

You Throw Like a Girl: Sport and Misogyny on the Silver Screen

Dayna B. Daniels
The University of Lethbridge—Alberta

Introduction

Sport has traditionally been accepted as a male domain. Incorrect beliefs in and about the histories of games and sport, and their inherent invisibility of girls and women as participants, have built a foundation of myths upon which the contemporary culture of sport and the construction of masculinity have been built.¹ As is true in many versions of history, women are absent from inclusion unless an individual woman or group of women was recognized as being exceptionally outstanding. The same is true for the history of sport. The invisibility of girls and women's games and events, not to mention many events held for women and men together in certain periods of history for certain classes of people, leads one to believe that only the Amazons, Annie Oakley, Mildred "Babe" Dirdrickson Zaharias, or the Edmonton Grads had any skills in physical activity or sporting prowess.² This is as untrue as any history that relegates women and their involvement in various societies and cultures to footnotes or invisibility.

Most contemporary North American references to girls and women in sport began in the late 1800's. Common sense understanding and acceptance of the involvement of women in sport since this time is based, to a great extent, on myth and misunderstanding.³ For the most part, 'facts' about women and sport are delimited to stories about and health cautions around physical activity for white, middle and/or upper class, heterosexual women. The sporting practices of poor and/or working class women, certain groups of immigrant, non-white, Aboriginal, and lesbian women are invisible in the mainstream historical records, newspapers, newsreels, and collective memories of most North Americans.

The participation rates of girls and women in sports and other physical activities skyrocketed in the 20th century. Women surpassed record setting performances by men in only a few years. Women participate in activities such as rugby, boxing, mountain climbing, tae kwan do, and hockey as well as in traditional gender appropriate activities for females such as gymnastics, swimming, tennis, and figure skating. Although there is growing acceptance across North America for girls and women to engage in all of these activities, there is still an underlying tone that they really do not belong in the male realm of sport. The abilities of

women athletes are constantly compared to those of men. The femininity and sexuality of women athletes are often called into question and the value of women athletes—both financial and personal—is based more on heterosexuality femininity than on athletic excellence.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate how language directed toward male athletes in sport genre films may have contributed to the traditional and collective beliefs about girls and women and their involvement in and relation to sport today. Has the practice of motivating men through language that demeans women in myriad, twentieth-century 'Hollywood' motion pictures about men and their sporting practices, perpetuated and reinforced the second class status of girls and women as athletes?

Setting the Scene

There are two primary *fin de siècle* factors that can be critically analyzed to construct the contemporary foundation upon which many beliefs and practices about girls and women's participation in sport and physical activity can be based: the social and economic conditions that led to the first wave of feminist activism in North America and the movement to rekindle the spirit of sport and manhood through the 'rebirth' of the Olympic Games. These factors likely contribute to the basis for the belief system about women and the role of women in the sport films used in this analysis. A third factor, relative to the purpose of this paper, the role of misogynistic language in feature films about men's sport, was the actual development of the first 'motion' pictures. This technology was also developed at the end of the nineteenth century and will be briefly discussed.

All Women are not Equal

The first of the factors that must be considered in an overall analysis about girls, women and their relationship to sport and physical activity in North America are the social and economic conditions that existed in the 19th Century. At Seneca Falls, New York in July 1848, the first Women's Rights Convention in the United States began a period of activism and education that started

significant social change for women in the United States, sometimes referred to as the First Wave of Feminism. Social rights, including access to education and a woman's right to vote became the agenda for a group of, primarily, white women and men. Women's universities and state universities first opened their doors to women following the U.S. Civil War. This access to higher education spawned great criticism regarding the effects of education on women's health and their ability to reproduce (Sayers). Educators and doctors, primarily male, wrote and lectured that girls' "education should...be tailored to their physiological functions, specifically to the biological requirements of menstruation and reproduction" (Sayers 9-10).

Dr. Stanley Hall, president of Clark University (c.1880-1890's) was a strong proponent of an education for girls that was not only different, but also less scholastic than for that of boys. Hall said that:

The 'data' from physicians showed, that the more scholastic the education of women, the fewer the children and the harder, more dangerous, and more dreaded is parturition, and the less the ability to nurse children. During menstruation, a girl should step reverently aside from her daily routine and let the Lord Nature work. Failure to tailor girls' educationto their physical need to rest during menstruation would endanger their reproductive powers (taken from Sayers 10).

It is obvious to see how beliefs such as these, supported by physicians and educators, might lead the general public to believe that sports and physical activities, especially rough and tumble games, were not only not appropriate for girls and women, but could also be physically (read: reproductively) harmful although no proof existed for such admonitions and no such cautions, however correct, were made regarding boys.

Although medical data is available, now, which refutes these beliefs about girls, physical activity, reproduction and health in general, it is very important to note that these early criticisms were not applied universally to girls and women. They were only applied to females of certain classes and races. At the end of the nineteenth-century there were large numbers of immigrants pouring into the United States and Canada. Significant amounts of racist and classist behaviors existed to relegate these people to second-class status. To 'protect' the alleged superiority and desirability of white people as central to the leadership and development of North American society, it became important to situate middle class white women as the focus of all educational and social matters (Sayers). The reproductive health and the actual number of children being born to white women were of particular concern. As women were entering post-secondary schools and professions, they had a tendency to have fewer children. Immigrant and non-white populations, on the other hand, were experi-

encing an increase in birthrates as their basic needs were being met in the 'new world.' While white girls and young women were discouraged from engaging in any activities that doctors and educators of the day, mistakenly, felt might interfere with their ability to get pregnant and carry healthy babies to term, hard physical labour and rough and tumble activities and sports appeared to have no ill-effects for poor women or women of colour. It was only the daughters and wives of the privileged classes of North America who seemed to be negatively affected by heavy physical labour and sport participation. The pale, thin woman of the Victorian era was indicative of a woman who did not have to labour hard in the sun. These were obviously women of class and they set a social and physical standard of desirability against whom all women would be judged.

