing nature of female sports in America. Within these debates, the combatants were largely divided between two competing, yet mutually contingent, positions. On one hand, seeking to advance the revolution, female sport advocates generated a discourse that dismissed these myths as groundless and rooted in cultural biases advocating instead that female athleticism be reconfigured as a healthy and empowering practice. On the other hand, motivated by a desire to maintain the status quo, those opposed to the revolution generated a discourse that upheld these myths as valid arguing that due to innate, biological gender differences, sport participation was physically and psychologically risky for females.
In this chapter, I review early research conducted on the female/sport relationship as it appeared in scholarly and popular print media publications during the 1970s. I revisit this work in an attempt to understand how these theories were shaped and limited by popular debates and concerns over female athletics and in turn, shaped particular “truths” about the athletic female body. To explore these concerns, I begin by examining the historical context in which this work emerged and gained popularity. Situating early research on the female/sport relationship in relation to historical context, I then discuss how its primary assumptions and findings were related to popular debates about changing nature of female athletics in America during the 1970s. Lastly, I direct particular attention to the ways in which the popular dissemination of this work helped to redefine the female athletic body as feminine, healthy, and empowered, yet biologically handicapped and in turn, dismiss cultural anxieties about female sport participation.

A “Revolution” in Women’s Sports

It’s a heated match. The sides are racing toward the extremes. One team argues females will bust their bones, batter their psyches, or – the ball is going! Going! – wreck marriage prospects with bulging muscles. The other team chants “Chauvinism!” as they rush headlong into a conditioned line, bursting for gains in sport games long ago set aside by sane men. (Williams, 1975, p.10).

As several authors have observed, the female sport revolution was produced at the intersection of particular social, political, cultural, and economic changes of the late 1960s and 1970s (Cahn, 1994; Guttmann, 1991). During this time, the United States witnessed the rise of several social movements including the civil rights movement, anti-war protests, the gay liberation movement, and the second-wave of feminism. In their respective protests of racial, sexual, ethnic, and gender discrimination as well as public policy, these movements collectively helped to reveal numerous forms of inequality within American
culture and to redress a number of gross historical inequities (Davis, 1999; Taylor, Whittier, & Pelak, 2001). Beyond formal politics, the 1960s and 1970s were also marked by a cultural revolution, expressed most boldly by members of the counterculture and by activists in a “sexual revolution” that advocated practices of self-expression, self-help, and consciousness-raising as a means of political expression and self-discovery. Taken together, these currents of political reform and cultural innovations, namely the critique of sexism and traditional gender roles advanced by second-wave feminism, generated a renewed sensitivity to issues of fairness, rights, opportunity, and discrimination within American culture that extended to female athletics (Cahn, 1994; Guttmann, 1991).

The political tools and strategies employed by feminists to address various forms of gender discrimination provided the means from which to address the issue of gender inequity in sport. For instance, influenced by these strategies, numerous female sport activists began to use legal means to bring attention, and an end to, gender discriminatory practices in female athletics (Felshin, 1974a). Although few of these activists explicitly identified as feminist, or attempted to forge a connection with the larger, more organized, and politically orientated feminist movement, their efforts to remove structural and cultural constraints on women’s and girls’ participation in sport and sport-related activities were consistent with feminist efforts. For example, during the 1970s, several women, including baseball umpire Barbara Jo Rubin, motorcyclists Debbie Sheldon and Kerry Kleid, and sportswriters Elinor Kaine and Melissa Ludtke filed and won sex discrimination lawsuits thereby affording each of them an equal opportunity to participate in their respective sport or sports-related field (Felshin, 1974a). Likewise, the collective work of high-profile female athletes like tennis star Billie Jean King, impacted many areas of female athletics.
by helping to address issues of gender pay equity and by founding advocacy groups such as the Women’s Sports Foundation (WSF) that worked to advance female opportunities and challenge sexism. Also at this time, a new and more liberal generation of women physical educators began their push to eliminate the long-standing ban on female varsity competition by founding what would be the sole sponsor and chief advocate of women’s intercollegiate sports during the 1970s, the Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (AIAW) (Hult, 1994). Illustrating the intersection of feminist ideas and sport, the AIAW rejecting the masculine model of sport and taking a somewhat radical feminist approach, conceived of an alternative model of varsity sport that emphasized the needs of students and downplayed competition (Cahn, 1994; Gerber, 1974; Hult, 1994).

Clearly the most significant, visible, and explicit site of convergence between efforts made on behalf of feminists during the late 1960s and 1970s to formally address inequalities and sport was Title IX. Upon the urging of feminists working on the issue of sex discrimination in schools, Title IX was introduced in 1971 as an amendment to an education bill that increased federal funding for colleges. Passed in 1972, the law officially prohibited sex discrimination in all federally assisted educational programs or activities. Considering the fact that virtually all public schools and colleges received federal funds, Title IX was wide reaching, affecting numerous aspects of women’s education including, particular classes that did not admit women, policies on maternity leave, and scholastic athletics. Given the long-standing bias against female sport participation in the United States, the application of Title IX to athletics was particularly significant and played an integral role in helping to bring visibility to, and address these inequalities. Emphasizing the “revolutionary” impact of the law, popular media reports
routinely made mention of the gross gender inequities in school athletic budgets Title IX had helped to redress. For instance *Sports Illustrated* (Gilbert & Williamson, 1973b) noted that in 1969, a Syracuse N.Y. school board budgeted $90,000 for extracurricular sports for boys while only $200 was set-aside for girls. Citing the tremendous change in girls’ high school athletics as evidence of this effect, a *U.S. News and World Report* titled “Women’s Sports Boom – Too Slow for Some” (1978), noted that the number of girls active in sports at this level in the United States grew from 294,000 in 1971 to 1,645,000 in 1976, and that the number of girls’ teams grew from approximately 15,000 to 70,000. To this extent, Title IX became symbolically central to the female sport revolution as an important victory for women’s and girls’ sport, and in the broader battle against sexism.

In addition to Title IX, the interests of organized feminism and sport also intersected in the high-profile legal campaign to allow girls admission into Little League Baseball. During the 1970s, Little League came increasingly under fire for banning female participation and was sued several times in efforts to relinquish the discriminatory rule. The strongest and most high profile of these lawsuits was filed by the National Organization for Women on behalf of Maria Pepe who sued Little League Baseball in the New Jersey Division of Civil Rights (Felshin, 1974a; VanAuken & VanAuken 2001). The suit charged that Little League used public land to discriminate against females because its “girls are not eligible” regulation, denied “girls the advantages, facilities and privileges of a public accommodation by specifically excluding them from competition … solely because of their sex” (VanAuken & VanAuken 2001; p. 149). Based on this argument, and the precedent set for the equalization of sport opportunities within public accommodations established under Title IX, in November 1973 the New Jersey Civil
Rights Division ruled that the public league should let girls play. In the words of Sylvia Pressler, the judge ruling on the case, “The institution of Little League is as American as the hot dog and apple pie. There is no reason why that part of Americana should be withheld from girls” (Deford, 1974, p. 27). In sum, given the popular designation of baseball as “the American pastime”, like Title IX, the admission of girls into Little League, became an important symbolic marker of the female sport revolution and the coming arrival of national gender equity in sport.

The interests of organized feminism also helped propel the female sport revolution through the widely held feminist view that self-awareness and female physicality could be used as a tool of female empowerment. The idea of empowerment was central to the second-wave feminist movement. Early second-wave feminist theorists and activists, drawing from the ideas of other oppressed or excluded peoples promoted the idea “conscientization”, or consciousness-raising (Kramarae, 2000). Consciousness-raising is a “coming-to-awareness” that makes explicit, and is critical of the power relations that underlie and are supported by dominant ideologies, beliefs, or cultures; it is also a revaluation of the perspectives, knowledge, and contributions of members of a subordinate or “invisible” group. This notion of changing consciousness was crucial to the early feminist use of the term empowerment because it called for women to become aware their own position and implication in structures and relations of power. A presumed effect and extension of women’s changed consciousness was the undertaking of actions informed by critical thinking and revisioning. In other words, empowerment was a process aimed at creating the conditions for the self-determination of a person or group as a means of mobilizing people to action. To this end, many feminist discussions of women’s
empowerment revolved around the redefinition of power, focusing on changing how power is exercised as well as changing power relations themselves. As such, many feminist theorists and activists sought to reclaim the term by distinguishing “power over” understood as domination, from “power to,” conceived as sense of internal strength, confidence, and hence the ability to determine the course of one’s life and actively participate in society and culture (Kramarae, 2000).

Although the specific ideologies of the various groups that made up the women’s movement were somewhat diverse, they shared a common opposition to sexism as a system of institutionalized beliefs and practices that decree men as superior and women as inferior. Thus, one of the strongest attacks of the women’s movement was directed against the stereotype of women as weak, passive, unable, and decorative “sex objects” (Davis, 1999; Felshin, 1974a). In the view of many feminists, this stereotype, especially the sexist socialization patterns associated with it, were at the root of women’s oppression: teaching them to become weak, disempowered, and subject to male control. To this extent, many feminists believed that overcoming oppression hinged on women’s ability to eschew the trappings of femininity and gain control over their own bodies. Empowerment and its relationship to the body in this case were understood in “terms of repressive power, a self-authorial-self contained within the body (that is, the liberal individual), and liberation aimed at throwing off repression in the name of self-sufficiency and will” (Cole, 2000b, p. 440). Following this view, many feminist efforts including reproductive rights campaigns, anti-rape organizations, women’s health clinics, women’s self-defense classes, lesbian feminist activism, and self-help groups seeking to end female oppression encouraged women to embrace a new female personality – one that was self-sufficient, active, and
competent – and thus entirely different from the current sexist socialization patterns (Davis, 1999).  

Sharing this feminist agenda, female sport activists advocated female sport participation because they considered it as a training ground for self-awareness, assertiveness, and the defiance of sex-role restrictions. For example, summarizing this viewpoint, female sport advocate Leanne Schreiber, former editor of womenSports magazine explained,

> Women have been systematically encouraged to divorce their identity from their bodies and in so doing, they have been divorced from their primary sense of power and their primary source of power … the physical discrepancies between men and women is the main source of all later forms of discrimination – economic, political, emotional, sexual, – it’s going root and reestablishing a sense of control that is ultimately going to be the most potent means of women claiming a sense of their power (quoted in Rohrbaugh, 1979, p. 42).

Helping to advance the female sport revolution, the feminist view of sport as an empowering activity also gained popular appeal and was constituted as a popular discourse through a number of popular print media reports. For example, numerous publications offered first-hand accounts of female athletes testifying to the self-empowering benefits of sport and its benefits as a pedagogical tool that taught women and girls to be aggressive, confident, and have a strong sense of identity. As marathon swimmer Diana Nyad in an interview which appeared in Vogue noted, “I truly believe that through sweat and strain come the stamina and endurance, not only bodily but mentally that build confidence” (Sabo, 1976, p. 74). Offering a powerful counter-argument to claims about the
masculinizing effects of sport participation on the female psyche, the feminist reconfiguration of sport as a “healthy” practice suggested that psychological masculinization was actually a good thing because it promoted a sense of body consciousness that extended to other areas of women’s and girls’ lives (Morrison, 1993).

The challenges to America’s traditional sporting order brought about by the female sporting revolution also helped bring into sharp relief the nation’s history of discrimination against female athletes. Constituted through a number of print media reports, this history was routinely made visible via a critical discourse about the contradictions underscoring America’s claims to sport as healthy and desirable practice for developing sound minds, bodies, and citizens, and the denial of this practice to the female half of its population (Sabo, 1976; Williams, 1975). ¹⁰ Taken together, these reports highlighted the ways in which cultural assumptions about the physical and psychological risks of female sport participation were rooted in cultural biases and had created a viscous circle of discrimination. One particularly influential example was Sports Illustrated’s groundbreaking three-part series published in 1973 titled “Women are Getting a Raw Deal: Sport is Unfair to Women”. Exposing the egregious inequalities and anxieties framing female sport participation in the United States, the series opened with the following statement:

There may be worse (more socially serious) forms of prejudice in the United States, but there is no sharper example of discrimination today than that which operates against girls and women who take part in competitive sports, wish to take part, or might wish to if society did not scorn such endeavors. No matter what her age, education, race, talent, residence or riches, the female’s right to play is severely
restricted. The funds, facilities, coaching, rewards and honors allotted women are
grossly inferior to those granted men. In many places absolutely no support is
given to women’s athletics, and females are barred by law, regulation, tradition or
the hostility of males from sharing athletic resources and pleasures. A female who
persists in her athletic interests, despite the handicaps and discouragements, is not
likely to be congratulated on her sporting desire or grit. She is more apt to be
subjected to social and psychological pressures, the effect of which is to cast doubt
on her morals, sanity and womanhood (Gilbert & Williamson, 1973b, p. 88).
Echoing these sentiments, a 1974 report addressing the risks of female sport
competition in Harper’s Bazaar notes,

Most girls are discouraged from taking part in all but the daintiest forms of athletic
competition not because strange hormones make them unable to throw a ball
correctly, or because any innate frivolity makes them incapable of self-discipline,
or because diving for line drives might knock their reproductive faculties and
sexual preferences askew. What does make a woman’s sex a liability to her game
is society’s willingness to believe these and other, even sillier, arguments against
participation by females, particularly after they have reached puberty. And this
prejudice has tended to be self-perpetuating. Mothers – and fathers – brought up to
think athletics are unsafe and untoward for women are apt to rear their daughters –
and sons – to believe the same thing (Rutan, 1976, p. 75).

Aligning with popular feminist critiques, these reports also asserted that America’s cultural
biases against female sport participation were an element in, and extension of an
oppressive ideology of femininity and broader system of gender inequality. For example,
directing particular attention to the problem of female attrition from sport during adolescence, clergyman/researcher Rev. Dr. Thomas Boslooper in an interview with the *New York Times* noted,

> In early childhood, we admire the spirit and activity of little girls. We encourage them to run and to compete with the boys, who are their equals until puberty. Then suddenly, at different ages for different women, we say, ‘When are you going to grow up and be a lady?’ We turn them off, deprive them of an important outlet (quoted in Lipsyte, 1969, p. S2, 1).

Echoing Dr. Boslooper’s comments, popular reports also suggested that as a result of athletic discrimination, adolescent girls, and by extension, adult women had also been denied an important life experience and as such, were at a disadvantage. As Mary Dubrow (1975) writing for *Harpers Bazaar* noted to this effect,

> The double standard regarding competition – it’s good for boys and bad for girls – begins with the games children play. If a girl is good at them, she’s a tomboy; if a boy excels, he’s all boy. This stereotype makes it difficult for girls to learn the “rules of the game”, which are valuable throughout life: how to use teamwork, think and act quickly, devise strategies, handle frustration, anger, losing and winning…These are assets in life as necessary in the boardroom as on the playing field. …If girls don’t learn to compete with confidence on the basketball course and Little League fields, how can they succeed in the major leagues – the ultra-competitive business world? (p. 150).

Contributing to the sense of revolutionary change in female athletics during the 1970s these discourses issued a powerful challenge to popular myths about the physical and
psychological dangers of female sport participation, suggesting that it taught valuable life skills.

Set against the female sport revolution, the disappointing performances of the 1972 and 1976 U.S. women’s summer Olympic teams also served to highlight America’s history of gender discrimination in sport. Countering the popular characterization of American female athletes as victims in an “unfair” contest against the corrupt Soviet sports machine, several reports suggested that the relatively poor performance of U.S. women was the product of an injustice of a different kind – nationally sanctioned prejudice against female athletics. As author Carol McCall (1976) noted in an article in Ms.,

If there’s any one glaring factor that explains why our women did poorly as a group in the Olympics it’s this. The femininity game is rigged to produce losers … An American woman in international battle faces more than her competition; she has to wage war on the psychological pressures, and usually the second-class training of a society that suspects the female athlete and is apathetic in its support of the amateur athlete, male or female… Our society has found it more profitable and safer to keep women physically unfit, to maintain the ‘fairer and weaker sex’ distinction, so that they may remain vessels of consumption and ornaments (p. 30).

In a similar report, commenting on the attention brought to women’s athletics in conjunction with the Olympics during the 1970s, Eva Auchincloss, director of the Women’s Sport Foundation, quoted in the New York Times suggested that “the effects were at once positive and negative. Watching our girls compete and sometimes lose made the public realize that we haven’t provided the necessary training and encouragement to make them equal contenders” (quoted in Roach, 1976. p. 14). Taken together, these
reports issued a profound critique of the U.S. sport system, implying that the inequities and cultural pressures were not only a domestic problem but were also responsible for an international embarrassment.

As an element in, and extension of the female sport revolution, the late 1960s and 1970s also saw the elimination many obstacles restricting female participation in physical fitness and exercise. As several scholars have noted, the 1970s were marked by an interrelated rise in cultural concerns for physical fitness and growth in the health and fitness industry otherwise known as the “fitness boom” (Eisenman & Barnett, 1979; Howell & Ingham, 2001; Ingham, 1985). Due in part to state interest in the health of citizens in an urbanized, industrialized society where sedentary lifestyles were the norm, the health and fitness of Americans became the focus of medical professionals and numerous government programs (Eisenman & Barnett, 1979). In this context, medical professionals began to advocate personal responsibility for one’s health as numerous studies revealed that obesity, high cholesterol, and stress were risk factors for many diseases. Moreover, in light of the nation’s economic crisis, preventive health programs, which included exercise, appealed to federal lawmakers as an easy solution to reduce federal health costs (Eisenman & Barnett, 1979). To this end, in 1976, Congress enacted the National Consumer Health Information and Health Promotion Act, which, among other things, allowed for funds to create an office within the Department of Health, Education, and Health Promotion to implement health maintenance programs. The surgeon general’s 1979 report, *Healthy People*, which encouraged Americans to exercise as a way to cut federal health expenditures, was the culmination of a decade of exercise promotion that placed the burden of good health on the individual.
As awareness of fitness grew, the role of exercise in American lives expanded beyond health concerns and encompassed recreational pastimes. Jogging was arguably the most prominent fitness trend of the 1970s. Most of those initially attracted to jogging in the first half of the decade took it up for reasons of health. Research by exercise physiologists and physicians, most notably Kenneth Cooper, had begun to point to the importance of cardiovascular training for disease prevention and weight maintenance. Touted as a natural, inexpensive, go-anywhere form of exercise, jogging was popular almost instantly. By 1971, Cooper’s (1968) *Aerobics*, which outlined a basic jogging plan, had sold two million copies. Road races, especially marathons, had increased in number of events and participants. The New York Marathon, for example, expanded from almost three hundred participants in 1972 to more than eleven thousand competitors in 1979 (Eisenman & Barnett, 1979). A number of factors differentiated jogging, or “running” as it came to be called from other kinds of exercise that Americans had practiced prior to the 1970s. In this context, taking up jogging did not mean simply beginning a new sport; because of its frequency (three times a week on average), starting a jogging program meant making a lifestyle change. Moreover, jogging was radically different from most sports because success was not defined in terms of wins and losses but rather on individual achievements.

At the same time that the jogging movement was expanding, a number of individuals were working to combine principles of cardiovascular training with dance routines to create new form of exercise known as “aerobics” (Eisenman & Barnett, 1979). The most well known of this group of aerobics pioneers includes Judi Sheppard Missett, founder of Jazzercise, and Jacki Sorensen, founder of Aerobic Dancing and one of the first
fitness instructors to publish a book of aerobics routines. Their work, and that of other early practitioners over the course of the 1970s, created a new form of exercise, increased awareness of physical fitness, and paved the way for aerobics to become one of the primary fitness activities of the following decade.

As part of the fitness boom, the 1970s also saw the growing popularity of bodybuilding. According to popular narratives, this change is largely attributed to the highly successful 1974 book, and 1977 film documentary *Pumping Iron*. Featuring a group of bodybuilders preparing for the Mr. Olympia and Mr. Universe competitions, and most notably a young Arnold Schwarzenegger, the book and later the film created awareness of what had previously been a little-known subculture and made visible-musculature a desired goal of many men as well as women (Eisenman & Barnett, 1979).

Aligning with the late 1960s and 1970s promotion of self-help and self-expression, the fitness boom’s emphasis on exercise as a practice of physical freedom, bodily pleasure, and leisure, fitness became a full-fledged lifestyle as Americans gave new meaning to “working out”. While some saw it as a test of self-determination, others perceived exercise as an act of environmental symbiosis, political protest, or a cure for stress or other mental health issues. With new forms of exercise available, the physical appearance of one’s body became more important: visible musculature and thinness combined to create a new “fit” aesthetic. Americans found several reasons for exercise beyond the improvement of their health. Amid difficult economic times, running functioned as a way to exert some small measure of authority in one of the few areas where individuals still maintained a sense of control – their own bodies. Some mental health professionals even advocated running as a treatment for depression, alcoholism, or schizophrenia.
Reverberating with feminist critiques of traditional femininity and desires for a more competent and confident, or “empowered” definition of femininity, new approaches to physical fitness, like sport, were particularly encouraging for women as it provided an alternative to the more sedentary and decorative 1960s ideal of heterosexual femininity – the physically fit woman. Furthermore, as part of the ever expanding U.S. consumer economy of the 1970s, sport and recreational activities became tied to a multibillion dollar private fitness industry that together with consumer interest, sparked a proliferation of clubs, television shows, books, records and fashions about exercise, diet, and nutrition. As a newly emerging segment of this market, this change was particularly significant for women as the fitness industry began to market more explicitly toward female consumers.

To this extent, the late 1960s and 1970s, witnessed a tremendous growth of female participants in several fitness-related activities such as weight training, running, swimming, and cycling, as well as the development of numerous community, school, and private fitness clubs/programs designed to attract and meet women’s and girls’ interest in fitness (Burton-Nelson, 1991; Davies, 1994; Eisenman & Barnett, 1979; Lenskyj, 1987).

As an element in, and extension of, the social, political, cultural, and economic changes of the late 1960s and 1970s, the female sport revolution was also produced at the intersection of several crises engendered by these transformations. For instance, these changing historical conditions, particularly the demands for inclusion by historically marginalized groups (women, people of color, gays and lesbians) mobilized via social protest movements were profoundly threatening to America’s democratic fantasies as they served to make visible nationally sanctioned forms of oppression and inequality. And, as several scholars have noted, the specific challenges against sexism and gender hierarchies
advanced by feminism, simultaneously engendered a crisis of masculinity as they served more specifically to make visible white, heterosexual, upper-and middle-class male privilege and disrupt established gender relations of power (Cole, 2002; Gibson, 1994; Jeffords, 1994). Furthermore, the positive changes fostered by social protest movements in combination with the experimental and permissive approach to sexuality advanced by the counterculture movement and sexual revolution, animated an interrelated set of anxieties about what was perceived to be a disintegration America’s common culture. Also threatening was the nation’s worsening economic situation which signaled to many an end to the promise of technological progress, social reform, high employment rates, rising wages, and the promise of ever increasing consumer options associated with the postwar American Dream (Gibson, 1994; Ingham, 1985; Reeves & Campbell, 1994). As a result, this moment was felt by many Americans as what Gibson (1994) identified as “a massive disjunction in American culture, a crisis of self-image” (p. 10).

Animated by these crises and related desires to maintain and protect the “American way of life”, the 1970s witnessed the rise of several counter-movements and a conservative backlash politics. Seeking to arrest and reverse the modest gains being made for and by historically marginalized groups and restore the traditional gender/sexual order, this backlash was largely centered around claims of imperiled white male privilege and a mutually contingent defense of traditional gender roles, motherhood, and the traditional family. For example, the campaign against the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), advocated traditional gender roles suggesting that equal rights would actually be a step down for women because they already had special privileges, such as the right not to take a job. A strong resistance to changes in traditional gender arrangements were even
expressed by those in favor of the ERA; although just over 50% of the public supported the ERA, polls also showed that most of these supporters continued to hold conservative ideas about gender roles. Similarly, one of the central tenants of the anti-abortion movement, was that abortion set selfish-individualism above family responsibility and challenged women’s traditional conception of themselves as nurturing caretakers. At the same time, white (largely male) reactions to expanded black economic opportunities in the face of a contracting economy was often harsh inciting claims of reverse discrimination and even violence (Gibson, 1994; Kimmel, 1997).

Given the privileged position of sport as a site for the production and preservation of America’s liberal promises, power relations between the sexes, and the naturalization of gender difference, the challenges presented by the female sport revolution facilitated an interrelated set of anxieties about the construction and meaning of gender and national identity. For example, popular critiques of the U.S. sport system animated by the feminist-influenced work of female sport advocates and recent failings of female athletes in high-profile international competitions, were particularly threatening as they served to expose a history of nationally sanctioned discrimination in the seemingly conflict-free space of sport. Like the challenges against sexism and gender hierarchies advanced by the feminist movement, the growing female presence in sport also engendered a crisis of masculinity as it threatened to colonize one of the few primarily male spaces used to symbolically create and preserve a masculine ideology. At the same time, by challenging the myth of female inferiority and the ideology of masculinity rooted in physical strength and athletic skill, the figure of the physically strong, athletic woman, was also profoundly disturbing to construction and meaning of gender difference. That is to say, female involvement in sport
begged the question: “if a woman can press 300 pounds, or play football, or participate in
the lewd sexual displays that accompany rugby, what does it mean to be a ‘man’?” (Birrell & Theberge, 1994, p. 342).

Reverberating with popular opposition to the seemingly threatening changes of the late 1960s and 1970s, the female sport revolution also animated extreme opposition and was subject to vicious and often misogynist attack. Indeed, as several scholars have noted, struggles over women’s involvement in sport have historically occurred at precisely those times and places when male egos feel most threatened by the social changes demanded by gender equality (Birrell, 1987b; Messner, 1988; Peiss, 1986). Given the perception of the female sport revolution as a threat to gender relations of power, popular symptoms of this resistance included mutually contingent efforts to preserve the sanctity of sport as a male preserve and sustain popular cultural myths historically used to limit female athletics. Summarizing the nature of this resistance Gilbert and Williamson (1973a) note, There are those who defend the present system in which girls and women participating in sports receive limited funds, facilities, coaching rewards and encouragement. The arguments for maintaining the status quo are that 1) athletics are physically bad for women; competition may masculinize their appearance and affect their sexual behavior; 2) women do not play sports well enough to deserve athletic equality; and 3) girls are not really interested in sports (p. 45).

Arguably the most visible and intense site of this conflict was the highly organized and publicized opposition to Title IX and the decision to admit girls into Little League Baseball (Davis, 1999). Although Title IX covered educational institutions in a very broad way, its provisions for the equalization of sport opportunities engendered extreme and
organized resistance as well as extraordinary claims about the pending disasters that would befall society if the legislative mandates were implemented. The NCAA, for instance, insisted that due to budget cuts, scholarship reductions, and the loss of other resources, Title IX would spell the doom of men’s intercollegiate athletics and lobbied for an amendment that specifically exempted athletic departments from Title IX requirements (Davis, 1999; Hult, 1994). Mobilized within the popular media, backlash against Title IX was also routinely made visible through emotionally laden narratives suggesting the law would place male sports in jeopardy. For example, in the *Sports Illustrated* series titled “Sport is Unfair to Women” Ron Wied, a Wisconsin high school coach noted,

> There is cause for concern among our male coaching staff over the pressure for girls’ sports. Facilities are a problem. We’ve got a boys’ gym and a girls’ gym. Before we could use the girls’ gym for wrestling and B team basketball a lot more than we can now. I think girls have the right to participate but to a lesser degree than boys. If they go too far with the competitive stuff, they lose their femininity (quoted in Gilbert & Williamson, 1973b; p. 94).

Similar to anti-Title IX arguments, girls admission into Little League was strongly opposed on the grounds that it threatened the male preserve of sport; one of the primary arguments made in defense of Little League’s “boys only” rule was that its federal charter, granted by the U.S. Congress in 1964, specifically charged the organization with administering a program for the betterment of boys. In opposition to the ruling, thousands of teams also suspended play, outraged supporters protested and signed petitions, and state legislators proposed two state bills appealing for stays or postponements. In sum, although these backlash strategies implicitly highlighted issues of discrimination in American sport by
emphasizing the gross disparities in U.S. athletic resources, they also served to circumvent the issue by framing efforts to address these issues as threat to male athletics.

Stimulated to a large extent by the passing of Title IX and the decision to allow girls admission into Little League, resistance to the changes brought by the female sport revolution were also made visible via debates about the appropriateness female participation in coed and/or contact athletic competition. Veiled in a language of compassion and concern for the safety of America’s girls, this resistance was underscored by the assertion that girls should be limited from participating in coed and contact sports because they were physically dangerous and could be psychologically dangerous to both sexes. In defense of these claims, Little League physicians and psychologists maintained that girls who got hit with a ball in the chest would suffer from breast cancer and that sex mixing early in life was dangerous for mental health and socialization because it could lead to “role blurring” (Deford, 1974). Similarly, coed physical education and sport drew the fire of sexual conservatives who expressed concern about the physical danger of girls and boys playing “contact” sports together and about the possible psychological damage inflicted upon the male ego in the event that a girl beat a boy in competition (Lenskyj, 1987).

Popular symptoms of the ideological contest over sport as a gendered cultural space also included a heightened preoccupation over the presumed tension between femininity and athleticism. As Sage and Loudermilk (1979) put it:

One of the oldest and persistent folk myths, and one of the main deterrents to female sports participation, has been the notion that vigorous physical activity tends to masculinize girls and women. Women of physical competence have been
stigmatized as masculine by a tradition that taught that women who have excellent physical competence must be unfeminine. The stereotype of the female athlete as aggressive, frustrated, and unfeminine is well described. … Thus, consciously or unconsciously, athletic achievement has been equated with loss of femininity (p. 89).

This tension, constituted to a large extent by the popular media, was revealed in alarming titles such as, “Why do Women Want to be Jocks?” (Koslow, 1975), “It was as if all Girls in Phys. Ed. … Were Less Than a she” (Harris, 1975), “An Unfeminine Stigma” (Scannell & Barnes, 1974), and “Competition vs. Femininity” (Dubrow, 1975). Tacitly reinforcing the idea that the role of female and sport participant were incompatible, popular articles repeatedly drew attention to female athletes’ attempts to negotiate other’s perceptions as well as their own fears about the masculinizing effects of sport participation. For example, offering a first-hand account of one athlete’s struggle with role conflict, a 1979 article in Psychology Today related the story of a 27-year-old married, long-distance runner, Vicki Foltz. When asked in an interview whether she had any “feminine hang-ups” about running, Foltz responded:

Yes, I have lots of hang-ups. You wouldn’t believe it. I always worry about looking nice in a race. I worry about my calf muscles getting big. But mostly I worry about my hair … I suppose that because so many people have this idea that women athletes look masculine, a lot of us try, subconsciously maybe, to look as feminine as possible in a race. There’s always lots of hair ribbons in the races! (quoted in Rohrbaugh, 1979, p. 30).
In a 1973 article, *Sports Illustrated* offered a similar account relating one athlete’s attempt to resolve or reduce the stigma attached to sport involvement. Emphasizing the assumed psychological strain that results from conflicting role expectations, an anonymous high school gymnast was quoted as saying, “Girls in sports are more careful about how they look. We wear skirts more than other girls because we are worried about being feminine” (Gilbert & Williamson, 1973b, p. 97). The oppositional strategy of arousing suspicions about the femininity of female athletes was also linked to the even darker insinuation that the female athletes’ alleged “mannishness” was a sign of homosexuality (Boutilier & SanGiovanni, 1983; Lenskyj, 1987). For example, *Ms.* magazine’s decision to put two female muscular, short-haired cyclists on its September 1974 cover was highly criticized on the grounds that the women appeared “too masculine”, and thus lesbian; the editors even heard the issue referred to as “dykes on bikes” (Kaplan, 1979).

During the 1970s, the recurring image of sport as a battleground in the “war between the sexes” indicated that women’s athletic demands for equality and female athleticism signaled a profound challenge to traditional gender relations that were part of a deeper societal rift over the distribution of power, the definition of masculinity and femininity, and national identity. This historical moment was also marked by a proliferation of scientific research focused primarily on rationally codifying the relationship of the female body to sport and exercise. Scientific interest in the female/sport relationship emerged not out of some isolated or merely coincidental discovery by scientists; but intensified in tandem with the female sport revolution and related cultural concerns about the validity of women’s sport, the femininity of female athletes, and the alleged dangers of female sport participation. A discussion of the central themes and
findings of this work as well as its articulation to sport-related and broader cultural changes and crises during the 1970s is the focus of the next section.

**Early Sport Science Research on the Female/Sport Relationship**

Despite the development of the sport sciences during the 1960s, significant interest in an analysis of the female/sport relationship did not begin until the early 1970s. One factor contributing to the slower more tentative approach to the study of the female/sport relationship within the sport sciences was the relative scarcity of women scholars. As Oglesby and Shelton (1992) note in their analysis of the impact of the women’s movement on exercise and sport science, up until the mid-1970s, the discipline was almost entirely sex-segregated and extremely sex-biased. For instance, women in the field were seen as potential outcasts to traditional scholarship, the approach to female athletics was built on a distinctly different philosophy from that of men, and research in the areas of biomechanics and physiology almost never used female subjects. Moreover, given the historical limitations and controversy surrounding female sport involvement, the demand for research on female athletes and the pool of female sports participants from which samples might have been drawn, was extremely limited (Gerber, 1974).

Although the shift in disciplinary focus within the sport sciences to the study of the female/sport relationship may have eventually proceeded, as Oglesby and Shelton illustrate, this shift was accelerated by the mutually contingent changes and tensions brought by the female sport revolution and feminist influences within education. For example, by opening up opportunities to women in education and sport, Title IX not only helped both to bring more women into the field but also to legitimate women’s sport as an area worthy of study. As was the case in other scholarly disciplines, many women who
entered the field of exercise and sport science also helped to change it by adopting feminist methodologies and bringing women and women’s issues into the field of inquiry (Oglesby & Shelton, 1992). The growing academic interest in the study of the female/sport relationship during the 1970s was evidenced by the development of several female/sport focused conferences, the first mention of sport in women’s studies journals, the appearance of the first journal issue devoted entirely to women and sport, and the development of several new research traditions (Birrell, 1987a). Situated within a context marked by broader cultural and sport-specific concerns about gender boundaries, deviance, and equality, this emerging body of research was largely centered on an empirical investigation of the gender-related consequences and determinants of female sport participation.16 Specifically, the most popular and influential research topics, which I briefly review below, were those concerned with perceptions of female athletes, sex role conflict, personality traits, psychological gender roles, socialization, body composition, and training effects.

**Gender Role Conflict in Sport and Exercise**

The feminist critique of traditional sex roles made popular via the women’s movement during the late 1960s and 1970s was also the focus of a burgeoning field of feminist research. To a great extent, this early work empirically confirmed feminist views about Americans’ subscription to a hierarchical, traditional, bi-polar view of masculinity and femininity. For example, the results of sex role research performed during this time suggested that males were perceived as independent, active, competitive, adventurous, self-confident, ambitious, and rough, while females were perceived as dependent, passive, noncompetitive, timid, gentle, and insecure (Bem, 1974; Rosenkrantz, Vogel, Bee,
Broverman, & Broverman, 1968). Research studies on the perception of sex roles also revealed that both sexes, including children as young as 5 or 6, regularly associated masculinity with words bearing positive connotations such as brave, logical, confident, strong, and trustworthy, but associated femininity with negatively charged terms such as petty, weak, coy, frivolous, vain, etc. (Lockheed & Hall, 1976).

Proceeding from studies of sex role perception as well as popular anxieties about female sport participation, researchers in the sport sciences dedicated a considerable amount of attention to the study of the social perception of female athletes (Boutilier & SanGiovanni, 1983). In general, the results of this work conducted throughout the 1970s, indicated that reactions to female sport participation were varied and sport dependent. Validating broader cultural sentiments and earlier research in this area, researchers found that some sports were perceived as less offensive to standards of approved female behavior than others. Generally, sports defined as “feminine” – those emphasizing aesthetic qualities or individual in nature such as gymnastics, swimming, and tennis – were found to be more socially acceptable, while sports defined as “masculine” – team sports and sports which were more directly competitive, such as basketball, hockey, and softball – were judged to be less acceptable (Kingsley, Foster, & Siebert, 1977; Malumph, 1968; Snyder, Kilvin, & Spreitzer, 1977). Another important area of this work was that which investigated how female athletes were perceived in relation to the image of the ideal or typical woman. Confirming popular conceptions of the athletic female body as an anomaly, the findings of this work revealed that societal pictures of the ideal female and the female athlete did indeed differ considerably (Hall, 1972). For example, in her survey of undergraduate students’ perception of female athletes, Griffin (1973) found that female
athletes and female professors were ranked furthest from undergraduates’ image of an ideal woman; closer to the ideal were “girlfriend” and “mother”.

Resonating with sport science work investigating role perceptions as well as cultural configurations of the role of female and athlete as incompatible, scholars interested in understanding the female/sport relationship hypothesized that women who became involved in sport might experience conflicting role expectations. As proposed by Harris (1971), “role conflict theory” was based on the assumption that female athletes may perceive and/or experience an interpersonal and psychological strain as a result of the negative sanctions applied to women and girls who cross the sex-segregated sport boundary. A popular area of research throughout the 1970s, studies applying role conflict theory by Harris (1977) and others (Kennicke, 1972; Tyler, 1973) were able to empirically verify that female athletes saw their athletic role as separate from and to some degree inconsistent with their general social self. For example, when comparing an athlete’s perception of her social self with her competitive self, Harris (1977) found that the competitive self was less change orientated, deferent, abased, and feminine, and emphasized achievement, dominance, aggression, and endurance.

