

Off-Side

Women, Hockey and the Gender Order in Canada

LAURAL RAINE

While women have been involved in the sport of hockey since its inception, their experience with ‘Canada’s national sport’ has been very different from that of their brothers’ and sons’. Sport in general, and the aggressive and physical game of hockey in particular, has been used throughout Canadian history as a ‘masculinizing project’, where traits associated with an idealized version of manliness were instilled in boys and men in order to combat perceived moral degeneracy and ‘social feminization’. Women’s involvement in hockey and other sports was often viewed as another contributing factor to this disruption of social order. Any approval for women’s participation in sports was based on their perceived primary role as mothers, which greatly limited the types of athleticism seen as appropriate. Because the sport of hockey was antithetical to ideas about acceptable feminine athleticism, the history of women’s hockey allows us to study how gendered discourses were used to minimize threats to masculine hegemony, and how women resisted that hegemony with a pair of skates, a stick and a puck.

The first recorded women’s hockey match took place at the Rideau rink in Ottawa in 1891. Although records of women’s games at this time are scarce, they appeared to be quite popular, with one game in Barrie attracting 400 fans in 1892 and another in Kingston in 1896 played before 1200 spectators. In some hockey towns, women’s games were extremely popular, as in the mining towns of Cobalt and Haileybury, where the women’s teams from each town competed against each other in a four game series for the prized O’Brien Trophy, which was covered quite extensively by local newspapers. By 1924, the Ladies’ Ontario Hockey Association was formed to organize and regulate women’s hockey clubs across the province. By the 1930s, women’s teams had begun travelling across the country to play

teams from other provinces. In 1933 the Canadian Women's Hockey Association was formed, and became responsible for the competition for the annual Dominion Title, the final series of which alternated in location from East to West each year. Also in the 1930s, the Preston Rivulettes established their reputation as the greatest women's hockey team of the decade – and possibly the best ever – with a win-loss record of 348-2. However, in the 40s and 50s, the momentum behind the expansion of women's hockey petered out, as many women entered the workforce during the war, and as increasing attention and resources were devoted to the professionalized men's hockey league, the NHL. While interest in women's hockey picked up again in the 70s and has been building in momentum, there remains a large gender gap in hockey league participation. In the 1998-9 season, male registration in hockey was at 471,088, while female registration was only 37,748.

Although many women seemingly enjoy playing hockey, female involvement in sports has always been a controversial subject. In the early part of the century especially, women who wanted to play sports like hockey faced serious obstacles. Until 1914, the Amateur Athletic Union of Canada refused to allow women to take part in any athletic activity under their control. Women were only allowed to participate in a few sports like golf and tennis until the 1928 Olympics, and even then, women's basketball was excluded until 1976, while women's hockey did not make it into the Olympics until 1998. For many years at the turn of the century, women were forced to play hockey matches in isolation, with no spectators allowed. At McGill University, the college women were allowed four hours of ice time every week, with the requirement that three men guarded the entrance at all times.

Joy Parr argues that gender history has increasingly “sought out analytical orientations that would ‘bridge the categories of private and the public’” and in this way has begun looking at the ways that gender and sexual relations are part of the discourses of power, economics, and nation building. In terms of hockey, separate spheres ideology defined women's roles as domestic, wife and mother, which shaped views about women's physicality and created concerns about the implications of women's participation in sports on the health and reproduction of the nation. These concerns were perpetuated in part by the mainly white, middle-class, and male medical profession, which served hegemonic

interests by defining women's physical and intellectual standing as inferior to men. Pronouncements about safe and acceptable methods of physical activity, which were picked up and continually reinforced by the media, were shaped by the "assumption that women's primary function was childbearing." In this way, both women's physiology and special moral status as wife and mother were seen as prohibiting strenuous physical activity, which was thought to waste vital energy necessary for childbirth, strain the weaker female body, and encourage traits inconsistent with "true womanhood." One of the first popular athletic activities for women was cycling on so-called safety bicycles with two large, rubber padded tires, an athletic activity, which also gave women greater independence and freedom of transportation. While some proponents argued that the fresh air and exercise related to cycling were good for women's health, others warned of damage to reproductive systems, including the danger of a displaced uterus, problems related to menstruation, and the potential for sexual stimulation from the saddle.

