

# **SPORT AND TRADITIONS OF FEMINIST THEORY**

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## Acknowledgements

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Stanley and Wise suggest “whatever situation I go into, whatever it is, wherever I go and whatever I do involves feminism- Because that’s me. Because that’s a part of my everyday interaction with people that I meet each and every day” (1993, p. 18 cited by Schacht, 1997, p. 4). My first debt of gratitude goes to the large number of feminist and feminist-inspired sport authors who have allowed me to see the world through a different set of eyes, and act in the world with a different set of interests. Many of the practices that I commonly engaged in as a younger athlete or academic have now been revisited with, in my opinion, a more discerning and broad-minded outlook. Where the project that I engaged in here began as an almost purely academic enterprise, I am now happy to admit that my orientation in all of my life’s experiences is feminist. For no other reason, that makes this project a success, and the authors who I have read, outstanding educators.

My feminism probably began as a young male child who enjoyed the support and inspiration provided by three older sisters. So I must also acknowledge Gay, Marg and Louise for demonstrating to me ideas of equity, empowerment, autonomy and freedom, before I fully understood what they meant. Also I owe a debt to my mother, Joan and father, Alan, who allowed and encouraged both their daughters and myself to break free of any of the gendered restrictions on our lives, as well as embodying the type of caring relationship with their children that remains an inspiration to me and a model for me.

My battles with the male establishment in sport also predated my feminist transformation. As a young, junior girls basketball coach I was fortunate to coach several teams who displayed outstanding capabilities as athletes. One of these teams was far superior to the other teams in the girl’s section of the competition, and I suggested that they apply for inclusion in the boy’s competition. The committee running these competitions rejected this bid on the grounds that the boys in the competition may be embarrassed if they lost to the girls. At least the committee did not dress up such

concerns in spurious biological justifications. So I also acknowledge the many hundreds of young female basketballers that I have coached, and I hope that part of my debt to them has been repaid by encouraging them to break free of the constraints that society imposes on them.

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## Abstract

“Sport and Traditions of Feminist Theory” involves a philosophical examination of the opportunities that are offered to females who seek authority in sporting participation, by an examination of the ideas that emanate from various streams of feminist thought. Chapter One introduces the concepts of oppression and authority in sport for females. It also introduces Rortian pragmatism, and four strands of feminist thought which will be utilised throughout the thesis; liberal, standpoint, poststructural and Foucauldian feminism. Finally it briefly suggests the potentials for each of these feminisms to explain and alter the situation of women in sport.

Chapter Two is an elaboration of Rortian liberalism. It explains the concepts of anti-foundationalism, the private/public split and the ideal liberal society. These ideas are then applied to an understanding of the opportunities for freedom in sport. Sport is viewed as a symbolic language medium where athletes have the opportunity to express their private freedom through idiosyncratic action. The chapter then goes on to address feminist concerns with Rortian pragmatism. It will be suggested that the female position in society forces a reformulation of Rortian pragmatism to include the possibility of collective expressions of freedom, and to recognise the systematic oppression of women in, and by, society. The female athlete must negotiate the unenviable position of performing in a practice that has a long history of male control over sporting discourses, and female exclusion from, or incorporation into, those sporting discourses. A feminist – reformed, Rortian pragmatism gives the female some tools with which to break down male control and produce individual and collective changes in the language (practice and theory) of sport.

Chapter Three is a selective history of feminist politics and female participation in sport. The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate that “strong poetry” (i.e. collective and individual language changes) which increased the opportunity for females to speak with authority, were often the result of both contingent conditions in society, and the whims of the dominant class of males. Yet two important points should be made; firstly,

within that limited area of freedom in both politics and sport, women did recreate themselves and their society, and secondly, the public discourse about female athleticism throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries suggests a genealogy of ideas which continues to limit female athletic participation and authority. It would be naïve to suggest that this history of ideas about female athleticism would be broken down simply by legislative change which allows for wider female participation in sport.

Chapter Four investigates one mechanism of gaining authority for females in society and sport, the liberal intervention of equal opportunities. It has been suggested by radical and postmodern feminisms that such an intervention is inadequate because it leaves in place the structure of ideas that oppress females in the first place. Critiques of liberal feminist interventions in sport likewise suggest that such interventions maintain the maleness of reason in sport. Females are asked to participate and be judged in sports that have a male history and male structure of control. However, because Rortian pragmatism recognises that sport is a symbolic medium, liberal interventions should not be discarded. There are a number of sports which women either are not allowed to play or are discouraged from playing. The liberal intervention may allow women to participate in sport, and gain authority through their local and specific languages of participation.

Chapter Five is an application of feminist standpoint theories to women's authority in sport. Feminist standpoints will be suggested as an important method for doubting the certainty of gendered truth statements in sport and society. The truth statements, which oppress women in sport reporting, and reinforce different modes of sport participation, will be deconstructed using feminist standpoint theories. Rortian pragmatism offers tools with which alternate candidates for truth status may be produced and disseminated throughout the sporting world. These alternatives may grant women greater authority in performing and talking about sports.