Research on the degree of role conflict experienced by female athletes, however, produced conflicting findings. Although this work indicated that female athletes did indeed experience a conflict between the roles of women and athlete, this conflict was not found to reach the level anticipated by investigators. For instance, a study of role conflict among female varsity college athletes from various sports and different colleges and universities found that while female athletes believed role conflict was a problem, they personally had experienced very little of it (Sage & Loudermilk, 1979). Although the
amount of role conflict was not found to be as high as expected, researchers did find that women in less socially approved sports and in higher levels of competition, experienced greater role conflict than those participating in socially sanctioned and less competitive sports (Sage & Loudermilk, 1979).

In their attempt to interpret these findings, scholars offered several possible explanations. Despite the seeming ambiguity of female athletes about their gender role, sport science researchers, drawing on notions of sport as a practice of empowerment, speculated that in some cases, women’s and girls’ participation in sport might actually help them to resolve role conflict by giving them a sense of confidence, competency, and self-determination (Boutilier & SanGiovanni, 1983). The preliminary findings of research in this area supported this contention (Snyder et al., 1977; Sullivan, 1973). For example, in her research on self-concept Sullivan (1973), found that while female athletes’ self-concepts did not measure up to their ideal selves, athletes generally viewed themselves more favorably than did non-athletes. With respect to the overall level of reported role conflict, scholars speculated that women who either perceived or experienced significant levels of role conflict, withdrew from sport participation before college and were not likely to be found in samples of female college athletes. Based on earlier studies examining the social perception of female sport participation (Malumphy, 1968; Metheny, 1965) scholars also hypothesized that women who played less socially acceptable sports were in fact, treated negatively by those who felt that only certain sports were acceptable. In sum, despite little empirical support to suggest that role conflict was a significant obstacle affecting female athletes, scholarly interpretations of this work maintained that it was a
persistent problem: reflective of the broader issue of sexism within American sport, and by extension as an important factor in limiting female sport participation.

Proceeding from popular conceptions and scholarly interpretations of role conflict as a significant issue framing female athletics, researchers in the sport sciences also dedicated a considerable amount of attention to theorizing about how female athletes could resolve or reduce the dissonance they experienced. Some of the common strategies identified by scholars as a way for female athletes to resolve role conflict included among others: 1) dropping out of sports altogether; 2) adopting an athletic role as their social role; 3) avoiding social situations that demand feminine behavior; and 4) managing to be both athletic and feminine according to demands of different social situations (Boutilier & SanGiovanni, 1983). Additionally several researchers, most notably Del Ray (1977, 1978) and Felshin (1974a, 1974b) reasoned that one important way for women athletes to resolve their conflict was by apologizing for their sport involvement. According to Felshin (1974a),

The apologetic suggests that the woman athlete: can appear feminine, which is why so many descriptions of women’s sports include reference to the attractiveness and physical attributes of the athletes; is feminine, which has to do with sexual normality and attractiveness as well as so-called lady-like behavior; and wants to be feminine, which means that social roles are valued more than sport roles, and life goals include marriage and motherhood rather than being a champion athlete (p. 204).

Thus, the apologetic, as the name implied, suggested that due to societal pressures, female athletes approach their involvement in sport and physical activity with a degree of shame.
The behavior was also thought to have many manifestations, all of which were accommodations to popular perceptions of female athletes as gender and sexual deviants including: 1) an overemphasis on feminine accouterments such as jewelry, ribbons, and makeup; 2) the affirmation of feminine values such as beauty, grace, and muscle tone as justifications for playing sports; 3) the denial of participation in sport as a serious competitive endeavor; and 4) the adoption of a more traditional, conservative view of women’s role in society (Boutilier & SanGiovanni, 1983). By implying that women in sport can look feminine, are feminine, and want to be feminine, scholars reasoned that apologetics served as an effective defense mechanism against social criticism, reassuring both female sport participants as well as others that sport did not invalidate their femininity.

**Personality and Gender Roles of Female Sports Participants**

In their efforts to address popular questions about the alleged positive and negative effects of female sport participation, sport science scholars also turned their attention to an examination of the gender-related personality traits or behavioral patterns of female athletes. Most of this work, conducted throughout the 1970s, relied heavily upon two gender role measures: 1) the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI) developed by Bem (1974), and to a lesser extent, 2) the Personality Attributes Questionnaire (PAQ) developed by Helmreich and Spence (1977). Proceeding from a belief in a multidimensional rather than the more popularly accepted bi-polar view of gender roles, the masculinity and femininity components of each measure were conceptualized as separate clusters of positive or desirable personality characteristics. On the basis of this new conceptualization of sex-based characteristics, these gender role measures also proposed adding a new concept –
androgyny, defined as the combination of both masculine and feminine behavioral characteristics – to the understanding of sex role behavior. Specifically the BSRI included 20 stereotypically feminine items (e.g., affectionate, sensitive to the needs of others) to assess femininity, 20 stereotypically masculine items (e.g., independent, willing to take risks) to assess masculinity, and 20 filler items (e.g., truthful, happy). Like the BSRI, the PAQ was designed as a self-reporting measure of masculinity, femininity, and androgyny that assessed separate clusters of positive or desirable masculine and feminine characteristics. Assessments made of individuals by researchers using these scales were typically made as follows: high scores on both scales were classified as androgynous, high masculine and low feminine scores were classified as masculine, high feminine and low masculine scores were classified as feminine, and low scores on both measures were classified as undifferentiated (Gill, 1992).

Specifically, the results of studies examining the gender-related personality traits of female athletes suggested that female sports participants were more likely to be masculine or androgynous than were female non-participants (Gill, 1992). For example, a representative study of intercollegiate athletes by Helmreich and Spence (1977) found most female athletes, like the high achieving female scientists in their samples, classified as either androgynous or masculine, while female college students most often classified as feminine. Several subsequent studies with female athletes yielded similar findings. Like Helmreich and Spence a survey of female distance runners by Harris and Jennings (1977) reported that most were androgynous or masculine. Additionally, using the BSRI with female and male racquet sports participants, Myers and Lips (1978) found evidence to suggest that the psychological gender classification of female athletes was dependent upon
the athletes’ competitive status. While all the males in their study identified as competitive and were classified as either androgynous or masculine, competitive females were classified as either masculine or androgynous, and noncompetitive females tended to be classified either feminine or undifferentiated. As scholars noted, these results suggested that women with a less traditional feminine psychological orientation were perhaps more drawn to, and more likely to remain involved in sport.

Bem’s (1974) development of the androgyny concept, also helped lay the groundwork for a new interpretation of mental health. In a highly publicized study of sex role stereotypes and the definition of psychological health conducted in 1970, researchers found that trained psychiatrists – the very people entrusted with the responsibility of helping to maintain mental health – harbored severe gender role prejudices (Broverman, Broverman, Clarkson, Rosenkrantz, & Vogel, 1972). According to the psychiatrists surveyed, the healthy man and the healthy adult were considered to be virtually identical; the healthy woman and healthy adult were viewed as contradictory roles. Substantiating feminist views about the hierarchical structure of gender, these results suggested that psychological health was incompatible with being female. Contrary to these findings, Bem argued that a psychologically androgynous individual, one free from the fetters of responding to situations in a gender-stereotypic manner in which masculinity and femininity were tempered with one another, was actually a more effective at behavioral adaptations than either the stereotypical male or stereotypical female. Bem reasoned that because such an individual was theoretically a more flexible human being, and able to respond to social situations with a greater repertoire of behaviors, androgyny represented a new standard of mental health. Interestingly, the preliminary findings of research
investigating the relationship between the gender-related personality traits of female athletes and self-esteem, conducted during the 1970s, supported Bem’s contention. For example, in addition to their findings on the personality traits of female athletes, Helmreich and Spence (1977) found that both male and female athletes who classified as masculine and androgynous also gained higher scores on self-esteem and greater behavioral adaptability than those classified as feminine.

Using Bem’s (1974) psychological categories, sport science scholars also speculated that given the perception of sport as an “agent of masculine orientation”, a majority of females would not be attracted to sport because of an incompatibility with their psychological frameworks (Duquin, 1978; Oglesby, 1978). Drawing on common and scholarly understandings of sport as a source of role conflict as well as an instrumental activity suitable only for males with its emphasis on power, product, rationality, and control, they argued that “feminine” females would feel uncomfortable performing instrumentally and when given a choice would reject sport. In an attempt to address this limitation, some scholars aligning with Bem’s understanding of androgyny as healthy, advocated an androgynous model of sport – one that incorporated both instrumentality and expressivity (Duquin, 1978; Oglesby, 1978). Such a model was thought to have the potential for appealing to the widest range of women as it allowed for play as well as work, the celebration of beauty as well as technique, and stressed the process as well as the end product.

Gender, Sport, and Socialization

Given the prevalence of popular cultural assumptions about the positive social benefits of sport participation coupled with questions about whether these benefits could
and should be extended to women and girls, one topic that received considerable attention early on from sport science scholars was socialization through sport. Contrary to popular beliefs, studies examining the social effects of sport participation on the development of particular values, attitudes, and orientations, offered little empirical evidence to support the socialization hypothesis. Although this work provided some evidence that behaviors specific to sport situations, such as competitiveness or sportsmanship are learned in sport settings, no evidence was found to support the hypothesis that these behaviors could be transferred to another social setting such as work (Kenyon, 1968; Loy, McPherson, & Kenyon, 1978). Interestingly, despite a lack of empirical support for the socialization through sport hypothesis, several studies performed during the 1970s offered evidence that suggested a link between female sport participation and achievement. For example, providing support for the claims made by female sport advocates about the positive benefits of female sport participation, several widely reported studies of women who had reached executive levels in male-dominated fields revealed that one factor achieving women tended to have in common was a love of sports as children (Harragan, 1977; Henning & Jardin, 1977; Sutton-Smith, 1979). Similarly, several studies examining the effects of high school athletic participation indicated that like their male counterparts, female athletes got higher grades and had higher educational aspirations than non-athletes (Hanks, 1979; Landers, Feltz, Obermeier, & Brouse, 1978; Snyder & Spreitzer, 1977).

Proceeding from popular and scholarly concerns about women’s and girls’ exclusion and attrition from sport, as well as feminist-influenced interests in gender socialization, sport scholars also began to look to social explanations for female sport involvement. A dominant topic within the sport sciences during the 1970s, research on
the socialization of women into sport was based on the assumption that women’s involvement in sport was attributable to socialization experiences in youth. Whether explicitly assumed or directly employed, the majority of studies in this area applied a general social learning paradigm to explain how females acquired the essential skills, knowledge, values, and dispositions to become a sport participant (Greendorfer, 1992). Based on social-psychological concepts of modeling, imitation, and vicarious learning – which assumes the presence, as well as the influence, of others – social learning assumed that observed behaviors were assimilated and exhibited in appropriate situations (McPherson, 1981). Although social learning placed a primary emphasis on what took place during childhood, the paradigm assumed that the process impinged upon individuals throughout the life cycle (Greendorfer, 1992).

Despite the fact that this research tradition was based upon a model that proposed interacting influences of personal attributes, significant others, and socializing situations, as determinants or causes of active sport involvement, only one element of the model, the influence of significant others, was tested (Birrell, 1987a). Following earlier research on sport socialization, scholars working in this area identified three socializing agents peers, family, and teachers-coaches, influencing female socialization into sport (Greendorfer, 1992). Although the results of research on the socialization of girls into sport revealed several differences in female sport socialization throughout the life cycle, some common patterns were observed. In general, female athletes were found to have one or more parents actively involved in sport, and physical activity appeared to be a “normal or expected” family activity. Additionally researchers identified three different patterns of influence on female sport participation by socializing agents; among these, school was not
found to be a major influence, while peer groups and family were found to be a consistent influence throughout the life cycle (Greendorfer, 1977, 1978; Greendorfer & Lewko, 1978). Comparatively speaking, research on the sport socialization patterns of girls and boys also found that as a result of social learning practices boys experienced a more rewarding and supportive set of experiences that predisposed them toward sport and physical activity. Consequently, they learned basic motor skills, engaged in gross physical activity, valued sport skills and physical ability, and developed a large repertoire of motor skills – all of which were evident by their pervasive participation in competitive team games (Greendorfer, 1992). In contrast, girls did not receive systematic or consistent encouragement or tutoring in the development of motor skills. Thus, their engagement in physical activity was problematic. For those who did not venture into physical activity the likelihood was that they would gravitate toward sex-typed activities that emphasized qualities associated with being female – rhythmic, graceful movements emphasizing fluidity of motion (Greendorfer, 1992; Metheny, 1965).

Taken together sport socialization research helped to verify commonsense assumptions about gender differences in social learning patterns and their effects on sport involvement. Moreover, in providing an explanation for the relative paucity of female sport participation in the United States, the results of this work helped to de-legitimate the myth of biologically-rooted female athletic inferiority, and in turn, support the feminist-influenced assessment that these differences were attributable to gender bias and social learning, and thus reversible.

Gender, Body Composition, and Performance in Sport and Exercise
Situated in a context marked by popular backlash sentiments about the frailty of female athletes and the masculinizing effects of female sport participation, as well as concerns about the competitive ability of high-performance U.S. female athletes, researchers in the sport sciences also turned their attention to the study of the relationship between gender, body composition, and performance.\textsuperscript{19} A common topic of research throughout the 1970s, studies on the body composition of adults, reported distinct gender differences. In general the results of this work indicated that on average, untrained women have more body fat and less lean muscle mass than their male counterparts. For example, in comparative studies on body composition, Behnke and Wilmore (1974) found the average range of percent body fat for college-aged females to be between 23\% to 27\%, and the average range of total percent body fat for college-aged males to be between 15\% to 18\%. Following the findings of socialization into sport research, scholars reasoned that these discrepancies were representative of the cultural constraints placed on female sport participation and physical activity and that such differences would be reduced as such sanctions were removed (Wilmore, 1974).

The findings of research examining the effects of training on the body composition of males and females supported the theory, proposed by sport science scholars, that body fat levels of women were directly parallel with activity level. For example in a 1974 study, Wilmore (1974) found that in response to a resistance training program, women were able to reduce their body fat, thereby making them significantly leaner than their untrained counterparts. According to the results of a similar study, training was also shown to help narrow the difference in body fat percentages between active men and women (Freedson, 1994). At the same time, research on the body composition of college-aged female athletes
also revealed significantly lower levels of body fat compared to the average college female (Shinning & Lindberg, 1972).

Another important sex difference in body composition observed as a result of training was in the amount of muscle hypertrophy. Even though the results of research examining the effects of resistance training on body composition reported similar relative fat losses for both sexes, the muscle mass gains and overall strength measures reported for women were dramatically smaller. For example, using a composite strength score from numerous isometric and isotonic measures, Laubach (1976) found that comparatively, trained females possessed only approximately one-half the upper-body and one-quarter the lower body strength of males. Similarly, Wilmore (1974) reported that in response to resistance training, female bench press and arm curl were also approximately one-half that of males. In interpreting these findings, sport science scholars reasoned that this difference, and related differences in strength, were attributable to the higher levels of testosterone in men (Brown & Wilmore, 1974; Wilmore, 1974). Since, at the time, no studies had been conducted on the effect of androgens on muscular hypertrophy and strength, the hormonal relation to bulk acquisition and strength was largely conjectural. As such, while this work implicitly indicated that gender discrepancies in body composition and performance were in part, the product of cultural constraints placed on female physical activity, it also simultaneously and explicitly suggested that these discrepancies had an underlying biological component.

Attracting the attention of popular print media by the early 1970s, sport science research on the female/sport relationship garnered broad cultural appeal. References to this work within debates about the female sport revolution, appeared in numerous articles
and was the focus of several multi-page feature stories within widely divergent publications such as *Ms.* and *Vogue*. This coverage is the topic of the following section of the chapter.

**“Femininity on the Line”: Sport Science Research in the Popular Media**

“The myth” has many parts. It says that women are the weaker sex. We don’t make good athletes because we are too emotional, too weak, too fragile – too feminine. We fall apart during menstruation, drop out during pregnancy, and in any case, we lack the aggressiveness and the competitive instinct. ‘The myth’ has prevented thousands of women from discovering their full potential, but it doesn’t stand up against the facts (Hammer, 1979, p. 101).

The contest over the changing nature of female athletics in America during the 1970s not only animated scientific interest in the study of the female/sport relationship but also helped fuel suspicions about the validity of popular myths historically used to dissuade female sport participation. To this end, American print media provided an important public forum for addressing these concerns and constituting them as a popular topic of debate. For example, highlighting the controversy over the legitimacy of certain concerns brought about by the female sport revolution, as well as the need for a value-free basis of assessment, Joanna Bunker Rohrbaugh (1979) writing for *Psychology Today* noted:

All over the country, thousands of women are joining in sports once considered “unladylike”. The trend raises questions not only about gender identities but about the goals of sports in general … Serious athletic competition is still viewed by many people as stressful for women because it creates a role conflict. How can a woman be feminine and a “jock”? Will extensive participation in sports masculinize females, both physically and mentally? And even if it doesn’t won’t others perceive the female athlete as masculinized, causing her to feel defensive
and unhappy about herself? Some writers have suggested that women who compete seriously in sports are preoccupied with the idea that their athletic activities will masculinize their bodies – they worry about becoming “muscular”, “large”, “thick”, or “mannish”. Is there any objective basis for these fears? (p. 30).

In efforts to address debates about the safety and limits of female athletic participation, several publications offered lengthy reviews of sport science research on gender differences in body composition and performance throughout the lifecycle. For example, generalizing the findings of this work, Vogue noted that, studies show, after eleven or twelve years of age, girls’ athletic ability measured by abdominal strength, upper body strength, grip strength, endurance, power, and agility levels off, then decreases; for boys, ability on all of these tests increases, sometimes dramatically, after twelve years of age. Body fat decreases in males after twelve; but body fat increases in females after twelve years of age, though it does not increase as much in athletically trained girls (Donahue, 1978, p. 75).

Similarly, in a September 1975 article in McCalls investigating the characterization of women as the so-called “weaker sex”, author Shirley Streshinsky (1975) explained that studies done in the United States “show that girls and boys are equally matched in physical ability until the ages of 10-13, however, after puberty, male strength tends to increase while that of girls tends to peak at about age 15” (p. 33). Articulating these findings to an assessment of female athletic performance, Streshinsky continued, at this time, “girls begin a lifelong decline, so that by the time they reach college, males are not only stronger but have more endurance and test out better in motor skills” (p. 33). Echoing these sentiments, a September 1974 article in Ms. titled “Closing the Muscle Gap”, cited the views of Dr.
Thomas Shaffer, pediatrics professor at Ohio State University, who argued: “adult men are at least 30 percent stronger than women until both subside into a more or less equally feeble old age.” (Scott, 1974, p. 50). Offering her overall assessment of this work, Ms. reporter Ann Scott (1974) concluded that,

Apparently no amount of conditioning can make women as lean, proportionately, as men. College-age men in the United States … average 15 percent body fat; women some 25 percent. In trained athletes, however, the difference is far less, although males are still lower on the average than females (p. 50).

By emphasizing scientific studies of female athleticism, particularly those indicating significant differences in body composition and strength, the overall implication of many reports was that there was some truth to the myth of female athletic inferiority.

In assessing popular debates concerning female sport participation, print media articles also addressed cultural myths about biologically based female athletic inferiority. For example, despite her apparent pessimism about the limits of female physical ability, *McCalls* author Streshinsky (1975) outwardly challenged this myth by suggesting that these disparities were the product of cultural biases toward female physicality. As Streshinsky asserted, “all kinds of cultural restrictions are applied to girls at puberty … at about the age of 13 girls tend to give up hopscotch, jump rope, and all the so-called tomboy sports of climbing trees playing baseball and pitting their strength in tug-of-war” (p. 33). Similarly, aforementioned Ms. author Scott (1974) openly acknowledged the common prejudices defining female physical capacities. According to Dr. Jack Wilmore of the University of California at Davis, cited in the piece, the presumed superiority of male strength and endurance may be more an “artifact of social and cultural restriction
imposed on the female … than a result of true biological difference in performance potential between the sexes” (p. 49). In sum, articles such as these helped to refute popular ideas about innate athletic inferiority among women by acknowledging that differences in sport performance were, in part, attributable to cultural constraints.

As part of their review of sport science research on gender differences in body composition and strength, several publications also applied this work to an analysis of gender differences in athletic performance. Some reports suggested that these differences, although small, placed women at a significant disadvantage in athletic competition. For example, Streshinsky’s (1975) *McCalls* article suggested that despite the fact that there are few actual measured differences in male and female athletic performance, due to their smaller size, women are athletically handicapped. As Dr. Wilmore cited in the piece explained, given that “women are an average of 40 pounds lighter than men, and their body composition is 25 percent fat compared to 15 percent for men — men have a decided advantage” (p. 33). Similarly, in reference to research on body composition and performance, a September 1974 article in *Ms.* noted that “most women athletes are like racehorses with a heavier handicap; that extra load of fat they have to carry around has a direct and negative effect on their work capacity and stamina” (Scott, 1974, p. 50).

Paradoxically, some reports suggested that gender differences in body composition, particularly women’s higher percentage of body fat, might give them an advantage in particular kinds of activities. For example, in a series of two articles confronting the myth of female physical inferiority, similarly titled “Are Women the Weaker Sex?” (Hammer, 1979) and “Are Women the Stronger than Men?” (Ullyot, 1975), *Harper’s Bazaar* asserted that women’s higher percentage of body fat gave them an advantage over men in extreme
endurance activities. Highlighting women’s apparent superiority in these types of competition, Dr. Joan Ullyot an exercise physiologist and marathon runner cited in each piece, asserted that not only do women survive extremes of cold and starvation better than men, but “women also finish marathons (26.2 miles) in better shape than most men” (Hammer, 1979, p. 146). Explaining the physical dynamics underlying these apparent gender differences in endurance, Ullyot (1975) suggested that they were due to women’s higher on average body fat percentages: “glycogen, the normal fuel, is used up at 20 miles”, after this point, “the body begins to use the fatty tissue for its energy” (p. 46).

Although reports such as these helped to discredit the myth of female athletic inferiority by suggesting that women might even have a genetic advantage over men in endurance events, by relying upon scientific measures of body composition, they also lent credibility to notion that gender differences in athletic performance were indeed biological. To this end, mass media analyses of sport science research on gender differences in athletic performance served to legitimate the notion that in sports relying upon strength, speed, and power, abilities required by the majority of sports popular in the United States, females are genetically disadvantaged.

Based primarily upon the aforementioned findings of scientific research on body composition and performance, print media efforts to address popular assumptions about the masculinizing effects of female sport participation collectively suggested that they were insupportable by scientific evidence. Highlighting the similarities between female athletes and non-athletes, Rohrbaugh (1979) writing for Psychology Today cited a study by Eldon Snyder and Joseph Kilvin of Bowling Green State University that compared the physiques of undergraduate female non-athletes with intercollegiate and Olympic-caliber
female athletes. As noted in the article, the findings of the study suggested that female athletes did not have significantly different physiques from those of non-athletes: although the athletes were slightly larger, the differences were hardly dramatic: one inch in height: (5’6” versus 5’5”) and only 3 pounds in weight (129 versus 126) (cited in Rohrbaugh, 1979). Based on the findings of studies examining the effects of exercise on females, Rohrbaugh asserted that there was no objective basis for the so-called muscle myth, “no matter how often a women lifts weights she won’t look like a scaled-down Arnold Schwarzenegger” (p. 30). In a similar vein, *Sports Illustrated*’s 1973 three-part series titled “Women are Getting a Raw Deal: Sport is Unfair to Women” Dr. Harmon Brown, a California endocrinologist, part-time women’s track coach, and experienced researcher on female athletes assured that while “women are capable of performing maximal resistance exercises and achieving considerable levels of strength”, they can do so “with little of no overt evidence of muscle hypertrophy” (i.e., excessive and obvious development) (quoted in Gilbert & Williamson, 1973a, p. 46). Affirming this claim, the article also referred to the authority of Dr. Ken Foreman of Seattle Pacific College who asserted that “the supposition that girls will become heavily muscled, malelike creatures as a consequence of intense training is a distortion of reality” (quoted in Gilbert & Williamson, 1973a, p. 46). Without specifically mentioning a particular study, a 1978 article in *Glamour* titled “6 Myths About Sports: Are They Keeping you From Starting?” offered a similar dismissal of the “masculinization thesis”. Referring to his research on female athletic performance, Dr. Wilmore, quoted in the piece, reassuringly explained that, “women can increase their strength 50 to 75 percent without any great increase in muscle bulk” (Short, 1978, p. 129). Citing the view of Dr. Dorothy Harris, the article concluded, “there is not one shred of
evidence to support the misconception that a woman becomes heavily muscled when she gets a lot of vigorous exercise” (p. 129).

Providing justification for the aforementioned findings on gender differences in body composition, strength, and performance, several publications asserted that these differences could be attributed to corresponding differences in sex hormones. Although sport scientists had merely speculated that these differences were hormonally based, popular media reports implied a scientifically proven causality. For example, when explaining the reason for gender differences in muscle development, Ms. author Scott (1974) stated that,

much of the answer lies in the male hormone, androgen, which produces denser bones and simulates the growth of muscle tissue. As a result, men are not only larger and heavier than women in general, but a normal man of any given size will have more muscle, or lean body mass, than a woman of similar build (or even than a man with a lower androgen level) (p. 50).

Likewise Sports Illustrated citing the expertise of Dr. C. Harmon Brown explained that women were “less likely to develop bulging muscles than men because, first the loss of fatty tissue camouflages such a change, and second, the amount of androgen (male hormone) produced by women is only 5 to 10 percent that of males” (Gilbert & Williamson, 1973a, p. 46). In a slightly different vein, Mademoiselle, suggested that the female sex hormone estrogen also affected body composition by inhibiting muscle development and increasing body fat retention. Commenting to this effect, author Harris (1975) asserted that women were biologically incapable of developing excessive musculature because of hormones: “Even systematic weight training will never make a
woman look like a man, unless she takes anabolic steroids” (p. 283). Furthermore, extending her assessment to an analysis of female athletic performance Harris concluded, “I think you can say with absolute assurance that the best women will never be as good as the best men” (p. 231). Situated in a context marked by debates about the limits of female athletic performance and the masculinizing effects of female sport participation, reports such as these provided reassurance that female athletes were not only feminine, but biologically incapable of becoming masculine in appearance as a result of athletic training.

As part of the media’s focus on popular concerns framing female sport participation in the late 1970s, several publications also used scientific and medical evidence to refute popular myths suggesting that competition was dangerous for female reproductive health. For example, *Sports Illustrated* in their three-part expose on the status of female athletic in America noted that “The belief that a female in competitive athletics is taking short- and long-term risks with her health is, according to existing medical information, simply wrong” (Gilbert & Williamson, 1973a, p. 45). Lending credibility to this assessment, reporters Gilbert and Williamson (1973) cited the work of Dr. Clayton L. Thomas, Harvard consultant on human reproduction and a member of the United States Olympic Medical and Training Services Committee who argued:

I do not believe there is evidence available supporting the view that it is possible for a woman of any age to indulge in a sport that is too strenuous for them. The literature of the past contains many opinions stating that competitive events are harmful for women. There are no data, however, to support these negative views (p. 45).
Related to this critique, several articles offered scientific data and opinion that suggested sport competition posed little risk of injury to female sex organs. For example, a 1974 article in *Ms.* suggested that doctors could find no evidence to suggest that blows to the breast cause cancer (Scott, 1974). According to the unnamed woman physiologist cited in the piece, “Considering all the mauling the breasts go through sex play and nursing, it doesn’t make sense that they are easily hurt” (p. 55). In a similar vein, *Sports Illustrated* reassuringly asserted, “the uterus, is one of the most shock-resistant of all internal organs, being protected by what amounts to an extremely effective suspension system. The external genitalia of females are less exposed than those of males” (Gilbert & Williamson, 1973a, p. 45). Likewise, *Harper’s Bazaar* argued that the well-cushioned uterus also refutes the “pregnancy myth” (the notion that exercise may cause miscarriage or damage to the fetus) (Ullyot, 1975). As Dr. Harris quoted in the piece reassured, “the baby is so well protected, nothing short of a puncture in the abdomen would hurt it. It’s like an egg – shaking it won’t break it” (p. 101). Removing speculation about the potentially harmful or limiting of the female reproductive cycle on athletic performance, Harris concluded by adding, “there is no physiological reason why performance should fall off during the menstrual period. World records have been set up by women athletes at all phases of the cycle” (p. 101).

In refuting these myths, several publications also offered scientific evidence suggesting that physical activity was even beneficial for reproductive health. For example, both of the aforementioned articles in *Sports Illustrated* and *Ms.* cited the findings of a study indicating that the length of labor and the necessity for cesarean section was significantly lower for women who regularly participated in athletics (Gilbert &
Williamson, 1973a; Scott, 1974). Likewise, Ms. also noted to the results of a 1965 study showing that female athletes had far less menstrual difficulty than non-swimmers (Scott, 1974). Similarly, the aforementioned article in *Harper’s Bazaar* suggested that several studies of women athletes revealed that, in giving birth, most of women “experienced less pain, shorter deliveries and recovery periods than non-athletes, “ and had “fewer cesareans” (Ullyot, 1975, p. 146). Lending further credibility to this assessment, the article also cited exercise physiologist Dr. Wilmore, who implied that trained women were better equipped to handle the physiological demands of labor (Ullyot, 1975). In sum, by emphasizing the seemingly innocuous and perhaps even beneficial effects of female sport participation on female reproduction, popular media reports not only helped to dismiss beliefs about the dangerous effects of female athleticism, but simultaneously discredited the “masculinization myth” by offering “objective proof” that athletes’ reproductive capacities would remain unharmed.

In addition to the media’s use of medical opinion to dismiss popular questions about the safety of sport for females, several media reports also used this evidence to address popular questions about the safety of co-ed athletic competition. For example, citing the opinion of Dr. Thomas, *Sports Illustrated*, in their 1973 series title “Women are Getting a Raw Deal” asserted that co-ed Little League competition poses little risk (Gilbert & Williamson, 1973b). According to Thomas’ assessment, at this age, the physical differences between the sexes are minimal, “prior to puberty boys are taller, but girls and boys are equal in weight, strength, and reaction time” (quoted in Gilbert & Williamson, 1973b, p. 46). A similar assessment of the dangers of co-ed sport competition was also offered in 1975 article in *Harper’s Bazaar* article titled “Competition vs. Femininity”
(Dubrow, 1975). Quoted in the article, Doctors M. Joan Lyon and Carl Klafs authors of *The Female Athlete*, asserted that “contrary to common opinion, the female athlete is not as handicapped in physiological respects as most people assume”, prior puberty girls have physical advantages because they are generally taller, heavier and even stronger than boys (p. 150).

Although some reports supported mixed competition prior to puberty, they also cautioned, based on medical opinion, that the same competition was dangerous for post-pubertal females. For example as *Sports Illustrated* noted,

a preponderance of medical opinion seems to be that girls, particularly after the onset of puberty, do face a disproportionate injury risk when competing with boys. Girls mature physically more rapidly than boys, but in the early teens the latter overtake the former. Thereafter the average boy tends to be larger and stronger (because of a higher proportion of muscle to fatty tissue) and therefore more faster and more athletically adept (Gilbert & Williamson 1973a, p. 46).

Also cited in the article, Dr. Ken Foreman of Seattle Pacific College, offering his evaluation of the situation, suggested,

it is as inadvisable to have high school girls competing in varsity football with boys as it would be to have high school boys competing with professionals … When you’re dealing with sports involving overloads and muscular strength, women should not compete with men. It would be a put down, they can’t win (p. 46).

To this end, popular media reports offered further support of the myth of female athletic inferiority by implying that due to biological changes associated with puberty, post-
pubertal female athletes were at a disadvantage in athletic competition and thus, ill-suited for co-ed competition.20

As part of the media’s efforts to assess the validity of myths governing female sport participation in the late 1970s, several publications also used scientific and medical evidence to refute concerns about its psychologically masculinizing effects. For example, in a seemingly unlikely place for a discussion of sport science and psychology research, fashion magazine Vogue provided a review of several studies on what Gloria Averbuch (1974) called the “athletic personality”. Citing the pioneering work of psychologist Sandra Bem, Averbuch suggests that a person defined as psychologically androgynous (i.e., having strong aspects of both sexes), is more psychologically healthy than a person defined as psychologically masculine or feminine. Affirming this claim, the Averbuch drawing upon Bem’s findings, also noted that those persons labeled as androgynous were more versatile and displayed appropriate traits in a variety of situations, while people who scored high either in masculinity or femininity, performed well only at tasks considered appropriate to their sex. Turning to the question of female psychological health and sport, the article cites another study of psychological gender orientation performed at Penn State. According to the findings of the study, female runners not only scored high on measures of androgyny, but supporting Bem’s assertion about androgyny and psychological health, they were also reported to appear more self-confident than women who scored high only on the masculinity or femininity scale.

Adding to popular media discussions of sport science research on psychological gender orientation, the aforementioned article by Rohrbaugh (1979) in Psychology Today also made mention of a series of studies indicating a correlation between the perceived
intensity of an athletic competition and the psychological gender orientation of its female participants. The studies performed by Canadian psychologists Anita Myers and Hillary Lips, were based on the assumption that given the view of competitive sports as a masculine activity, women in competitive situations would need a more flexible view of themselves and would describe themselves as androgynous sex-types, whereas males, not needing this flexibility, would describe themselves as masculine sex-typed. The findings of the study cited in the piece suggest that this assumption was correct: using the BSRI to survey male and female competitors in a national level racquetball tournament, Myers and Lips found that a majority of the male competitors tended to be masculine while a majority of the female competitors tended to be androgynous. Lending support to the notion that women with an androgynous personality are more apt to participate in competitive sport, the article also highlights the fact that the female distribution in the study was significantly more androgynous than Bem’s normative samples. The article also emphasizes that none of the women in the study showed up as masculine by the Bem scale definition. In the second study by Myers and Lips cited in the piece, the BSRI was given to male and female competitors in a less competitive setting. When the participants were divided into competitive and noncompetitive groups on the basis of their reasons for entering the tournament – to win or simply to have fun – the researchers found that while all of the males fell into the competitive group, women in the competitive groups tended to be androgynous and the women in the noncompetitive group tended to be feminine. According to Myers and Lips, these findings suggest that given the definition of competition as masculine, “defining the situation in a noncompetitive way makes it less masculine and therefore allows participation by traditionally sex-typed women”
(Rohrbaugh, 1979, p. 36). Like reports about the physical effects of female sport participation, reports such as these implied that based on a lack of empirical evidence, the notion that female sport participation, even high-level competition, encourages psychological masculinity was erroneous. As author, Rohrbaugh surmised to this effect, “perhaps the fear that sport will masculinize women is simply that – a fear” (p. 36).

In their efforts to address concerns about the gender role conflict experienced by female athletes, many publications also turned to research on the apologetic. For instance both the aforementioned Mademoiselle and Psychology Today articles cited a study designed to test the validity of the assumption that female athletes feel a need to apologize for their involvement. The study, performed by Cleveland State University professor of physical education, Patricia Del Ray was based on the assumption that women participating in more “masculine” sports would espouse more traditional attitudes toward women than those participating in more “feminine” sports. According to Psychology Today author Rohrbaugh (1979), the study provided partial support for the apologetic: at two of the schools, women playing tennis, a traditionally “ladylike” sport expressed more liberal attitudes than women swimming or playing more “masculine” sports such as basketball or softball. Summarizing these results, Del Ray quoted in Mademoiselle noted that,

tennis players had the most liberal view of the woman’s role in society …. It’s not a deviation anymore to excel in tennis. Basketball and softball players had the most conservative attitudes…. If you’re apologizing for your participation you’ll hold on to the old view of the woman’s role – you’ll still believe that women should cling
to one husband, never use curse words, never go into a bar alone (Koslow, 1975, p. 231).

Lending additional support to the existence of an apologetic in female athletes, *Psychology Today* also cited a study of college women by Snyder and Kilvin which indicated that female athletes were more traditional than female non-athletes in several of their attitudes including those toward family life, women working outside the home, women holding positions of authority over men, and women competing for the same jobs as men. Despite refuting popular myths about the psychologically masculinizing effects of female sport participation, these reports offered empirical evidence to suggest that such myths remained an influential factor in the lives of female athletes.