Upper class women, however, were not strangers to physical activities. There were many activities that were deemed appropriate for women of their social station. Horseback riding, croquet, lawn tennis, and golf were among the activities engaged in by upper class women (Cochrane). Winter activities such as curling and ice-skating were also popular activities. Women's participation in sporting activities was not accepted without criticism and frequent ridicule. However, women did participate and they demanded greater opportunity to be involved in university and private club sports as they were accepted into these institutions. It is interesting to note that among the first events open to women in the modern Olympic Games were the traditional, upper class sports of golf and tennis. This adds further to the myths regarding women's involvement in sports, as country clubs and hunt clubs were generally restricted and built behind walls that not only kept out 'undesirables,' but kept women's involvement further hidden.

Nationalism and the Pride of Youth

The second factor from the late 1800's which has had an impact on our beliefs about the abilities and appropriateness of girls and women in sport to this day was the birth of the modern Olympic movement. Concerned about the health of aristocratic youth, Baron Pierre de Coubertin of France was instrumental in resurrecting the ancient spectacle of the Olympic Games. He was concerned that French youth were not prepared to be soldiers. He saw the athletic contests of the Olympics to be a training ground for the bodies and minds of future soldiers and statesmen. The vision that de Coubertin had for the Games was not unlike that of the Greeks.

The first recorded Olympic Games (776 B.C.) barred women entirely from this religious and political event. For these sacred celebrations only the public beings—men—were allowed to be present. Women, the private beings, could not even view the Games and faced

the death penalty for entering the sacred grounds (Boutilier and SanGiovanni 221).

Although de Coubertin's concept of the Modern Olympic Games did not include death to women spectators, he did envision only male athletes. The role of women in the Modern Olympic Games was to cheer on the male athletes and to garland the winners. Women were not included in the first Modern Olympic Games, held in Athens in 1896. The Paris Games of 1900 did include nineteen women in three sporting events: Golf, Tennis, and Croquet. It ought to be noted, as was indicated in the previous section of this paper on social and economic factors, that these events were activities engaged in primarily by upper class, aristocratic, white women.

The growth of women's inclusion in the Modern Olympic Games has been one of struggle and controversy over the century in which they have been held. Certain sports are still not offered for women competitors. The addition of sports for women to the Olympic program has always been criticized and an uphill battle. The nineteenth century notions of women's frailty and potential dangers to their reproductive health has held sway for decades beyond the dissolution of these myths and obvious success of high performance women athletes with no negative health repercussions. However, the opposition to women's sporting involvement was strong and public through the first six decades of the twentieth century, which was also the time of the development and growth of the modern motion picture industry.

As women athletes, of all social classes and more diverse races, were gaining success as high performance athletes in the Olympics, concerns regarding their femininity and sexuality paralleled this success. Gold medal contenders in track and field and various team sports were suspected of being males masquerading as females. How could women be that good? In 1968, the International Olympic Committee began a practice of 'femininity' testing on all women entered in the Olympics to 'prove' they were female (Daniels). This practice spread to other world championships as women continued to improve in sport and shattered world records set by men only short time periods previously. The practice of sex testing or gender verification came under strong censure and the IOC finally curtailed the practiced for the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney.

Questioning the sexuality and femininity of women athletes did not end with the stopping of the testing. Girls and women in sport continue to face criticism from various media, school athletic departments, and many in the public who see females in sport as trespassers into this still male domain.

Lights, Camera, Action

Sport had a significant role to play in the creation of the very first 'moving picture.' As the technology of still photogra-

phy rapidly developed in the late 1800's, the ability to capture images of moving objects—mostly people and animals—improved. The first 'moving pictures' were actually a serial presentation of still photographs shown at a rate that took advantage of the phenomenon of persistence of vision. This optical process 'tricks' the brain into seeing 'normal' motion when one image is superimposed on another at a rate of projection equal to that of the rate of pictures taken, generally 24 images per second for normal human motion. Children's toys, including 'flip books' and the early nickelodeons, were designed on this principle.

Edward Muybridge, a California photographer, was the first known producer of serial motion photographs. As the science of photography rapidly advanced, he used a variety of techniques, including multiple cameras and trip wires to obtain photographs in series. His early works were displayed on a device he called a zoopraxiscope (Muybridge). The first images that Muybridge used in his work were of a running horse, but he quickly turned his interest to the human body, in mostly, athletic actions. In 1883, the University of Pennsylvania chose to support a program in photographic research, focusing primarily on human movement. Muybridge provided his services to the faculty (Muybridge).

The men and women who performed before his battery of cameras were, in part, connected with the university. The "professor of physical culture", "the champion runner", "instructors at the Fencing and Sparring Club" and a "well-known pugilist" were among the male performers. The women were chiefly—since many of them appeared nude—professional artists' models, but the *premiere danseuse* of one of the Philadelphia theatres also danced before the 48 cameras on the university campus (Taft in Muybridge x.).

The hundreds of sequences, composed from thousands of individual photographs, showed women and men in a variety of movements. The photographs, displayed rapidly in sequence, were the first 'moving' pictures. These sequences had an important impact on physical culture as well as visual art as accurate motion capture was finally available to show the detail of human movement.

It is of particular interest to note that Muybridge took hundred of sequences of photographs of men and women performing myriad tasks. Men were photographed performing some actions from daily life such as swinging an axe, carrying a rifle and digging with a spade. The majority of the sequences of men's movements were sport related. Muybridge captured on film, men walking, running, jumping, hurdling, throwing balls, a javelin, and a discus. He filmed sequences of men kicking balls and striking with tennis rackets and baseball bats. He captured boxing, wrestling, acrobatics, and fencing. The variety and number of sporting activities shows how well sports movements lent themselves to film.