Chapter Six will look at the postmodern and Foucauldian treatments of the female body as another mechanism of challenging the 'his-story' about female athletes, which continues to limit both their participation in sports and their commentary about sports. It will be suggested that the fuzziness of the athletic body allows women all sorts of opportunities to challenge the maleness of authority in sport. One case study, which will be particularly investigated here, is the suggestion that women athletes could look at

drugs as a mechanism for approaching the narrowly defined (by men) participation standards of male athletes. And as authority in sport is partially granted on the basis of 'objective' sporting performance, females should view the drug ban as potentially a piece of phallogentric legislation designed to maintain male power. Other case studies that could be investigated at a later date are the suspicions about genetic engineering and virtual reality 'sport', and the distaste for female athletes aborting before sporting performance. Are these suspicions and distaste mechanisms of the control of the female athlete's performance which females should oppose?

The final chapter summarises the opportunities that a reformed Rortian pragmatism, reformed by the female question, provides for females in sport. Sport as a bodily activity may offer some potentials and obstacles that are not present in theoretical activities like education and politics. This is not to imply a dualism, but simply to suggest that sport, like dance and theatre, is an activity where the body's movements and actions are symbolically communicative.

## PRESENTATIONS AND PUBLICATIONS ARISING FROM DISSERTATION

### Journal/Book Publications

- 2004 Burke, M. "Female Sport and Equal Opportunity Legislation: Protecting Male Discourse by 'Protecting' Female Bodies." *Australian Feminist Studies*, (Accepted for publication, 2004).
- 2003 Burke, M. "Could a 'Woman' Win a Gold Medal in the 'Men's' One Hundred Metres? Female Sport, Drugs and the Transgressive Cyborg Body." *Philosophy in the Contemporary World* (Accepted for Publication, 2003).
- 2003 Burke, M. "Drug-Taking, Bodybuilding and Sporting Women: Utilising 'Otherness' for Feminist Purposes." *Professional Ethics: A Multidisciplinary Journal*. (Accepted for Publication in 2003).
- 2002 Burke, M. "Can Sport Cope with a "Wimpy Virus"? Questions not asked in the HIV and Sport Discourse" *Journal of Philosophy of Sport*, XXIX/1, 2002, pp.54-65.
- 2002 Burke, M. "Joshing and Nudging the Big Boys: Sports Comedy Shows on Television" *Anthology on Gender and Sexuality in Sport*, Edited by Dennis Hemphill and Caroline Symons, Walla Walla Press: Sydney, 2002, pp.81-91.
- 2001 Burke, M. "Obeying Until it Hurts: Child Sexual Abuse in Sport" *Journal of Philosophy of Sport*. Volume XXVIII/2, 2001, pp. 147-160.
- 1999 Burke, M. "Is Boxing Violent? Let's Ask Some Boxers" In *All Part of the Game: Violence and Australian Sport*. Edited by Dennis Hemphill. Petersham, NSW: Walla Walla Press, 1998, pp.111-132.
- 1997 Burke, M. "Drugs in Sport: Have We Practiced too Hard? A Response to Schneider and Butcher." *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, volume XXIV, 1997, pp.47-66.
- 1997 Burke M. and Roberts, T.J. "Drugs in Sport: An Issue of Morality or Sentimentality." *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, volume XXIV, 1997, pp.99-113.

### Non-Refereed Publications

- 1999 Burke, M. "Creating Consensus: A Response to J. Neville Turner." *Bulletin of Sport and Culture*, Number 18, July 1999.
- 1999 Burke, M. and Symons, C. "Re- Asserting Drugs as a Feminist Issue" *Bulletin of Sport and Culture*, Number 17, March, 1999.
- 1998 Burke, M. "Drugs and Postmodern Female 'Identities'- A Response to Tara Magdalinski" *Bulletin of Sport and Culture*, Number 15, July, 1998.

- 1994 Burke, M. "Sport, Feminist Theory and Foucault", *Discourse on Sport: 21st. Annual Conference of the PSSS*. Edited by Simon Eassom. Fort Worth, Texas, June, 1994

Conference Presentations

- 2000 "Child Sexual Abuse and Coaching in Sport" *International Association for the Philosophy of Sport Conference*, Melbourne, Australia, September 1-3, 2000.
- 2000 "Drugs in Sport and Post-rational Feminism" *International Association for the Philosophy of Sport Conference*, Melbourne, Australia, September 1-3, 2000.
- 1999 "Obeying Until it Hurts: Child Sexual Abuse in Sports"  
Sport and Social Justice: Policy and Practice Conference, July 1, 1999 (VUT)
- 1999 "Drugs, Sport and Human Rights"  
Human Rights and Sport International Conference, Sydney, Sep. 1, 1999.
- 1997 "Joshing and Nudging the Big Boys"  
Gender, Sexualities and Sport Conference, June 25, 1997 (VUT)
- 1993 "Sport and Foucauldian Feminism"  
Philosophic Society for the Study of Sport Conference, Fort Worth, Texas, Oct. 7-10, 1993