In addressing popular anxieties about the safety of female athletic participation several publications also routinely employed the authority of scientific research examining the effects of sport participation on self-concept and self-esteem. For example, addressing the dramatic changes in female athletics as a result of Title IX, *Newsweek* suggested that female sport participation was linked to mental health (“New Rules for Women”, 1975). Offering an expert assessment of the findings of sport science research exploring self-perception, Dr. William Morgan of the University of Arizona’s Sports Psychology laboratory quoted in the article noted that, “Athletes are less depressed, more stable and have higher psychological vigor than the general public. This is true of both men and women athletes” (“New Rules for Women”, 1975, p. 50). Similarly, *Psychology Today* offered the details of several research studies suggesting that sport participation may foster self-confidence and identity, especially when they are part of the adolescent growth experience (Rohrbaugh, 1975). One of the studies cited in the article, conducted by Snyder
and Kilvin found that female sport participants in both college and high school not only rated their bodies much more positively in terms of energy level and health but also rated themselves as more feminine than their non-athletic counterparts. Likewise, another study mentioned in the article, conducted by M.F. Vincent, found that regardless of their activities during college, women who participated in high school sports scored higher than their non-athletic counterparts in measures of self-concept. Also lending support to the apparent correlation between female sport participation the article cites the findings of yet another study indicating that when compared to non-athletic college women, college-aged female athletes are more self-actualized, surer of themselves, their world, and of their ability to relate meaningfully to that world. Although the results of scientific research examining female sport participation and self-perception did not indicate a causal relationship, popular media reports also implied, based on scientific evidence and opinion, that sport fosters self-confidence and a general sense of well-being.

In addition to discussions of the relationship between psychological androgyny and sport, some media reports approached the issue of sex roles and sport by highlighting the view proposed by some sport science scholars during the 1970s, that sport be reconceptualized as an androgynous activity. For example, citing the opinion of sport science scholar Mary Duquin of the University of Pittsburgh, Rohrbaugh’s (1979) article for Psychology Today asserted that the Western cultural view of sport be reconfigured to emphasize the “expressive” (emotional and feminine) aspects of athletics so that it might be considered appropriate for females. Lending additional support to this idea, the article cites another advocate for an androgynous view of sport, associate professor of sports psychology Carole Oglesby. In a critique of the Western configuration of sport an agent
for developing male instrumentality (the aggressive manipulation of the environment), and an appeal to the notion of sport as androgynous, Oglesby, quoted in the piece expressed the following:

We call off the masculinity-femininity game in sport by recognizing and publicizing that sport is not masculinity training, but androgyny training. All the qualities of fully functioning human beings are potentially communicable/reinforceable in sport. … For example, we have long proposed that sport participation can assist the development of independence and dominance (two qualities of the so-called masculine principle). I believe it is equally possible to demonstrate that sport can and does assist the development of such qualities as dependence and subordination. In softball or baseball, when the squeeze play is on, the runner at third base breaks running with the pitch trusting/depending that the batter will do what she/he must to make the play successful. In the many sacrifice situations (and scores of other instances) a player learns the benefits of subordination of personal glory to team victory (p. 36).

Thus, despite a lack of empirical evidence to support the notion that sport influences behavior, popular reports helped to verify assumptions about the character building properties of sport while at the same time dismiss fears about the psychologically masculinizing effects of female sport participation by suggesting that sport fostered psychological characteristics coded as masculine and feminine.

**From Myth to Reality: Defining the Athletic Female Body**

One way of dealing with these disparities between the athletic promise and achievement of men and women is to view women as truncated males. As such they should be permitted to engage in such sports as men do … but in foreshortened versions (Weiss, 1969, p. 102).
To the extent that popular myths historically used to limit female sport participation in the United States were largely based on self-serving ideological “evidence”, the emergence of sport science research on the female/sport relationship during the 1970s offered a new and seemingly unbiased standard by which to assess their validity. To a large extent, the mass appeal of this work within the popular media can be attributed to the cultural authority of science and its cultural resonance. The preliminary questions engaged by early research on the athletic female body articulated with a diverse set of discourses, intersecting with social debates about the changing nature of female sport in America and interrelated concerns about the traditional gender/sexual order. For example, in a climate in which body consciousness was often equated with political and self-consciousness, the suggestion that female sport participation fostered high self-esteem, simply made sense.

Specifically, the emphasis of popular media reports on research examining personality and the gender role orientation of female athletes helped to relieve anxieties about the presumed psychological dangers of female sport participation. For example, scientific evidence defining female athletes as psychologically androgynous helped to dismiss suspicions about the psychological “gender-bending” effects of female sport participation by offering unbiased proof that females athletes were, in part, psychologically “feminine”. To this end, the popular dissemination of sport science research also helped to increase the acceptability of female sport participation. Repeated media references to research indicating that female athletes did not experience role conflict, but rather had high self-esteem, and classified as psychologically androgynous (defined as a new standard of mental health) served to redefine the female athletic female body psychologically healthy and in turn, female sport participation as a healthy and desirable practice. At the same
time, these reports helped to defer popular questions and concerns about gender
discrimination in sport. Although this work confirmed that female athletes do internalize
cultural biases against female sport participation, and thus “apologize” for their sport
involvement, by equating female athleticism with psychological health, this work implied
that while cultural biases against female athletes existed, athletes were not adversely
affected by negative social sanctions.

In a slightly different vein, mass media analysis of sport science research on the
reproductive health, body composition, strength, and performance of female athletes
helped to assuage concerns about the masculinizing effects of female sport participation.
For example, in suggesting that sport participation was not dangerous to, but actually
benefited women’s reproductive health, this work served to affirm the femininity and by
extension, the heterosexuality of female athletes. At the same time, the popular
dissemination of sport science research indicating that obvious muscle development in
women, and athletic performances surpassing men (for post-pubertal women), were
biologically impossible, served not only to refute the masculinization thesis, but also
offered reassurance that women’s “intrusion” into the male dominated space of sport posed
no threat. Although this evidence had the effect of removing cultural barriers to female
sport participation, it also incongruently served to maintain the masculine hegemony of
sport and suspicions about the gender deviance of female athletes. In suggesting that
women were biologically incapable of matching male athletic performance, this work
offered “objective” proof that women were not deserving of athletic equality. At the same,
time to the extent that the athletic female body was normalized as always already feminine,
and biologically handicapped except through the use of performance enhancing drugs, this
work served to delineate the acceptable boundaries of female athletes’ appearance and ability. In other words, bodies that exceeded these boundaries – female athletes that appeared overly muscular (read: masculine) or athletically skilled – would remain coded as gender deviant, unnatural, and suspect.

Situated in a context marked by debates over the limits of the athletic female body, early research on the female/sport relationship became highly influential outside its disciplinary boundaries as popular print media accounts routinely appropriated its expertise to negotiate these concerns. As my analysis illustrates, the definition of the athletic female body that emerged from these discursive negotiations was coded as: psychologically and physically healthier (e.g. possessing higher self-esteem, psychologically androgynous, at lower risk for certain diseases, and reproductively fit) than its non-athletic counterparts, biologically inferior and thus incapable of surpassing men in terms of athletic performance, physically “feminine” in appearance, and subject to, but not adversely affected by gender discrimination in sport. During the 1980s, the scientific re-shaping of the athletic female body proved to be an enduring concept as illustrated by its influence on popular representations and debates over Title IX. At the same time, led by new directions in feminist and critical theory, sport scholars offered numerous critiques of this highly circulated and influential early work. The these popular discourses, debates, and scholarly critiques are the focus of the next chapter.

1 The low priority given to female athletics was also matched by the detachment of most female athletes from the goals of women’s liberation. For example, surveys often found socially conservative attitudes among women who stepped out of conventional roles in order to participate in intercollegiate sports (Guttmann, 1991).

2 For an insightful discussion about why women’s athletics was largely peripheral to the women’s movement see Elkins (1978).
During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, competitive athletics were considered appropriate for men because they developed manly strength. However, because the development of strength was not considered appropriate for women there was no comparable justification for women’s athletics. Adhering to these Victorian ideals, female professional physical educators frowned upon intercollegiate competition because they viewed it as unwomanly and a potential health risk (Gerber, 1974; Hult, 1994). Many physical educators also wanted to guard women’s programs at high schools and colleges from the professionalization of men’s intercollegiate athletic programs. To this extent, female physical educators created a new athletic philosophy for women based on securing the “greatest good for the greatest number” and created athletic programs that focused more on intramural competition such as field days, rally days, and class days, where the competition was not as vigorous (Hult, 1994; Oglesby, 1978). This philosophy served as the underlying basis of women’s sport programs for the better part of the 20th century.

Radical feminism reflects a diverse theoretical tradition. In general, radical feminists view contemporary society as a patriarchy, a system organized in ways that accords privilege to men as a group and allows them to have systemic coercive power over women. Given this, radical feminists believe that in order to eliminate sexist oppression, patriarchy must be challenged and ultimately dismantled. As such, a long-range goal for many radical feminists involves developing a woman-supporting culture; that is, developing communities or societies informed by female values, appreciation, and respect. Women engaged in such projects advocate separatism, or the creation of spaces for women that are free from male intrusion (Costa & Guthrie, 1994).

Following this model for most of the twentieth century, the AIAW initially opposed organized interscholastic competition and athletic scholarships (Gerber, 1974, Hult, 1994). However, necessitated by the Title IX mandate for equality in financial aid, the AIAW was forced to “masculinize” their programs in 1973 and relinquish the ban on athletic scholarships (Guttmann, 1991; Hult, 1994). Due, in part, to this decision, the funding and number of female athletic scholarships dramatically increased. For instance, between 1974 and 1981, the number of institutions offering athletic scholarships for women climbed from sixty five to five hundred while the women’s share of funding for athletic scholarships soared from 1 to 22 percent of the total (Guttmann, 1991).

Feminists strategically decided not to lobby for the bill hoping few would realize its significance. Their strategy was apparently successful, athletics was only briefly mentioned twice during the Congressional debates over Title IX, and the bill was virtually unopposed in Congress (Davis, 1999).

Title IX was part of a much more extensive global women's rights movement in the 1970s that included: the landmark Royal Commission on the Status of Women (Canada, 1970), with two recommendations directly relating to gender equity in school sport; and the 1979 UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, which included Article 10(g) directly relating to women's sports participation.
For an excellent discussion of the different ideological strands of the second-wave feminist movement in the United States see Taylor et al. (2001).

Interestingly, advocates of women’s equality in sport and self-defense did not always see the connection between the two activities. While some feminists supported the training of girls and women in self-defense they gave sport-related issues low priority, at the same time, some advocates of equal opportunity in sport did not support the rationale of women’s self-defense (Lenskyj, 1986). As Lenskyj (1986) notes, ironically, the connection between self-defense and sport was “often quite clear to the detractors, who correctly perceived the blurring of sex differences through equal opportunity in sport, particularly contact sports, as a slippery slope leading to the breakdown of traditional male/female power relations” (p. 109).

Co-authored by Gilbert and Williamson (1973), this national overview of sexual inequality in sport won the 1974 National Magazine Award for Outstanding Editorial Achievement in Service to the Individual.

Fitness programs in the workplace also came into existence in the 1970s. Originally targeted at male executives who were considered at risk for heart attacks, the programs were started after companies began to assess the financial costs of decreased productivity because of employee illness or death. Corporations such as Xerox and Pepsi installed workout and locker room facilities for employees, and more ambitious companies hired staff to teach nutrition and exercise. Business publications such as Forbes and Business Week began to run articles on the fitness programs of top executives and politicians. These kinds of articles reinforced the perceived link between productivity and physical fitness. By the end of the decade, the media was reporting on overweight individuals who had difficulty finding employment because prospective employers imagined them to be lazy and not properly representative of the company’s image (Eisenman & Barnett, 1979).

For more comprehensive discussion of the fitness boom see Davies (1994), Howell and Ingham (2001), Ingham (1985), and Lenskyj (1986).

The emergence and success of the fitness boom were also largely attributable the rise of the “self-help movement”. An element in, and extension of the social and political changes of the late 1960s and 1970s, the dramatic impact of this trend on American culture is best illustrated by the extraordinary increase in the popularity of self-help and popular psychology books and programs during the 1970s. Of course the self-help movement, was not just tied to popular psychology but was also tied to sport and fitness. As Howell and Ingham (2001) illustrate, during the late 1970s the articulation between self-help and fitness appeared over a range of consumer orientated events, texts and practices (exercise, nutrition, jogging), through a number of cultural mediums (television, print, conversation), cultural sites (health clubs, schools, the workplace, hospitals, the shopping mall) and social groups (baby boomers, women, blue collar).
As I discuss in the following chapter, this type of anti-feminist backlash would become more prevalent in the 1980s.

The controversial nature of Title IX, especially with regard to sport, was also demonstrated by the numerous delays and problems that plagued its enforcement. It was not until December 1978, nearly a decade after the enactment of Title IX, that its final guidelines were issued and scheduled to take effect the following year (Guttmann, 1991).

For example, the first two books on women and sport, The Femininity Game (Boslooper & Hayes, 1973), and The American Woman in Sport (Gerber, Felshin, Berlin, & Wyrick, 1974) each incorporated several of the emerging subdisciplines of the sport sciences including chapters on physiology, psychology, sociology, anthropology, and history.

In a replication of the Broverman et al. (1970) study, Brooks-Gunn and Fisch (1979) found no change in college males’ assessment that healthy women were not healthy adults; however college females perceived healthy women as androgynous. The study reveals the lessening of negative stereotypes about women, but only by women.

Stimulated to a great extent by feminist critiques of the notion of biological gender differences and the ideology of femininity, the 1970s were marked by a proliferation of research on gender socialization. Prominent areas of research included examining how various and related factors such as the family, sex-typed toys, education, the media, gender role stereotyping, and the labeling of activities impact the ways in which boys and girls “learn” gender through social situations.

Drawing largely upon a model of body composition developed during the 1970s by Behnke and Wilmore (1974), this work was based on the assumption that the body could be divided into three main components: muscle, bone, and fat. Direct assessment of body composition on human cadavers and animal carcasses requires a chemical analysis of the different tissues of the body. Commonly used indirect techniques for measuring body composition include underwater weighing, skin folds, and circumferences, bioelectrical impedance, and infrared technology (Freedson, 1994).

In response to concerns about the changing nature of female athletics in America, particularly those regarding co-ed competition, the American Medical Association organized a special committee of doctors to assess these issues and offer their recommendations. Acknowledging the cultural taboos against female athleticism, their report published in the Journal of the American Medical Association, noted that “female participation (in sports) was discouraged due to societal and cultural stereotypes that considered such participation a departure from the ‘traditional role’” (cited in Williams, 1975, p. 12). However, the committee conceded, that female sport participation had both physiological and social benefits, and could also improve female reproductive functions. Additionally, the committee suggested that co-ed contact sports such as football were unsafe for females. Drawing upon sport science research on body composition and performance to make their assessment, the committee argued that given women’s higher
percentage of body fat, coupled with the fact that pound for pound women could not generate the same muscle force as men, women would be at a higher risk of injury.
CHAPTER THREE

“A Critique of Critiques”: Feminist Sport Studies, Title IX Backlash, and the New Athletic Ideal of Beauty

In 1982, just 4 years after announcing the arrival of the so-called “female sports revolution”, *Time* magazine, making an equally important proclamation, declared that this revolution had also produced a “new ideal of beauty”. Capturing the celebratory spirit surrounding this transformation, Richard Corliss (1982) described the physical and psychological dimensions of the new female athletic aesthetic as follows:

At home or on the beach or by the office water cooler, a new form is emerging. It may be slimmer than before, but it is surely stronger. It may be massive or petite, but it is always graceful. The face, stripped of its old layers of makeup, looks more natural. The frame, deprived of some adipose tissue, looks more sinuous. It is a body made for motion: for long purposeful strides across the backcourt, through the mall, into the boardroom. It is a body that speaks assurance, in itself and in the woman who, through will power and muscle power, has created it, it is not yet, and may never be, for everybody, but for many men this feminine physical assurance can be galvanizing; there can be an allure to equality (p. 72).

A recurring theme within popular media and consumerist discourses throughout the 1980s, this seemingly progressive bodily transformation of the American woman was regularly credited as the comely by-product of Title IX, the second-wave feminist movement, and the fitness boom. Seemingly in the course of a decade, America’s cultural biases towards, and concerns about the dangers of female sport participation had been replaced by increasing gender equity in sport, and the image of the sexy, athletically empowered woman: strong, confident, and willing to take risks.
Despite celebrations over the arrival of the athletic/beautiful female body during the 1980s, the forces explicitly identified (Title IX and the second-wave feminist movement) and in part, implicitly responsible (sport science research) for its production and emergence were also the subject of intense backlash and critique. Situated within a broader context of backlash against the gains of second-wave feminism, this period was marked by repeated formal attacks against Title IX designed to weaken or block its provisions and related calls for women to “prove” their competitive worthiness. At the same time, largely influenced by new directions in feminist and critical theory, feminist sport science scholars offered numerous critiques of the highly circulated and influential research on the female/sport relationship produced during the late 1960s and 1970s, as well as the popular articulation of female athleticism with sex appeal.

How can we account for the apparent disparity between favorable accounts of the feminist re-shaping of the American female body as both physically and mentally strong, backlash sentiments against female sport participation, and critiques of early sport science research on the female/sport relationship? In this chapter, I attempt to understand how these competing discourses came to co-exist during the 1980s, and understand how they have influenced understandings of athletic female body in the late twentieth century United States. In order to explore this question, I begin by analyzing popular discourses concerning the athletic female body during the 1980s, exploring how these discourses intersected with key cultural discourses of the period as well as the lasting influence and continued authority of sport science research in its production. I then focus on the significant shifts and critiques in sport science research on the female/sport relationship during this same period, analyzing the ways in which social, political, and historical
dynamics influenced its key findings and assumptions. I suggest that despite their apparent
divergence, these discourses are mutually “embedded in a politics of ‘violation’ and
corresponding demand for ‘control over’ women’s bodies (Cole, 1994). To this extent, I
suggest that celebratory, backlash, and critical discourses concerning the athletic female
body might be viewed as part of a larger backlash against feminism and postfeminist
discourses prevalent during the 1980s. With this in mind I close the chapter by
considering how both popular and scientific discursive preoccupations with the question of
female agency have served in seemingly contradictory ways to maintain suspicions as well
as marginalize female athleticism, while at the same time reconfiguring female sport
participation as a healthy and desirable practice.

**Form Without Function: The Athletic Female Body in 1980s America**

It’s as if they’re all in training for the Olympics. They’re all muscled up with
nowhere to go (Paul Corkery, quoted in Corliss, 1982; p 74.)

Contrary to popular narratives, America’s new found acceptance and celebration of
the muscular, athletic female body and largely unequivocal recognition of sport and
exercise as healthy pursuits for females during the 1980s were not simply the natural
historical outcome of the second-wave feminist movement and its sport specific
manifestation – the female sport revolution. As I suggested in the previous chapter,
popular meanings of the athletic female body were largely negotiated and revised during
the late 1960s and 1970s through the popular dissemination of sport science research. In
order to understand the lasting influence and appeal of this work within media coverage of
female athletics and the athletic female body during the 1980s, it is useful to review the
broader social, economic, political, and cultural dynamics that shaped and limited the
meanings of feminism, gender, sexuality, health, agency, the self, fitness, and the body.
The rise of neoliberal economics and ideology in the United States during the 1970s, and related economic recession, helped set the stage for the rise of a neoconservative ideology (championed by Reagan and the New Right) during the 1980s (Cole, 1996; Ingham, 1985; Reeves & Campbell, 1994). As Reeves and Campbell (1994) explain, capitalizing on America’s economic insecurities and anxieties, Reagan’s conservative egalitarianism demonized the old Fordist regime while sanctifying the new entrepreneurial order of flexible accumulation. That is to say, Reaganism rhetorically counter-posed an oppressive system of bureaucracy, big labor, and big government, against positive the more positive values of possessive individualism, personal initiative, and privatization. In many profound ways, this sanctification of the new order was a rewriting of the late nineteenth-century utopian myth of Horatio Alger. In Alger’s capitalist utopia, the ideal society was a meritocracy in which brains, initiative, and hard work were their just rewards. The key virtue was self-reliance; the admirable man was the self-made man. The underlying pretext for this political and moral ideology of the 1980s was a denunciation of the liberal democratic ideals and hedonistic anarchy of the 1960s. As Ingham (1985) notes, under the liberal democracy of the 1960s, “the State was morally obligated to use its resources not only to provide a safety net for those whose attributes and capacities left them noncompetitive in the labor market, but also to ensure that all individuals would get a ‘good start in life’ so that recruitment and reward would become more meritocratic” (p. 46). However, following New Right thinking, liberal democracy was reconfigured as one in which individuals were morally responsible for making themselves competitive in the labor market and the State was responsible for providing a safety net for those who try but fail and for those who are “genuinely” disabled. In this
sense, to paraphrase Reeves and Campbell (1994), as an orthodoxy of inclusion, the right thinking ideology of the Reagan era promised to take all of America back to the gilded age of a pre-Fordist Horatio Alger enterprise culture; while as an orthodoxy of exclusion, it promised to deliver America from color and gender-coded “special-interest groups” and the social welfare state.

The ideological framing of social problems as a matter of individual self-will and moral restraint employed by the New Right during the 1980s are representative of what several scholars have identified as a more general modernist turn toward a therapeutic ethos (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1996; Lasch, 1979; Lears, 1981; Rapping, 1997; Rose, 1990). As Lears (1981) explains, the development of therapy’s social influence can be traced to the turbulent sociocultural shifts from religion to science, from farm to factory, from scarcity to abundance, and from self-sacrifice to self-realization that took place during the turn of the century. Emerging from this transformation was the rhetoric of therapy: a historically specific discursive formation marked by therapeutic buzzwords – personal responsibility, recovery, and self-transformation – and therapeutic values – individualism, famililism, and self-help (Cloud, 1998). In this regard the therapeutic ethos is marked by three central characteristics. First, as an ideological strategy of crisis management deployed at different times in United States history (particularly as a response to social conflict with regard to race, class, gender, and sexuality), the therapeutic effectively locates blame and responsibility for social/collective problems to the private sphere. A second defining feature of the therapeutic ethos specific to late modernity and the shift to late capitalism is the articulation of self-improvement and self-transformation to the body and lifestyle/consumer choices. It is in this sense a
biological do-it-yourself discourse of self-betterment, independence, and self-sufficiency, where through the workings of the market and working on the body individuals are afforded the opportunity to share in the pleasures, freedom, success, mobility, and self-esteem of the good life.\(^1\) The third defining feature of therapeutic discourses is that they are significantly gendered. As Wood (1993) contends, therapeutic discourses, insofar as they are personalizing and domesticating, often are coded as feminine discourses, and women are prescribed a particular agency in implementing therapeutic solutions to crises.

Most explicitly, the neoconservative appeal to the therapeutic discourse of individualism and self-help of the 1980s was largely figured through what Ingham (1985) describes as “a national preoccupation with the body and lifestyle politics” (p. 48). According to Cole and Hribar (1995) this preoccupation as it was “articulated in the United States in the context of Reagan’s war on drugs and AIDS, was most explicitly bound within the logic of addiction, a logic that depends on free will and locates insufficient free will in the bodies of Other” (p. 355). As Jeffords (1994) explains:

In the dialectic of reasoning that constituted the Reagan movement, bodies were deployed in two fundamental categories: the errant body containing sexually transmitted disease, immorality, illegal chemicals, “laziness”, and endangered fetuses which we can call the “soft body”; and the normative body that enveloped strength, labor, determination, loyalty, and courage — the “hardbody” — the body that was to come to stand for the emblem of Reagan philosophies, politics, and economies (pp. 24-25).

A recurring theme within popular media throughout the 1980s, this system of thought marked by patriotism, sexuality, race, and gender produced an affective economy of
images populated by productive and non-productive bodies. Capitalizing on the neoconservative ideology of lifestyle, these images were characterized by a solicitation of the deep-self, free will, and a desire to work on the body and consume commodities in order to maintain the body and stabilize identity (Cole & Hribar, 1995). For example, the popularization of the hard, masculine, white body as the embodiment of Reagan era ideals, was routinely made visible via films/characters such as Rambo (Jeffords, 1994) as well as the figure of working-out yuppie, defined by a consumerist-orientated philosophy of self-improvement and quality of life (Howell, 1991). At the same time, following this dialectic reasoning, gendered and racially-coded images of bodies marked as morally weak and in need of discipline were generated through debates around urban poverty, the war on drugs, welfare, teen pregnancy, abortion, and AIDS.

As the discourse of the hardbody/softbody was articulated to the New Right’s anti-welfare agenda, it served to legitimate the Reagan administration’s assertion that the economic turmoil, and its attendant forms of human troubles within America’s inner cities, were the consequences of cultural pathologies driven by individual deviance, immorality, or weakness. Most explicitly, this appeal to individualism and free-will was figured through the so-called breakdown of the black family (Cole, 1996; Reeves & Campbell, 1994). Signified by the welfare mother and the absent inseminating black male, “the failed black family” became historical mechanism for displacing the social, economic, and political forces shaping the lives of the urban poor. Characterizing welfare dependence, particularly its supposed primary beneficiary, the welfare mother, as deviant, immoral, and lazy, this blame-the-victim mentality became the organizing logic behind the government’s systematic defunding of social welfare programs during the 1980s. As Cole and Hribar
(1995), building on Ingham (1985) contend, the Reagan administration capitalized on a discourse of individualism, will, and personal resolve that effectively transposed structural and social problems into individual inadequacies; people in trouble were reconceptualized as people who make trouble.³

The devastating attacks upon federally funded social welfare programs during the 1980s were also closely tied to the New Right’s pro-family (anti-feminist, anti-gay) agenda. This argument, as it was articulated in the 1980s, relied upon the demonization of movement feminism and the presumed casual relationship between feminist activism and the decay of traditional moral values, the collapse of the nuclear family, and the obfuscation or “pollution” or gender boundaries.⁴ Under the logic of the New Right, movement feminism was rearticulated as anti-women: denigrating women who choose domesticity, and leaving those women who wanted and tried to “have it all”, disillusioned and dissatisfied (Cole & Hribar, 1995; Whelehan, 1995). Highlighting the media’s role in the constitution of anti-feminist backlash sentiments of the 1980s, Faludi (1991) notes that during this time, the popular landscape was saturated with reports suggesting that single were women suffering from record levels of depression, and professional women were struggling with infertility and succumbing to “burnout”, a syndrome that supposedly caused a wide range of mental and physical illness. If women had not received their independence, the backlash theory went, then the single ones would be married and the careerists would be home with their children – in both cases, feeling calmer, healthier, and saner.

At the core of the New Right’s pro-family (anti-feminist, anti-gay) agenda was the question of women’s reproductive agency (Reeves & Campbell, 1994). For example, in
critiques of the “underclass,” low-income women of color were portrayed as particularly
dangerous and amoral agents of social decay, whose unrestrained sexual urges promoted
illegitimate births, a cycle of dependency, and subsequent disintegration of the family.
Summarizing the news media coverage of the cocaine epidemic of the 1980s, Reeves and
Campbell (1994) argue that two stereotypical maternal figures dominated the media
landscape: “the composite [white] Reaganite “she” in need of protection [and] the [black]
-crack mother … a composite ‘she devil’ in need of discipline” (p. 207). While
conservatives and popular media encouraged low-income women of color to bear fewer
children, middle and upper class Caucasian women were urged to bear more children.
During this time, the mass media bombarded white professional women with warnings of
declining birth rates and an infertility epidemic among middle-class Caucasian women that
accompanied career pursuits and delayed childbearing. Tying the fall of the birthrate with
the rise in women’s rights, conservative politicians and social analysts urged middle class
women to refuse the “feminist” allure of careers in order to maintain U.S. world
dominance and social order (Faludi, 1991; Wattenberg, 1987). In sum, popular discourses
suggested that the wrong women (read: low income and women of color) were having too
many children while those best prepared for motherhood were delaying childbearing until
it was too late.

Given the convergence of anti-movement feminist sentiments with the
neoconservative rearticulation of the body, identity, and difference, Cole and Hribar (1995)
suggest that the 1980s national imaginary can also be thought of as a postfeminist
imaginary. The discourses constituting postfeminism are characterized by three major
ideas. First, in a general sense, postfeminism signifies a “shift from a historical moment
characterized by activist feminisms (which took their form in demonstrations, the establishment of domestic violence shelters, and feminist health projects, and political identities) to a historical moment dominated by popular feminisms” (p. 356). In this sense, postfeminism does not refer to the absence of feminism, but rather signifies the recuperation and distorted vulgarization of feminist ideas (Whelehan, 1995). Second, postfeminism is characterized by a displacement of the anxieties between feminism and consumption. Where the very nature of feminism presupposes a hostility and discord with consumption, the postfeminist imperative replaces activism and consciousness-raising with benefits and solutions attainable only through the market (Avenose, 1992; Cole & Hribar, 1995; Lafrance, 1998). Lastly, postfeminism is characterized by the belief that women have achieved full equality, and that consequently, the women’s movement is no longer needed or required (Goldman, 1992; Humm, 1995; Lafrance, 1998).

The historical shift from activist feminisms to popular feminisms during the 1980s is also marked by what several scholars have identified as a discursive reconciliation of the therapeutic with feminism.⁵ As Cloud (1998) and Rapping (1997) note, the feminist understanding of personal and emotional issues as political and socially determinant were revised through their articulation with the self-help movement and neoconservative discourses. In other words, in its postfeminist incarnation, the practice of consciousness-raising was seen as an end in itself, aimed at simply redeeming its participants, while failing to address any collective context in which one might act to change the significant obstacles to individual mobility and well-being. To this extent as feminism became commodified, and established itself in the realm of the popular, the recuperation of feminism with the therapeutic generated a female-targeted self-help industry, comprised of
television talk shows, media “experts”, and mass market books promoting the postfeminist rhetoric of “recovery” and “self-transformation”.

Helping to displace the antagonism between feminism and consumption, advertisers, responding to feminist critiques of consumerist discourses, particularly images of women, converted feminism into signs and values associated with certain products seemingly aligned with feminist values, meanings, and goals (Cole & Hribar, 1995; Goldman, 1992). To this extent, commodity feminism was largely formulated around the incorporation and promotion, within advertising, of what appeared to be feminist-sanctioned positive images of women who were “defined through a series of signs and attitudes that converged around the characteristics of the neoliberal subject: individuality, self-acceptance, choice, and independence” (Cole & Hribar, 1995, p. 356). The popularization of feminism was also notably marked by the emergence of a celebrity industry. Comprised of many diverse and mutually contingent spaces celebrity feminism included, “feminist” media stars, television shows, movies, multi-national corporations, political and social controversies (Wicke, 1994). Finally, postfeminism was popularly manifested by way of a nostalgic discourse of domesticity that served to reaffirm and naturalize traditional womanhood defined through the family, marriage, heterosexuality, and proper gender. This “new traditionalism” was characterized by the routine (fictional) suggestion made via the popular media and advertising that women were willingly fleeing the workforce or making less demanding career choices in order to devote themselves to be “better” mothers (Faludi, 1991). In sum, “although diverse, postfeminist spaces are not self-contained nor are they mutually exclusive; they most unequivocally converge around a
sense of women who had it all – and still have it – or who have had enough and women who have not had it all because of their own inadequacies” (Cole & Hribar, 1995; p. 356).

The aforementioned conditions and forces mark the context, as well as the ideological complex, into which the athletic female body of the 1980s was articulated and in which popular discourses concerning women’s sport and fitness took place. Following the postfeminist sensibilities on offer, these discourses were marked by the repeated suggestion that as a result of the female sport revolution, this decade marked the dawn of a new age of gender equality in American athletics. As P.S. Wood (1980) commenting on the so-called “explosion” in female competitive sports of the past decade noted in a cover story for The New York Times Magazine, “If women have not yet achieved equal rights or equal time on the playing fields of America, or equal space in the halls of fame, they have, as they say, come a long way, and they are moving up fast” (p. 32). Among the list of recent achievements in female athletics the article cites a six-fold increase in female athletic participation in high school in the past ten years, a 250 percent increase in college since early 1970s, and increased financial rewards for female athletes, such as college scholarships and professional salaries that allow women to earn a living through sport. Appealing to the overall sense of optimism underlying the state of female athletics in America during the 1980s, the article concludes that in light of the present success of Title IX, the nation had only begun to see what girls and women in sport will accomplish. In a similar vein, Time captured the “feel good” postfeminist sentiments associated with the female sport revolution and its most revolutionary by-product, the empowered athletic woman:
You’ve come a long way sister. The gym classes you skipped at school now form a significant part of your adult entertainment. You are working hard, playing hard, making yourself hard and strong. The sports for which you were once only a cheerleader now serve as you after-work recreation and thanks to Title IX, part of your school-age daughter’s curriculum. Spurred by feminism’s promise of physical, domestic, and economic freedom, you have done what few generations of women have dared or chosen to do. You have made muscles – a body of them – and it shows (Corliss, 1982; p. 75).

Offering yet another assessment of these changes with regard to the broader gains made for women as a result of the second-wave feminist movement, Dorthy Schefer (1988) writing for Vogue asserted that “Nowhere have women’s achievements been more remarkable than in sports – a dramatic accomplishment, considering women until recently were relegated to third-rate training” (p. 196). In sum, by recalling past moments through which female athletics had been limited, mediated discourses offered assurance that its “shape” had changed and would continue to do so by the time the curtain fell on the 1980s.

Also contributing to the popular notion that gender equity in American sport was only a matter of time, were repeated media assurances that historical fears about physical and psychological risks of female sport participation were unfounded and outdated. In keeping with media discourses of the 1970s, the primary authority used to substantiate this assessment was sport science research on the female/sport relationship. However, unlike previous references, this work was not appropriated to negotiate anxieties about the ill-effects of sport and exercise for women, but as definitive proof that these concerns were unnecessary. For example, in reference to beliefs about female athletic inferiority and
reproductive health risks associated with female sport participation, a 1983 article in the *Reader’s Digest* titled “The Olympics: Unfair to Women” author Walter Ross (1983) noted that “findings in sports medicine, physiology and psychology generally do not support these views. On the contrary, they largely disprove them” (p. 19). Separating these “popular beliefs from facts” Ross offers an extensive summary of specific scientific evidence disputing such beliefs, concluding that there is no justification for prohibiting women from competing in most sports. Similarly, illustrating the cultural authority of sport science research on female athletics in relation its presumed (mythic) risks, articles in both *Newsweek* and *The New York Times Magazine* noted that there was little scientific or anecdotal evidence to support folk wisdom suggesting women are more prone to athletic injury or are incapable of handling the mental strain of competition (Gelman, 1981; Wood, 1980). Further emphasizing the irrationality underscoring historical arguments against female athletics, both articles reiterate the point made repeatedly within media debates about female sport participation during the 1970s, that in some respects women may be a good deal tougher than men. Specifically, both articles note that women’s overall higher average percentage of body fat, and ability to convert it into energy, may make them more efficient at sports such as swimming, and at long-distance events such as marathons and super-marathons. Capturing the overall sense that fears about female sport participation and their related prejudices were no longer valid, Wood (1980) writing for *The New York Times Magazine* noted in reference to these facts, “the point here is that, if concern for safety is a determining factor, women should have the same rights and opportunities to participate in competitive athletics as men” (p. 38).
Mobilized by the contemporary emphases on fitness, health, and personal responsibility, the bulk of mass media discourses concerning female athletics during the 1980s also continued to advance the idea, popularized by the mass media dissemination of sport science research during the 1970s, that the healthy female body was a physically active one. Illustrating the continued authority of this work, fashion magazine *Vogue* provided two in-depth reviews of the specific health benefits available to women via sport and exercise. Addressing the relationship between exercise and women’s health, author Janice Kaplan (1985) noted that exercise can reduce the risk of hypertension, high cholesterol, and diabetes. Articulating the new athletic ideal of feminine beauty to the politics of lifestyle, R. James Barnard, professor of kinesiology at the University of California at Los Angeles quoted in the piece urged that “there’s good evidence that many degenerative diseases are aggravated by lifestyle than by the biological aging process … paying more attention to exercise could change that” (p. 407). In helping to encourage women to become more aggressive in using sport, exercise, and nutrition to improve overall health, the article also recommends several specific dietary and fitness related practices. Similarly, as part of its regular “Fitness Now” column, *Vogue* author Dr. Jack Wilmore (1988) professor of kinesiology and health education, reporting on the topics discussed at the annual meetings of the American College of Sports Medicine, suggested numerous ways that sport and exercise can increase women’s overall quality of life and longevity. These included among others: aiding in weight loss, the prevention of heart disease, reducing the risk of certain forms of cancer (particularly breast and colon cancer), reducing the effects of premenstrual syndrome, and increasing bone mass. In a slightly
different vein, *Time’s* cover story on the new ideal of beauty highlighted the recent transformation in cultural attitudes toward female athleticism,

In the old days, when women’s shapes were expected to be either pillows or posts, today’s muscular woman might have been considered a freak. No more, [there is] nothing unfeminine about being healthy, health, is beauty, you can’t have one without the other (Corliss, 1982, p. 73).

Indicative of the postfeminist moment, reports such as these suggested that negative social sanctions against female sport participation had not only dissipated, but that as a result, women were to take agency for their physical fitness and, in turn, health.

Putting to rest questions about the physically masculinizing effects of female sport participation, and providing further justification that sport and exercise were safe and healthy practices for women, several publications laid claim to the benefits of physical activity on sexual and reproductive health. For example, in an endorsement of the athletic female body as healthy, disciplined, and therefore properly reproductive, *Harper’s Bazaar* cited research indicating that as a function of increasing women’s overall health, vigorous physical activity also improved sexual function (“Wake up your sex life,” 1982).