Although Muybridge did capture some women throwing balls, jumping, running, and dancing, the majority of the sequences photographed of women illustrated women carrying out somewhat bizarre, if not presumably feminine, activities such as “walking with hand to mouth,” “walking and turning while pouring water from a watering can,” “woman turning, throwing a kiss, and walking upstairs,” and “turning while carrying fan and flowers” (Muybridge xvi-xvii). It is likely this difference in the sequences, when shown in academic and public forums, invited more interest in the men in athletic movements and sparked further interest in this area for the burgeoning film industry.

Sports on the Silver Screen (1997)

The first commercial motion picture was made and shown in New York City in 1896. The film was a staged remake of the prizefight between Gentleman Jim Corbett and Pete Courtney (*Sports on the Silver Screen*). Boxing lent itself naturally to early motion picture technology restrictions. The ring became a stage on which the motion was confined to a small space and lighting was easily controlled. Because the ‘plot’ of a fight was well understood by the audience, boxing made for a good subject of silent films. However, even once talkies became possible, boxing remained a popular film subject. Within the genre of sport films, more movies have been made about boxing (a sport that might epitomize masculinity) than any other sport.

Sports heroes became natural movie stars as their popularity was already well established. Gentleman Jim Corbett became the first personality to sign an exclusive movie contract (*Sports on the Silver Screen*). Many famous athletes became cross-over stars in the movies including Babe Ruth (*The Babe Ruth Story*), Jackie Robinson (*The Jackie Robinson Story*), Babe Dirdrickson Zaharias (*Pat and Mike*), Ben Hogan (*The Caddy*), and Gussie Moran (*Pat and Mike*). Many Hollywood stars fulfill their dreams of being professional athletes by creating or accepting movie roles as athletes. Kevin Costner (baseball) and Sylvester Stallone (boxing) have made numerous movies with sport themes. Some of Hollywood’s most prolific and successful actors have played athletes: Robert Redford (*The Natural*), Robert DeNiro (*Raging Bull*), Gene Hackman (*Hoosiers*), Tom Selleck (*Mr. Baseball*), and even Frank Sinatra (*Take Me Out To The Ball Game*) have taken up bats, balls, clubs, and gloves to play athletes on the silver screen. Some actors have transformed themselves and their bodies in order to realistically depict a real or fictional athlete on the screen. Pat Morita knew nothing about martial arts until he was cast as Mr. Miagi in *The Karate Kid* (*Sports on the Silver Screen*) and Denzel Washington and Will Smith trained and reinvented their bodies in an attempt to become Hurricane Carter and Mohammad Ali, respectively. Although fewer athlete roles for women have been available, Elizabeth Taylor (*National Velvet*) and Katherine Hepburn (*Pat and Mike*) were among the early women box-office favorites to

take on the role of an athlete in a motion picture.

Sport can provide all the drama and excitement that Hollywood attempts to capture in motion pictures. Drama and pathos, humor, ethos, poignant coming of age stories, fantasy, hope and tragedy have all been captured on film through the grit, sweat, blood, sorrow, joy, and even, the corruption of sports. The range of films on sports includes everything from fictionalized biography (*Raging Bull*, 61*), fantasy (*Field of Dreams*), make believe (*It Happens Every Spring*, *Angels in the Outfield*), political issues (*Chariots of Fire*, *The Bingo Long Traveling All-Stars and Motor Kings*), prison movies (*The Longest Yard*), exploration of



“Pat Pemberton (Katherine Hepburn) with Mike Connor (Spencer Tracy) in *Pat and Mike* (1952).
Courtesy of Film Archive

sexuality (*Personal Best*, *The Broken Hearts Club*), and musicals (*Damn Yankees*, *Take Me Out to the Ball Game*). Many ‘family’ movies are about children and sport (*The Bad News Bears*, *The Big Green*). Sport movies cover themes from the ridiculous (*Flubber*) to the sublime (*Bang the Drum Slowly*).

The importance of a film can be judged, to some extent, on the recognition given to it through the Academy Awards. In just the third year of presentations, *The Champ* (1931) won the Oscar for Best Actor (Wallace Beery) and Best Original Screenplay. This film, centered on boxing, was just the first of many sport films to be recognized for their excellence. Sport films have won the Academy Award in every major category except one. *Rocky* (1976) and *Chariots of Fire* (1981) won for Best Picture. In 1980, Robert DeNiro (*Raging Bull*) won for Best Actor. Best Supporting Actor and Actress winners were Cuba Gooding, Jr. (*Jerry Maguire* 1996) and Ann Revere (*National Velvet*). *The Hustler* (1961) won Oscars for both Art Direction and Cinematography. *Chariots of Fire* also won Academy Awards for Best Original Score, Best Costumes, and Best Original Screenplay. *Rocky* won for Best Director and for Best Editing. Other Best Editing Oscars went to *Raging Bull*, *National Velvet* and *Pride of the Yankees* (1942). The one category obviously missing from this laudatory list is Best Actress.

The ‘All-American’ (sic) Hero

One of the reasons for the popularity and success of the sport film genre is that male athletes fill a need for heroes in a culture in times between wars and other aggressive political activities. “In America, sports continue to be the strongest reference point for promulgating the most sacred values of a male-dominated, success-oriented, and status seeking society” (Sabo and Runfola x). Reflection theory posits that sport is a mirror of soci-

ety. If a culture's values and beliefs are seen to be present in sport, then sport and the athlete will be seen to be a positive aspect of a society. Therefore, sport represents a positive way for children to be socialized into the norms of that society.

However, sport is traditionally seen as a male activity and, therefore, the role of girls and women is tenuous at best. Sports and masculinity have become entwined to the point that the normative characteristics of a masculine male and the normative characteristics of an athlete are nearly identical. If athlete *means* masculine, where do femininity and females fit into the equation?