Recalling historical concerns about the health risks of sport, exercise, and women’s reproductive function, Gideon Panter M.D. (1981), diplomat of the American Board of Obstetrics and Gynecology writing for *Parents*, cited a study by Dr. R.H. Dressendorfer examining the effects of a strenuous jogging program on pregnant women up to the time of delivery and postpartum. The findings of the study suggested that jogging at up to 95% of one’s pre-pregnancy maximum heart-rate produced no ill-effects for the woman or the fetus. Furthermore, the article suggests that while pregnancy is not a time to begin a new
sport, women can continue to participate in their pre-pregnancy activities (i.e., skiing and horseback riding) unless they cause pain or discomfort. Revisiting scientific evidence put forth during the 1970s, several reports also noted that athletic women generally have fewer problems (i.e., shorter labors, and fewer Cesarean sections) in giving birth than inactive ones. Relatedly, Brie P. Quinby (1984) writing for Mademoiselle, suggested that it was not only safe for women to train during pregnancy but that they “train” for pregnancy, urging that “how well it (pregnancy) goes and how healthy the baby is, depend on her nutrition and well-being” (p. 50). The article, aptly titled “Are you ‘Fit’ for Motherhood?” discusses the specific ways in which a woman can “get a healthy start on a healthy pregnancy” including quitting “bad habits” such as smoking and drinking, limiting caffeine intake, practicing good nutrition, losing weight, and getting fit before conception (p. 50). Concluding, Quinby likens the physical strain of pregnancy, labor, and delivery to running a marathon, suggesting, “You wouldn’t consider running a marathon without training for it, would you … why not train for pregnancy too?” (p. 50).

Emphasizing the positive link between sport, exercise, and pregnancy, several publications also cited recent evidence indicating that pregnancy may even aid athletic performance. For instance both Sport and Discover printed articles charting the record-setting post-partum achievements of elite female runners such as Valerie Brisco-Hooks, an African American U.S. sprinter who won three gold medals two years after giving birth (“Athletic Moms: No More Pregnant Pause,” 1986; “Moms May Just be on the Right Track,” 1986). Speculating as to the cause of these improvements, Discover cited the views of Georgetown University gynecologist and expert on women’s sports medicine Mona Shangold, who asserted that women who had given birth were not only more
confident, fulfilled, better able to handle pain, and thus able to train with greater
determination, but also reaped physiological benefits, including muscle development as a
result of increased weight-bearing, the ability to radiate heat better, and improved heart
function (“Moms May Just be on the Right Track,” 1986). Similarly, appealing to
traditional notions of reproduction as the hallmark of female fulfillment, Sport stressed that
the figurative changes in a women’s heart that accompany pregnancy and in turn,
motherhood, such as increased confidence, were equally beneficial to athletic competition
(“Athletic Moms: No More Pregnant Pause,” 1986). In sum, by appealing to the discourse
of the hardbody/softbody, particularly as it related to discourses concerning female
sexuality in the postfeminist moment, reports emphasizing the health benefits of physical
activity on pregnancy, and conversely, the benefits of pregnancy on sport performance and
mental health, served to delineate the acceptable boundaries of female reproduction,
suggesting that a responsible mother was a physically active one.

The presumed resolution of past anxieties concerning femininity, health, and sport
during the 1980s was also made visible via the popular articulation of physical strength
with psychological empowerment and feminine beauty. While mainstream publications of
the 1970s often tacitly forged and reinforced the articulation of the athletic female body
and psychological androgyny with self-efficacy and self-esteem through the authority of
science, during the 1980s, this articulation, mobilized by contemporary emphases on self-
sufficiency and lifestyle, was presented as commonsense. For example highlighting the
self-authorial commonsense underscoring the athletic ideal of beauty, Time noted,

The new body is to be seen and appreciated in the sum and the movement of its
parts, the most important of which may be the brain that determined to shape them
…with exercise you get strength and grace. The strength makes you self-assured.

The grace makes you more feminine” (Corliss, 1982; p. 72).

Referring to the female athleticism as the aesthetic manifestation of gender equality, Corliss (1982) explained, “Women liberated from the courtesan’s need to entice, have become more enticing. To be in condition is not only healthy, it is sexy – and inseparable from a strength of the self and the spirit” (p. 73). Similarly, equating female physicality to psychological health, Grace Lichtenstein (1981) writing for *Vogue* asserted that “feeling good about the body also means feeling good about brain, sense of humor, and other abilities”, “athletic champions represent a breed of women unafraid to be that strong, that tough.” (p. 458). According to *Time* the self-confidence and assertiveness symbolized by the athletic female aesthetic also signaled a cross-generational progression toward gender equity,

What is great about the new women is her fearlessness, she’s standing up in a way she never used to … She is teaching her own daughter to stand even straighter and stronger … The previous generation of mothers had not put much store in exercise, for themselves or their children. But members of the Jane Fonda generation have remade their own bodies, and are encouraging their young daughters to start from scratch (Corliss, 1982; p. 77).

Thus in keeping with postfeminist discourses, reports such as these implied that the female sport revolution had not only afforded women and girls new opportunities for self-actualization but pointed more broadly to the fact that women’s liberation had arrived.

Though the fitness craze was mostly a white middle-and upper-middle-class phenomenon, in keeping with the national preoccupation with the body on offer in 1980s
America, popular reports stressed that the much-celebrated female athletic aesthetic was accessible to all women. As Corliss (1982) writing for *Time* asserted, “The fit look has nothing elitist about it. It represents an attainable goal for all ages, races, walks of life. It requires little more than the will to work at them” (p. 73). In a similar vein, appealing to the discourse of the hardbody/softbody, body-builder Rachel McLish, quoted in the article asserts that “you have a simple choice of what to put on your bones: fat or muscle. Working out is a positive addiction” (p. 75). Taking this logic a step further, Corliss urged that the fit body was not only equally attainable, but also a desirable expression of a woman’s self-realization,

As a symbol of status, health, or sex appeal, the strong body is a sensible goal – and not only for those women whose livelihoods depend on the rigorous care and feeding of their bodies. Jane Doe as well as Jane Fonda is making a good habit out of exercise, and weightlifting, and has the new body to prove it. A well-toned body shows that a woman cares enough about herself to improve herself (p. 74).

As part of the ever-expanding U.S. consumer economy, contemporary emphases on lifestyle, fitness, health, and America’s newfound acceptance of female physicality, the 1980s also witnessed the continued growth of the women’s fitness market. For example, seeking to compensate for limited economic success and create a new market segment of female fitness consumers, several leading sport and fitness companies began to manufacture and market athletic apparel and shoes designed and sized specifically for women (Goldman & Papson, 1998). Following the postfeminist response to feminist critiques of “unhealthy” and “unrealistic” female beauty standards this female-targeted approach differed from the more traditional methods of selling athletic apparel and female-
specific products. This strategy, deployed by companies such as Reebok and Nike, emphasized the healthy, empowered, athletic female body as an alternative to the more sedentary and decorative ideal of heterosexual femininity. The continued growth of the women’s fitness industry during the 1980s also sparked a proliferation of television shows, infomercials, books, magazines (i.e., *Fit* and *New Body*), and related celebrity fitness experts (i.e., Jane Fonda, Kathy Smith, and Richard Simmons) designed to attract and engage women consumers.

Despite the celebratory spirit surrounding America’s seemingly growing acceptance of female athleticism, as part of the broader backlash against feminism during the 1980s, the apparent gains of the female sport revolution animated both extreme and subtle opposition. To the extent that female sport participation was deemed safe by science and medicine, popularly valorized, and women were seemingly given the equal opportunity to compete, the competitive worthiness of the athletic body was repeatedly called into question.

The most blatant and organized of these attacks ironically was waged against the popularly designated liberator of female athletics – Title IX. Echoing broader feminist backlash of the 1980s, opponents of the law argued that the gains of women under Title IX had been made at the expense of men’s intercollegiate athletic programs. In efforts to reverse these gains, those in opposition to Title IX argued that its uniform application in college athletics be eliminated, claiming that its provision, which prohibited sex discrimination in educational institutions that receive federal funds, did not apply to athletics because no athletic programs receive federal financial assistance (Eitzen & Sage, 1986).
Specifically the question of the reach of Title IX’s provision was tested during the early 1980s when Grove City College, a small private college in Pennsylvania, seeking to preserve its institutional autonomy by declining state and federal assistance, refused to sign a statement affirming its compliance with Title IX. Given that the Grove City did enroll a large number of students who received federally funded Basic Educational Opportunity Grants (BEOG), the Department of Education determined that it was subject to, and subsequently in violation of, the nondiscrimination requirements of Title IX and terminated federal assistance to the student financial aid program. In response, Grove City, on behalf of its students, sued for reinstatement of the BEOG grants. In the case, *Grove City College v. Bell* (1984) the Supreme Court favored the more limited interpretation (also favored by the Reagan administration) of Title IX, ruling that the law did not cover entire educational institutions – only those programs directly receiving federal funds. For all intents and purposes, Title IX was dead. Shortly after the Grove City decision, several colleges, no longer feeling the pressure to behave equitably, cut scholarships for their female athletes and all pending and open complaint files, including those that had already resulted in findings of discrimination, were summarily closed. For several years following the decision, Congress tried unsuccessfully to pass corrective legislation that would reinstate the institution-wide interpretation of Title IX. Finally, in 1987 Congress restored this interpretation by successfully passing the Civil Rights Restoration Act.

Resistance against the changes brought by the female sport revolution were also made visible via questions about the efficacy of coed youth athletic competition. As part of the broader backlash against the gains of second-wave feminism, coed sports drew the
fire of sexual conservatives who expressed concern that instead of fostering equilibrium, the feminist move to integrate youth sports had promoted sexual insecurity and not only compromised sport, but also the physical and psychological development of its participants. One particularly influential and comprehensive article highlighting this controversy, was Psychology Today’s aptly titled March 1983 feature story: “The Failure of Coed Sports”. Veiled in a language of compassion and concern for the desires of America’s sporting youth, the article begins with the following statement:

The idea was to bust up the training camps of machodom, turn cheerleaders into quarterbacks, and let the chips of gender identification fall where they might. But after a decade of attempts to rewrite the lineups of childhood, the great coed sports experiment appears to be failing. Although scarcely anyone asks them, most girls – and especially boys – don’t seem to want to any part of it, for reasons that may be as deeply entrenched as anatomy and the torturous uncertainty of adolescence itself (Monagan, 1983, p. 58).

Aligning with the popular backlash characterization of feminism as a zero-sum-game for both men and women, author David Monagan (1983) continues by suggesting that coed athletics has not only failed to open up more opportunities for girls, but threatened the integrity of sport for all children:

Across the country many children face the choice of coed competition or no competition at all. The evidence suggests that significant numbers are choosing the latter course, while many more simply muddle through coed sports for a couple of years only to revert to more traditional sex-segregated activities in early adolescence. But thousands of community, school, and national youth sports
leagues keep pushing ahead with new attempts to transform what were once some of the clearer rights of childhood and adolescent passage (p. 58).

In sum, characterizing children as the victims of the failed adult-ideological experiment known as coed sport, the article suggests that boys and girls collective disinterest in mixed gender competition, is evidence of the natural psychological and physiological developmental needs of children.

More specifically, Monagan (1983) questioned the feminist presumption underlying the coed youth sports movement that “any means of breaking down the polarity of the sexes is healthy” (p. 60). Revisiting concerns about the relationship between gender role development and coed sports raised during the 1970s, Monagan asserts that integrating sports, an activity designed to consolidate a group identity (i.e., the team), at a time when children are developmentally searching for a sense of competence and sexual identity, is an “irresponsible”, “unhealthy”, and “ill-timed demand”. For example, despite scientific evidence indicating that mixing genders in early athletic competition promotes a healthier androgynous psychological disposition (i.e., more sensitive men, more assertive women), the article offers contrary scientific evidence indicating that this practice can also promote new ridicule and failure. Citing the views of Richard Gladston, child psychiatrist and assistant professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, the article suggests that early public failure while competing against the opposite sex has been a psychologically crushing humiliation for many youths. As Gladstone quoted in the piece notes, “A team of boys and girls is like a cross between a zebra and an elephant. For developmental purposes, it’s not positive or healthy for anybody. It begs the question of adolescence” (p. 58). Highlighting the specific damaging effects of coed sport on sex role development, the
article also incites the opinion of psychoanalytic adolescent development expert Peter Blos. According to Blos, mixed-gender competition during adolescence is particularly threatening for boys who need to reject maternal commands and girls in general, in attempt to establish an independent self. Girls, on the other hand, unencumbered by Oedipal fears and social taboos, adjust to puberty differently, by either moving toward the opposite sex or mimicking masculine behavior and dress in the tomboy period, thereby being spared some of the anxieties of coed competition. Drawing upon Gladston and Blos’ critical expertise, Monagan returns to earlier critiques of coed sport, suggesting that it is damaging to boy’s egos, posing a cultural Catch-22 – “where they are told to be gentlemanly and, in essence, to keep on their kid gloves in competing with girls, but subject to ridicule and loss of self-esteem if they lose” (p. 62). Lending support to the case for segregated sport, Monagan contends that pushing girls into either coed or traditionally male sports, is also problematic for gender identity development because it promises “a false developmental haven in a temporarily institutionalized tomboyism” (p. 62).

In challenging the “ideological pressure” to institutionalize coed youth athletic competition, Monagan (1983) also revisits the question, repeatedly raised during the 1970s, of whether girls were physiologically capable of competing with boys. Illustrating the lasting influence of sport science research in helping to define the female athletic body, the article repeatedly draws upon the scientifically supported notion, popularized within debates about female sport revolution, of the female body as physically inferior. For example, in disputing scientific evidence used to bolster support for coed athletic competition, which suggested that in early adolescence girls tend to equal or outperform boys, the article offers an extensive review of new research indicating that “boys and girls
are rarely physical equals” (p. 60). For example, emphasizing physiological gender differences and their relation to sport performance, the article cites recent research evidence gathered at the Youth Sports Institute of Michigan State University, which indicated that as early as 2 1/2 years old, boys can already outrun girls. Countering the notion that true athletic divergence occurs at ages 13-14 or is due in part to cultural restrictions on girls’ physical activity, the piece also refers to research led by the Institute’s director, Vern Seefeldt, identified as one of the nation’s leading investigators of coed sports. According to Seefeldt’s assessments, in five out of eight standard tests of strength, speed, and agility, boys demonstrated superiority by the age of 7 1/2 to 8 (in two tests they were equal; in a test of flexibility, the girls were superior). Further challenging the notion that girls can physically match boys’ athletic prowess, Monagan cites scientific evidence indicating what appear to be unequivocal gender differences in physical performance and potential. Evidence of this mismatch include, a divergence in dynamic strength (relative to weight) between boys and girls at age 13, and in boys: a greater respiratory volume and higher systolic pressure to compensate for physical exertion, better ability to deliver oxygen and rid the body of lactic acid from exercise, and a more athletically proficient bone structure of the lower torso. Instead of enhancing and creating more sport opportunities for girls, Monagan suggests that given the biologically-based gender differences in sport performance, “forced integration would mean that only the few outstanding girls would have a chance to play, leaving the vast majority of girls unable to participate” (p. 61). To this extent, resistance against coed sport competition suggested that girls, and by extension women, were at best, deserving of separate-but-equal competitive sport opportunities.
Backlash against the changing nature of female athletics during the 1980s was also made visible via the popularization of scientific research evidence indicating biologically-based, gender differences in sport performance. Illustrating the enduring influence of sport science in helping to shape popular definitions of the athletic female body, unlike similar reports of the 1970s, the question of female athletic inferiority was no longer the topic of debate, but rather repeatedly presented as a biologically-based, scientifically indisputable fact. During this time references to exercise and physiology research examining gender differences in body composition (muscle mass, body fat), hormones, overall body size, muscular endurance, and muscular strength in relationship to sport performance appeared within numerous and widely divergent publications including, among others, *Newsweek*, *Esquire*, and *The New York Times Magazine* (Gelman, 1981; Satterthwaite, 1983; Wood, 1980). For example, in an implicit reference to sport science research examining gender differences in sport performance, both *Newsweek* and *The New York Times Magazine* emphasized the physical differences between men and women, noting that men on average are biologically predisposed to have more muscle mass and less body fat, larger hearts and lungs, more hemoglobin in their blood, as well as longer arms, legs, and wider shoulders than women (Gelman, 1981; Wood, 1980).

In assessing the relationship of these differences as they apply to sport performance, popular reports repeatedly asserted that women were biologically incapable of matching male levels of sport achievement. For example, one particularly illustrative example was a 1980 feature story in *The New York Times Magazine* titled “Sex Differences in Sports”. According to author Wood (1980), the implications of this work are clear, “women are no match for men in football, baseball, and basketball, all of which
place a high premium on upper body strength” (p. 96). Acknowledging America’s increasing gender equity in sport, Wood reinforces the notion that biology is destiny,

   No one suggests now that equal experience is going to lead to equal performance in all things athletic, or even that the average woman can match the average man. The physical plant is not the same. Men are bigger and stronger, can run faster, throw and jump farther (p. 38).

Newsweek’s 1981 feature story profiling several controversial new areas of research and theories about sex-difference echoes these sentiments. The separate sport-specific segment of the piece titled “In Sports, ‘Lions vs. Tigers’”, opens with the following statement:

   Athletics is one area of sex-difference research that generates little scientific controversy. Physiologists, coaches and trainers generally agree that while women will continue to improve their performances, they will never fully overcome inherent disadvantages in size and strength. In sports where power is a key ingredient of success, the best women will remain a stroke behind or a stride slower than the best men (Gelman, 1981, p. 75).

Echoing these sentiments, the article also cites Barbara Drinkwater, physiologist with the University of California at Santa Barbara who noted that, “training reduces fat, but no amount of working out will give a woman the physique of a man. But a woman won’t throw a discus as far as a man” (p. 75). In yet another implicit reference to sport science research regarding gender differences in sport performance, an Esquire article titled “Men Competing with Women” suggested:

   Men on average are bigger and stronger, can run faster, throw and jump farther.

   Women have better tolerance for cold temperatures, better buoyancy, and extra
energy reserves stored in body fat that may give them an advantage in super marathon swims. But in any sport that draws on raw speed and power, men have a decided and enduring advantage (Satterthwaite, 1983, p. 104).

Resonating with broader feminist backlash sentiments, and more sport specific attacks on Title IX, the routine and explicit mention of women’s incontrovertible athletic weaknesses gave scientific justification to the notion that women were not deserving of equal opportunity in sport.

Despite the profound influence of early sport science research on the female/sport relationship in shaping popular definitions and debates about the athletic female body during the 1980s, sport scholars also began to critically evaluate and redirect this work. A discussion of these critiques as well as the central themes and findings of this new research, particularly its articulation to contemporary developments in feminist theory, broader cultural dynamics, and sport-specific transformations of the decade, are the focus of the next section.

Towards a New Sociology of Gender and Sport: Critical Sport Studies in the 1980s

Social reality defines our categories, directs our research perspective and often leads to an interpretation of the results which best supports our preconceived notions of reality (Duquin, 1981, p. 78).

Following the progression of the second-wave feminist movement, feminist thought also became more complex with the development of many feminisms or distinctive strands of feminism, each focusing on specific areas and issues. During the late 1970s, and early 1980s, these various politically-based ideas about women’s oppression became more formalized within an emerging body of feminist scholarship and particular types of feminist theory. At the same time, critical scholars in the United States also began
to show an increasing interest in British cultural studies models, which, like the various stands of feminist theory, offered a means of comprehending and analyzing the struggle between dominant and subordinate groups. Concomitant with these broader scholarly trends, the 1980s also marked a turning point for the study of the female/sport relationship as critical sport scholars, informed by these new developments, began to develop a more formal theoretical self-consciousness about sport. In sum, this new critical agenda in sport studies was characterized by what Hall (1996) identifies as a move from categorical and distributive research – concerned with quantifying and empirically studying gender differences in sport and documenting gender inequalities – to relational analyses – concerned with examining the ways in which sporting practices are historically produced, socially constructed, and culturally defined to serve the interests and needs of powerful groups in society.

To a great extent, modern liberal feminism developed as a wave of theory that reflected and influenced women’s experiences at a certain point of history in the 1960s and 1970s. Bearing the legacy of Western liberal philosophical positions, the focus of this liberal tradition was on equality of access and opportunity. Specifically, liberal feminists contended that a lack of opportunity, seen in socialization practices (in the family and schooling) and through gender stereotyping and discrimination, had denied girls and women the same access and opportunities as boys and men. Consequently, as demonstrated during the second-wave feminist movement in the United States, liberal feminists fought for women’s liberation via changes in the law and in educational practices. Given this, the underlying assumption of a liberal feminist approach to sport is that sport is fundamentally sound and represents a positive experience to which girls and
women need access. From this perspective it is argued that differences in female sport participation are the result of socialization practices as well as unequal access to facilities and resources carried out by social and cultural institutions. Examples of these practices proposed by liberal feminists include the socialization of girls into “feminine” activities such as gymnastics or dance, restrictions on female sporting opportunities within educational settings, and the underrepresentation of women in coaching and leadership posts (Scraton & Flintoff, 2002). Through the work of activists within women and sport initiatives (e.g., Women’s Sport Foundation), and the application of theory to practice, these issues were placed on the agenda of sports organizations, governing bodies, schools and other institutions. As a result, issues of equity and equality became part of the mainstream sports agenda and new opportunities were opened for women. At the same time, early sport science research in the liberal feminist tradition helped to establish the social construction of gender, and in turn, re-examine biological explanations of women’s subordination in sport, as well as document the real distributive inequalities between men’s and women’s sport (Scraton & Flintoff, 2002).

Also developing out of the second-wave feminist movement and radical politics in the 1960s and 1970s, was a strand of feminist thought known as radical feminism. Radical feminism incorporated some of the arguments of liberal feminism but also provided an alternative theory to explain women’s oppression. For radical feminists, the question of women’s oppression was more about the power relations between women and men and the structures and institutions of a society that maintain and reproduce those inequalities. To this end, radical feminism views sexuality as the primary foundation for the formation and maintenance of a structurally-based system of patriarchal power relations, and recasts
relations between women and men in political terms (Echols, 1989). For radical feminists the liberal perspective of gaining access to an unequal society is insufficient, unraveling the complex structure on which gender inequality rests requires a fundamental challenge and transformation to structural power relations. Seeking to meet this challenge, radical feminist activists working in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s responded by celebrating women’s values and practicing a kind of conversion strategy known as consciousness-raising that encouraged women to view their experience, previously thought of as personal and individual (e.g., sexual exploitation or employment discrimination), as social problems embedded in gender inequality. During the late 1970s and 1980s, emerging from this focus, feminist scholars developed a more formal radical-feminist-based theory of gender oppression that helped to formulate influential critiques of the family, marriage, love, motherhood, heterosexuality, sexual violence, capitalism, reproductive policies, the media, science, language and culture, the beauty industry, politics, technology, and the law.

Another strand of feminist thought to develop out of the dialogues constituting the second-wave feminist movement was socialist feminism.⁷ Consisting of a confluence of Marxist, radical, and psychoanalytic schools of feminist theory, socialist feminism stems from Marxist feminists’ dissatisfaction with Marxism’s neglect of gender. Challenging and reworking the Marxist feminist notion that the sexual division of labor and gender inequality is derived from capitalism, class, and economic exploitation, socialist feminism attempts to replace this economic determinist approach by examining the interdependence of class, gender, capitalism, and patriarchy (Boutilier & SanGiovanni, 1983; Scraton & Flintoff, 2002).⁸ To this extent, socialist feminists see the oppression of women as a dual
problem that must be fought by eradicating privilege based on both class and sex.

Developing as a distinct focus of feminist scholarship during the late 1970s and 1980s, early work done under the sign of socialist feminism helped to examine those practices and ideological fields that organize and reproduce gendered economic relations and regulate women’s sexualities (e.g., medicine, science, law, and the media).

A critical, Marxist-informed, interdisciplinary approach to the study of culture, cultural studies developed as a response to the massive cultural changes of postwar Britain during the 1950s and concomitant challenge to orthodox Marxism and American positivist sociology. As such, one of the chief projects of cultural studies was to replace the pragmatic linear determinism that had dominated cultural analyses by clarifying the relationship between the processes of cultural production and ideology. In this sense, the cultural studies tradition was based on a recognition of the underlying tension of dominant and subordinate groups over issues of material distribution and ideological ascendancy (Birrell, 1987a). From the beginning cultural studies has shared concerns and methods of analysis with Marxist theory. One shared assumption is that culture is dialectical in nature: it is theorized “as the site through which social relations are legitimated and mystified, the site through which the social order is constructed, categorized, experiences, and made meaningful and pleasurable – raising questions about the active production of identity, agency and consent” (Cole, 1994, p. 10). Ignited in the wake of the 1960s social movements, British cultural studies and its intersection with feminism, Foucault, and postmodernism also sparked new areas of critical inquiry including gender theory, critical studies of race, gay/lesbian studies, American studies and critical ethnography.\(^9\)
Feminism and cultural studies are compatible in many ways, they share intellectual roots, including a critique of positivism as ahistorical and material, and they share a focus on the struggle between dominant and subordinate groups. Together, the scholarly development of these theoretical perspectives during the 1970s and early 1980s helped to produce several valuable critiques that were particularly influential in shaping sport science research on the female/sport relationship. For instance, it was in this context that feminist scholars came to address the sexism and male biases embedded within the theoretical paradigms and methodological approaches of many academic disciplines. During this time, leading feminist theorists such as Chodorow (1978), Gilligan (1982), and Harding (1986) among others working in the social sciences and humanities exposed the patriarchal nature of these disciplines in which women were represented as the inferior sex, or not at all, and the male perspective rather than the female one, was taken to represent the social norm. Drawing upon radical feminist and socialist feminist theory, feminist theorists also began to recognize the limits of liberal feminism. One of the major criticisms of liberal feminism was that in focusing on changing individual attitudes and on changing legislation, it tended to retain existing patriarchal structures (the family and capitalist system) and equate male values with human values, and in turn encourage women to be more like men. Other feminists also contended that the assumptions of liberal feminism are racist, classist, and heterosexist in that they imply that all women regardless of their race, ethnicity, age, sexual preference, social class, or marital status will have equal access to certain opportunities when they are granted. Drawing upon radical and socialist feminist theory as well as the methods of British cultural studies, feminist scholars also questioned the presumed objectivity of science, suggesting that scientific
practice is socially contextualized. Critiquing scientific practice on the grounds that it was embedded in patriarchal values and interests, these scholars looked to qualitative assessments, rather than the traditional and masculinist quantitative methods, as a means more suited to addressing issues of bias and relational analyses. Following from these critiques as well as radical feminist emphases on women’s experience, some feminist scholars also advocated the use of interactionist methodologies, such as structured interviews, as a way to more fully understand gender dynamics within scientific research. 

Drawing and building upon feminist critiques of science, social science, and liberal feminism, several feminist sport scholars began to apply these critiques within the discipline. For example, in a series of articles examining the status of women in research in physical education, Safrit (1979, 1984), exposed the gender inequality of the sport sciences, noting that female sport scholars were routinely underrepresented in journal publications, and had a higher unemployment rate as well as a lower salary and lower rank than their male counterparts. In reasoning why women were less productive scholars, Safrit (1979, 1984) suggested that these differences were largely due to related gender inequalities in educational access and career opportunities, such as differential training in graduate school, comparatively weak academic credentials, and inadequate support systems for women. In a slightly different vein, Hall (1979) offered a more critical evaluation of the field, arguing that the issues of sexism predominating the sport sciences (e.g., hiring practices, salary differentials, publishing opportunities, and career patterns), were only peripheral to the deeper problem of an “intellectual sexism” grounded in “andocentric assumptions and resultant biases” constituting the discipline. Following feminist critiques of the social sciences, some scholars questioned the use of quantitative
research methods and the influence of social and cultural factors upon the study of the female/sport relationship. For example, in her article “Creating Social Reality: The Case of Women in Sport”, Duquin (1981) highlighted the cultural dependency of sport science research, and thus the sexist practice of studying sex differences in sport. Likewise, in her assessment of the treatment of gender in sport within sport science research, Birrell (1983) critiqued the use of theories and methodologies typically used to study males within research designed to investigate women and gender differences in sport. According to Birrell, such methods were inadequate for the study of the female/sport relationship, because they were grounded in andocentric biases that served to reproduce male interpretations of the social world.

It is within this context of broader concerns about the discipline that sport scholars, building on, and drawing from cultural studies and feminist theory, also came to critique specific research traditions and past practices in the field. Proceeding from the more general critiques of sex role research, these scholars openly questioned the use of the notion of sex roles as a basis for the study of gender and sport. In her review and assessment of the literature on the psychological determinants and consequences of female sport participation, Birrell (1983) provided an excellent critique of the problems involved in sport science research examining the personality and gender roles of female sports participants. Although Birrell endorses the practice of biological classification, and the connection made between biological or physiological sex differences and behavior inherent in this work, she also contends that the sex-role literature is plagued by sex bias in conceptualization, methodology, and theory. One major conceptual problem concerns the notion of categorizing traits by sex. Assigning traits to a particular gender, according to
Birrell, serves to normalize culturally-based notions of sex and gender, and perpetuates the sexist tendency to value more highly those traits assigned as male. Moreover, for Birrell, these assessments are embedded in culturally dependent definitions of masculinity and femininity and are valid only in the context in which they are studied. Lastly, in Birrell’s assessment, research on masculinity and femininity is most problematic because it conceives of these concepts as bi-polar and therefore obscures the complexity of sex-based tendencies in behavior.

In response to this critique, Birrell (1983) suggests that the concept of psychological androgyny is perhaps a more useful concept because it undermines these bi-polar conceptions and broadens the range of acceptable behaviors for male and females. In another critique, Hall (1981, 1988) expressed some major concerns about sport science research on sex-roles. According to Hall (1981) the concept is, sociologically illogical in that we do not speak of race roles (or age roles or class roles) because we do not attempt to explain differential behavior patterns on the basis of race, age, or social class alone, but we do explain them in terms of a power differential that certainly coincides with race class and age distinctions (p 21).

Also problematic for Hall is the way in which focusing on individual roles, tends to displace focus on social structure thereby depoliticizing the central questions of power and control in explaining gender inequality. Moreover, Hall contends the use of analytical concepts like “sex role stereotyping”, “sex role socialization”, and “sex role orientation” in concrete terms tend to reify such as concepts as social fact. Lastly, unlike Birrell, Hall (1981) suggests that the concept of androgyny is equally problematic because it simply combines the old dualities of masculinity and femininity, concepts that are themselves
socially constructed, and thereby will do little to bring about real change in a society that is fundamentally oppressive to women.

Proceeding from feminist critiques of sport science research, some scholars also questioned the soundness of research examining role conflict among female athletes. According to several scholars, this research suffers from a number of poorly conceived, vaguely understood, and inadequately articulated conceptual and methodological problems (Hall, 1981; Boutilier & SanGiovanni, 1983). Relevant conceptual issues identified by these authors include problems of scaling and measurement, imprecise conceptualization of variables, sampling biases and restrictions, and the failure to identify the contextual and other mediating influences (e.g., the level and type of sport involvement, and the way in which sex roles intersect with other social memberships) upon the hypothesized relationship between sport participation and role conflict. Additionally, Boutilier and San Giovanni (1983) make the point that role conflict research is marred by problems of liberal bias. Following more general critiques of the limits of liberal feminism, they suggest that these early analyses of women in sport remain locked in largely liberal feminist concerns about sex differences that defines women and their world, not sport itself as problematic. Moreover, Boutilier and San Giovanni suggest that this liberal emphasis (evidenced by the near obsession over the question of whether a woman can be feminine and play sport) is especially problematic in that it has resulted in an uncritical acceptance of the traditional view of women and the conventional arrangements of sport, that fails to challenge the broader structural relations of sport and extend sport opportunities to all women. Finally, elaborating on these critiques, Theberge’s (1985a) “Toward a Feminist Alternative of Sport as a Male Preserve” argues that the biggest problem with role conflict research is
that, like research on role conflict in general, it is lacking an adequate sociological perspective. That is to say for Theberge, by emphasizing individual attributes, perceptions, and “felt states”, role conflict research depoliticizes and individuates women’s sporting experience, thereby defining the problem as one that lies with women rather than examining the broader ideological and structural forces that inform and limit women’s sporting experiences.

Resonating with more general critiques of the social sciences, sport science scholars interested in evaluating the current status of research on the female/sport relationship as well as advancing the field, also questioned the conceptual and methodological underpinnings of the literature on socialization and sport. For example, exposing the limitations of sport socialization research, Theberge (1985b) contends that while the practice of recognizing the connections between sport and other social experiences within the literature is well conceived, the manner in which it is explored often obscures the broader ideological and structural forces that define and constrain women’s sporting practice as well as the place of sport in the process of gender role socialization and gender inequality. Also addressing the limits of socialization research, Birrell (1982) suggested that the practice of bringing women back into social science research, while worthy, is problematic because it does not provide an evaluation of the different meaning of sport for women and men. According to Birrell, this practice perpetuates a false model of gender arrangements as complimentary, thereby serving as a smoke screen for unconsciously sexist biases in research. In sum, in a seeming departure from contemporary neo-liberal discourses of individualism, sport science scholars sought to
question the traditional view of sport underlying sport science research as well as the broader structural forces influencing the female/sport relationship.

In addition to their critiques of early sociological and psychological based studies, sport sociology scholars also questioned the philosophical and conceptual foundings of sport science research examining the physiological aspects of female sport participation. Although these scholars concede that this work does indeed have its place within the study of gender and sport, and that it is not necessarily “bad” science, concurrent with their critiques of other research traditions, they contend that much of this work remains grounded in unconscious and unexamined sexist assumptions. To this extent, some scholars suggested that sport science was not yet asking the appropriate questions about the sporting performance of women. According to Boutilier and SanGiovanni (1983) questions about biological aspects of female sport participation and biological differences, arise from an underlying (and problematic) philosophical position that needs to be reconsidered; “it is the very question posed, how and why it is asked, and the conclusions drawn from the answer that should be critically evaluated rather than treated as problematic or taken for granted” (p. 21). One particularly illustrative example of the sex bias within this research offered by Boutilier and San Giovanni is the way in which women’s capacities are routinely measured against that of men; the implied assumption is that male performance is the benchmark against which females should be judged and encouraged to strive for, without complementary attention to the deficiencies of male performance and efforts to encourage their improvement in these areas. Similarly, Birke and Vines (1987) contend that although research on gender and sport performance appears to move away from the naive biological determinism governing the history of female sport
participation, sport science is trapped in its own underlying assumptions about gender, the
naturalness of particular hormones, and a biologically determined “femininity”.
Illustrating the sexist nature of this logic Birke and Vines explain, “it is really sort of a
Catch-22. If a woman performs as well as a man she is seen as masculine and abnormal…
But when clear-cut differences between men and women do appear in, say, muscle mass
and proportion of body fat, women’s inferiority is readily attributed to a ‘natural’ regime of
‘female’ hormones” (p. 340).
In a second and related point of critique, some sport sociologists also questioned
the notion of biologically determined sex differences. Following the more general trend
toward social constructionist views of gender difference within feminist theory, these
critiques downplayed the role of biology and instead emphasized the importance of social
and cultural factors in determining gender difference. One particular brand of this logic
stressed within sport sociology critiques emphasized a kind of “biological interactionism”,
where biology is said to interact with the environment to produce a particular trait.
Theberge (1981), illustrates this critique in the following terms:

Performance in sport is … the outcome of the interplay of a multitude of factors,
including biological, psychological, cultural and social. Because of the gender
differences in psychological, cultural and social factors which have prevailed to
date, it is impossible to know how much of the sport performance differential
between men and women is based on genetic factors (p. 350).
In similar attempts to move away from notions of biological differences in sport
performance, some feminist sport scholars stressed that the ‘biological factor’ was not an
interactive one, but a secondary issue, given the broader history of discrimination against
dfemale sporting opportunities.

In light of these critiques and the concomitant growth of the sport sciences,
research on the female/sport relationship gave way to more theoretically based and
sophisticated analyses. Nonetheless, despite these critiques, research traditions of the
1970s such as role conflict, androgyny, and socialization remained popular and prominent
within the sociology of sport. At the same time, given the call for qualitative approaches
to the study of gender and sport, many quantitatively-based early topics of interest within
the sociology of sport such as traits and motives, sex roles, and psychological femininity,
were adopted by sport psychology.