Another normative, although generally unspoken, requirement of the athlete, beyond masculinity, is that of heterosexuality. "In our culture, male homosexuality is a violation of masculinity, a denigration of the mythic power of men" (Pronger 2).

In many important respects, the difference between an athlete who is homosexual and an athlete who is heterosexual is nonexistent. Sexuality has no bearing on the hitting of tennis balls, speed of skating, height of jumping, precision on gymnastics apparatus, or any other strictly athletic phenomenon. But in our culture, athletics has more than purely athletic significance. And sexuality is not just a matter of the pleasure of flesh meeting flesh. Both sexuality and athletics draw meaning from our culture's myths of sexuality and gender. Because homosexuality and athletics express contradictory attitudes to masculinity, violation and compliance respectively, their coexistence in one person is a paradox, the stuff of irony. (Pronger 2-3)

So, to be an athlete is to be masculine and heterosexual. To be feminine and/or homosexual is antithetical to being an athlete. Thus the foundation for the place of women in sport and in relation to sport is built.

The Distaff Side

If the majority of sport-theme films are about men and/or men's sports how does the treatment of women (and men) within these films contribute to or impact upon contemporary attitudes about girls and women in general, and as athletes in particular? Investigating the variety of roles for women in sport films and their relationships to (or the absence of relationship with) men, may tell us a great deal about the struggles that women athletes face today. Although there was an increase in films containing a women and sport theme in the late 20th century, their numbers and popularity in no way match those about men and men's sports in the same time period.

"Women Weaken Legs"

This phrase was spoken as a fact and an admonition by

Meredith Burgess, playing the boxing manager, in *Rocky*. A recurring theme in sport films is that women, specifically sex with a woman, will drain a man and interfere with his ability to perform as an athlete. The no-sex before sport myth is a recurring theme in sport films. A scene in *Rocky* has Adrian attempting to get close to Rocky. Rocky, getting increasingly frustrated with her emphatically states: "Hey, hey, come on. No foolin' around, awright?.....Hey, Adrian! I'm serious now. There's no foolin' around during training. Ya unnerstan, I wanna stay strong." A similar scene in *Raging Bull* has Jackie, Jake LaMotta's wife, attempting to resist his advances, stating: "You said never to touch you before a fight" and "You made me promise not to get you excited." Jake, not able to resist his wife's eventual attention, gets out of bed and pours ice cubes down his shorts.

Whether films took the no-sex idea from actual sporting mythology or whether the myth was kept alive through sport films hardly matters. The message being sent is that women are bad for athletes—at least during training and before competition. The curfew set for athletes was more about keeping them away from women than for getting them ready for a game. In the musical, *Take Me Out To The Ball Game*, O'Brien, one of the baseball players, bemoans: "When I think of all the dames I lost because I had to be in bed by 10 o'clock."

Athletes are notoriously superstitious and the no-sex rule is alive and well. Many professional teams still keep their players away from women before games and the no-sex myth among boxers is as strong as it ever was (Davison). The notion of women interfering with athletic performance is taken to its ultimate conclusion with Lola from *Damn Yankees*. Lola is sent by the devil to seduce the star player from the Washington Senators and actually drain him of all his baseball skills.

"Ball players? I haven't got ball players. I've got girls. Girls are what you sleep with after the game, not what you coach during the game."

Tom Hanks, playing coach Jimmy Dugan in *A League of Their Own*, bemoans this to the league representative and illustrates the other side of women as sexual beings, not athletes, as portrayed in sport films. Once the games are over, women are for sex, and the only role for a woman during the game is to be a pretty cheerleader. In many films the treatment of women as sex objects is degrading and violent. Women are hardly seen as human beings. Throughout the movie *Varsity Blues* the high school football players are constantly making crude remarks about girls and sex. Getting sex is the only reason to be with a girl. "Will ya listen to me? Awright. Bitches are all just panty droppers. Listen, you give 'em a Percoset, two Vicadin and couple of beers, and the panties drop. Very nice. Very nice" (*Varsity Blues*). Not only are drugs and coercion seen as appropriate ways to treat a woman, physical violence is also seen as normal behavior. A football player at a party, carrying a baseball bat, is singing "She broke my heart, so I broke her jaw" (*Varsity Blues*). This was received by his friends

with cheers. Even in more light-hearted movies, such as the musical *Take Me to the Ball Game*, Ed, one of the players says: “Danny, tell ‘em about the girls, the quails, the mice.” Danny goes on to sing a song called “Love ‘em and leave ‘em.”

The notion that women, and by extension women athletes, are considered somewhat less than human is illustrated at a later point in this film when the three star players are spying on the team owner as she swims. She is never referred to as a woman, and the implication is that sex is all she wants.

- O'Brien: “Not bad for a dame who can field a hot grounder. Denny, I have hunch that girl is human.”
- Ryan: “No!”
- O'Brien: “If she’s a dame, she wants romance. And *she’s* a dame.”
- Goldberg: “It’s been my experience that the athletic type girls, like Higgins, might go for the caveman approach, like this.....come ‘ere!”

The role that women are allowed to play in the games is that of wife (usually seen sitting in the stands in the “Player’s Wives” section) or cheerleader. The cheerleader in sport movies is often viewed as a potential sex partner and it is imperative that these women possess heterosexy femininity. In *What Price Victory*, Robert Culp playing the arrogant president of a fictional NCAA Division I university football boosters club, remarks to team officials: “While we’re at it, can we get some real good lookin’ cheerleaders?” In *Eddie*, the new owner of the New York Knicks announces to the crowd that the games will be more entertaining and that “You’re gonna see cuter cheerleaders.” This is done only to increase the number of fans and make more money. That cheerleaders supply something more than just enthusiasm to the players and fans can be seen in *The Longest Yard*. A football game is staged in a prison between the prisoners and the guards. The cheerleaders for this game are other prisoners, dressed in drag. If the only function of cheerleaders was to lead cheers, then the men would not have to dress in drag to play the part.