In the move towards a more critical agenda for the study of the female/sport
relationship, sport sociologists began to call for a deeper commitment to an academic
feminism and recognition of gender within critical models of sport (Cricter, 1986; McKay,
1986; Whannel, 1983; Whitson, 1986). Perhaps the most significant of these studies was
Boutilier and SanGiovanni’s (1981) *Women, Sport, and Public Policy*, which introduced
and explained Jagger and Rothenberg’s (1984) seminal classification of the various models
of feminism and feminist theory and applied them to issues related to female athletics. As
Birrell (1987a) notes, this work together with Boutilier and SanGiovanni’s later book, *The
Sporting Woman* (1983) provided an important orientating framework from which sport
sociologists could move forward with a feminist analysis of gender and sport. Concurrent
with the critiques of positivist and quantitative research traditions within the sport sciences,
and more general trends within feminist scholarship, several feminist sport scholars also
called for a broader acceptance of qualitative, interpretive, and reflexive methodologies as
the means best suited to expand an understanding of the female/sport relationship (Birrell, 1983; Boutilier & SanGiovanni, 1983; Hall, 1985; Hargreaves, 1987; Theberge, 1987). Particularly influential in this regard was Hall’s (1985) “Knowledge and Gender: Epistemological Questions in the Social Analysis of Sport”, which provided an excellent analysis of the need for new feminist epistemologies, and outlined the implications of what she defined as feminist methodology and epistemology for the social analysis of sport. Lastly, informed by the models of British cultural studies, Cole and Birrell’s (1986) highly influential essay “Resisting the Canon: Feminist Cultural Studies” laid the groundwork for a feminist cultural studies approach to sport and specifically outlined new analytic perspectives for examining power relations as they apply to gender and sport as well as the place of sport in cultural production.

Accompanying the more general move to explain the role of sport in the production and maintenance of patriarchal relations, and conversely, issues of gender inequality in sport via radical feminist, socialist feminist, and/or Marxist theories, the study of the female/sport relationship during the 1980s was also marked by the emergence of several distinct critical advances. As Birrell (1987a) notes, the most prominent research themes to emerge from this new critical agenda include: (a) the production of an ideology of masculinity and male power through sport, (b) the production of dominant notions of femininity through media images of women in sport; (c) the significance of issues regarding physicality, sexuality, and the body for defining gender relations; and (d) the resistance of women to dominant sport practices and in turn, the creation of woman-centered alternative sport forms.

Production of an Ideology of Masculinity and Male Power Through Sport
To a great extent, the specific move to theorize sport as a historical and cultural formation, as well as a patriarchal institution and site for the production of an ideology of masculinity was influenced by the earlier work of several scholars working in primarily from within the cultural studies tradition. Sheard and Dunning’s (1973) subcultural study, “The Rugby Football Club as a Type of Male Preserve” developed several significant themes important to this reconfiguration. Focusing on certain rituals of rugby football (e.g., the crude lyrics of drinking songs) designed to show contempt for women, they helped to demonstrate the ways in which sport serves as location for the preservation and reproduction of anti-female sentiments, and thus as an arena for the production of an ideology of male dominance and female subordination. Anticipating the arguments current in the field almost 15 years later, Willis’ (1974) article, “Performance and Meanings: A Sociological View of Women in Sport” provided a seminal analysis of the importance of ideology and hegemony as they apply to gender and sport. In this paper, later published as the better-known, “Women in Sport in Ideology” Willis (1982) argued that women’s sporting practice is an ideological process that legitimates certain dominant versions of social relations. What is important for Willis is the manner in which gender differences in sport performance are understood and taken into the popular consciousness of our society and used to buttress social attitudes and prejudice. In Willis’ assessment, these differences, as they are mobilized via sport, provide an extremely effective means for the reproduction of the ideology of male superiority. Moreover, given the importance of physical capacities in sporting performance and the apparent autonomy and separation of sport from other areas of life, Willis suggests that the notion that differences between the sexes are “natural” and that men are “naturally dominant”, presents itself as commonsense.
Continuing in this tradition, during the 1980s, sport sociologists working from cultural studies and feminist perspectives, began to document the process by which sport came to embody male domination and power. During this time Birrell (1987b), Dunning (1986), Hargreaves (1986), Kimmel (1990), Lenskyj (1987), and Peiss (1986), among others, all provided historical evidence of the use of sport as a means to (re)produce gender boundaries and gender hierarchies in contexts marked by tensions over changing gender relations. For example, in a later revision of his study of rugby football, Dunning (1986) suggested that the rugby player’s attempt to discourage female intruders, and preserve their male-defined space, was particularly prevalent during times of encroachment by women into traditional male worlds and privileges. Similarly, in his analysis of the role of baseball in the United States during the early twentieth century, Kimmel (1990) showed that the historical conditions of this period – the first wave feminist movement, mechanization, immigration, and the loss of the American frontier as a space in which to create heroic male myths – all created a crisis of masculinity that was played out by the claiming of baseball as a place for the restoration of masculine hegemony.

In addition to historical evidence, several authors, beginning with the assumption of sport is a male preserve, addressed the contemporary ways in which sport had produced an ideology of male dominance. For example, in her article “Toward a Feminist Alternative to Sport as a Male Preserve” Theberge (1985a) documented how, despite recent gains achieved by women in sport, the masculine prerogative of sport continued to be reproduced through the trivialization and denigration of female athletes in the media, and in the construction of sport as an activity largely organized for and by males. In a slightly different vein, Hargreaves (1986) highlighted the role of the athletic male body in the
ideological production of sport as a male preserve and in turn, gender hierarchies. As Hargreaves suggests, sport provides a process for the ideological mobilization of bias by linking male muscularity with the embodiment of power as well as highly valued and visible skills. The result is the reproduction of an ideology of domination based on the inferiorization of women’s activities and the representation of males as naturally superior to females. Another important point to Hargreaves and Dunning’s analysis is the explicit sexual dimension that underlies the domination of women by men in sport. Dunning’s example of the degradation and symbolic violation of women in rugby songs is a particularly vivid depiction of this dimension, as are Lenskyj’s observations on male control of female sexuality through allegations of lesbianism, and the heterosexualization and sexual objectification of female athletes.

More importantly, in addition to offering evidence of the ways in which sport operates as a male preserve, sport science scholars, building on earlier work in the field, addressed the manner in which the production of an ideology of male dominance through sport gives meaning to broader patterns of social relations. In their book, *The Sporting Woman*, Boutilier and San Giovanni (1983) argue that sport and masculinity are social realities that “support, inform and reinforce” each other and together in ways that contribute to the traditional polarization of sex roles. Their analysis is predicated on the argument that there is an isomorphism between sporting roles and male-dominated instrumental roles in the public sector, and on the assumed socializing effects of sport. Supported by a discussion of the connections between sport and the educational system, the media and public policy, and family socialization, the overall effect of their analysis is to present a strong case for the connection between gender differentiation and inequality in
sport and other institutions. In a slightly different vein, Lenskyj’s (1987) sociohistorical account of the major influences upon the definition and implementation of girls’ physical education in Ontario from 1890 to 1920, provided a historical perspective of sport as a male preserve and other forms of patriarchal control. As Lenskyj shows, physical education as formulated by experts from the medical, physical education, and education fields, emerged as a social practice designed to legitimate women’s personal and economic subordination by “demonstrating” innate differences or the “facts” of women’s physical and psychological frailty.

**Media Representations of Women in Sport**

Following broader trends within feminist studies, and specifically feminist media studies, media analyses of the female/sport relationship conducted during the 1980s were marked by a critical shift from quantitative to more qualitative types of analysis. Stemming from a desire to document various forms of gender inequality, early feminist media analyses found the media to be deeply implicated in the patterns of discrimination operating against women in society – patterns that produced an absence of women in media content and its production. Despite the usefulness of these studies, particularly in helping to give women a voice in the media, during the late 1970s and early 1980s, feminist scholars gradually came together to produce a more complex analysis of the cultural, economic, and social relations that produce gendered discourse.

In focusing on the ideological effects of media representations, feminist critiques of media content and its implication in the construction of gender were largely positioned around two specific axes: a focus on the politics of representation and the production of knowledge in which women are objects rather than active subjects, and an analysis of the
structures of power in which women are systematically subordinated. These two concerns were addressed in many studies of print media, television, and advertising during the late 1970s and early 1980s as problems of “images of women in the media”. In summarizing these projects Gallagher (1985) found that women in media content tend to be young and conventionally pretty, defined in relation to their husband, father, son, boss, or another man, and portrayed as passive, indecisive, submissive, incompetent, and almost always subservient to men. In addressing the effects of these representations, feminist media scholars argued that this symbolic annihilation of women endangered the social development of women and girls who lacked positive role models. To this extent, feminist scholars contended that these stereotypical representations be replaced by more favorable ones that portrayed more diverse and realistic representations of female gender roles, and encouraged a view of women as independent and competent.

In examining media content and its effects, feminist scholars, aligned with feminist activists and more general feminist critiques of the media, also specifically addressed pornography. In this work, feminist scholars and activists argued that pornography was the ultimate cultural expression of men’s hatred against women; it was seen as a form of sexual violence against women, and viewed as a product of a deeply misogynistic society. To this end, feminist media scholars advanced the argument that pornography, through its objectification of women for men’s pleasure, contributes to an eroticization of violence and power that in turn, restricts women from the full exercise of their citizenship and participation in public life.

Taken together, the work done in these areas share an assumption of the media as an instrument for conveying stereotypical, patriarchal, and hegemonic values about women.
and femininity. To this end, the media are conceptualized as agents of social control: in research on stereotypes it is said that the media pass on society’s heritage – which is deeply sexist – in order to secure continuity, integration and the incorporation of change (Tuchman, 1978); anti-pornography campaigners argue that media serve the needs of patriarchy by representing women as objects and by suppressing women’s own experiences (Dworkin, 1981); and in theories of ideology the media are viewed as hegemonic institutions that present the capitalist and patriarchal order as ‘normal’, obscuring its ideological nature and translating it into ‘common sense’ (Women Take Issue, 1978). All three of these areas of research employ what is commonly known as a structural functionalist approach to media theory. At its most basic level, this model assumes that, 1) the media plays a vital role in the transmission of sexist, patriarchal, and capitalist values, thus contributing to the maintenance of social order, and 2) that meaning is located primarily in relatively consistent and uncontradictory media texts, and the audience acts as a passive mass, merely consuming media images.

During the 1980s, feminist media scholars began to question the conception of a passive audience and unequivocal meaning of media texts underlying “images women in the media” research. Attempting to expand this narrow descriptive model, feminist media scholars began to problematize the relationship between the reader and the text, examining the ways that individual members of an audience interpret media messages and use them for their own gratification. This more complex conceptualization of media consumption also sought to address the complex dynamic among the producer of the text, the structural inequalities of the text, and the context in which it is consumed. The now classic example of this analytical approach is Ang’s (1985) Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the
Melodramatic Imagination. In her survey of women’s positions towards the television show Dallas, Ang discovered three general views: one group of fans, a second set of viewers who watched the program ironically, and a third group who hated the show. Ang’s work demonstrated that the consumption of cultural artifacts (in this case watching TV) was a complex negotiation involving sometimes the wholesale acceptance of the show’s message (by fans), sometimes an outright rejection of such debased messages and meanings (by haters), and sometimes an inverted re-reading of the show’s message and meaning (by ironists).

Sport sociologists continuing the prominent 1970s research practice of documenting the media’s “symbolic annihilation” of female athletics, found that this pattern of exclusion continued into the 1980s. For example, the results of several studies conducted during this time revealed that women athletes remained underrepresented as subjects of media coverage in newspaper accounts, sports magazines, television broadcasts, sports novels, and feature films (Boutilier & San Giovanni, 1983; Kane, 1988; McCollum & McCollum, 1980; Rintala & Birrell, 1984). In her study of feature articles in Sports Illustrated, Kane (1988) reported that despite the influence of Title IX, the exclusion of women had not changed significantly, although the amount of coverage of “serious” women athletes (as opposed to swimsuit models) had increased slightly. Similarly, with regard to television coverage, studies indicated that a majority was allocated to men, even when the sporting event being reported was relatively open to female involvement such as the Olympic Games (Brown & Fraser, 1985; McCollum & McCollum, 1980). In interpreting these findings, sport studies scholars suggested that the underrepresentation of women’s athletics was structurally embedded in the practices (e.g.,
reliance on wire services, the structure of the sports section, too few female sports reporters) that produce sport news. Other interpretations emphasized the ideological underpinnings of these patterns, arguing that erasing women athletes from view conveys and confirms the impression that women are not an important part of the sport world, sanctions sport as a male preserve, and in turn, deters female participation.

In keeping with the more general move towards qualitative feminist media analyses during the 1980s, sport science scholars working in this area also began to document and criticize the ways in which the limited media coverage of female athletics was characterized by exclusionary and denigrating tactics. For example, Bresnahan’s (1987) analysis of media coverage of women marathoners found that even when women runners were being featured on the television screen, commentators were as likely to talk about the unseen male runners as about the women supposedly featured. Bresnahan also found that both television and print media de-emphasized the efforts on the part of the female runners and instead, emphasized their physical characteristics, family life, and directed questions about training to their male coaches. Similarly, Duncan and Hasbrook (1988) found that mass media coverage of male and female athletics differed considerably in that men’s games and contests were represented as dramatic spectacles of historic significance, whereas female athletics were presented as recreational activities. Specifically, in their analysis of broadcasts of men’s and women’s basketball, surfing, and marathon running Duncan and Hasbrook found that women’s strength, speed, and athletic ability were routinely undercut with objectifying comments about their physical attractiveness and private lives. As such they conclude that the ambivalence of television coverage serves to trivialize and marginalize female athletics: “it excludes women by its brute neglect of
women’s sport … and denigrates them by conjoining images of female strength with images of female weakness” (p. 19).

Several sport science researchers working in media analysis also found that one specific way in which the trivialization and marginalization of women’s sport occurred was through the routine sexualization and heterosexualization of women athletes. Perhaps the most obvious documented example of this tendency is the swimsuit issue of *Sports Illustrated* magazine. In her analysis of the sexualization of women within the issue, and the mockery it makes of women’s sport, Davis (1992) noted that the sexual explicitness of its content is evident by the fact that protests against the publication expressed outrage over the fact that images of soft-core pornography were being made accessible to young boys. The continuing association of women’s sport and sexuality was also graphically documented in Duncan’s (1990) analysis of photographs that accompanied sports stories concerning the 1988 Winter and Summer Olympic Games and the 1984 Summer Games. Duncan’s examination revealed that the photographs emphasized sexual difference through a variety of methods including an emphasis on physical appearance, sexually suggestive poses, submissive body positions, emotional displays, and camera angles that look down on women signaling their inferior position. In her analysis of *WomenSports* magazine, Endel (1991) argued that even magazines produced for a predominantly female audience undercut women’s serious involvement in sports with sexualized images. According to Endel, the magazine, which began in the early 1970s, and was defined as a consciously activist magazine aimed at increasing female involvement and enjoyment in sport, and at the time conferred a sense of power and competence through its representation of female athleticism. However, upon reorganizing and subsequent restyling as *Women’s Sports and
Fitness during the 1980s, Endel suggests that the publication essentially lost its feminist stance and sensibility when it began promoting physical activity in terms of attractiveness and personal improvement. Lastly, in her feminist media analysis of advertisements for fitness products and televised workout shows, MacNeill (1988), noted that these media forms promote the objectification, fragmentation, the heterosexualization of women’s bodies, thereby framing the objective of physical activity as sexual attractiveness rather than as a means of empowerment and liberation.

A less obvious but equally problematic message in the representation of female athletes documented by sport science scholars was the construction of female athletic bodies as different from and physically inferior to men’s bodies. In their assessment, the continued emphasis on the distinction between male and female athletes within televised images, advertisements, cartoons, sports photographs, and written media texts, tended to naturalize gender divisions in sport so that they appear to be the outcome of biological difference. To this end, sport science scholars argued that this construction of difference occurred through sexualized imagery, traditional descriptions of female hysteria (i.e., references to athletes’ nerves, emotions, and personalities), and the use of male standards and norms to evaluate and interpret women’s performances (Costa & Guthrie, 1994). Focusing on media strategies in portraying female athletes, Messner (1988) suggested that although accounts of women’s sport appear to be somewhat liberated from the degradation of earlier times, the media nonetheless maintain practices that reinforce ideas about women’s inferiority. According to Messner, in their attempt to provide “equality” in sports reporting, the media construct gender comparisons of athletic performance based around
definitions of athletic achievement that favor men, that ironically become a means to explain and justify apparently “natural” gender differences.

In sum, analyses of media coverage of female athletics conducted during the 1980s and early 1990s suggested that despite the growing occurrence of positive images of sportswomen within the media, these representations were tempered with negative suggestions or innuendo that served to trivialize or undercut female athletic performance. Focusing on the impact of these representations, critics contended that by producing an image of women as physically inferior to men, media coverage of female athletics simultaneously serve to (re)produce the masculine hegemony of sport and harm women’s chances for equal opportunities.

**Female Physicality, Power, and Resistance through Sport**

Drawing upon broader trends in cultural studies and feminist theory, particularly radical feminist theory, sport science research examining the social and cultural aspects of the female/sport relationship conducted during this 1980s were also marked by a move to theorize the connection between sport as a physical activity and physicality as the key to women’s oppression. To a great extent, this was influenced by earlier work in French phenomenology and existentialist philosophy. Particularly important to feminist analyses of the relationship between the body, power, and subjectivity was Merleau-Ponty’s (1962) development of the concept of the “body-subject”, and de Beauvoir’s (1974) application of this concept to an analysis of women’s oppression. For Merleau-Ponty, human subjectivity is rooted in the lived body and in how one learns to live in one’s body. In this sense, *I, I can*, and *I cannot* are all embodied experiences, and one’s sense of oneself as an active person is developed precisely through experiences of mastering one’s body and
realizing one’s intentions in physical movements in and through space. In *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir (1974), drawing on Merleau-Ponty, contends that women historically have been taught to embody what she calls “inhibited intentionality” in which feminine body comportment, feminine movement patterns, and tentative uses of space all say *I cannot* in the very act of trying. In such movement habits, says de Beauvoir, women embody the contradictory nature of their experience in patriarchal societies, a contradiction between their phenomenal experience of themselves as active subjects and their social construction as objects for others. “Femininity” then is not an essence that all women have naturally or even that some have more than others. It is, rather, a product of discourses, practices, and social relations that construct the situation of women in patriarchal societies in ways that typically disable women in relation to men. Thus, just as feminizing practices serve to construct the female body as object in ways that inhibit women, masculinizing practices teach boys to live in their bodies and to experience themselves in active and powerful ways. As radical feminists centralize sexuality as a major site of men’s domination over women through the social institutionalization of heterosexuality (Rich, 1994), such control, they argue, is accomplished through an ensemble of cultural practices that includes rape, domestic violence, sexual harassment, pornography, male-defined standards of beauty, unattainable media images, and compulsory heterosexuality.

Given the strong identification of sport with masculinity, its symbolic value for patriarchy, and focus on physical power and domination, feminist scholars working from a radical feminist perspective reasoned that sport played an important role in the social construction of male sexual dominance and female sexual submission. To this end, several scholars explored how, as an institution under patriarchy, sport served to help maintain
male cultural hegemony by preventing women and girls from developing physical skills. Key to this analysis was the recognition of the ways in which different types of activities are encouraged, and pursued by, male and female children. According to Bennett, Whitaker, Smith, and Sablove’s (1987) observation of these differences, play for girls typically includes activities requiring little skill, space, muscle force, cooperation, rules, organization or complexity, while play for boys usually includes activities requiring large amounts of space, physical prowess, structured rules, and considerable complexity. This “political economy of developmental opportunities”, sport scholars argued played an important role in the development of one’s sense of self and agency as it relates to the environment and physical abilities. For males, the encouragement of skillful performance reinforces a sense of agency, of instrumentality, and understanding of oneself as an subject and owner of himself, while for females, the denial of this experience reinforces a sense of physical weakness, helplessness, and sense of self as object. As feminist scholars like MacKinnon (1987) and Young (1980) contend, it is in through these dynamics, in part, that the discourses of masculine strength and feminine weakness become self-fulfilling prophecies. To the extent that a female pursues a feminine persona via the denial of her physicality, the more likely it is that she will feel ambivalent about her own strength and will actually become more inhibited and tentative in her movement patterns, thereby giving credence to the notion that women cannot do physical things or push themselves without harm.

In examining the role of sport in the normalization of discourses of masculine strength and feminine weakness, sport science scholars also explored how sport might have the potential to function for women’s benefit. Building on the feminist belief that the
oppression of women is intimately connected to their bodily experience in the world, these scholars reasoned that in living in their bodies as skilled and forceful subjects rather than as objects of the male gaze, and especially in embodying power themselves, the athletic female body provided a powerful challenge to one of the fundamental sources of male power – the ideological equation of physical power itself with masculinity. For example, showing the relevance of sport to the women’s movement, Theberge (1985a) notes that women’s performances in sport “are particularly effective means to refute the myths of female frailty” (p. 50). As a result, she suggests that feminists might make strategic use of women’s sporting accomplishments to advance their cause in other domains such as restrictions upon women’s employment in physically demeaning and hazardous occupations” (Theberge, 1985a; p. 50).

Drawing from feminist critiques of the limits of liberal feminism as well as radical feminist revisions of traditional or male-stream theories of power, feminist scholars also questioned the fundamental conception of power as domination in sport and proposed an alternative discourse of empowerment. In their call for a feminist analysis of sport, Bennett et al. (1987) critique the assumption that women’s participation in sport constitutes a feminist activity. While they applaud the many gains made for women in sport over the past decade, they suggest that the liberal feminist move for equality in sport has been to create increased access for some women into an anti-feminist, patriarchal flawed system. In this sense, Bennett et al. advocate shifting the analytical framework of feminist sport studies from women’s participation in a patriarchal defined endeavor that defines women, not sport as the problem, to an analytical framework based on women-centered questions that explore the meanings women attribute to their own skillful physical activity. While
Bennet et al. concede that the reconceptualization of sport is a difficult task, they suggest that such a process begin with changes in the concept of domination and submission upon which sport under patriarchy is based. Similarly, MacKinnon (1987), suggested that the meanings and practices that have been naturalized in much of men’s sport may not be what women want, and proposed that a feminist analysis of sport reexamine just what is empowering and pleasurable in physical activity. According to MacKinnon’s view, the masculine vision of sport leaves out “some rather major elements” key to forging an alternative discourse of empowerment through sport. Thus as an alternative to the discourse of power through domination in sport, feminist scholars advocated that the value and purpose of sport also include the pleasures and the sense of accomplishment gained through learning how to move in coordinated and increasingly skillful ways, coordinating your own movements with those of others, leaning how to use equipment, and learning how to generate force and power and to take advantage of these in competitive games, rather than in the domination of others.

In developing a sense of sport that can serve as a site for female liberation, some feminist scholars addressed the ways in which women actively resist dominant images of femininity and sport, creating woman-centered alternative sport forms, and transforming sport for their own enjoyment. As Grant (1984) notes in her analysis of women’s field hockey, when women are in charge of organizing sport, they tend to emphasize mutual support and development rather than masculine aggression and competition. Birrell and Richter (1987) presented a complementary argument based on their analysis of feminist attempts to reform softball into a woman-centered activity. According to their analysis, these feminists enacted a sport form that was suffused with the following
counterhegemonic practices: an emphasis on the process of play that rejects sport as a rational practice; an inclusiveness that insists on providing opportunities for women of all ages, sizes, classes, and races, and a safe space for those who have not had an opportunity to develop their skills; collective coaching practices that deconstruct the hierarchical relationship between player and coach; and a refusal to see the opponent as other.

For feminist scholars, the move away from the traditional masculine preoccupation with force and domination in sport toward a new emphasis on personal experiences of skill and pleasure in motion, was not simply about the acquisition physical skill, but more importantly about its related psychologically empowering effects. Following the understanding of the body suggested by many second-wave feminists, as the site of oppression by acts of male power (physical power, or the power to control and direct female agency), feminist sport scholars reasoned that the sporting body offered women an opportunity to experience agency and physicality in an empowering and profoundly personal way. Feminist liberation or empowerment in this sense is enacted at the bodily level of practice, where, in McCaughey’s (1998) terms, women “develop a new self-image, a new understanding of what a female body can do, and thus break out of the expectations under which they have acted – expectations that have cemented themselves at the level of the body” (p. 4). In other words, through the acquisition of new and previously denied bodily knowledges, feminist sport scholars argued that the body becomes a site of resistance against patriarchy and, more importantly, for the transformation of women’s consciousness. For example, as Bennett et al. (1987) suggest, beginning to see oneself as a potentially active and skillful person is the beginning of reclaiming the self. Based on comments of participants in a women’s fitness class, Bennett et al. assert that as women
change in movement competence, they also change emotionally, gaining confidence and a more positive self-image. A similar reference to the psychologically transformative aspects of sport is found in Theberge’s (1987) “Sport and Women’s Empowerment”. In assessing the testimonial evidence of physically active women within the popular media, Theberge contends that the message is that regular physical activity is not only appropriate but desirable and can lead to a more positive sense of self and physical well-being.

Given their emphasis on the transformative aspects of sport for women, feminist sport scholars also critiqued contemporary forms of female physicality directed at consumption and the maintenance of sexual attractiveness. For example, in her analysis of sport and women’s empowerment, Theberge (1987) suggests that the emergence and celebration of women’s participation in fitness programs, videos, and classes during the 1980s, and the seeming challenge of these practices to traditional notions of female physical inferiority, may be unwarranted. According to Theberge, “the feminization of the fitness movement represents, not the liberation of women in sport, but their continued oppression through the sexualization of physical activity” (p. 389). Similarly, McCormack (1983) questions the transgressive bodily politics associated with the mediated image of the “new female jock”. Although these representations show women with pride and confidence in their bodies, attitudes that replace shame and guilt, she suggests they do not offer liberation. In McCormack’s view, rather than making a radical statement about women and their bodies, the “female jock” is represented as part of a class stereotype where fitness, as form of consumption and lifestyle, serves to transform the reproductive body into a body that exists for athletic glory and male pleasure.
Conclusion

As illustrated in this chapter, early sport science research on the female/sport relationship remained a prominent and authoritative voice within popular discourses concerning female sport participation well into the 1980s. While popular references to this work during the 1970s repeatedly cited specific studies, during the 1980s we can see this knowledge solidified and presented as commonsense. According to popular media reports, “folk wisdom” prohibiting women from sport participation due to its physical or psychological risks there was not supported by scientific or anecdotal evidence. In fact, in an appeal to contemporary emphases on health, lifestyle, personal-responsibility, and postfeminist sensibilities, popular media and consumer discourses routinely encouraged women to actively pursue sport and fitness practices for improving reproductive health, disease prevention, mental health, and self-fulfillment. To this end, the image of the athletic female body coded as physically healthy, psychologically empowered, and aesthetically beautiful, was routinely celebrated as a symbol of America’s commitment to women via Title IX, and broader national progress towards gender equity.

Despite the celebratory spirit surrounding America’s seemingly growing acceptance of female athleticism, the apparent gains of the female sport revolution animated both extreme and subtle opposition. In particular, as Hogshead-Makar and Zimbalist (2007) suggest the 1980s marked the first major wave of backlash against Title IX. Echoing broader backlash sentiments that characterized men as the victims of feminism, the gains of women under Title IX were largely interpreted as a threat to men’s intercollegiate athletic programs. At the same time, the feminist move to integrate youth sports also came under increased public scrutiny. According to opponents, instead of
fostering equilibrium, coed competition not only compromised the integrity of sport, but also the physical and psychological development of both its male and female participants. Illustrating the lasting influence of sport science research in helping to define the athletic female body, these attacks repeatedly drew upon scientific evidence suggesting that girls were physically incapable of matching boys in sport performance, and thus ill-suited for coed competition. In a similar vein, backlash against the changing nature of female athletics during the 1980s was also made visible via the popularization of scientific research evidence indicating biologically-based, gender differences in sport performance. Unlike similar reports of the 1970s, the question of female athletic inferiority was no longer the topic of debate, but rather repeatedly presented as a biologically-based, scientifically indisputable fact. Thus although early sport science research on the female/sport relationship was used to validate the postfeminist celebration of gender equity in sport, the routine and explicit mention of scientific evidence pointing to women’s incontrovertible athletic weaknesses also served advance backlash sentiments suggesting that women were not deserving of athletic equality.

Although early sport science research was influential in shaping popular discourses about the athletic female body, critical sport scholars questioned its fundamental assumptions. Drawing upon recent developments in critical and feminist theory, these scholars highlighted the ways in which liberal feminist concerns about the relationship between sex/gender differences in sport served to reify socially constructed definitions of sport and gender, and at the same time displace the central questions of power and control in explaining gender inequality sport. As part of their critiques of past research in the field, these scholars also highlighted the ways in which media coverage of female athletics
trivialized female performance through its focus on aspects unrelated to athletic competition and physical activity such as sexual attractiveness. Drawing from these critiques, these scholars considered how sport and physical activity could help to end the systemic oppression of women by teaching and reinforcing control of women’s bodies, values, and attitudes toward the self.

Despite the apparent divergence of celebratory, backlash, and scholarly discourses concerning the athletic female body during the 1980s, I suggest that they might collectively be viewed as part of a larger backlash against feminism, and mutually contingent neoliberal and postfeminist conditions of their emergence. For example, as Cole (1994) elaborates,

Numerous feminist critics have argued that women’s physicality and participation in sport potentially offers a site for progressive body politics since it challenges the passivity inscribed on women’s bodies. However, most of the arguments have obscured the politics of late, surveillance-dominated capitalism, a context in which the body and exercise have become commodified in ways which manage gender relations (p. 11).

Indeed, as we have seen, rather than working as technologies of transgression, during the 1980s, the new feminine aesthetic – physically strong, beautiful, psychologically empowered, healthy, properly reproductive, and self-sufficient – represented a highly marketable commodity and a desirable expression of a woman’s self-realization.

Furthermore, in Cole’s (1994) view, the notion of female sport participation as a transgressive body politics is problematic in that it relies on a similar, uncritical acceptance of liberal subjectivity based on autonomy and free-will. As Cole elaborates,
Although feminist critiques produced in the 1970s and 1980s located the body as a site of power, many of the critiques, despite the diverse projects engaged, remain embedded in a politics of “violation” and a corresponding demand for “control over” women’s bodies. Such projects locate the body in an unproblematized realm of the private, assume as individual that stands outside of cultural production, and theorize power as easily locatable (p. 13).

Thus, rather than offering a powerful critique, this work served to validate the new female athletic aesthetic. As the same time, to the extent that these critiques relied on notions of liberal subjectivity, I suggest that like previous research in the field, it failed to address the broader structural relations define and constrain women’s sporting practice, thereby advancing backlash sentiments suggesting that women not deserving of athletic equality.

Thus, we can see how despite their apparent divergence, both popular and scholarly discourses on the athletic female body during the 1980s functioned as an element in, and extension of, neoliberal and postfeminist discourses to maintain suspicions and marginalize female athleticism, while at the same time constructing female sport participation as a healthy and desirable practice. This construction would prove an enduring concept as questions about the efficacy of female athletic performance and mutually contingent emphasis on the importance of sport and exercise as a tool for building self-esteem among girls and women intensified with the coming of the second so-called “female sport revolution” during the 1990s. The popular construction of the athletic female body within this revolutionary framework, the commonsense acknowledgement of sport as an integral part of healthy female adolescent (particularly within sport-centered, girl-targeted public health policy and advocacy programs), and new directions in academic research on the
female/sport relationship, during the 1990s and early 2000s are the focus of the next chapter.

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1 As Ingham (1985) explains, lifestyle as a concept conflates two versions of the “good life”: it provides a continuum with nineteenth century precepts of middle-class respectability and self-discipline and more recent concerns for training the body to fulfill its capacity as a receptacle of sensations. When fused with right-thinking commonsense, these old and new definitions of lifestyle create a double-edged sword. Used in an upward direction, its blunt edge of permissiveness is targeted upon conspicuous consumption; when used in the downward direction, its sharp edge of social and moral indignation is targeted on the abuses of State spending which rewards the maligners and wasteful by promoting their dependencies (Ingham, 1985). It is in this sense that the right-thinking version of lifestyle provided an ideological resolution for the crisis of the welfare state within the framework of consumer culture, helping to balance and justify the New Right’s reallocation of the State’s resources, the driving down of capital’s labor costs, while promoting consumption. For right-thinkers, both the old and the new versions of lifestyle stigmatize the poor, equating dependency on the State with moral weakness and inability to perform the consumer role. In other words, following the logic of lifestyle, the poor represent a drag on the capitalist economy and violation of the “American way of life”; their lifestyle of dependency represents an unwillingness to maximize potentials, to blame the system when they should be blaming themselves. From this viewpoint, self-help and privatization become not only plausible but desirable solutions.

2 Drawing on Foucault’s concept of normalization, Cole (1996) understands “the modern regime to be organized around a division between, and interdependence of the normal and abnormal” (p. 373). Thus the normal self cannot know itself by reference to itself but is produced, stabilized, contingent, and dependent on what it excludes: the designation of who/what is seen as deviant. That is to say, the normal and abnormal are mutually implicated dependent categories. More specifically, Cole notes, the designation of the normal and the abnormal, are imagined through the received categories of corporeal identities. In this sense, the popularization of the categories of the hardbody and softbody during the 1980s, must be understood as mutually contingent corporeal identities.

3 The general political currency of this racially-coded logic was also circulated in part by the New Right’s appropriation of celebrated achievements of a handful of prominent African American “individuals” as evidence of America’s increasing racial justice and “color-blindness” (Reeves & Campbell, 1994). Thus, in this morally ahistoric view of race relations Reagan administration officials were able to justify the elimination of affirmative action programs by suggesting that such programs, by treating people differently because of their race, constituted a new form of racism.

4 So powerful were its anti-feminist sentiments and forces that members of the Republican party were elected in 1980 on a platform developed explicitly to “put women back in their place.” Key to the New Right’s antifeminist agenda was the Family Protection Act. This
first legislative initiative, introduced into Congress in 1981, had little to do with helping households. The act’s proposals: eliminate federal laws supporting equal education; forbid intermingling of the sexes in any sport or other school-related activities; require marriage and motherhood to be taught as the proper career for girls; deny federal funding to any school using textbooks portraying women in nontraditional roles; repeal all federal laws protecting battered wives from their husbands; and ban federally funded legal aid for any woman seeking aborting counseling or a divorce (Faludi, 1991). The bill was largely written in the negative; in its long list of federal programs to rescind, the act offered only one real initiative of its own – new tax incentives to induce married women to have babies and stay home. Under this provision of the bill, a husband could set up a tax-deductable retirement fund if his wife earned no money at all that year.

5 In locating power and resistance in the realms of identity, discourse, and personal life, feminism (especially the second-wave practice of consciousness-raising) is potentially a therapeutic politics. As the authors Mander and Rush (1974) suggest in their book, *Feminism as Therapy* “it is precisely because feminism includes the political that it is therapeutic. It is therapeutic to integrate the personal and the political” (p. 49).

6 For an exhaustive and highly insightful argument concerning Nike’s role as a celebrity feminist see Cole and Hribar (1995).

7 For excellent review of the different strands of feminist thought see Cole (1986) and Scraton and Flintoff (2002).

8 See Cole (1986) for a discussion of the subtle nuances of socialist feminism.

9 For a groundbreaking discussion of the feminist cultural studies project and its importance to the study of sport see Cole’s (1994) essay “Resisting the Cannon: Feminist Cultural Studies, Sport, and Technologies of the Body.”

10 Symbolic interactionism is a major sociological perspective (paradigm) that is influential in many areas of sociology. It is derived from American pragmatism and particularly from the work of George Herbert Mead, who argued that people’s selves are social products, but that these selves are also purposive and creative. Herbert Blumner, a student and interpreter of Mead, coined the term “symbolic interactionism” and claimed that people interact with each other by interpreting or defining each other’s actions instead of merely reacting to each other’s actions. One of the perspective’s central ideas is that people act as they do because of how they define the present situation. Through their interactions, individuals create the symbolic structures that make life meaningful. Reality does not impose the names and definitions of things, but rather people must define things and make them meaningful in order to make them socially real. Through interaction we create structures that multiple social actors experience and understand in similar ways: this is how “society” is created.
CHAPTER FOUR

“If You Let Me Play Sports”: Empowerment, Risk, and the Athletic Girl-Child in 1990s America

Marked by a series of female sporting milestones that included the 1996 Olympic Games (dubbed the “Year of the Woman”), the successful launching of the WNBA, and the 1999 Women’s World Cup Team USA victory, the 1990s were popularly recognized as a revolutionary period for American women’s sport. In a *Newsweek* cover-story fittingly titled “Girls Rule!” Mark Starr and Martha Brant (1999) captured the national fervor and symbolism that surrounded the 1999 Women’s World Cup:

> It was a delirious moment – one that enthralled sports fans, especially young girls, and which may mark a new high for women’s sports…. From suburban soccer fields far and wide came a new battle cry: Girls Rule! … World Cup fever seemed to signal that 27 years after Title IX legislation mandated equal financing for girls’ athletics, women’s team sports have truly arrived. Sports fans thrilled to the spectacle of charismatic female athletes. The players, in turn, discovered that they – young, muscular women of surpassing skill – had become a new kind of national hero (p. 50).

Unlike its lesser-known 1970s counterpart, the 1990s version of the female sport revolution was not shrouded in controversy over the physical and psychological risks of female athleticism, but rather signaled a paradigmatic national shift toward the widespread acceptance, celebration, and active promotion of women’s and girls’ sport participation. Informed by a popular consensus of the athletic female body as physically strong, mentally fit, and self-determined, as well as commonsense notions of sport as a major determinant in enhancing self-esteem, America’s newly crowned athletic heroes were hailed as an
inspiration to women and more importantly as highly-desirable role models for young girls. To this extent, the second coming of the revolution was largely defined by the emergence of two equally affective and marketable figures, the female athlete, and her imagined successor – the athletic little girl. By the end of the 1990s, these two figures, symbolically joined by a post-Title IX, women-girl-sport generational narrative of opportunity and possibility had come to occupy a unique and prominent place in the landscape of American popular culture.