“We’re honored to have the lady athlete in our class”

In the made-for-TV movie, *Quarterback Princess*, Tammy Maida has successfully tried out for quarterback on a high school football team. A teacher in the school made the quote above as she took attendance in her class on the first day. The potential meanings behind this statement are troubling for two reasons: one, either there are no athletic teams for girls at all in this school, or two, the only way to be an athlete is to play on a boy’s team. The idea that women cannot be real athletes is put forward in a number of ways in various sporting films. In *What Price Victory*, the

importance of college football above all else is implied by the president of the booster club, while encouraging the university to bend rules to recruit the best football players. He says, “Of course, we’re not talking ladies volleyball here or tippy toe gymnastics. We’re talking major ball.”

When a woman athlete does appear in a sport film, she is generally the only woman on a team and a cause for conflict among the players, for other teams, or some sort of joke. In *Necessary Roughness*, when the coach recruits a woman soccer player to be a place kicker on a losing football team, the players comment either on their embarrassment at having a woman on the team or they focus on her as a sex object. In one exchange, one of the players laments: “We’ll be the laughing stock of college football.” Once the players see the skill of their new kicker, they are still less impressed with her as an athlete than as a woman: “She’s got some foot.....and it keeps getting better on the way up.”

In *The Big Green* and *Little Giants*, even though the one girl is the best player on her respective soccer and football team, the presence of these girls creates conflict. In *The Big Green* an opposing coach pulls his all-boys team off the field, remarking: “Get rid of the girls.” His comment implies that the game would be diminished and an embarrassment to his players if they had to compete against (and possibly lose to) girls. Becky (Icebox O’Shea) is the best player on her football team in *Little Giants*. A very cocky boy will not play on the team with girls. Because Becky likes this boy, she quits the team and becomes a cheerleader (with all the other girls). Of course, she comes back to the team in the final crucial moments to win the game, but she struggled with her



In *A League of Their Own* the “ladies” are required to wear short skirts.

Courtesy of Film Archive

role as an athlete because of the attitude of the boy.

Even when female players are seen to be skilled, their femininity is highlighted at the expense of their abilities. In *A League*

of *Their Own*, Marla Hooch, powerful switch hitter, is going to be left behind because the scout does not think she is pretty enough. The uniforms the players are required to wear have short skirts and are designed to show off the femininity and sex appeal of the players. When the players comment on the inappropriateness of the 'uniforms': "Excuse me, that's not a baseball uniform," "What do you think we are? Ball players or ballerinas?"; the league representative lays down an ultimatum: "Ladies, if you can't play ball in this, you can't play ball with us. Right now there are thirty-eight girls getting train tickets home who would play in bathing suit if I asked 'em." The players are also required to go to charm school to make certain that they appear feminine and lady like on and off the field. The newsreels made of the AAGBL (All American Girls Baseball League) showed the players powdering their noses, pouring coffee and knitting rather than playing ball. At the end of the first season, even though the league eventually became a very successful sporting and commercial enterprise, Mr. Harvey, the owner of the league, expresses his real feelings about women and sport when he states: "I love these girls. I don't need 'em, but I love 'em. ... There is no room for girls' baseball in this country once the war is over." Although the actual AAGBL did continue for a few years, the sensibilities of 1950's America did not provide for the support of such a masculine activity for young women.

Gender Slurs

It can be seen that the representation of the presence of girls and women in sport film is one of tolerance at best. Even in films that are primarily about women athletes, the players are always judged in relation to men or they have their femininity and/or sexuality questioned. In films that highlight highly successful women athletes, such as *A League of Their Own* or *Pat and Mike*, there is still an undercurrent of caution regarding the suitability of women to sports participation, especially those sports traditionally deemed masculine.

Organized youth, school and professional sports were originally designed by and for boys and men. As reported by Messner:

Organized sport, as we know it, emerged largely as a masculinist response to a crisis in the gender order of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The world of sport gave men a retreat from what they feared was a "feminized" modern culture, and it gave white upper-class men (initially) and working-class and minority men (eventually) a means of "naturalizing" dominant forms of masculinity. Throughout most of the twentieth century, this masculine institution of sport existed alongside a vibrant but much less visible tradition of women's sport.

The fallacious beliefs of participants and spectators that only males can participate in sport was reinforced through the

popularity of sport films about men and boys (and in other forms of media), which contributed to the invisibility of women's sports and helped to establish the normative domain for all sporting contexts as male.

Girls and women have always been involved in various sports and physical activities to some degree. The age, race, and socio-economic class might have dictated the 'appropriate' activity for the participants, but this is as absent from the silver screen as it is from historical accounts. What does show up, repeatedly, in sport-genre films is the attempt to motivate male athletes through the vilification of women and homosexuals. If only masculine males have a right to the domain of sport, then the implication that an athlete who is not masculine (read: feminine or homosexual) would not only impute his ability as an athlete, but would cause question of who he is as a man.

In previous sections of this paper, it has been demonstrated that the relationships of male athletes to women have been primarily sexual, or if athletic, reluctant at best. What is clear from watching sport related films is that nothing is a greater insult to a male athlete than to imply that he is female, feminine, or homosexual. Gender slurs, insults, that are directed toward men that are meant to imply that they are less than masculine or not completely heterosexual, have been used time and again as a motivating factor by coaches, fans or other athletes to get a man to strive for greater athletic success. This can be seen in countless sport films. This can also be seen in the actual practice and game situations, and in the locker room interactions of boys and men in sports.⁴

Girls are the worst!!

Boys learn very early to believe that sports are their exclusive domain, no matter how good a girl is as an athlete. Girls are ridiculed and form the basis for some of the worst insults that boys can hurl at one another. In *The Sandlot*, a film about a group of misfit boys who join together to play baseball to support the one truly skilled athlete in their group, the insult of implying that a member of a rival team plays 'like a girl' is the one slur that raises a challenge between the two teams. In a toe-to-toe confrontation, one boy from each of the opposing teams exchanges the following dialogue:

Sandlot player: "Watch it, jerk."

Team player: "Shut up, idiot."

S: "Moron!"

T: "Scab eater!"

S: "Fart smeller!"

T: "You bob for apples in the toilet.....and you like it!"

S: "You play like a GIRL!"

This last insult, delivered with more gusto than any of the previous indignities, caused the other players on both teams to get very quiet and to have the looks on their faces turn to horror.

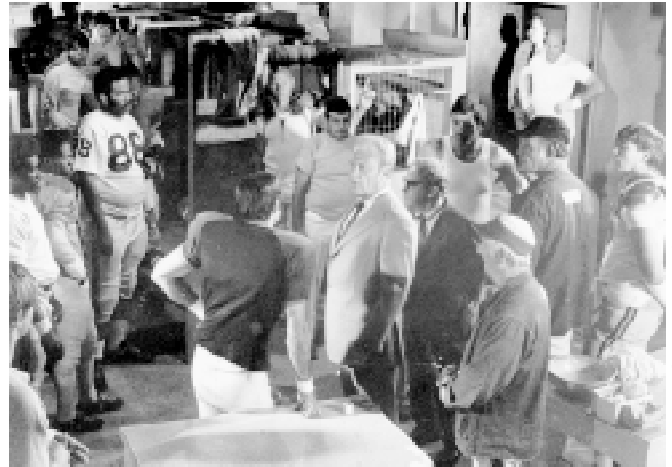
The player from the organized team is so shocked by this barb that he is momentarily struck dumb, knowing that he could not possibly top, or even equal, this ultimate insult. The only possible response is to accept the challenge of a game in order to prove themselves as males and as athletes.

It is not only young boys who lament at any similarities between themselves and females. In one scene in *Raging Bull*, Robert DeNiro, playing Jake LaMotta, is lamenting that he will never be able to fight Joe Lewis, the best fighter of his day. In conversation with his brother, LaMotta, bemoans: "I got these small hands. ... I got...girl hands. ... Like a girl." He likens his eventual failure to a quality that he deems feminine.

In sport movies that involve teen-age boys and young men, the juxtaposition of sport, girls and sexual innuendo is frequently present. Throughout the football film *Varsity Blues* players are constantly talking about girls as sexual objects. They demonstrate their 'superiority' over friends and other players by referring to them through slang expressions describing females in order to get them to do their bidding. Dialogue lines such as "Hey, Mox, you skinny-assed bitch, let's roll" are heard throughout the film. The coach in *Varsity Blues*, in an attempt to show his contempt for the poor level of play of the team, says to the players: "Why don't you let the pom-pom girls play for you?" This slur is meant to humiliate the players by equating them to pretty girls who have been referred to throughout the movie as only sex objects. *Above the Rim*, a relatively new form of sport film which highlights entire groups of young black males, rather than the one breakthrough hero on an otherwise white team, has dialogue between players that reflects what has been popularized as 'street language.' Throughout the film the basketball players refer to each other as 'pussy' or 'bitch' in lines such as "You're a pussy...without the hair." Reductive language that has been used to equate women to animals, toys, foods, and body parts, is a hegemonic practice that keeps males in an artificially superior position to females (Ayim, Baker). This language form is used frequently in sport films about adolescent males.

The attempt to motivate male athletes through language that vilifies females is common in sport films focusing on adult male athletes in a variety of sports and settings. The level of sophistication of the language may vary, but the common denominator is to slur women in an attempt to motivate male athletes to perform better or to train harder. Coach to player and teammate to teammate interactions often utilize language degrading to women to spur on a team or player. The following dialogue bits are representative of numerous examples to be found in many sport films, generally those about male team sports: "You're playing like a bunch o' girls out there, everyone of ya (*The Longest Yard*)!"; "Sit down and shut up you mouthy prima dona (*The Natural*)!"; Crush: "I don't believe in fighting." Ebbie: "That's sweet, you pussy (*Bull Durham*)!"; and "If you're going to act like a loser, raise your hand. If you're going to act like a pussy, raise your hand (*Any Given Sunday*)!" Even in

the movie *Eddie*, in which Whoopi Goldberg plays a fan-coach of the New York Knicks, she repeatedly refers to the players as girls and ladies in both practice and game situations in an attempt to get their attention and performance.



Courtesy of Paramount Pictures

"You're playing like a bunch of girls" (*The Longest Yard*).

Gender slurs can also be combined with other epithets to raise the level of certain male athletes over other male athletes. In *Slapshot*, as a Francophone hockey player from an opposing team is announced to the crowd, one of the home team players calls him a "frog pussy" thus slandering both his gender and his heritage. In a later scene in the same film, a teammate of the player who made this slur says to his own teammate: "You're the biggest fuckin' pussy in the league" indicating that it is not only rivals toward whom gender slurs are thrown.

The only thing worse is bein' a fag....

Misogynistic comments are not the only slurs that coaches, athletes, and spectators use to put down or to motivate male athletes to train harder or to strive to a higher level of performance. What might be a worse aspersion to the masculinity of an athlete than to imply that he is feminine or in any way female, would be to question his heterosexuality. As sport is seen to be an "overtly masculine and heterosexual culture" (Messner 155), the very idea of homosexual male athletes would not only be untenable, but would even be frightening to athletes who share numerous homosocial encounters on and off the field and in the locker room. The presence of a gay man in a team sport environment would challenge the well-constructed myth of the masculine athlete, not to mention the masculine male, at its very center. The presence of homophobia in sport is demonstrated through words and actions in the same way, and for the same purposes, as misogyny.