As outlined in previous chapters, the investment in, and plausibility of, girl-sport-knowledge during the 1990s was largely derived from earlier historical reconfigurations of the athletic female body. However, a more specific conjunctural view also reveals these changes to be reflective of, and implicated in a socio-cultural milieu characterized by an increased focus on the welfare of the American girl-child as well as a radical reshaping of the definitions of girls and girlhood. The two most prominent discourses organizing this profusion of interest in girls during the 1990s are the multi-stranded girl power and Ophelia. In seemingly contradictory terms, girl power represents a “new girl” assertive, dynamic, and unbound from the constraints of passive femininity, while Ophelia presents girls as vulnerable, voiceless, fragile, and in crisis. Given the mutually contingent emergence of the women’s sport movement and the girl revolution during the mid-1990s, sport is inseparable from girl culture. Indeed, by the end of the 1990s, the articulation of girl power and sport had become a relatively uncontested frame of reference in public service advertisements (PSAs), public policy concerned with girls’ health, and commercial deployments seeking to capitalize on the women-girl-sport message of empowerment.
The high profile and affective purchase of sport-inflected girl power during the 1990s and early 2000s raises a particular set of questions for the discussion of girls, women, and sport in the United States. First, what are the contemporary conditions of possibility that have enabled the girl power/Ophelia dyad to circulate as a powerful truth about girls and girlhood? And, how is sport positioned within this dyad? Second, how are these truths and their articulation to the image of the powerful, athletic female body implicated in the forms of subjectivities made available to girls? And, lastly, what are the political consequences for the forms of subjectivities and truths made available through the articulation of girl power/Ophelia discourses and the athletic female body?

In order to address these questions I begin by defining the terms of girl power/Ophelia discourses, exploring how these discourses are linked to shifting social, economic, and political changes, and in turn, changing cultural ideals of personhood, individuality, and agency. I then outline the terms of America’s second female sport revolution and its articulation to girl power/Ophelia discourses. Specifically I offer the HHS Girl Power! campaign and the National Youth-Anti-Drug (NYAD) campaign as case studies as a means of demonstrating the ways in which the articulation of sport, female health, and empowerment rhetoric accrued power in the American imagination during the late 1990s and early 2000s. Drawing on cultural studies, poststructuralist, and postmodern theories, I suggest that women-girl-sport empowerment discourses participate in the forging of a new relationship between femininity and discourses constituting the neoliberal subject. Although the new forms of gender and the attendant meanings created through the articulation of sport and girl power have been largely celebrated, I suggest that they
function together to articulate a complex dangerous fiction and fantasy regarding popular knowledge concerning girls, social problems, and their solutions.

**Girl Power/Ophelia Discourses in 1990s America**

America today limits girls’ development, truncates their wholeness and leaves many of them traumatized (Pipher, 1994, p. 12).

She [the little girl] is the custodian of the promise of zones of privacy that national culture relies on for its magic and its reproduction (Berlant, 1998, p. 60).

The use of the term “girl power” is usually traced back to the early 1990s to a loosely formed underground feminist punk movement of young, mainly white, and middle-class women who called themselves Riot Grrrls. By most accounts, the movement was a response to the sexism, elitism, and violence of the local masculinist punk scene where exclusionary practices meant that girls were considered less than full members (Gonick, 2006). Drawing upon second-wave feminist critiques of heterosexual femininity and related notions of female physicality as a feminist practice, Riot Grrrls advocated an ironic melding of feminine style with physical expression. For example, with their mottos “Grrrls need guitars” and “revolution girl style” Riot Grrrl bands such as Bikini Kill and Bratmobile celebrated the fierce and aggressive potential of girls as well a reconstitution of girl culture as a positive force embracing self-expression. In addition to the music scene, Riot Grrrl constituted a subculture marked by numerous zines, the do-it-yourself (DIY) and anti-consumerist ethic, art, political action, and activism. Like members of the civil rights movement who used Black Power as a motto to rearticulate the signification of blackness, the Riot Grrrls strategically reclaimed the word girl to distance themselves from the adult patriarchal world of status, hierarchies, and standards (Hessford, 1999). In this vein, many
grrrls used their bodies to convey Riot Grrrls’ ironic melding of style with political expression by, for example, the juxtaposition of gendered signs (e.g., 1950s dresses with combat boots, shaved hair with lipstick, and studded belts with platform heels) and through writing politically loaded words such as “rape,” “shame,” and “slut” on their arms and stomachs (Japenga, 1995; Klein, 1997). By drawing attention to issues of women’s oppression Riot Grrrl was, and is viewed by many who study U.S. girls’ subcultures as exemplary of what has been called “youth feminism” (Garrison, 2000) as well as the starting point of third-wave feminism.¹

During the 1990s, coverage of Riot Grrrls quickly appeared in American mainstream magazines such as Newsweek (Chideya, 1993), Rolling Stone (France, 1993) and Time (Labi, 1998). While the Riot Grrrls saw their movement as attached to a liberatory social and political agenda, the mainstream media wrote-off its more serious political nature. Blaming feminism for complicating femininity, Rolling Stone concluded for example: “Riot Grrrls’ unifying principle is that being feminist is inherently confusing and contradictory and that women have to find a way to be sexy, angry and powerful at the same time” (France, 1993). In a slightly different interpretation, Newsweek dismissed the movement as an expected but temporary aspect of youth rebellion:

There is no telling whether this enthusiasm of the Riot Grrrls’ catchy passion for ‘revolution girl style’ will evaporate when it hits the adult real world. Most of the grrrls are still in the shelters of home or college – a far cry from what they’ll face in the competitive job market or as they start to form their own families (p. 85).

Despite popular critiques and dismissals of the Riot Grrrls, certain aspects of their politically charged stylistic blend of bodily empowerment and femininity soon became
ubiquitous. During the 1990s girl power and its embodied form, the empowered female entered mainstream cultural arenas through a diverse range of forms and contexts including among others, marketing slogans, child welfare programs, television, film, music, and mainstream magazines. Bringing together popular, celebrity and feel-good post-feminist sentiments, girl power in its multiple guises is signified by a celebration of female empowerment. Part social transformation, part niche market, this highly saleable brand of empowerment is defined by a take-charge attitude coupled with an aesthetic blend of femininity and physicality that celebrated the ability women and girls to break traditional molds and become who they want to be, feminine but strong, free yet in control. To this extent, female subjectivity under girl power is not defined by a situation of vulnerability but rather by one of limitless opportunity that suggests feminism is no longer needed.

The emergence of this popular trend is largely attributed to the enormously popular British pop band the Spice Girls. Selling themselves as radical, the Spice Girls embraced female empowerment as their lyrics advocated equal rights, female sexuality and physicality, as well as the importance of strong, loyal female friendships. Bearing a direct relationship to the words Riot Grrrls wrote on their bodies, T-shirts with pro-girl sentiments like “Girls Rule” and “Girls Kick Ass” started to show up at malls (Jacques, 2001). The pro-girl trend was also witnessed in the proliferation and widespread success of several television shows promoting mythic representations of empowered beautiful women characters such as Buffy, the Vampire Slayer, Xena: Warrior Princess, Sabrina the Teenage Witch, and Charmed. Outside the realm of mythic fantasy, girl power also underscored HBO’s award-winning and enormously successful series, Sex and the City, which focused on the lives of four single New York career-women who are presented as
smart, independent, sexually-powerful, fashion-minded, single, and sexually adventurous. Girl power also fueled competition between the box-office hits *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and the 1970s remake of *Charlie’s Angles* when in 2000, critics clashed over which film featuring female heroines held the rights as the archetypical girl power movie of the year (Gonick, 2006). The reach of girl power’s message of empowerment even extended to very young girls. For example, the advertising pamphlet to the *Sesame Street* musical production entitled “When I Grow Up reads: “Girl-power takes stage,” and notes “if girls follow their dreams and work hard, they can do whatever they want” (quoted in Gonick, 2006).

With the proliferation of the term girl power, “its meanings and what girls who embraced it could do with it did not remain static, nor was it received in the same way as the political and social intentions of Riot Grrrls” (Gonick, 2006, p. 7). In contrast to the media’s response to the messages of the Riot Grrrls, these more commercial messages of female empowerment were met with mixed reviews. Some feminists embraced the phenomenon for bringing a certain brand of feminism into the mainstream. According to the *Village Voice* for example, the Spice Girls “have done the seemingly impossible: they have made feminism, with all its implied threat, cuddly, safe, and most importantly sellable” (Press, 1997, p. 60). Extolling the girl power message of female empowerment, Debbie Stoller editor of *Bust* magazine, says of television characters Xena, Buffy, and Sabrina: “these characters all share a common strength: the ability to leap over sexist stereotypes in a single bound,” arguing that the popularity of these shows points to “a wellspring of untapped ‘Girl Power’ out there, with the potential to change the world if it could only be released. You go girls” (quoted in Projansky & Vande Berg, 2000, p. 20).
However, other feminists expressed concerns about the proliferation of girl power as a powerful economic force and its feminist authenticity. While the Riot Grrrl was deliberately anti-consumer culture, girl power is defined by an alliance with feminism, femininity, and commercialization. Young people now have more buying power than every before with girls representing the most profitable segment of the youth market. Moreover, girl power’s commodified celebration of femininity and self-assertion constitutes a seductive and profitable spill-over market for 20 to 30-something women to whom girl was once a derogatory term. In this vein girl power’s popularity was criticized for the way it reflected the ideologies of neoliberalism (e.g. individualism, personal responsibility, meritocracy, consumerism) over collective responses to social problems. Locating girl power within the realm of popular and commodity feminisms, Taft (2001) suggested that girl power’s gentle, non-political, and non-threatening commercial brand of feminism functions as a way for girls to identify girl-positive feelings in ways devoid of social and political action. Even the mainstream media questioned the authenticity of girl power, when for example, USA Today in commenting on the launch of Teen Vogue, accused it of “hawking fake girl power” (Vanderkam, 2003, p. 13). Similarly, in the oft-discussed Time magazine cover story, “Is Feminism Dead?”, girl power is regularly credited as a marker of both the triumphs of feminism as well as a sign of its demise (Bellafante, 1998). In yet another take on the girl power phenomenon Driscoll (1999) argues for an understanding that does not position it as “either it is or it isn’t” feminism. Driscoll states that while popular expressions of girl power may not produce revolutionary change, the message does serve to create shifts in the dominant modes of cultural production directed at girls. Regardless of questions over its meanings and rival interests
in the conditions of its circulation throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, girl power was, without question, solidified as a highly marketable, economically viable, and culturally acceptable consumer entity.

Running counter to the girl power movement, the 1990s also witnessed the simultaneous emergence and proliferation of a seemingly conflicting and contradictory set of discourses falling under the banner of “Ophelia”. Unlike the feel-good, girl-friendly, empowerment rhetoric of girl power, Ophelia discourses represent girls as vulnerable, voiceless and fragile. They get their name from the international best-selling book by psychologist Mary Pipher (1994) titled *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls.* Tapping into popular concerns about the vulnerability of girls and the potential dangers they face growing up Piper’s overriding premise is a familiar one: that adolescence is an especially precarious time for girls, a time when the fearless, outgoing child is replaced the unhappy and insecure girl-woman. While there is nothing inherent to *Reviving Ophelia* that dramatically appends or changes how we think about adolescent girls, as Maria Mastronardi (1988) convincingly argues, the popularity of the text marks a “watershed” moment for popular understandings. The book’s multiple-month stint on the *New York Times* best-seller list not only launched public awareness of this discourse, its success also highlights the intensified cultural fascination with girls.

A practicing therapist, Pipher’s (1994) motivation for writing *Reviving Ophelia* is based on her own gathering of anecdotal evidence as woman and former adolescent herself, the mother of a teenage girl, and a clinical psychologist whose practice was increasingly occupied by troubled girls. Drawing on a series of metaphors, Piper
crystallizes her construction of a problem of grave concern. The following excerpt, containing perhaps her most famous metaphor, is instructive:

Something dramatic happens to girls in early adolescence, just as planes and ships disappear mysteriously into the Bermuda Triangle, so do the selves of girls go down in droves. They crash and burn in a social Bermuda Triangle. In early adolescence, studies show that girls’ IQ scores drop and their math and science scores plummet. They lose their resiliency and optimism and become less curious and inclined to take risks. They lose their assertive, “tomboyish” personalities and become deferential, self-critical and depressed. They report great unhappiness with their own bodies (p. 19).

Unable to explain or understand these happenings through her own experience as an adolescent in the 1960s or in light of the apparent gains of the women’s movement, Pipher describes herself as “bewildered”, “frustrated”, and aware of how little she understood about the world of adolescent girls.

As the foundation of her argument, Pipher (1994) suggests that the disturbing behaviors and illnesses exhibited by today’s girls are actually symptoms of a more pressing, more fundamental problem. Offering a powerful metanarrative by which all aspects of girls’ problems can be fitted or explained, she contends that due to pressure from U.S. culture, adolescent girls suffer a damaging loss of self-wholeness and authenticity. Illustrated through an array of clichés, metaphors, allusions, and hyperbolic rhetoric mourning the death of girls’ “selves”, Piper claims that girls are coerced into putting aside their “authentic selves” splitting what was, in their a younger days, a healthy and united individual into true and false selves. This pressure to be someone they are not,
disorients and depresses most girls. At puberty, “girls become ‘female impersonators’ who fit their whole selves into small crowded places. Girls stop thinking, ‘Who am I? What do I want? And start thinking, ‘what must I do to please others?”’ (p. 27). According to Pipher, even girls’ bodies work against them, “everything is changing – body shape, hormones, skin and hair. Calmness is replaced by anxiety. Their way of thinking is changing” (p. 27).

To the extent that Reviving Ophelia tells a story of tragedy underlying a familiar problem and a tenuous offer of hope for girls and the adults who care about them, it clearly is a book about girls written for adults, particularly the parents of adolescent girls. At the same time, Piper’s (1994) framing of the problem also raises the question of whether Ophelia is better understood as a movement not for girls but for adult women. Although adolescence eventually passes, Pipher warns, the way girls handle these problems can have implications for their adult lives; without help, the loss of wholeness self-confidence and self-direction can last well into adulthood. Thus, the reach of Ophelia is not limited to adolescent girls, but also located within a moral imperative connected to women’s health, and by extension, the nation’s future. Drawing on her experience with adult women in therapy, Pipher discusses having to work “20 years behind schedule” to “piece together a picture of childhood lost” in order to heal their pain and “reestablish each woman as the subject of her life, not as the object of others” (p. 26). Again, grounding the loss of self in women’s and girls’ struggles to conform to the cultural limits of femininity, Pipher notes that many women regain their preadolescent authenticity with menopause because they are less concerned with being beautiful objects and caring for others. In other words, unbound
by gender constraints, post-menopausal women are “free to become the subjects of their own lives” (p. 26).

Piper (1994) lays a good portion of the blame for girls’ withering sense of self flatly upon America’s “girl hostile culture”. Drawing on popular postfeminist assumptions about the overarching gains of feminism, she expresses her surprise in the fact that girls today are much more oppressed. According to Pipher, there are three things that make girls more vulnerable during adolescence: the physical and emotional changes of puberty, the girl hurting “isms” of American culture – sexism, capitalism, and lookism – and the cultural expectation that adolescent girls are to distance themselves from their parents and turn to their peers for support. As a result of the escalating pressures of America’s “girl-poisoning” culture, Piper explains, we are slowly loosing “our girls”. Framing the problem as a national crisis, we are told, “everyone is grieving”. According to Piper, if girls are to enter adulthood and realize their full potential, we need to cultivate a place that fosters high self-esteem among girls, thereby allowing them to discover their “true selves”.

The idealization of preadolescence that underscores the construction of Ophelia is clearly an element in and extension of Carol Gilligan’s (1982) idealization of an authentic female voice. Since the debut of her acclaimed book In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development, the range of Gilligan’s work has significantly influenced both popular and academic discourses about adolescent girls. Influenced by feminist critiques concerning the limits of “universal” theories of psychological development, Gilligan’s work critiques the meta-narratives of psychology that assume a single mode of social experience and interpretation. According to Gilligan, the moral reasoning of men and women differ dramatically, where men operate according to “an
ethics of justice”, women operate according to “an ethics of care”. Because women’s
nurturing morality typically privileges a concern for others and a desire not to cause pain,
Gilligan suggests that women tend to avoid conflict, suppress emotions, and silence themselves. In her view, this silencing begins during adolescence when girls begin to realize that their ethical foundations are not respected or recognized. Here Gilligan’s work expresses the common view within U.S. feminist psychology that sees women’s subordination as rooted in the “false” or silent self, and their strength emerging from the recovery of an “authentic” voice (Mahoney, 1996). To the extent that the absence of voice and its recovery hinges on the notion remaining or true to one’s self, women’s oppression and agency, as a construct of authenticity, is determined by self-esteem. Following this logic, silence – the marker of oppression and having abandoned one’s true self, is both the cause and effect of low self-esteem. Thus the problem of the self, and more specifically self-esteem, is at the center of adolescent girls’ subordination and empowerment. Seeking to address this problem, Gilligan emphasized the positive value of girls’ moral reasoning. This kind of inclusion, Gilligan argued, was critical for creating the necessary social and cultural shifts to contain the crisis of young women’s self-esteem. Although Gilligan’s work has been critiqued for the way in which it relies on the experiences of primarily privileged white girls, her groundbreaking study is largely credited with establishing the discourse of girls’ poor self-esteem (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000).

Although Ophelia and girl power discourses rely on highly gendered constructions of adolescence, the saliency of these discourses also builds on the more generalized construction of youth. Underlying this construction is an understanding of the category “youth” as a product of shifting sociohistorical, material, and discursive contexts rather
than a universal biologically grounded condition of human development. As numerous scholars have noted, youth have historically been represented in similar, though not identical ways, as a symbolic register for modernity and its claims to progress (Giroux, 2005; Wyn & White, 1997), and as a focal point for the expression of uncertainty and tension during periods of dramatic change in the social, cultural, political, and economic order (Giroux, 1997; Lesko, 2001). That is to say, as a fundamental, yet albeit fragile symbol of the national future, the category youth is a continual site of representational struggle and national anxiety. For example, in the United States at the turn of the century, anxieties over racial progress, changing gender relations, and the character of the nation coalesced around the figure of the young, white, middle-class male as he represented both the potential and the problems of changing norms and expectations (Lesko, 2001).

In this vein, the almost simultaneous emergence of girl power and Ophelia discourses in the early 1990s suggests that rather than opposing, competing, and contradictory significations of femininity they are reflective of, and implicated in broader national anxieties. Consider: girl power and Ophelia became dominant modes of representation during a period marked by rapid social, economic, and political changes taking place due to neoliberal policies. And, as Henry Giroux (1997) argues, children, (like other already vulnerable populations) unequally bear the burden of these oppressive political and economic forces. To a great extent, the 1990s brought about the end of almost a century-long belief in policy-led “child saving” as social programs supporting this belief were replaced with zero tolerance policies and drastic cuts in social welfare (Giroux, 2005; Lesko, 2001). As Dwyer (1998) argues, these changes meant that young people had the difficult task of reconciling the contradiction between the reality of the structural
constraints shaping their specific circumstances and the “promises” of wealth and well-being offered by an increasingly global society.

In this context, the United States witnessed a proliferation of both scholarly and popular books addressing the risks associated with adolescence as well as a flood of alarming stories about the endangered lives of youth. Although the specific content of these stories varied including most notably, sensationalized reports on school shootings, teen drug use (heroin, meth amphetamines, marijuana, and ecstasy), smoking, suicide, teen pregnancy, eating disorders, effects of harmful media (internet, video games, music, movies) and lack of morals among teens, their respective narratives highlight three main themes; namely, that “risky” behavior among youth, especially white middle-class youth and girls was on the rise, the future of youth was in danger, and calls for something to be done about the omnipresent youth crisis.

Risk in this case was most broadly defined by an uncertainty about the ability of youth to make a “safe passage” to a healthy, productive, adult life. For example, data from the widely publicized Carnegie Corporation’s Council on Adolescent Development (1995) report on titled Great Transitions: Preparing Adolescents for a new Century, warned that half of the nation’s young people may be irrevocably damaging their chances for productive and healthy futures by becoming life-long casualties of drug and alcohol use, violence, suicide, and teen pregnancy. As Griffin (2004) explains, for young people, the cycle of production/reproduction/consumption is represented as something to be entered via a series of transitions associated with adult status. This series of transitions – the means by which society seeks to integrate each new generation of young people – follows a historically specific normative progression that ensures a safe, healthy and
productive adult life. Thus, in this context, troubled teens largely represented a source of adult concern over young persons’ disordered relationship with consumption (e.g., drug use or food), reproduction (e.g., teen mothers), and/or production, which usually refers to the transition from education to the job market (e.g., slackers and youth crime) (Griffin, 2004). Moreover, contemporary discourses about youth at risk, like the Carnegie Council report (which is largely based on social psychology research) suggest that an “unhealthy” transition into adulthood may have lifelong effects. In this regard the transitional period of adolescence generally referenced as the ages 9-14, or the “tweens”, served as a key category of concern.

As part of the general rise in concerns about youth at risk during the 1990s, with the introduction of Ophelia into the popular vernacular, this period was also marked by a more gender specific proliferation of alarming discourses about the health and well-being of girls.8 During this time, heightened concerns over the familiar problems facing girls – eating disorders, depression, teenage pregnancy – as well as the addition of newly formulated problems said to affect girls – substance abuse, violence, suicide – received national coverage over a range of media forms. Naomi Wolf’s (1991) bestselling book, The Beauty Myth, brought notice of the fact that that 150,000 girls die annually from eating-disorder complications. The widely reported results of the Department of Health and Human Services (1995) Youth Risk Behavior Survey, indicated that teenage girls were now nearly twice as likely as teenage boys to have seriously thought about or attempted suicide, and were equally likely to use illicit drugs. A special issue of U.S. News World Report titled “Teenage Wasteland?”, dedicated to addressing the “risky passage” of adolescence, recapitulated anxieties about youth in general while highlighting the
emotional fragility of teenage girls (Shapir, 1995). Summarizing the commonsense view of girls as vulnerable and at risk made visible during the 1990s, Margot Hornblower (1998) writing for *Time* magazine notes:

> Girls today are in trouble. They lose confidence in early adolescence.

> Their grades plummet, and following sexual stereotypes, their interest in math and science flags. They are plagued by eating disorders, suffer depression, get pregnant, attempt suicide (p. 199).

One of the most important concerns regarding girls – especially in terms of public interest, and policy – was teenage pregnancy. As an issue inextricably linked to reproductive heterosexuality, the family, national reproduction, the “problem” of teenage pregnancy is certainly not new. Nevertheless, on January 24, 1995 in the annual presidential State of the Union Address, President William J. Clinton declared that the “most serious social problem” facing America was the “epidemic of teen pregnancies”.

Although the overall rate of teenage pregnancy at the time of Clinton’s proclamation was down, the number of out-of-wedlock births among U.S. teenagers had reached an all-time high. According to popular reports, despite its relatively low rates, teenage pregnancy posed serious social and economic costs, particularly long-term dependency on public assistance for teen mothers and the greater likelihood that children born to them would also have children as unwed teens, require aid, and thus continue the cycle. Furthermore, mainstream media coverage on the topic made repeated mention of the fact that the United States had comparatively high rates of teenage pregnancy. For example, according to data collected by the Alan Guttmacher Institute during the 1990s, U.S. teenage pregnancy rates were twice as high as England and Wales or Canada, and nine times as high as in the
Netherlands or Japan. Thus, America’s “teenage pregnancy epidemic” was not a matter of scale but rather embodied broader crises involving girls, national reproduction, and national identity.  

The most drastic and controversial policy change implemented to address the problem of teenage pregnancy, and dependency was the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (1996). Signed into law by President Clinton, “Welfare Reform” as it came to be called, contained a sweeping bipartisan plan to dramatically alter the state of America’s welfare system. In sum, while playing off contemporary fears about “risky” behavior among girls, and capitalizing on the logic of personal responsibility, this key reform policy limited the amount of time a woman could receive welfare benefits, and carried with it strong work requirements. Additionally, in an effort to reinforce family values, personal morality, and decrease the apparent “attractiveness” of living on welfare, the law stipulated that unmarried minor parents were required to stay in school and live at home or in an adult-supervised setting. Furthermore, Welfare Reform allowed states the option to end benefits for teen parents who have children outside of marriage, and granted states financial incentives for reducing the number of out-of-wedlock births without simultaneously experiencing an increase in abortion rates (Watts, 1997). To this extent, Welfare Reform effectively ended welfare from an economic standpoint as established under the New Deal. At the same time, the underlying logic of this reform and the subsequent teenage pregnancy initiatives that would follow, served to lay the blame for societal problems upon who and what were perceived to be national problems, in this case the irresponsible welfare queen, teen parents, and pregnancy outside of marriage.
But of all the problems said to be affecting America’s girl crisis, arguably none had attained the prominence of self-esteem. According to popular narratives, the widely publicized results of the American Association of University Women (1991) study *Shortchanging Girls Shortchanging America*, legitimated the importance of girls’ mental health. The most extensive national survey on gender and self-esteem ever conducted, the study polled 3000 boys and girls between the ages of nine and fifteen on their attitudes toward self, school, family, and friends. The results confirmed previous reports and popular suspicions that for girls, passage into adolescence was not just marked by puberty but also a loss of confidence in their abilities (especially in math and science), an extremely critical attitude about their bodies, and a growing sense of personal inadequacy. The report’s most devastating charge was the claim that schools, particularly teachers, were biased against girls, and called on boys more often, thereby driving them away from advanced study. Among its more intriguing findings, the American Association of University Women (AAUW) survey revealed that although girls consistently report lower self-esteem, the severity and nature of reduced self-worth varied among ethnic groups. The survey also offered new information in that it distinguished between girls of different backgrounds, noting that African American girls retained their self-esteem during their adolescent years more than white or Latina girls. The disquieting results of the AAUW study also prompted several popular follow-up books such as Orenstein’s (1994) *Schoolgirls Girls, Self-Esteem, and the Confidence Gap* investigating the causes behind the steep decline in girls’ confidence.
during adolescence. Building on the AAUW survey, Orenstein argues that despite racial, economic, and class differences, girls are culturally expected to adhere to preconceived notions of passivity and dependence that preclude them from reaching their full potential. Drawing our attention to the importance of self-esteem with regard to girls’ well-being, Orenstein, like Piper (1994) suggests that low self-esteem is not necessarily dangerous in itself, but problematic as a state of mental health that underlies other more serious problems such as eating disorders, substance abuse, teenage pregnancy, and suicide.

Running parallel to discourses concerning America’s girl crisis, the success and ideological work performed by the Ophelia metaphor also spawned a virtual cottage industry about teenage girls at risk. Notably this includes a small sub-genre of books explicitly bearing the Ophelia signature: *Ophelia Speaks: Young Girls Write About Their Search for Self* (Shandler, 1999), *Surviving Ophelia: Mothers Share Wisdom in Navigating the Tumultuous Teenage Year* (Dellasega, 2002), and *Ophelia’s Mom: Women Speak Out About Loving and Letting Go of Their Adolescent Daughters* (Shandler, 2001). This proliferation of publishing was also matched by a number of commercial and grassroots programmatic responses in school, communities, and religious organizations designed to address the problem of girls’ self-esteem and vulnerability. One high-profile example is the Dove self-esteem project that develops and distributes resources that enable and empower women and girls to embrace a broad definition of beauty. A small sampling of non-corporate self-esteem building programs include, The Ophelia Project, a volunteer organization turned national with paying members and a team of volunteers, as well as Ophelia Club’s at local high schools (Gonick, 2006).
Berlant’s (1997) work offers important insight into the recent gender specificity in concerns about youth at risk. In her work on American identity, national fantasy, and citizenship Berlant argues that, because it cannot be secured or guaranteed, the national future is a continual site of national anxiety. Among others, Berlant and Jeffords (1994) have argued that the 1990s saw an American populace faced with a crisis of identity, a turbulent period of struggle and strife between who and what counts (and will count) as ideal “American” citizens. As Berlant elaborates, within this conjuncture, “the nation’s value is figured not on behalf of an actually laboring or existing adult, but of a future American, both incipient and pre-historical … the American child” (p. 6). In Berlant’s view, the iconicity of the child in this sense is due to its position as unconstrained ahistorical figure invested with the promise of the nation’s future. Thus as Berlant argues, the most hopeful images of life circulating in the public sphere at this time are not adults, but rather children, particularly little girls, understood to represent America’s future.

As several authors have noted, Ophelia and girl power discourses also represent a social and cultural fascination with girls that reflects shifting concepts of modern subjectivity (Gonick, 2006; Harris, 2004b; McRobbie, 2004). According to Gonick (2006) the 1950s marked a critical shift in the relationship between femininity and subjectivity that is important antecedent to the recent emergence of the girl-subject. It was during the 1950s that the historical constitution of an opposition between womanhood and personhood was disrupted and women were, for the first time, recognized as subjects within discourses of modernity. Previously, the binaries defining the modern subject positioned woman as Other to man’s rationality, agency, and individuality. That is to say women were located in the subordinate position within the binaries of passivity/activity,
agent/victim, and subject/object and were therefore constituted as outside prevailing definitions of full personhood. These same cultural definitions precluded young women from meeting the criteria of modern adolescence in the form of the individual en route to becoming the self-determining adult (Hudson, 1994; Walkerdine, 1990). According to Johnson (1993), this shift was won as a result of the feminist agenda of the time and concomitantly as a result of women’s changing role in the process of modernization, whereby their involvement as both laborers and consumers created new demands for technologies and cultural goods.\(^{13}\)

Like the 1950s, Gonick argues, the 1990s have also produced a new relationship between femininity and subjectivity. While in the 1950s women were recognized as having the potential to exhibit the active agency characterizing the modern subject, subjectivity under neoliberal ideology has been marked by an intensification of what Beck (1992) has called a “social surge of individualization” (p. 87). Among other factors, this refers to the shift (outlined in the previous chapter) in relations between the state and its citizens from a focus on state-building (through the development of government programs in support of citizens during the postwar period) to an increasingly privatized notion of citizenship that places emphasis on individual experience, personal responsibility, and consumption (Giroux, 2000). Specifically, as Burman (2005) suggests, through the articulation of the self-help movement and neoconservative discourses as personal/individual matters, the contemporary proliferation of psychological culture promoting emotional literacy (and therefore self-responsibility) has contributed to a feminization of neoliberal subjectivity. At the same time, recent shifts in the economy from that of production to consumption privileges the feminine through women’s’ and
girls’ long-standing association with consumption. This development may be credited to the replacement of manual production with service work – a feminized sector – as the mainstay of the neoliberal economy.

Extending this logic to an analysis of girl power/Ophelia discourses, Harris (2004b) suggests that the recent convergence of neoliberal and feminist discourses has emerged to radically reshape the categories of, and social ideas about girls. The convergence of the needs of the new economy with some of the successes of second-wave feminism such as the expansion of opportunity for girls and women in education and some forms of employment in developed countries has resulted in discourses that construct girls in terms of the girl power/Ophelia model, or what Harris calls the “can do/at risk” paradigm. In a contemporary U.S. context marked by deindustrialization, decentralization, the expansion of global communications, technology, and service sectors, Harris and fellow girl studies’ theorist McRobbie (2004) argue that girls rather than boys or youth are being constructed as the ideal neoliberal subjects. As Harris explains,

in a time of dramatic social, cultural, and political transition, young women are being constructed as a vanguard of new subjectivity … power, opportunities, and success are all modeled by the ‘future girl’, a kind of young woman celebrated for young woman celebrated for young woman celebrated for her ‘desire, determination, and confidence’ to take charge of her life, seize chances, and achieve her goals (p. 1).

In this postfeminist context, young women are championed as a metaphor for social change – a metaphor that disavows the need for feminism and other social justice struggles (McRobbie, 2004). Girl power, as embodied by the “new girl,” assertive, dynamic, and
unbound from the constraints of passive femininity, represents the idealized form of these new subjectivities; and the fragile and vulnerable, Ophelia is her shadow twin, who without intervention is at risk of failing to produce the required attributes of the neoliberal feminine subject.

Among the diverse range of forms and contexts occupied by girl power/Ophelia discourses, arguably none has obtained the high-profile and affective purchase as that of sport. The ways in which girl power/Ophelia discourses are articulated to contemporary sporting discourses and, in particular, popular understandings of the athletic female body, are the focus of next section.

Sport-inflected Girl Power and America’s Second Female Sports Revolution

According to popular narratives, the advent of America’s second female sports revolution was marked by the much anticipated and enormously successful efforts of the U.S. women at the 1996 Olympic Games. During the months preceding the 1996 Olympic Games, the popular media heralded the high probability for Team USA’s women in Atlanta. Touting these prospects, Newsweek (June 23, 1996) devoted an entire issue to the nation’s female Olympic competitors declaring 1996, the “Year of Women”. Given that for the first time in a summer Olympic games, women athletes, rather than men, held the nation’s best prospects for Olympic gold, The New York Times Magazine (June 23, 1996) also dedicated an entire issue to the women of the U.S. national team, further building the team’s symbolic purchase with the American public. Prior to the Atlanta Games, media and fan interest of women’s Olympic sports largely favored those in which U.S. women were somewhat successful and also that conformed to the traditional feminine image of appropriate movement activity such as gymnastics, running, diving, volleyball, equestrian,
and swimming. However, unlike previous Olympiads, media coverage preceding the 1996 Games embraced women’s team sports, particularly basketball, softball, and soccer. By the close of the Games, the media frenzy surrounding Team USA’s women was justified as outstanding performances in the individual sports of swimming, gymnastics and track, as well as gold medal team sport efforts in women’s basketball, soccer and softball served to usher in new generation and gender of Olympic heroes. Key figures and national celebrities to emerge from the Games included gymnast Kerri Strug whose heroic vault guaranteed the first ever U.S. women’s gymnastics team gold medal, women’s basketball players Lisa Leslie, Sheryl Swoopes, and Rebecca Lobo, as well as soccer star Mia Hamm. Given the historical disavowal of women’s sports, particularly team sports, the collective success and popular acceptance of women athletes of the 1996 Games was heralded as a positive step toward gender equity in sport (Deford, 1996; Longman, 1996).

The paradigmatic shift in women’s sports and female athleticism precipitated by the 1996 Olympics was followed by yet another highly anticipated and media-hyped landmark female sporting event, the development of the WNBA. Unlike previous attempts at organizing women’s professional basketball in the United States, which had failed due to a lack of funding and marketability, the WNBA was developed on the heels of a growing social momentum behind women’s basketball, as well as the name recognition, financial backing, and extensive marketing of the fiscally lucrative National Basketball Association (NBA). In the absence of a U.S. professional women’s league, the only options for women to continue their athletic careers after college was to play in one of the many professional leagues abroad (VanDerveer, 1997). Given the historical inability of the United States to support professional women’s team sports, the WNBA’s debut
season, like the 1996 Olympic Games was highly symbolic (Leland, 1997; Lopez, 1997; Wulf, 1997). Indeed, the WNBA's aggressive use of its first season marketing slogan “We Got Next”, was more than a clever use of a playground etiquette catch phrase, but also a semiotic nod to the historic border crossing that underscored the development of the league. The timing of the WNBA's debut, occurring just two days prior to the 25th anniversary of Title IX, facilitated popular perceptions of the league as the “natural” outgrowth of America’s commitment to women’s and women’s sport via Title IX. This point was perhaps best illustrated and summarized in a sign held by a fan at the league’s inaugural game, which read simply — “Thank You Title IX” (Lopez, 1997). Based on the league’s reputation as a progressive and a pro-women endeavor, fans of the league (especially in the league’s first season) were not only supporting their favorite team but said to be participating in a form of activism. As John Wideman (1998) commented on the cultural politics surrounding the league:

In the inaugural WNBA season, buying a ticket to a Liberty or Comets or Sting game expressed more than a mere entertainment preference. It was a chance to feel good, to support a new, worthy and long overdue women’s enterprise. You could be part of the wave. Raise the stakes of the game. Participate in a lively bit of consciousness-raising (p. 66).

To a great extent, the WNBA’s initial success hinged on its use of three high-profile former Olympic players: Lisa Lobo, Sheryl Swoopes, and Lisa Leslie. Known for their on-court talent and intensity and off-court grace and virtue this charismatic crew was said to capture the varied makeup of American women: Lobo, the all-American girl next door; Leslie, the glamorous and beautiful model; and Swoopes, the down-home ethereal everywoman and
soon to be mother (Marks, 1997). The popular identity of the league’s players, defined in
terms of both personal character and style of play, was also repeatedly defined over and
against the identity of male professional athletes, especially players in the NBA. Recalling
the popular perception of male professional athletes (Albert Belle, Michael Irving, Dennis
Rodman) as arrogant, violent, greedy, criminal, and distracted from their fans, WNBA
players, in comparison, were valorized for selflessly giving back: graciously signing
autographs, playing a team oriented game, and abstaining from violence both on and off
the court (Banet-Weiser, 1999).