In *Slapshot*, one of early age restricted ® rated sport films,

the hockey players are participating in a fashion show for publicity. One of the players in protest exclaims: "I look like some cock suckin' faggot. Nowhere in my contract does it say I gotta make a fool outta myself." Throughout this film players refer to each other and taunt each other with accusations of 'faggot' or 'fag.' In *Bull Durham*, another R rated sport film, the rookie pitcher is enticed into wearing black underwear and a garter belt to help his concentration. He defends this strange behavior and tells a teammate: "This underwear makes me feel kinda sexy. Don't make me a queer, right? Right! I ain't no queer, no, I ain't." Later in the film, a veteran player gets into a shouting match with an umpire and calls him a cocksucker. This, not surprisingly, causes a fight to break out.

Psyching players up in the locker room before a game or during half time became an important vehicle in sport films beginning with the "win one for the Gipper speech," re-enacted in the 1940's film *Knute Rockne: All American* (Thomas). Whether Rockne ever actually said this mythic phrase, the ever-present locker room inspirational speech was certainly defamed by a football player in *Varsity Blues* who intones over and over again, prior to a game: "And, yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no faggot from Bingville."

The Critic's Corner

At the end of the nineteenth century, the cautions around girls and women's participation in sport were primarily directed toward the potential harm to their reproductive systems that might occur through vigorous physical activity. These admonitions did not concern the more 'lady-like' activities such as dance or gymnastics or the traditional sporting activities of the upper class female. They were directed toward the more rough and tumble activities that were considered more appropriate for boys. Although these myths have been proven fallacious, they still surface from time to time as resistance to the success of women athletes, and their entry into all activities, lingers.

Throughout the twentieth century, two different, but related themes have plagued women athletes as they have attempted to take their rightful place on the playing fields: masculinization and lesbianism. The concerns over reproductive harm have been replaced by a possibly greater need to preserve the domain of sports for men. If the athlete epitomizes masculinity, then the female athlete must be masculine. If the female athlete is masculine or wants to participate in masculine activities, then maybe she really wants to be a man. This often translates into the rationalization that women athletes are lesbians.⁵ The association of women athletes and lesbians "roils beneath the surface as a subtext of all discussions about women athletes and their appearance, prowess, and acceptability" (Griffin ix).

The language and innuendo used and implied in sport films about women in general and women athletes in particular support

these two stereotypes that have plagued women athletes for more than one hundred years. Many sport genre films, along with other forms of media, have reinforced the misogynistic attitudes toward women athletes that have blocked their entry into sport, camouflaged their improvements and successes, and kept girls and women in a second-class status with respect to sport for over a century. Attacks on femininity and homosexuality directed toward male athletes are a tool that has solidified a common sense understanding of athlete as male: masculine and heterosexual. Women, then, become trespassers in the domain of sport.

"Women's serious participation in sport brings into question the 'natural' and mutually exclusive nature of gender and gender roles. If women in sport can be tough minded, competitive, and muscular, too, then sport loses its special place in the development of masculinity for men" (Griffin 17). The sport film, and its often misogynistic celebration of male athleticism, may be one of the barriers to women's full acceptance into the world of sport.

That's a wrap!

Nineteenth century Victorian beliefs about gender and gender roles, Baron Pierre de Coubertin's ideals in resurrecting the Olympic Games, and Edward Muybridge's breakthrough photographic techniques that led to the beginnings of the motion picture industry are all woven together in a complex tapestry that has, concurrently, sanctified sport as a North American cultural form for men, and vilified it for women. It is unlikely that the gender and sexual slurs used in movie dialogue (and in actual team rooms and sporting venues) to motivate male athletes to strive for excellence were included for the intended purpose of demeaning women athletes. The effect, however, frequently repeated and coupled with other misogynistic beliefs and practices, just maybe had that exact effect. One of the barriers that women athletes must overcome might be explained by dialogue from a sport film primarily about women athletes. In the Katherine Hepburn / Spencer Tracy movie, *Pat and Mike*, when a golf pro asks the Hepburn character: "What's your handicap?," her response is simply: "A fellah."

Works Cited

- Ayim, Maryann. "Wet sponges and band-aids—a gender analysis of speech patterns." *Women and Men: Interdisciplinary Readings on Gender*. Ed. Greta Hoffman Nemiroff. Toronto: Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 1987. 418-430.
- Baker, Robert. "Pricks and chicks: A plea for persons." *Philosophy and Sex*. Ed. Robert Baker and Frederick Elliston. Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1984. 249-267.
- Boutillier, Mary A. and Lucinda SanGiovanni. *The Sporting Women*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics Publishers, 1983.
- Cahn, Susan K. *Coming on Strong: Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Women's Sport*. New York: The Free Press, 1994.
- Cochrane, Jean, Abby Hoffman and Pat Kincaid. *Women in Canadian Life: Sports*. Toronto: Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 1977.
- Curry, Tim. "Fraternal Bonding in the Locker Room: A Profeminist Analysis of Talk

About Competition and Women.” *Sport Sociology Journal* 8 (1991): 119-135.

Daniels, Dayna B. “Gender (Body) Verification (Building).” *Play and Culture* 5 (1992): 370-377.

Davidson, Sean. (2002). “Debunking the no-sex rule.” *The Globe and Mail* 30 Apr. 2002, R5.

Griffin, Pat. *Strong Women, Deep Closets: Lesbians and Homophobia in Sport*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 1998.

Henderson, Carla, M., Deborah Bialeschki, Susan M. Shaw and Valerie J. Freysinger. *Both Gains and Gaps: Feminist Perspectives on Women’s Leisure*. State College, PA: Venture Publishing, Inc, 1999.

International Olympic Committee. Official website of the International Olympic Committee, Olympic Museum. Lausanne, Switzerland.
http: www.museum.olympic.org.

Lenskyj, Helen J. *Out of Bounds: Women, Sport and Sexuality*. Toronto: The Women’s Press, 1986.