The third, and perhaps most well-know in the series of milestones to mark the
second U.S. revolution in women’s sports was the 1999 FIFA Women’s World Cup. For
the first time the tournament was played in huge stadiums and set new records for
attendance, media coverage, and television audiences. Spectator figures topped 660,000,
the media numbered near 2,500, and all 32 games were broadcast live on national
television. In the words of Marla Messing, CEO of the U.S. organizing committee “This
World Cup was a world-class, world-caliber, stand-alone event for women like none other.
In a small way, we were all a part of history” (Saporito, 1999). The unprecedented
interest of the tournament among U.S. fans was due in large part to the popularity of the
highly-favored-to-win U.S. women’s soccer team

In the months preceding the games, a savvy summer public relations advertising
and media blitz featuring key players such as the charismatic and talented Mia Hamm,
Brandi Chastain, Julie Foudy, and veteran Michelle Akers vaulted the team into public
consciousness. Situated in a context marked by a series of high-profile female sporting
milestones, the U.S. team’s mission to win the World Cup was routinely likened to a
crusade to prove that women’s team sports, and soccer in particular, deserved the same kind of attention, admiration, and money as that of their male counterparts. Particularly telling in this regard was Hamm’s now famous 1999 Gatorade spot in which she challenged fellow University of North Carolina superstar Michael Jordan to a series of sports contests. Set to the song, “Anything You Can Do, I Can Do Better” the commercial ends with Hamm flipping Jordan over her hip in a judo maneuver, thereby exemplifying the impact she had on the male-dominated world of American athletics. Following the routine characterization of female athletes as more virtuous than their male counterparts, the team was extolled as role models for exercising the virtues of teamwork, selflessly giving back to their fans, and demonstrating a healthy female body physique.15,16

Proving to be everything that organizers, advertisers, and fans had hoped the U.S. women’s team easily advanced to the finals. With an estimated 40 million U.S. television viewers the Cup final featuring Team USA vs. China was the most watched soccer match in the history of American network television, and the turnout of 90,185 at the Rose Bowl was the largest ever at a women’s sporting event (Saporito, 1999). After a sweltering 90 minutes of regulation play and 30 minutes of sudden death overtime produced a scoreless tie, the winner was decided by an unpopular tie breaking method in soccer: the penalty shoot-out. After penalty shooting had also resulted in a 4-4 tie, U.S. player Brandi Chastain converted the last penalty kick to seal a breathtaking 5:4 victory of the United States over China. Chastain celebrated by whipping off her jersey, waving it above her head, and falling to her knees with fists clenched before a thundering crowd. Her infamous moment, nicknamed “the bra heard ‘round the world” was featured on the covers Time (Saporito, 1999), Sports Illustrated (Wahl, 1999), and in Newsweek (Starr & Brant, 1999)
under the title “Girls Rule!” In a fitting end to their highly symbolic crusade, Team USA’s win was celebrated not only as an incredible achievement for women’s sport, but also more importantly as a victory for women’s liberation.

As illustrated by the feel-good post-Title IX, pro-women sentiments surrounding America’s second female sport revolution, sport and more specifically its iconic and highly marketable female athletes, were inseparable from the expression of girl power. The national hero status afforded to high-profile female athletes is best summarized by the 2000 advertisement for Gatorade, which suggested, vis-à-vis the lyrics of The Guess Who, these female athletic heroes represented the American woman. As the embodiment girl power, female athletes were seen as promoting more than just the promise of a brawny physique and good health but also the postfeminist, post-title IX promise of gender equity, female agency, autonomy, and power (Bellafante, 1998; Delaney, 1998). In the words of Robert Sullivan (1999), today’s female athletes are the “daughters of Title IX, they’ve never been told what they can and cannot do” (p. 62). Unlike their pop music and teen television counterparts, renounced for their glamorization of teenage sexuality and for being more shallow commercial hype than substance, girl culture’s mature female sports stars endorsement of a stylistic blend of bodily empowerment mixed with femininity was (and continues to be) celebrated as an example of a “healthier” female embodiment. As such, female athletic heroes were routinely cast as an inspiration to women, and especially girls, for whom sport participation is deemed as a major determinant in psychological and physical well-being.

The emergence of the feel-good image of the successful female athlete as role model in the mid-1990s also gave rise to an equally symbolic figure, her designated heir,
the athletic little girl. Featured as the visual compliment to the successful female athlete, the figure of the athletic little girl was repeatedly represented within mainstream media coverage of high-profile female sporting events as an adoring young female fan. Within this media context, the symbolic purchase of these mutually contingent figures was also repeatedly substantiated by textual references to the shared symbolic relationship between aspiring and awestruck young female fans and their willing, deserving, and grateful adult female sporting role models. As an element in, and extension of, the girl power/consumer culture alliance, the figure of the athletic young girl was also a highly marketable figure. To this effect, images of as pony-tailed, baseball hat wearing, basketball dribbling, precocious, pint-sized little girls, symbols of sport-inflected girl power, were repeatedly used to sell everything from athletic apparel to insurance. For example, a popular Buick advertising campaign of the early 2000’s featured the image of an assertively postured young girl dwarfed by female basketball players with the tagline “What do you want to be when you grow up?” Underscoring girl culture’s gender equity thread, Nike aired a series of advertisements in the late 1990s featuring girls playing sandlot football and engaging in intense peewee contract negotiations to suggest that in light of the success of the WNBA, the Women’s National Football League, Women’s Major League Baseball, and the Women’s National Hockey League were only a matter of time. Even Mattel, manufacturer of the notorious anti-role model, the Barbie doll, attempted to exonerate itself with a series of print ads and billboards featuring portraits of tough girls with hockey sticks and wind-whipped hair accompanied by the slogan, “Become your own hero.” Whether represented by the image of an actual young female fan, or commercial representation of the athletic little girl, the message was the same. For these girls, designated as America’s daughters
and granddaughters of Title IX, limitations and vulnerability are passé; today’s girls have the strength, authority, and opportunity to be self-made.

Considering until recently female sport participation was largely ridiculed and considered risky, how are we to understand the recent saturation and widespread appeal of female athleticism in contemporary America? According to popular narratives, Title IX is repeatedly given credit for the most recent female athletic revolution. As mainstream outlets such as *Sports Illustrated* and ESPN’s *SportsCenter* have pointed out, the United States has witnessed remarkable changes in the female sporting landscape since the enactment of Title IX in 1972. In this time, record numbers of women and girls have signed up to play in youth leagues, on high school teams for competitive intercollegiate programs, or local recreational offerings. According to a longitudinal study, since the passing of Title IX, female high school athletic participation has increased by 904% and female collegiate athletic participation has increased by 456% (Acosta & Carpenter, 2008).

In addition to women’s gains on the playing field, Title IX is also given credit for the commercial appeal and related endorsement opportunities now available to celebrity female athletes. Although women’s endorsements still lag significantly behind men’s, and the specter of homosexuality still haunts the commercial appeal of women’s sports, a few female athletes have emerged as true success stories. For example in the past decade, recognizably feminine athletes such as Mia Hamm, as well as tennis stars Venus Williams and Anna Ivanovic, have landed some of the most lucrative endorsements in the history of women’s sports. In many ways, the recent expansion of women’s and girls’ sport, due in part, to Title IX is hopeful, encouraging, and represents real progress; female athletes now
have freedoms and opportunities that were not only unavailable but unthinkable only a few decades ago.

On another level, the recent attention afforded to women’s and girls’ sports and its articulation to girl culture is more about commercial value than gender equity. As Cole (2000a) and Heywood (2000) have noted, the girl culture/sport alliance represents an exercise of global capitalism and its ever-increasing ability and need to produce profitable new markets and trends. Given the increased popularity of women’s sport (particularly team sport) and in turn, commercial potential, corporate America took notice. According to market research, women’s sport attracts “women, and well-educated, family-oriented fans”, a sizeable and largely untapped sports consumer demographic (Hamilton, 1995, p.46). Not coincidentally, the pledged allegiance to women and girls by multinational sports-fitness corporations such as Nike, Reebok, and Adidas has predictably followed the growth of a sport-minded female population and stagnation growth in male markets (Cole, 2000a). For example, in 1994, it was announced that, for the first time, women were outbuying men in the athletic shoe market (Wallenchinsky, 1996). In response to this trend, Nike released its first basketball shoe named after a woman: the Air Swoopes named after basketball player Sheryl Swoopes (Lewis, 1996). Further demonstrating the importance of women athletes to the sports-fitness market, in 1999 Nike named its largest campus building for Mia Hamm to acknowledge the positive commercial impact of her accomplishments as a Nike-sponsored athlete. Recognizing the marketing potential women’s sports, the 1990s also marked the emergence of two sports magazines geared specifically for women consumers – *Sports Illustrated Women/Sport* and *Amy Love’s Real Sports* (later named *Real Sports*). The seemingly instantaneous commercial success of
women’s sport even caused conspiracy theorists to speculate that when Brandi Chastain doffed her jersey to reveal her black Nike sports bra after scoring the winning penalty kick, that the powerful and creative forces of Nike wrote the script for her. Part social transformation, part niche market, this highly saleable brand of girl power also gives consumerism meaning as supporting women’s sport through consumption is considered a progressive practice and a political experience (Geissler, 2001). Indeed, as a result of their efforts to capitalize on the girl power promise of opportunity and self-reliance represented via the successful female athlete and her imagined heir, multinational corporations have successfully created a powerful brand of empowerment “for sale”.

Moreover as Heywood (2000) argues, the mass appeal and emergence of the Übergirl are, in part, responses to the recent popularization of sport and physical activity as a healthy part of female adolescent development. For example, according to the findings of the highly-publicized President’s Council on Physical Fitness and Sports (1997) report: *Physical Activity and Sports in the Lives of Girls*, sport and physical activity can help girls “weather the storms of adolescence and lay the foundation for a healthier adult life” by reducing girls’ risk of many chronic diseases of adulthood, improving academic performance, and promoting better mental health. Despite the many benefits of sport and physical activity for girls, the report also warned that girls experience a steady decline in physical activity at the onset of adolescence that oftentimes precludes them from reaping its many benefits. The release of the President’s Council report was followed by yet another highly publicized study, the 1998 Women’s Sports Foundation (1998) report, *Sport and Teen Pregnancy*. Designed to test the commonsense claim that sport participation helps reduce the risk of teen pregnancy, the study concludes that female sport participation
during adolescence has a positive influence in sexual behaviors while simultaneously reducing risk the risk for teen pregnancy.

Arguably the most publicly recognized compilation of this work debuted in 1995 as one of Nike’s most talked about and memorable advertisements titled “If You Let Me Play”. The advertisement gave voice to the consequences of denying girls the same opportunities for sports that boys routinely receive. Set in a playground signified by swing-sets, monkey-bars, and a simple merry-go-round, the ad features quick camera shots and slow-motion takes of teenage and preteen girls. Shown in tight facial close-ups, four girls of mixed races and ethnicities take turns solemnly reciting soundbites that sound as if they have been scripted by social scientists and women’s health advocates. As each girl voices her (very adult) line, she meets the camera’s eye:

If you let me play sports, I will like myself more; I will have more self-confidence, if you let me play sports. If you let me play, I will be 60 percent less likely to get breast cancer; I will suffer less depression. If you let me play sports, I will be more likely to leave a man who beats me. If you let me play, I will be less likely to get pregnant before I want to. I will learn what it means to be strong. If you let me play sports. If you let me play sports. If you let me play sports. If you let me play.

Invoking the discourse of science to shore up the legitimacy of its claims, Nike’s sound bites are backed by a long list of references, including studies completed by researchers for the National Cancer Institute, the National Institutes of Health and the Ms. Foundation. Although the advertisement provides no documentation to the studies being referenced, the address appears as truth because of the context in which it is deployed.
Nike’s “If You Let Me Play” is part of Nike’s larger efforts to gain public recognition for being a socially responsible corporation through its P.L.A.Y. campaign (Participate in the Lives of America’s Youth). The centerpiece of Nike’s pro-social intervention, P.L.A.Y. is a $10 million a year Nike-sponsored program whose goal is to provide safe, clean, and accessible facilities and recreational opportunities “to kids” (Goldman & Papson, 1998). Press releases and advertisement agency memoranda maintain that Nike started P.L.A.Y. because it felt ethically responsible to do something to mitigate the crisis of American youth. Like the P.L.A.Y. campaign, Nike’s “If you let me Play” campaign has been explained by its originators as emerging from a need to attend to a crisis. The four women who designed the campaign for advertising agency Weiden & Kennedy were explicit about their intentions,

What we hoped to create with this advertisement was twofold. One, we wanted to help end the discrimination every little girl – and woman – is faced with when it comes to organized sports. And two, to alert fathers, mothers, teachers, friends, family members and girls themselves to the profound, and unsettling benefits that sports and fitness can give them if they start young enough. The benefits [of sports for women] are astounding (Goldman & Papson, 1998, p. 137).

Newspaper reviews of the advertisement reinforced Nike’s pro-social motives describing it as “heartbreaking”, “chilling” and “eerie” (Goldman & Papson, 1998). As Jennifer Frey (1995) told the Washington Post,

The first time I saw the commercial, it stopped me cold in my living room, and I had to sit down for a moment, just to absorb what had been said. Part of me was
thrilled by what I was seeing. Part of me was profoundly disturbed. More than 20 viewings later, I am still pulled in two directions (p. D7).

The advertisements also garnered industry acclaim for its pro-social content. In addition, several feminist new services and women’s health organizations heralded the ads as finally “showing the reality of girls’ lives” (Enrico, 1995, p. B3).

While some applauded Nike as doing its part to empower girls, others interpreted the ads’ meaning in a cynical and skeptical way, questioning Nike’s commitment to social justice. Perhaps the most telling criticisms came from those who read Nike’s “empowerment strategies” as thinly veiled attempts to hawk sports equipment at the expense of obscuring what more satisfying empowerment would involve and those who resented the patriarchal permission-requesting tone of “If you let me” (Lucas, 2000; Mastronardi, 1999). Despite its criticism, the goal of Nike’s powerful advertisement – to stir the pot, and generate talk – remains intact. Indeed, over a decade later, the provocative blend of empirically supported soundbites of Nike’s “If you let me Play” campaign is still popularly recognized as one of the most powerful and thought-provoking messages about female sport participation.

As an element in, and extension of, sport-inflected girl power’s commercial appeal, its connection between sport participation and successful self-production also served as a powerful marketing tool for what Pitter and Andrews (1997) identify as the “social problems industry” that emerged with regard to sport and recreation for youth during the 1990s. Premised on the well-established proposition that sport and exercise for youth have positive effects that extend beyond the limits of health and fitness, this “industry” witnessed tremendous growth in the late 1980s and 1990s (Hartmann, 2001). In 1997, the
journal of *Parks and Recreation* identified some 621 problems-based athletic initiatives targeted specifically on reaching “at-risk” youth (Will, 1997). Formal and informal projects of this nature have been implemented by organizations such as the YMCA, Boys and Girls Clubs, Police Athlete Leagues, as well as schools and community centers. A large contributor to the growth of this social problems industry was the creation of numerous girl-specific and girl power-themed programs advocating sport and physical activity as way to reduce girls’ participation in risky behaviors and/or promote healthy adolescent development. High-profile examples of these girl-targeted campaigns include among others, the WNBA’s “Be Active” campaign, the WSF’s “GoGirlGo!” program, and the Dove Self-esteem Fund.

As sport scholars and sport historians have well documented, the use of sport and physical activity as a means of building character and self-discipline among youth, as well as its use as a tool for preventing criminal and delinquent behaviors is a time-honored practice within American culture (Hartmann, 2001; Pitter & Andrews, 1997). A much broader conjunctural view of this practice reveals that the previous use of athletically based programs to achieve broader social ends is reflective of, and implicated in broader social, economic, cultural and political transitions. For example, the systematic effort to structure and formalize play and play spaces during the early 1900s was intimately connected to larger social and political fears of industrialization, immigration, and urbanization. Specifically, this “playground” or “play” movement was the work of progressive reformers who saw the development of parks and recreation programs as a way to socialize and assimilate the largely immigrant ethnic working classes moving to U.S. cities into twentieth-century American democratic norms (Hartmann, 2001). And, as mentioned
earlier, the massive public efforts to foster physical fitness among American citizens, particularly youth, throughout the 1950s and 1960s were deeply intertwined with national insecurities related to the Cold War. In this context, highly publicized results of studies indicating that American youth were significantly less fit than their European counterparts were interpreted as evidence that America might be going “soft” in the fight against communism, thus spurring moves to stimulate national fitness as a matter of national security (Howell & Ingham, 2001).

Like previous sport, fitness, and recreation-based movements in the United States, the social-problems industry that emerged with regard to sport and recreation for youth during the 1990s are reflective of, and implicated in, broader historical circumstances. To this extent, the girl-specific and girl power-themed programs of this movement are no exception. Indeed, it is not surprising that sport, America’s favorite morally and economically viable solution to a host of social issues, figures prominently within youth social problems campaigns in a context marked by the mutually contingent discourses of girl power and Ophelia. However, despite their similarities, unlike previous U.S. sport and fitness reform movements directed toward the more general category of “youth” (read: boys and adolescent males), the girl-specific focus of these more recent problems-based sport and fitness initiatives, and more specifically their focus on girls’ self-esteem, marks a significant departure from previous efforts.

In following section(s), I provide a critical overview of two high-profile, government-sponsored youth health campaigns created during the 1990s: the U.S. HHS Girl Power! campaign and the NYAD campaign. Through this reading I highlight how the familiar logic of the “can-do/at-risk paradigm” and the category of self-esteem serves as a
largely uncontested frame of reference within each campaign, and in turn, how this
discursive construction contributes to contemporary ways of thinking about the various
problems facing girls.

*Girl Power!*

*Girl Power!* is the power that girls have, individually and collectively, to be the best they can be—confident, fulfilled, and feeling good about themselves. *Girl Power!* helps girls make the most of their lives and pursue their own interests and talents. *Girl Power!* is about telling all girls that they are worthy of succeeding, that opportunities do exist, and that expressing themselves is okay. *Girl Power!* is about being healthy—physically and mentally. *Girl Power!* girls can grow into strong and competent women. (*Girl Power! Campaign pamphlet*).

In November of 1996, HHS Secretary Donna Shalala gave a keynote address to the American Public Health Association’s Annual Meeting. The primary purpose of this speech was to launch the national public health education campaign sponsored by HHS called, *Girl Power!* A multi-phase public health initiative, *Girl Power!* was implemented as a direct response to national and international concerns about the mental and physical health needs of women and girls. Dr. Nelba Chavez, Administrator of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, summarized the rationale and aim of the campaign as follows:

Too many girls grow up doubting they have a role and a place in society, making the risks of depression, substance abuse, and suicide very real. The fact is, our culture bombards girls with messages to stay thin, attract boys, consume harmful drugs, and focus more on what others think of them than what they think of themselves. Government along with other positive forces can work to combat these

In her speech Shalala also lauded the campaign’s gender-specific approach to public health education. As Shalala (1996) asserted, “The Girl Power! campaign realizes that while some health messages work equally well for boys and girls, girls also need to hear health messages target to their unique needs, interests, and challenges” (p. 4). Citing the mutually contingent health risks of girls – eating disorders, low self-esteem, depression, eating disorders, substance abuse, and teenage pregnancy – and their said causes – media influence, unequal opportunities, changing nature of the family, and a lack of encouraging role models – Girl Power! was intended to target these overlapping issues in a comprehensive, gender-specific approach to public health.

As we can see, the campaign is not just constructed in terms of girl power, but is billed as a response to the Ophelia crisis. For example in offering further justification for the campaign, Shalala (1996) described the problem with girls explicitly in terms of Ophelia: “Between the ages of 9 and 14, too many girls once full of resilience, somehow lose their very selves” (p. 4). According to campaign materials these problems reflect something new and different happening to our girls. For instance, constructing the present crisis informing Girl Power! in terms of the past Shalala remarked,

We were able to emerge from young adolescence pretty well adjusted. And that’s because our parents encouraged us to get involved in so many activities that we didn’t have time to get in trouble. It’s because there was peer pressure not to smoke or put other terrible substances in our bodies – especially if we were
athletes. And, I think, more than anything, it’s that we were surrounded by caring adults who bolstered our self-confidence (p. 4).

To this end, the problems facing girls under Girl Power! are configured as discursive ones, predicated on the assumption that girls who engage in “unhealthy” practices suffer from an impoverishment of health-positive messages and influences (Mastronardi, 1999). Because the issues informing Girl Power! are conceptualized as discursive ones, the set of solutions are also discursive ones. The primary objectives of the campaign are to provide accurate health information and positive messages to girls and their caregivers; raise public awareness about substance abuse and risky behaviors; help girls develop the skills they need to resist unhealthy influences and make positive choices; and to support girls and the adults who care about them. According to Shalala, “Girl Power! is not another way of saying no – it’s a reason to say yes” (quoted in Powers, 1997, p. 76). Unlike “just say no” campaigns Girl Power!’s marketing scheme involves not only the unselling of particular behaviors, but the promotion of positive alternatives such as physical activity, art, and academics for girls to build self-efficacy and self-esteem.

Specifically, in its effort to provide education about girls’ health issues and to empower girls, the campaign draws on a number of sources and strategies to deliver its messages. Adopting a multi-stranded marketing model, Girl Power! incorporates celebrity endorsements, high-profile public events, media outlets, private partnerships, and community programs to promote and meet campaign goals. Girl Power! resources and materials, gradually developed and integrated since the campaign’s launch include posters, fact sheets, PSAs, and community education kits. Girl Power! also emphasizes an alliance with corporate endorsers to promote the its message. For example, Jane Cosmetics, the
largest manufacturer of cosmetics for teenagers, and Girl Power!’s first corporate sponsor, brought campaign displays to 7500 retail outlets including Walmart, Kmart, and Target (Mastronardi, 1999). Each display featured tear-off sheets promoting “drug-free” messages and a 1-800 telephone number for girls to call to get “cool free stuff” (stickers, a pen, and diary of affirmative writings by girls). Perhaps the most extensive informational and interactive aspect of the campaign was the Girl Power! website. Some of the more notable features of the website included interactive games, health information, drug avoidance messages, hyperlinks to other “safe,” girl-fun sites, homework-help links, job information, and opportunities for peer and mentor interaction. The website also offered numerous free or nominally priced Girl Power! products such as diaries, address and assignment books, baseball caps, T-shirts, and water bottles. The most popular of these was the Girl Power! assignment book, which according to campaign materials is intended to help girls build good habits and “instill the self-discipline that can only lead to a path for success” (“Girl Power! Celebrates 4th Anniversary”, 2000)

Following its launch in 1997, the campaign garnered national attention and acclaim reaching and according to campaign estimates, was said to have reached millions of people via its website, campaign promotions, and partnerships. For example, to promote its message the campaign teamed with numerous community-based programs and organizations, as well as local and national endorsers including the AAUW, the American Medical Association and the Girls Scouts of the U.S.A. In working with the campaign, the Girl Scouts offered a “girl power” patch that girls could earn by completing an activity guide that encourages them to stay off drugs, stay active, and excel in school. Given the initial success of Girl Power! the campaign was subsequently expanded to include
emphasizes on eating disorders, healthy self-image, teen pregnancy, sport and physical activity, as well as chronic illness and disabilities.

As an element in, and extension of sport-inflected girl power, sport and physical activity were a defining element of the Girl Power! campaign. The campaign’s investment in sport and physical activity draws almost exclusively from the President’s Council report: *Physical Activity and Sports in the Lives of Girls* (1997). In a carefully orchestrated media event, the report findings were released against the backdrop of the 1997 NCAA Women’s Final Four, and used as a strategic platform from which to introduce the sport-centered phase of the campaign. As HHS Secretary Shalala, said of the Girl Power! campaign,

> With ‘Girl Power!’ we see physical activity as a cornerstone of our strategy to give 9-14 year-old girls the confidence and resilience they need to stay away from dangers like tobacco, drugs, and teen pregnancy and make the most of their lives (Shalala, 1997)

Thus, one of the campaign’s primary aims was to increase awareness about health issues associated with inactivity and to build girls’ self-confidence through participation in sport and physical activity and ultimately encourage “healthy” development. In its efforts to promote sport for girls, Girl Power! also drew on a number of sport-inspired messages including PSAs featuring celebrity female athletes, a Girl Power! sports poster, an extensive sports area of the campaign website, as well as several high-profile corporate partnerships. For example, in cooperation with the WNBA, the Washington Mystics hosted Girl Power Night, a special game night that features the Girl Power! campaign. Through its partnership with Nike P.L.A.Y., Girl Power! also worked with coaches of at-
risk girls in youth sport leagues to reduce the obstacles hindering girls sport participation. Additionally as part of its partnership with the Girl Scouts, Girl Power! hosted sports workshops designed to build young girls self-confidence and self-esteem by inspiring them to get active. And, in conjunction with Avon Running – Global Women’s Circuit, Girl Power! sponsored the Girl Power! Mile, a one-mile run specifically designed for young girls 9 – 14 years of age and is held as part of Avon Running’s series of 10K runs, 5K walk/fun runs and workshops for women. In commenting on this Girl Power! partnership Secretary Shalala underscored the campaign’s message of sport-inflected girl power explaining that, “running is healthy for the heart and soul. Your body gets stronger and you gain self-confidence and self-esteem. This healthy approach to living will help girls build a foundation for a successful adulthood” (“HHS/Avon Running Announces the Girl Power! Mile”, 1999).

National Youth Anti-Drug Campaign

The NYAD campaign was created by the U.S. Congress, with the goal of preventing and reducing youth drug abuse across the nation. Under the management of the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP), and in collaboration with the Partnership for a Drug-Free America, the campaign is modeled after advertising industry and market research practices and complemented by public health communications and outreach. To this end, the NYAD campaign’s strategy is behavioral change, specifically to reinforce existing anti-drug attitudes in youth and adults and to reverse the attitudes of those who have positive ideas about illegal drugs. Through its relationship with the ONDCP, the NYAD campaign is generally thought to be the single
largest source of drug-prevention messaging directed to teens and is the single largest public service initiative in the history of advertising.

The NYAD campaign draws on two primary anti-drug messages or brands to reach out to its intended audiences. “Above the Influence” is the campaign’s teen brand, intended for teens ages 14-16, encourages teens to live “above the influence” and “make the right decisions” to resist drug use. The campaign’s brand directed toward parents, caregivers and community organizations titled “Parents. The Anti-Drug”, highlights the dangers of teen drug use and other risky behaviors and encourages parents to take action – talking, rule-setting, monitoring, and connecting – to keep their teens healthy and drug-free. Both campaign messages are disseminated via media advertising and each brand’s respective Web site, www.AbovetheInfluence.com, and www.TheAntiDrug.com. In addition to advertising and the web, the NYAD campaign’s “anti-drug” message has been promoted or featured by top online and traditional media venues. These venues included, but are not limited to: About.com; aol.com; oprah.com; drkoop.com; MTV.com; NASA.com; the Lycos Network; Yahoo; Wired.com; CNN; USA Today; The Atlantic Monthly Online; the Benton Foundation’s Connect for Kids, Oxygen Media, and local daily newspapers nationwide. With input from behavioral scientists and drug prevention experts, the campaign also develops a wide range of materials for youth, parents, and adult influencers, including brochures, handbooks, toolkits, posters, postcards, and CD-ROMs, many in bilingual versions. In order to disseminate these materials and the campaign’s anti-drug message, the NYAD campaign works with nearly 100 community, youth-serving, education, prevention, and public health organizations, as well as 50 corporations, which adds both credibility and reach to its messages. Some recent partnerships have
included collaborative efforts with the American Academy of Pediatrics, Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America, the National Alliance for Hispanic Health, the YMCA, the National Urban League, the National Parent Teachers Association, Students Against Drunk Driving, ATT, GEICO, Procter & Gamble, entertainment industry guilds, and all the major U.S. broadcast networks (ABC, CBS, NBC, FOX).

The NYAD campaign’s media-driven message was intentional. According to campaign materials, teens spend a great deal of time with media – about six hours per day spent reading and watching TV, internet, videos, magazines, and newspapers – forms of media that often glamorize smoking and drug use and can “normalize” these behaviors for viewers, influencing and even encouraging them to become users. Informed by research showing that teen attitudes about risky behaviors can be influenced by media messages and consumption, the campaign strives, through anti-drug messages, to have a positive impact on teens. To this end, all NYAD campaign ads go through rigorous qualitative and quantitative testing to ensure messages will be effective when they reach their audiences. Unlike traditional public service campaigns that depend on donated advertising time and space from media outlets, the NYAD campaign relies on a Congressional mandated budget to ensure effective media placement of messages. While the effectiveness of a national campaign on illicit drug use is difficult to evaluate, national independent surveys show a steady decline in youth drug use during the period following the campaign’s launch. Through paid and donated advertising on television, radio, print, and the internet it is estimated that the NYAD campaign delivers anti-drug message to target audiences via more than 1,000 media outlets across the country, reaching 97% of teens approximately 70 times throughout the year.
Like HHS’ Girl Power!, the NYAD campaign is also heavily invested in sport as part of its anti-drug strategy. The campaign is engaged with major professional and amateur sports organizations in high-profile outreach programs targeted toward youth. Organizations including the NBA, Major League Baseball, and the WSF participate in NYAD campaign related activities ranging from press events and satellite video broadcasts to youth journalism projects. In addition, more than 75 professional football, basketball, hockey and baseball players have provided personal statements for inclusion in youth outreach. The notion of sport as an alternative to drugs is also an integral part of the NYAD campaign’s core message delivery method: its television advertising campaigns. In the NYAD campaign’s well-known “What’s your Anti-Drug” series of advertisements, various youth credit their participation in activities such as dance, running, basketball swimming, snowboarding, and football with helping to keep off drugs. To this end, the campaign also makes repeated use of high-profile sports celebrity spokespersons and their respective sports accomplishments to emphasize the NYAD campaign’s anti-drug message. Noteworthy NYAD campaign contributors include: National Football League players Kurt Warner Tiki Barber, and Eddie George, snowboarder Rosie Fletcher, extreme athlete Andy McDonald, Olympic Gold Medalist Tara Lipinski and Michael Johnson, National Hockey League member Mike Modano, Venus and Serena Williams, as well as the 1999 World Cup Champion U.S. Women’s Soccer Team.

And, like other sport and recreation youth health programs to emerge in the 1990s, The NYAD campaign’s marketing strategy is informed by girl power. Take for example, the following NYAD campaign advertisement that began airing in June of 2000. Developed by the Partnership for a Drug-free America and advertising agency Ogilvy and
Mather, the PSA is compelling. Unlike other girl-centered marketing, the PSA does not plug products, but rather, draws attention to contemporary social problems and the resources available for girls to overcome them. The ad begins with familiar feel-good images of young girls cheerfully sweating it out on a muddy field and scenes of the 1999 U.S. Women’s Soccer Team’s World Cup championship. In the throes of a victory celebration, surrounded by her white-clad teammates, soccer celebrity Brandi Chastain looks buff in her equally famous black Nike bra. As these images roll on one half of the screen, a procession of women and girls on the other half speak eloquently to their sisters:

Chastain: There’s never been a better time to be a girl – to be brilliant, fierce.

An Olympic teammate: To start something.

Girl #1: There’s never been a better time to be a girl.

Girl #2: Not the 1950s.

Girl #3: Not the Middle Ages.

Girl #4: The Victorian Era definitely stunk.

Tiffeny Milbrett (soccer Olympian): There’s never been a better time to be a girl.

Another teammate: To take barriers and smash them to pieces.

Girl #5: There’s never been a better time to be a girl.

Chastain: There’s never been a better time to be what you are: a force to be reckoned with: a girl.

Girl #6: There’s never been a better time not to use drugs.

Chastain: Don’t blow it.

Unspoken message displayed on screen: Opportunity: the anti-drug.

Clearly, the NYAD campaign’s hook is a powerful blend of girl power and sport.

Its anti-drug message draws on the now familiar knowledge that sport participation and the
positive influence of healthy role increase girls’ self-esteem and empower them to make healthy choices. Through the authoritative and authenticating perspective of America’s female athletic icons we are repeatedly told that today’s girls do not have to be victims, but instead have the power to challenge problems and beat them head on.

**Surviving Ophelia: Sport and the “Can Do/At-Risk” Paradigm**

Given the historical denial of women’s and girls’ physicality, the development of girl-sport problems-based fitness initiatives like Girl Power! and the NYAD campaign are hopeful and encouraging.Unlike other girl-centered marketing, these programs do not plug products but rather draw attention to contemporary social problems and the resources available to girls to overcome them. In general, we see two main themes emerge: first, that girls are empowered because their right to play sport is acknowledged; and second, “playing sports” takes on a transformative capability, able to magically save a girl from the problems of Ophelia. Although Girl Power! and the NYAD campaign draw our attention to the problems of modern girlhood, through their message of sport-induced empowerment, we are assured that girls will have the tools needed to successfully navigate the heavy emotional and social pressures of girlhood. The current generation of girls, we are told, is not bound by the past or differential circumstances; the time to be a girl – autonomous, free, independent – is now. Unprecedented possibilities, the implied motivation for girls to say no to drugs, alcohol, and sex, is theirs to take or loose. When “Girls Kick Ass!”, who wouldn’t want to be one? It seems the soccer girls have it right: “There’s never been better time to be a girl”.

But perhaps it’s all too easy to get caught up in the “You go girl” effect. To the extent that girl-targeted health initiatives rely specifically on *sport-inflected* girl power as a
remedy to the problems of Ophelia, they also represent a more recent reconfiguration of what Cole (1996) identifies as the “sport/gang dyad”. According to Cole, the sport/gang dyad, accrued prominence in the national imagination during the 1980s as a mediated discourse that positioned poor urban African American youth within two interrelated tropes: redeemed by following the right path of sport, or alternatively, lost to the failed black family and in turn, the wrong path of gangs and drugs. Such stereotypes not only offer limited visions of the of black experience in sport, and society more broadly – especially those associations with violence and criminality – but further to reproduce a neoliberal ideology which pathologizes black communities while failing to address social and economic inequality. Although the logic of displacement and related politics of lifestyle underscoring the sport/gang dyad is troublesome, more insidious for Cole is the way in which these exclusions are stabilized through a process she calls “somatic reterritorialization”. According to Cole, through the categories of the athlete and the gang member, the sport/gang dyad functions to reterritorialize the conditions of late modern America (the effects of transnationalization, joblessness, and the defunding of social programs) through somatic identities, thereby reducing participation in sport and gangs to an expression of individual choice and in turn, deepening and justifying desires for policing, punishment, and revenge directed at African American inner-city youth.

Like the sport/gang dyad of the 1980s, I argue that sport advocacy programs such as Girl Power! and the NYAD campaign, rely on a logic of displacement that functions to reterritorialize the various dangers facing girls as a matter of choice. As we can see through Girl Power! and the NYAD campaign this process relies on invoking the past in order to reconstruct the present. In the case of Girl Power! we hear a nostalgia for a
particular kind of past when there “was peer pressure not to smoke” or that girls “were surrounded” by caring adults. What is missing, however, in Girl Power!’s appeal to this imagined past is any comment on the social conditions that may have allowed for these circumstances or explanation as to why they no longer exist. Unlike Girl Power!, the NYAD campaign invokes a pessimistic view of the past in order to construct an optimistic view of the present. However like Girl Power!, the NYAD campaign also offers no explanation as to why, the conditions of the present in this case, are ripe with historically unprecedented opportunities for girls and the risk of drug use. To this end, both Girl Power! and the NYAD campaign, despite their differences, bypass serious consideration of the possible causes of both the past and present problems facing girls. To this end, they produce and rely on an image of a teenage girl plucked from her historical, cultural, and political surroundings. As Mastronardi (1999) argues, this “radical decontextualization that wears the mask of well-intentioned liberalism” allows “new campaigns to respond to these ‘new’ and dangerous developments, manifesting themselves in the form of strong ‘no-use’ messages about drugs and alcohol that pass themselves off as encouragement” (p. 262). In other words, both Girl Power! and the NYAD campaign serve to frame (or reterritorialize) the very conditions shaping girls’ lives in such a way that the discursive solutions they offer “make sense”. What is important is not changing the conditions that have allowed for these campaigns to exist, but telling girls that they are worthy of happiness and success, that opportunities do exist, and that expressing themselves is okay.

To a great extent the plausibility of the discursive solutions that inform both Girl Power! and the NYAD campaign, gain force and momentum through an appeal to the mutually contingent categories of sport and self-esteem. According to both campaigns, the
problem of girls’ low self-esteem (or Ophelia), is coded as both the cause and effect of social problems. In other words, low-self esteem is part of a viscous circle of disparity – the emphasis is on “inequality as a threat to self-esteem and low self-esteem as something that perpetuates inequality” (Hewitt, 1998, p. 94). In this way the category of self-esteem serves to direct attention away from structural explanations for inequality and toward explanations of personal circumstances and personality traits. Moreover, as appalling as the problems affecting girls (e.g., abuse, depression, drug use, alcohol use, eating disorders, unintended pregnancy, etc.) that underscore these campaigns are, their emphasis on sport as an agent of healthy self-esteem, further obscures an understanding of the conditions that foment these frightening scenarios. Through both campaigns, we hear no reference to the ability of sport-induced empowerment to mitigate against poverty, nor is sport linked with providing girls with material resources that would allow them better standings with regard to their imagined futures. The message is clear: the girls can do anything” rhetoric of girl power girls Girl Power! and the NYAD campaign imagines girls as autonomous agents who make choices about their future: avoiding the pitfalls of female adolescence can simply be avoided by saying no to low self-esteem and yes to sport.

The discourse of sport-inflected girl power, and particularly its reliance on the category of self-esteem can be seen as an element in, and extension of Harris’ (2004b) “future girl”. The construction of the can-do future girl, in Harris’ view reflects the needs of the new global economy which relies on individuals with flexibility who see their lives as projects and who will take responsibility for their failure rather than looking to the larger economic structure or to the sate. As Harris elaborates,
Late modern times, are characterized by dislocation, flux, and globalization, and demand citizens that are self-realizing. Direct intervention and guidance by institutions have been replaced by self-governance; power has devolved onto individuals to regulate themselves through right choices [and] public policy often employs the language of individual responsibility and enterprise to fill the gap left by deregulation (p. 4).

In this context, the project of self-realization is supported by a discourse of limitless choice – of consumer products, life-course decisions, and identities – that are instruments of self-production. Although “future girl” subjectivity and the goals that accompany it might sound like a positive construction, Harris (2004) points out that this discourse obscures the ways in which young women constitute those hardest hit by the effects of the new global political economy on jobs, welfare, and the community. We can see this logic directly in construction of the Girl Power! campaign. Although it is billed, by its very name as an optimistic and progressive program for girls, is served as the primary teen pregnancy prevention program employed by Welfare Reform. Given the focus of policy initiatives such as Girl Power! and the NYAD campaign on behavior modification and personal responsibility it appears the politics of lifestyle has indeed finally “tickled-down” to girls.

To this end, programs such as Girl Power! and the NYAD campaign participate in what Harris (2004b) identifies a “new watchfulness in youth research, policy, and popular culture” that “seeks to shape conduct through perpetual everyday observation and to elicit self-monitoring in youth themselves” (p. 6). Among the effects of this focus on individualism and personal responsibility within contemporary health initiatives is a noticeable disregard for social systems and institutions. For example through their focus
on self-esteem, both Girl Power! and the NYAD campaign serve to obscure the material and discursive forces shaping identity and the ways gender, race, class, and sexualized identity may give girls privileges or pose challenges. This contradictory aspect of current health promotion is such that seemingly well-intentioned campaigns help to secure the smooth reproduction of the conditions that produce the perceived need for the campaign. As Heywood (2007) in her discussion of girl-targeted, sport-centered health promotion explains, this problem is inherent in current health marketing strategies, in order to be marketable, claims have to be overstated, and complications effaced, as structural explanations are not saleable or marketable, and do not work as effective tools to generate funding for programs.

Lastly, like the sport/gang dyad, to the extent that programs such as Girl Power! and the NYAD campaign serve to obscure and displace the broader social, cultural, and economic dynamics, they also facilitate a moral politics of blame. As Heywood (2007) explains, to the extent that the marketing approach of sport-themed girls health advocacy programs marry the discourse of liberal feminism with that of neoliberalism, they also create

a contradictory condition in which the discourse used to sell the programming seems also to serve the interests of the ‘new economy’, producing ‘ideal’ girls as self-made, flexible consumer subjects who are self-monitoring and adaptable to change, and which blames girls designated ‘at risk’ for their failures (p. 104).

Configured around the image of the neoliberal “can do girl”, both Girl Power! and the NYAD campaign encourages young women to work on themselves, largely through sport consumption and in turn, to blame their inevitable ‘failures’ on themselves rather than the
system their lives are structured within. As such campaigns such as these oblige girls the difficult task of reconciling the contradiction between the reality of the structural constraints shaping their circumstances and the “promises” of empowerment being offered. As Heywood (2000) in her critique of the women-girl-sport narrative of possibility provokes, “What about the lack of opportunity that a young Hispanic woman, born to less than privileged economic circumstances and deprived of affirmative-action legislation, may very well face no matter how great her legs and lats are from playing sports?” (p. 109). Moreover, in this most recent version of the sport/gang dyad we have already seen a moral politics of blame and punishment directed toward so-called immoral and undisciplined teen moms enacted under Welfare Reform and toward girls who “choose” to engage in “risky” behaviors. By playing off America’s tandem fears about the safety and well-being of its’ girls and the national future, while at the same time, constructing girls as self-made, self-monitoring flexible consumer subjects, girl power/Ophelia discourses as disseminated via public health initiatives like Girl Power! and the NYAD campaign suggest empowered girls are held accountable for their actions. As the concluding message of the NYAD campaign specifically warns — “Don’t blow it”.

Conclusion

The sheer newness and ubiquity of Girl Culture is difficult to ignore. And, as I can attest, its celebratory association of power with girls and promotion of girls and sport is incredibly appealing. Unlike Nike’s early captivating yet unsettling “ads with a conscience” that addressed girls’ exclusion from sport through the image of female vulnerability (Lucas, 2000), the new millennium’s image is the empowered girl-child transformed and protected through sport. The popular appeal of this image is the sense of
reassurance and comfort, for girls and adults, that comes from what appears to be a
national commitment and compassion for girls, à la policy such as Title IX and new federal
programs addressing girl’s health, and thus the sense that girls are valued and will continue
to prosper. As the declarations of the anti-drug campaign make clear, the odds appear to
be stacked in girls’ favor, with the help of sport and today’s female sports stars, girls now
have the ability and opportunity to take control of their lives.

However, the subsequent and wishful proclamation, “There’s never been a better
time to be a girl”, deserves critical reflection. Although I am not against recent health
initiatives directed toward girls, I want to suggest that these programs do not exclusively
emerge out of an obligation to protect or nurture youth, but are also an expression of a
recent neoliberal policy shifts and processes of individualization. While health advocacy
programs such as Girl Power! and the NYAD campaign represent a positive move toward
acknowledging and proposing to resolve the unique problems and challenges facing
America’s girls, as we have seen, the language of empowerment, recovery, and self-esteem
animating these campaigns serve to displace complex and messy problems like racism,
sexism, and poverty, allowing for what appear to be simpler solutions.

To suggest a critique of sport-inflected girl power/Ophelia discourses is not to
suggest that we must abandon our girl-friendly rhetoric, but rather that we remain
conscious of the limits and complications of such claims. Although girl-target health
campaigns function very positively in the context of health and proposing sport as a means
to attain it, through the image of the empowered female athlete and her imagined
successor, the athletic girl, they create a contradictory condition in which their promotional
discourse effectively masks the structural problematics the programming is said to address.
While the solution to these systemic contradictions require more than girls elective
physical and mental self-transformation, through programs such as Girl Power! and the
NYAD campaign these are increasingly the only solutions seen as legitimate.

1 Riot grrrl was, and is often associated with third-wave feminism (it is sometimes seen as
its starting point). However, riot grrrl’s emphasis on universal female identity and
separatism often appears more closely allied with second-wave feminism than with the
third wave.

2 According to popular narratives, Pipher’s (1994) landmark book about adolescent girls
Reviving Ophelia, was almost never published. In the oft repeated story, Pipher’s book
was rejected 13 times before Grosset/Putnam agreed to print the hardcover version. Since
then, the book, now also available in paperback, has become something of a cultural
phenomenon selling nearly a million copies and spending 63 weeks on The New York
Times bestseller list.

3 The “authentic voice” position infuses not only the work of Gilligan (1982) but also that
of several other feminist psychology scholars. See for example, Bekenky, Goldberger, and
Tarule (1986).

4 For an excellent analysis of the relationship between sport, youth, and national identity
see, Kimmel (1990).

5 Here I rely on Males’ (2002) Framing Youth: 10 Myths About the Next Generation,
which provides an exhaustive overview of media discourses concerning youth at risk
during the 1990s.

6 For comprehensive data on youth behavior, risk-taking, and health, see the Center for
Disease Control (CDC) Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS).

7 Coded in terms of national health, popular discourses of adolescents at risk make visible
an array of bodies, acts, and identities that are understood to threaten the sanctity of normal
national culture in its present and future forms. As anthropologist Stephens (1995) argues,
there is not only “a growing consciousness of children at risk” but also a growing sense of
children themselves as the risk” (p. 13). According to the results of the Ad Council’s
(1999) study Kids These Days: What Americans Really Think About the Next Generation,
Americans were deeply troubled, almost fearful, about the moral character of the next
generation. Specifically the report found that fewer than half of adults, and about only
one-third of teens, said the next generation would make America a better place.

8 See Kusz (2001) for an excellent and insightful discussion of white masculinity and
popular discourses about the endangered lives of young males.
There are three primary sources of U.S. pregnancy data on teens - those published by the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS), those published by the National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion (NCCDPHP), and those published by the Alan Guttmacher Institute, a private, non-profit organization dedicated to protecting and expanding the reproductive choices of all women and men. According to the NCCDPHP, birth rates during 1991–1996 declined for teenagers in all racial and ethnic groups.

The AAUW report was followed by *Failing at Fairness: How America’s Schools Cheat Girls* (Sadker, 1994) a book written for a popular audience by academics which reported on the many forms of discriminatory practices against girls in schools, including the fact that teachers were more likely to respond to boys rather than girls.

Some examples of national headlines depicting the endangered lives of adolescent girls suggested by the AAUWs report include among others, “Dreadful Waste to female talent” (*San Francisco Chronicle*), “Bias Against Girls Found Rife in Schools, With Lasting Damage” (*New York Times*), “Girls’ Confidence Erodes Over the Years, Study Says” (*Chicago Tribune*).

Current anxieties and interest in the health risks of girls also draw from a growing investment in the health of the world’s women and girls. During the 1990s the United Nations hosted two international conferences to address discrimination and the empowerment of women. What emerged from both conferences, the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) and 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women (1995), was a program of action which focused on eliminating obstacles to women’s full and equal participation in all spheres of life, women’s health issues, and the rights of the girl-child.

The changing social world produced by modernity was met with a profound ambivalence as both women and youth became symbolic for expressing this concern. Specifically, the figure of “woman” was employed by cultural critics to express this unease by constantly drawing negative connections between mass culture and the feminine (Johnson, 1993).

Whereas league expansion and high media visibility give the appearance that the WNBA was financially viable, since the inaugural season, the financial stability of the league has been in question due to conflicting media reports on ticket sales, revenue, and television viewership.

This fact was humorously illustrated by Nike’s “We Will Take on the World as a Team” campaign. Playing on an exaggeration of Team USAs superstar players’ devotion to each other, one add shows teammates joining Tisha Venturini on a date, while the other, set in a dentist’s waiting room, shows superstar teammates and a receptionist pledge to have “two (unnecessary) fillings” in touching display of camaraderie toward Brandi Chastain who has in fact, just gotten two fillings.
Late-night talk show host David Letterman had Brandi Chastain on his show three days before the opening match. During the interview, Letterman held up a copy of Gear magazine, which featured a naked Chastain, and said, “Soccer moms? Soccer mamas!” Letterman later said to his audience, “The U.S. team … is babe city, ladies and gentlemen, babe city!” His comments were not atypical.

The spot is linked to Gatorade’s initiative with the WSF, which includes the development of a girls’ sports website which promotes sports participation on the local level. Gatorade and the WSF are also partnering to sell “American woman” T-shirts on the WSF’s website. This TV spot was Gatorade’s first-ever ad featuring only female athletes.

The Air Swoopes was developed in response to growing market for women’s athletic shoes, and a masculine association with Nike. According to the company’s research, when girls who played sports were asked what they thought of when they heard the word “Nike” they typically named a male athlete, usually Charles Barkley or Michael Jordan. Trends also showed that young female basketball players were buying men’s shoes rather than women’s. In response, Nike signed several female basketball players, and created the Air Swoopes. The shoe has been one of Nike’s best sellers (Lewis, 1996).

The 1990s Barbie slogan “It’s a great time to be a girl!” follows a similar theme.

For a similar reading of the GirlPower! campaign, see Mastronardi (1998).

As Mastronardi (1999) explains, the current construction of public health campaigns largely follows two main theoretical perspectives: the health belief model and social marketing. The health belief model is concerned with how individuals learn certain beliefs and attitudes about risky health-related behaviors such as smoking or drug abuse, and is based on an explicit agenda to change practices by changing beliefs or intentions. The social marketing model, as the name implies, borrows heavily from traditional marketing literature, and is concerned with an emphasis on so-called non-tangible products—ideas attitudes lifestyle changes. These two perspectives converge in McGuire’s (1984) defined purpose of health communication campaigns as “convincing individuals to exercise personal responsibility for their health by altering their lifestyles in more healthful directions, [through the use of] mass media and other communication channels to inform the public about dangers, motivate them to reduce risks, or train them in skills that enable them to adopt more healthful lifestyles” (as cited in Mastronardi, 1999; p. 254). Thus, the goal of contemporary health promotion is to secure consent to particular kinds of behavior and is predicated on the belief that the realm of the discursive represents an effective means for securing “health positive behaviors”.
CHAPTER FIVE

“It’s a Skills Thing”: Biological Essentialism, and the Marginalized Female Athlete in the Post-Title IX Era

On August 25, 2007 in its now familiar, controversial, and contrived marketing style, Nike launched yet another advertising strategy sure to generate buzz: its multi-platform “ATHLETE” campaign. The opening group spot featuring a host of celebrity female athletes debuted during the WNBA playoffs on ESPN. Set in a high school gymnasium one by one, the athletes (and one male coach) dressed in athletic apparel or a simple t-shirt bearing the Nike swoosh and the word “ATHLETE” step onto a small stage and speak into a giant megaphone. In what ad agency Weiden and Kennedy describe as unscripted (but edited) monologues each person shares their views on being an athlete:

I am, Cappie Pondexter.
I am, Diana Taurasi.
I am, Cherie Nelson.
I am Picabo Street.
And I’ve got something to say.

Female athletes have to overcome the bias that their game isn’t as good as the men’s game.

Are boys bigger, stronger, faster? Yes.
Is that all that has to do with being an athlete? No.

The halfpipe doesn’t care that I’m a girl.
I want to pitch for the Boston Red Sox.
When I look in the mirror I see an athlete.
I am an athlete.
And I’m proud of that athlete.
It’s not a girl thing, it’s not a boy thing. It’s a skills thing.

Unlike the popular marketing message of opportunity and empowerment signified by sport-inflected girl power, the ad, and others in the series, draw attention to the fact that disrespect, sexism, and inequality continue to permeate America’s sporting landscape. Like Nike’s other “ads with a conscience”, the “ATHLETE” campaign serves as solicitation on behalf of America’s female athletes: in this case, that they be respected and judged solely on their athletic abilities, not their gender.

Nike’s campaign was introduced just months following the nationwide controversy over radio host Don Imus’ sexist and racist comments regarding the Rutgers University women’s basketball team. During an April, 2007 on-air discussion about the women’s NCAA basketball finals, Imus described the Rutgers players as “rough girls with tattoos”, and “nappy-headed hos”. In the subsequent backlash that followed, Imus apologized for his derogatory remarks, but his show Imus in the Morning was quickly cancelled. Shortly after Imus’ blunder, Nike, a sponsor of the Rutgers team, took out a full-page ad in The New York Times. The ad did not mention Imus by name but opened with: “Thank you, ignorance. Thank you for starting the conversation,” followed with several more “thank yous” for “moving women’s sports forward” and “making us all realize we all have a long way to go”. According to Nike spokespersons, the aim of the Imus-inspired ad was to spark conversation regarding racism, sexism, and inequality initiated by Imus’ poorly chosen words. Following the New York Times ad, Nike released the “ATHLETE” campaign as yet another response to the Imus incident and more broadly as a way to speak
to the disrespect and inequality that continues to plague women’s sport. According to Nancy Monsarrat Nike’s U.S. brand director: “We want to make sure women and girls are respected as athletes, and we wanted to provide a platform for them. The “ATHLETE” campaign challenges stereotypes and provides a platform for female athletes to air their views” (quoted in Howard, 2007). Keeping with the sports-inflected girl power theme of the previous decade, the “ATHLETE” campaign also includes a community outreach aspect that is the creation of the Let Me Play for Girls Fund. Starting with an upfront donation of $425,000 ($25,000 in cash and $400,000 in sports footwear, apparel and equipment) to the fund is designed to support girls’ sports programs.

In addition to the Imus incident and Nike’s subsequent commercial response, the mounting questions of respect and gender equity in women’s sport raised during the 2000s were also made visible through what Hogshead-Makar and Zimbalist (2007) identify as the second backlash against Title IX. In January of 2002 the application of Title IX was formally challenged when The National Wrestling Coaches Association (NWCA) announced its decision to bring a lawsuit against the Department of Education charging that the law discriminates against male athletes. Adding to the backlash, in June of 2002, the Bush administration announced plans to create the Commission on Opportunity in Athletics to re-examine the proportionality requirements of Title IX brought into question by the NWCA lawsuit. The NWCA’s controversial challenge to Title IX garnered national media attention. For example, weighing in on the controversy both ESPN’s popular series *Outside the Lines* and CBS’ *60 Minutes* featured segments outlining the debate. As explained in *Outside the Lines*, the NWCA’s challenge to the proportionality prong of Title IX’s three-part compliance test was based on the allegation that proportionality amounts to
a quota system that forces schools to eliminate men’s programs to balance their participation numbers. In the words of Leo Kochner, head wrestling coach at the University of Chicago and one of several plaintiffs in the NWCA suit, “Women have made great gains without the quota. Quotas don’t work. And Title IX would be much better without the quota” (quoted in Ahmed, 2004). At the same time, drawing on what would appear to be (given America’s most recent female sports revolution) outmoded stereotypes, Title IX opponents suggested that the law had gone so far as to over-provide sports for women who did not desire the opportunities foisted upon them (Hogshead-Makar & Zimbalist, 2007). Although the NWCA’s lawsuit was dismissed by a U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, in 2005, the Office of Civil Rights changed the third proportionality requirement, allowing universities to prove they were meeting the athletic interests of women by carrying out surveys of students’ interest in sports. This change was strongly critiqued by Title IX supporters who claimed it severely weakened the Title IX enforcement by allowing a low response rate, typical with such surveys, to be equated with a lack of interest.

The recent characterization by Nike of female athletes as martyrs, the issues of racism and sexism raised by the Imus controversy, the accusations of reverse discrimination, and marginalization of women’s sports expressed in this most recent wave of attacks against Title IX appear, at first glance, to be in stark contrast with the celebratory spirit toward women’s sports and female athletes that defined the 1990s. However, upon closer examination, I argue that these recent changes do not represent a change in attitudes toward female athletics but rather illustrate how, as I have argued throughout this project, over the last 40 years, certain knowledges about the athletic female body have achieved
cultural dominance that in turn, shape and limit current ways of thinking about the female/sport relationship.

The guiding aim of my study has been to intervene in commonsense assumptions about the athletic female body. Although Title IX is repeatedly given credit as the generating force behind changing cultural attitudes toward female sport participation and the athletic female body, as I have shown, these changes have taken place through a series of historically situated and complex discursive negotiations.

In order to disrupt these commonsense assumptions, I began my study during the mid-late 1970s, a period marked by dramatic changes in America’s female sporting landscape and related cultural anxieties and debates over these changes as they challenged the validity of popular cultural “myths” historically used to dissuade female sport participation. Through the course of my study I show how debates about the validity of these myths were negotiated through the popular dissemination of sport science research on the female/sport relationship. Moreover, I show how this work gained cultural authority because of its scientific and thus “objective” nature and through its articulation with dominant cultural discourses. To this end I have argued that the popular dissemination of early sport science research served to debunk the popular cultural myths about the physical and psychological risks of female sport participation that had historically justified gender discrimination in sport. More specifically my analysis shows us that the definition of the athletic female body advanced through these discursive negotiations is coded as: psychologically and physically healthier (e.g. possessing higher self-esteem, psychologically androgynous, at lower risk for certain diseases, and reproductively fit) than its non-athletic counterparts, biologically inferior and thus
incapable of surpassing men in terms of athletic performance, physically “feminine” in appearance, and subject to, but not adversely affected by gender discrimination in sport.

In my efforts to trace the reconfiguration of girl/sport knowledge and in turn, its material effects, I looked at the convergence of discourses I saw operating to reinforce these newly popularized definitions of the athletic female body. Through the methods of conjunctural analysis I have shown how, during the 1980s, these definitions gained cultural authority and influence through their articulation with dominant cultural discourses. I argue that we can see the continued influence of scientifically supported definitions of the athletic female body through America’s celebration of its ever-increasing gender equity in sport, and its corporeal embodiment the muscular, athletic female body. However, despite this celebratory consensus, I have argued that the popularization of early sport science research on the female/sport relationship, and specifically its repeated assertion that women were biologically incapable of matching male levels of sport achievement and thus not deserving of athletic equality, also served to advance popular backlash sentiments against women’s recent sporting achievements, specifically, Title IX. To this end I have also illustrated how new critical advances feminist sport scholarship, despite a well-meaning investment in a transgressive body politics via sport, were articulated to postfeminist, neoliberal, and psychotherapeutic discourses. As such I have shown how this work, particularly its reliance on notions of liberal subjectivity, served to normalize popular cultural definitions of the athletic female body as physically strong, sexually desirable, psychologically empowered, and properly reproductive, while at the same time obscuring the broader structural relations define and constrain women’s experience.
Lastly, in my continued analysis of contemporary reconfigurations of the athletic female body their material effects, I examined how during the 1990s and early 2000s these formations informed American notions of girlhood. To this end I have illustrated how the now commonsense definition of sport as a major determinant in women’s and girls’ physical well-being and the enhancement of self-esteem was articulated to the figures of the celebrity female athlete, the athletic little girl as well as girl power/Ophelia discourses. Specifically, I offered a discursive analysis of two girl-targeted sport advocacy health campaigns, HHS’ Girl Power! campaign and the NYAD campaign, as a means of demonstrating the ways in which the articulation of sport, female health, and empowerment have accrued power in the contemporary American imagination. Based on a critical contextual reading, I illustrate how the women-girl-sport empowerment discourses mobilized through these campaigns, participate in the forging of a new relationship between femininity and discourses constituting the neoliberal subject. To this end, I have argued that the production of girls as self-made, self-monitoring, consumer subjects, within these campaigns and by extension, within broader cultural discourses concerning girls and girlhood, serve to reterritorialize the various problems facing girls as a matter of choice that in turn, facilitates a moral politics of blame directed at girls designated “at risk” for their supposed failures.

I elected to begin this chapter with a review of Nike’s “ATHLETE” campaign, the Imus controversy, and America’s most recent wave of Title IX backlash because they effectively illustrate how the historical (re)construction of girl/sport knowledge I have outlined in this project continue to govern contemporary discourses. For example, Nike’s affirmation of male athletes as “bigger”, “faster”, and “stronger” than their female
counterparts, clearly demonstrates how scientific constructions of the athletic female body as biologically inferior now operate as truth. And we can see in Imus’ poorly chosen remarks how racially-coded definitions of the athletic female body as always already feminine, healthy, and sexually desirable, serve to delimit the acceptable boundaries of female athleticism and in turn, encourage gender discrimination in sport and cultural anxieties (Cooky & McDonald, 2005). Lastly with respect to the most recent wave of Title IX backlash, we can see how as Messner and Solomon (2007) argue, the question of male and female interest in athletic participation is underscored by a biological essentialism. For example, as illustrated in recent Title IX debates, commonly accepted understandings of biologically based female athletic inferiority add fuel and justification to anti-Title IX sentiments by suggesting that women are not as competitive or interested in sport as men, and by extension, that opportunities for women in sport have come at the expense of their more deserving male counterparts.

Despite popular backlash against Title IX, the law, which turned 40 during the final stages of this project, has helped to reverse years of gender bias in American sport. Women’s and girls’ ability to participate in sport, something that was once cause for national controversy, is largely taken for granted now. Since Title IX, there has been a 1,079 percent increase in the number of girls playing high school sports (Maxwell, 2012). And, as we have seen, it is no longer unusual for America’s athletic heroes to be women. However, even with women’s and girls’ continued inroads into sport, gender discrimination remains. Indeed, although the liberal-feminist agenda of achieving improved sporting access (and in turn, visibility) for women has seen some success, as Laurendeau and Sharara (2008) ask, a central question that remains “Access to what?” (p.
Exploring the potential for women to enact social change within sporting contexts, Dworkin and Messner (1999) make a distinction between what they see as two different types of agency - “reproductive” and “resistant” - exhibited by women in sport. Reproductive agency is when women simply insert themselves into male dominant institutions such as sport. According to Dworkin and Messner this type of agency is limited in its transformative potential as it “firmly situates women’s actions and bodies within the structural gender order that oppresses them” (p. 349). Resistant agency, on the other hand, involves building or transforming institutions so that they speak to the needs and interests of women. As women continue to make inroads into sport, we can see how women employ strategies that often show elements of both resistance and reproduction.

With the relatively recent emergence of alternative sports (e.g. snowboarding, skateboarding, surfing, skydiving), scholars have been particularly interested in how these sports present a unique opportunities for shifts in gender equity, as the organization and values embedded in these sports are up for negotiation (Beal, 1996; Rinehart, 2005; Thorpe, 2005). As these authors have observed, there is some evidence to suggest that we should have a degree of optimism about the potential for women to make inroads into these sports. However, as Heino (2000) has noted, as these sports have become mainstreamed, and have been infused with the notion that female participants are less skilled than their male counterparts, the gender gap has widened. As such, scholars have observed considerable evidence of reproductive agency in the strategies women employ to negotiate space in these sports. For example, Laurendeau and Sharara found that in response to feeling sexualized, trivialized, or judged as inadequate in comparison to their male counterparts, female skydivers and boarders employed three main strategies to negotiate
these male dominated spaces – avoidance, downplaying gender and underscoring benefits. In Laurendeau and Sharara’s view, these strategies exemplify reproductive agency in that some women boarders upon recognizing the assumption that women are poorly skilled boarders, refrain from casting it as a issue of gender discrimination, but rather instead frame it in terms of skill and expertise. That is to say, the transformative potential of these strategies are limited, given that structural problem (degrading treatment of women) is framed as individual trouble with a solution rooted in individual behavior.

In a slightly different vein, a recent line of inquiry highlighting the notion of reproductive agency is the exploration of how (as I argue in Chapter 4) liberal-feminist discourses inform women and girls’ sporting experiences (Cooky & McDonald 2005; McGinnis, McQuillan & Chapple, 2005). For example, in their study of the narratives of young, white, middle-class female athletes, Cooky and McDonald (2005) describe how consistent with the advertising rhetoric of such multinational corporations as Nike, these girls all advocate hard work, choice, opportunity, and personal responsibility in playing sport and in challenging gender discrimination. To this extent, Cooky and McDonald suggest that “these girls’ sport experiences are grounded in liberal discourses connected to their privileges of whiteness and middle-class status in ways that serve to create a set of standards of femininity that marginalize other potential embodiments of femininity.

Although there is considerable evidence of reproductive agency in women’s and girls’ sporting discourses, recent evidence also suggests that female athletes engage in strategies that exemplify resistant agency. If we follow Nike’s suggestion, this type of transformation is as simple as changing the parameters upon which “athletes”, both male and female, are judged. According to the directive of the “ATHLETE” campaign: “It’s
“not a girl thing. It’s not a boy thing. It’s a skills thing”. As Laurendeau and Sharara (2008) point out, emphasizing skill represents an important strategy employed by female snowboarders to disprove gendered assumptions about athletic skill. More specifically, the way they attempt to change the image surrounding female boarders is by engaging in practices that emphasize their femininity (but not their sexuality) so that others on the hill will know that it is a woman performing with a degree of expertise. While creating space for themselves on the hill, these women are also working on transforming social relations, even though their strategies are individual in nature.

To a great extent Nike’s proposed emphasis the execution of sport skill rather than sport performance as a measure of athletic achievement largely parallels the previously discussed suggestions made by feminist sport scholars during the 1980s (another period marked by backlash against women’s sport, particularly Title IX) for an alternative to the masculine discourse of power through domination in sport. As an alternative sport form, these scholars advocated moving away from the traditional masculine preoccupation with force and domination in sport toward a new emphasis on personal experiences of skill and pleasure in motion and its related psychologically empowering effects. In the recent surge in scholarship concerning alternative sports, Thorpe (2005) suggests there is some evidence of these kinds of collective strategies in snowboarding. For example, she describes events like the “Queen of the Mountain” competition that “encourage participation on the basis of feminist sporting principles such as recreation, fun, and friendship [and] allow women to define and shape their own boarding experiences” (p. 94).

In a slightly different vein, Markula (2004) explores how Foucault’s concept of technologies of the self: practices of freedom that are characterized by ethics of self-care,
critical awareness, and aesthetic self-stylization, might be employed by female participants in the commercial fitness industry. Based on interviews with instructors of a fitness class called Hybrid (Pilates, yoga, and Tai Chi), Markula found that for at least one instructor, Hybrid provided a viable alternative to other group fitness forms and discourses. For this instructor, Hybrid’s creator, her practice of self-care translated into creating an exercise class that de-emphasized the looks of the body in favor of the functional benefits of fitness. As such, Markula suggests that Hybrid, when done with critical awareness of dominant body discourses, allows for an ethics of self-care and freedom for both instructors and participants that in turn, can evoke a political statement toward changing fitness discourses.⁴

As recent sport sociology research indicates, to the extent that female sport participants recognize gender imbalances and dominant fitness discourses, they employ strategies that show elements resistance, reproduction, and that allow for an ethics of self-care. Through these practices, they are able to bring about diffuse and localized incremental changes within sport and fitness. However, these strategies hint at what Laurendeau and Sharara (2008) describe as a “reluctance, even resistance to mobilize around the concept of ‘women’, and reflect middle-class and liberal ideas of opportunity and individual responsibility” (p. 43). Thus, while female athletes have found strategies for negotiating their way within these gender regimes, they have not, for the most part, engaged in the type of radical resistance likely to result in sweeping change. As the recent wave of Title IX backlash and continued gender discrimination in sport illustrate, increased opportunity, and thus visibility of women and girls in sport while a necessary starting point, is not the endpoint of social change.
In her essay “What’s queer about (queer) sport sociology now? A review essay” King (2008) highlights the limitations of queer scholarship that equates visibility with power and legitimacy in ways that is useful for understanding the limitations of women’s agency in sport, liberal policies like Title IX, and the current scholarship on the female/sport relationship. According to King, the focus among sport scholars on the power of queer identity and visibility oftentimes fails to contextualize these issues within the workings of contemporary capitalist and racial formations thus obscuring the ways in which they implicitly collude with those formations and their celebration in popular discourse. As King, drawing on Walters (2001) explains, although visibility is a necessary part of any movement for social change, it brings with it no guarantees; visibility does not lead automatically to the erasure of stereotypes, the end of violence, the redistribution of resources, or to greater freedom, its effects are various and unpredictable. As we have seen, like King’s critique of queer sport scholarship, and more broadly, identity politics, popular, participatory, and scholarly evaluations of the female/sport relationship tend to equate visibility with power and legitimacy. To this end, similar to King, and Cole (2004), I have argued that these assessments are problematic in that they fail to acknowledge how the transgressive potential of the athletic female body has been recuperated through an articulation to neoliberal political and economic agendas. Moreover as I have argued throughout this paper, the question of female visibility in sport is predicated on a set of now commonsense assumptions about the athletic female body that serve to define and constrain women’s sporting practice. Thus, as we have seen, to the extent that female sport participants and sport scholars fail to contextualize questions of visibility within the workings of neoliberal and postfeminist formations and critically interrogate popular
beliefs about the athletic female body they implicitly collude with these formations and their celebration in popular discourse. As such, the transformative potential of their entrance, and analysis is limited at best.

My dissertation has been shaped by a desire to part-company with traditional histories that posit Title IX, the second-wave feminist movement, and the fitness boom as the driving forces behind what has popularly come to be known as America’s female sports revolution. Instead I emphasized how these changes were also facilitated by a discursive reconfiguration of the athletic female body. In my project, then, I believe I have examined an important moment in a cultural formation that is has been unexamined by intellectual traditions I had been most invested in. To this extent my dissertation joins a tradition of feminist scholars and more specifically feminist sport scholars (Cole & Cook, 2001; Cole, Geissler, Giardina, & Metz, 2001; Cole & Hribar, 1995; Geissler, 2001; Giardina & Metz, 2005) who have sought to 1) reconstitute sociology and social theory through a focus on the discursive construction of the body, and 2) problematize the notion of an authentic feminist agency that underscores a large area of girl culture and critical sport studies literature. My project extends this tradition in several significant ways. It provides a more nuanced history of the athletic female body that exposes the discursive practices (particularly the role of the sport sciences) behind commonsense assumptions about female athletic performance and the health benefits of sport and exercise for women and girls. Through the methods of conjunctural analysis, this study helps to illuminate how and why the reconfiguration of female sport participation as a healthy and desirable practice emerges when it does. It examines how over the last 30-40 years, these discursive constructions have shaped and limited ways of thinking about the female/sport
relationship. This project concludes that it is important to critically examine how in seemingly contradictory ways, the “truth effects” of this discursive formation serve to maintain suspicions about the athletic female body, marginalize female athleticism, and constrain the potential for real institutional change in sport, while at the same time maintaining female sport participation and fitness practices as healthy and desirable.

Grossberg (1992) writes, “If you want to change the ending, you have to tell a different story” (p. 11). It is my hope that looking at social change from the historical perspective outlined in this project might allow for sociologists of sport to “tell a different story” about the history of women and girls in sport and physical fitness in the United States post-Title IX. This history is one that provides sociologists of sport the opportunity to bring “the body” back into their analyses of the female/sport relationship and prompts us to explore how scientific definitions of the athletic female body shape and limit our ways of thinking and the stories we tell. Furthermore, it is my hope that such a refocus can offer a way to play the sport and fitness truth game differently, offering us ways to problematize commonsense definitions of the athletic female body and initiate localized practices of freedom in ways that create new discourses, and in turn, new possibilities for women and girls.

1 As an element in, and extension of, the America’s second female sports revolution, the 1990s marked a period of rapid reform for Title IX that included numerous legal victories and stronger regulations that appeared to secure its effectiveness as a guarantor of equity on the playing field. The most significant of these victories was a Title IX class-action suit filed in 1992, Cohen v. Brown, which charged Brown University with discrimination against women in the operation of its intercollegiate athletics program, and in violation of Title IX. In March 1995, a U.S. District court ruled in the athletes’ favor maintaining that Brown violated Title IX and rejected Brown’s challenge which was based on the stereotype that men are more interested in sports participation than are women. In their decision, the courts clarified the interpretation of the original three systems of criteria to determine appropriate representation of female athletes known as the Three-prong
Accommodation Test. According to the ruling, in order to demonstrate Title IX compliance schools must either show 1) that their athletic enrollment by gender is proportional to their general enrollment by gender; 2) that they are in a process of continual expansion of sports programs for the underrepresented sex; or 3) that the school fully and effectively accommodates the interest and ability of the underrepresented sex.

2 According to popular media discourses, advocates of the law asserted that the gradual elimination of many men’s minor collegiate sports was not attributable to Title IX requirements but rather schools’ investment in college football (Hogshead-Makar & Zimbalist, 2007; Messner & Solomon, 2007). Moreover in response to allegations that women were not as interested in sport as men, Title IX supporters such as Nancy Hogshead-Makar director of the Legal Advocacy Center for Women in Sports argued that the dramatic increase of female sport participation in the 30 years following Title IX demonstrated that interest follows opportunities.

3 This system proved detrimental to the gender equality of athletic education for two reasons. First, it allowed schools to interpret a lack of student response as a lack of interest. Second, it neglected the obvious confusion of cause and effect – students interested in a particular sport would elect to go to a school that offered that sport, whether or not the school was desirable for other reasons.

4 With this in mind, in a further related study, I would like to explore how the like Markula’s (2004) study of Hybrid, the recently popularized strength and conditioning program CrossFit might also offer possibilities for an ethics of self-care and some form of resistant agency through which participants can problematize discursive constructions of the athletic female body. Although most fitness practices can be seen as practices of aesthetic self-stylization CrossFit describes its program as “constantly varied, high intensity, functional movement,” with the stated goal of improving fitness and therefore general physical preparedness. That is to say, the emphasis of a CrossFit program (at least in ideology) is on improving health and quality of life through functional fitness training (movements based on real-world situational biomechanics). Thus, while CrossFit might help to build a more fashionable body, it is viewed a by-product not a goal. The CrossFit program also differs from most traditional sports and fitness regimens in that it is designed for universal scalability, meaning it can be applied for anyone regardless of age, ability, or gender. To this end, CrossFit affiliate gyms also place a high value on community building among its members. Interestingly, it is quite common for CrossFit participants both male and female to express that CrossFit has helped them to feel for the first time accepted and respected as athletes. Given this, and my own experience as a CrossFit athlete, I would like to examine how CrossFit athletes experience themselves as subjects of fitness and how these experiences might evoke a political statement toward changing sport and fitness discourses.
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267