Messner, Michael A. *Power at Play: Sports and the Problem of Masculinity*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1992.

Muybridge, Eadweard. *The Human Figure in Motion*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc, 1955.

Pronger, Brian. *The Meaning of Masculinity: Sports, Homosexuality and the Meaning of Sex*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990.

Sabo, Donald F. and Ross Runfola. *Jock: Sports and Male Identity*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc, 1980.

Sayers, Janet. *Biological Politics: Feminist and Anti-Feminist Perspectives*. New York: Tavistock Publications, 1982.

Simri, Uriel. *A Concise World History of Women’s Sports*. Netanya, Israel: Wingate Institute for Physical Education and Sport, 1983.

Thomas, John D. “Jock Flicks: HBO’s Sports on the Silver Screen.” 1997.
www.creativeoafing.com/archives/atlanta/newsstand/031597/b_sport.html.
www.oscar.com. Official website of the Academy Awards.

Zucker, Harvey Marc and Lawrence J. Babich. *Sports Films: A Complete Reference*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., Inc, 1987.

FEATURE LENGTH FILMS (In order of year of release)

National Velvet. Studio: MGM. Producer: Pandro S. Berman. Director: Clarence Brown. Based on a novel by Enid Bagnold. Screenplay: Theodore Reeves and Helen Deutch. 1945.

Take Me Out To The Ball Game. Studio: MGM. Producer: Arthur Freed. Director: Busby Berkeley. Screenplay: Harry Tugend and George Wells. 1949.

Pat and Mike. Studio: MGM. Producer: Lawrence Weingarten. Director: George Cukor. Screenplay: Ruth Gordon and Garson Kanin. 1952.

The Longest Yard. Studio: Paramount. Producer: Albert S. Ruddy. Director: Robert Aldrich. Screenplay: Tracey Keenan Wynn. 1974.

Rocky. Studio: MGM/UA. Producer: Robert Chartoff and Irwin Winkler. Director: John C. Avildsen. Screenplay: Sylvester Stallone. 1976.

Slapshot. Studio: Universal. Producer: Robert J. Wunch and Steven Friedman. Director: George Roy Hill. Screenplay: Nancy Dowd. 1977.

Raging Bull. Studio: MGM/UA. Producer: Robert Chartoff and Irwin Winkler. Director: Martin Scorsese. Based on a book by J. LaMotta with Joseph Carter and Peter Savage. Screenplay: Paul Schrader and Mardik Martin. 1980.

Chariots of Fire. Studio: Warner Bros.. Producer: David Puttnum. Director: Hugh Hudson. Screenplay: Colin Welland. 1981.

The Natural. Studio: TriStar Delphi/Columbia. Producer: Mark Johnson. Director: Barry Levinson. Based on a story by Bernard Malamud. Screenplay: Roger Towne and Phil Dusenberry. 1984.

Hoosiers. Studio: (HBO Video) Orion Pictures. Producer: Carter deHaven. Director: David Anspaugh. Screenplay: Angelo Pizzo. 1986.

Bull Durham. Studio: MGM (Orion). Producer: Thom Mount. Director: Ron Shelton. Screenplay: Ron Shelton. 1988.

Necessary Roughness. Studio: Paramount. Producer: Mace Neufeld and Robert Rehme. Director: Stan Dragotti. Screenplay: Rick Natkin and David Fuller. 1991.

A League of Their Own. Studio: Columbia. Producer: Robert Greenhut and Elliot Abbott. Director: Penny Marshall. Screenplay: Lowell Ganz and Babaloo Mandel. 1992.

The Sandlot. Studio: 20th Century Fox. Producer: Dale de la Torre and William S. Gilmore. Director: David Mickey Evans. Screenplay: David Mickey Evans and Robert Gunter. 1993.

Little Giants. Studio: Warner Brothers. Producer: Arne L. Schmidt. Director: Duwayne Dunham. Screenplay: James Ferguson and Robert Shallcross and Tommy Swerdlow and Michael Goldberg. 1994.

Above the Rim. Studio: Alliance / Newline Cinema. Producer: Jeff Pollak and Benny Medina. Director: Jeff Pollak. Screenplay: Barry Michael Cooper and Jeff Pollak. 1994.

The Big Green. Studio: Disney / Caravan Pictures. Producer: Roger Birnbaum. Director: Holly Goldberg Sloan. Screenplay: Holly Golderberg Sloan. 1995.

Eddie. Studio: Hollywood Pictures. Producer: David Permut and Mark Burg. Director: Steve Rash. Screenplay: Jon Connolly and David Loucka and Eric Champbella. 1996.

Varsity Blues. Studio: Paramount. Co-producers: Herbert W. Gains and Rubin Hostka. Producers: Tora Laiter, Mike Tollin, and Brian Robbins. Director: Brian Robbins. Screenplay: W. Peter Iliff. 1999.

Any Given Sunday. Studio: Warner Bros. Producer: Lauren Shuler Donner, Dan Halstead, and Clayton Townsend. Director: Oliver Stone. Screenplay: Joan Logan and Oliver Stone. 1999.

MADE-FOR-TV MOVIES

Quarterback Princess. Studio: CBS Entertainment Production. Producer: Gary M. Goodman and Barry Rosen. Director: Noel Black. 1983.

What Price Victory. Studio: Warner Bros. Television. Producer: Mark A. Wolper. Director: Kevin Connor. Story: Richard A. Shephard. Teleplay: D.M. Eyre, Jr. 1988.

DOCUMENTARIES

Sports on the Silver Screen. HBO Sports. Consultants: Harvey Marc Zucker and Lawrence J. Babich. 1997.



Dayna B. Daniels, Ph.D. is an Associate Professor and former chair of the Department of Kinesiology at the University of Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada. She also chaired the program in Women’s Studies there from 1989-2003. Her research focuses on the intersections of femininity, sexuality, and women’s involvement in sport/physical activity.