The role of women as mothers served as the primary basis for arguments about women's involvement on both sides of the debate. While we have seen above that danger to reproductive systems was central to the argument against women cyclists, early maternal feminists, who justified women's role in society on her inherent nurturing and mothering qualities, discouraged frivolous or unproductive use of leisure time in sport, and instead saw it as women's duty to use their free time to 'mother' the poor and needy. Those who did see the physical and mental benefits of exercise for women often valued only a narrow range of activities. For example, physical training in a gymnasium was seen as beneficial, because "it encourage[d] faith in the future of a country that will be able to draw from so bright-eyed, healthy bodied, clean-limbed a host, for the mothers of a coming generation."

As Colin Howell points out in his article on how baseball in Canada was used to shape ideas about masculinity, the body became central to Victorian attempts to distinguish gender. The images of ideal male and female physiques reinforced consolidating ideas about male strength and female softness, and about patriarchal dominance. While the ideal form for men was judged in terms of strength, proper female exercise was seen as promoting beauty and grace. For example, according to *Everywoman's World* magazine in 1914, rowing

produced “a full chest and graceful shoulders,” archery was “conducive to graceful movement” and discus throwing illustrated “poetry in motion.” Ice hockey clearly did not fit into this category of acceptable female sports. An article in *Chatelaine* in 1933 entitled ‘Girls Shouldn’t Do It!’ explained that:

“There are sports, I hold, which women are physically and temperamentally unfitted, and among these I would place all those which exact too much exertion to perform expeditiously and skillfully, as well as those which bring the inevitable concomitants of fatigue and exhaustion in their wake. Ice hockey is a game, fortunately indulged in by comparatively few girls teams, even as in lacrosse, for which the soft, yielding flesh with which Nature equips the sex, makes them wholly unsuited, to say nothing of the general unwisdom of arming members of the more impassioned gender with clubs to be bent over beautiful heads that were surely created for more entrancing purposes.”

In addition, concern about the physical and moral degeneracy of the nation was widespread in Canada at the turn of the century and sport was often advocated as a way to promote social regeneration by developing masculine qualities in boys and men. Because gender history “assumes that masculinity and femininity do not exist in isolation from each other,” it is important to explore the ways sport was used to construct ideas about ‘true manliness’ in relation to the implications of that discourse on women’s participation in sport, and vice versa. For women, sport as a method of social change was a much more contested issue, and was seen as both a positive and degenerative social force. Organizations like the YWCA provided lunch hour and evening classes in physical training for working women, who often worked up to 60 hours a week, and did not have the time or money for outdoor sports. Such activities also served as a social control for working women, who were seen as needing protection, by discouraging unchaperoned meetings with men and other dangerous activities that could occur in leisure time. As well, in some cases, sport was seen as preparing women for married life, as discussed above, by developing physical and mental stamina. Some also saw physical training as remedying feminine traits such as lack of self-control, vanity and impatience, while instilling traits women were seen to lack, such as “accuracy, logical thought and a sense of humour.”

However, women's involvement was more often seen as a threat to the social order. Much criticism was directed at the bloomer, which, early in the century, replaced the long heavy skirts often previously worn for sports, and allowed for much greater freedom of movement. One reporter asserted that "one girl in a bloomer costume will create far greater and more widespread corruption among boys than a city full of showbills [of dancers]."

The impact of sports on women's sexuality was also a subject for concern. In the early part of the century, sport was seen to masculinize women, making them more like men sexually. It was feared they would become more "passionate, uncontrolled, assertive," although it was generally assumed this sexualization would remain heterosexual in nature. By the 20's and 30's, traditional gender constructions began to be challenged, and encouraged a heightened focus on heterosexuality and increased sanctions on deviations from sexual norms, whereby "female athletic mannishness began to connote failed (rather than excessive) heterosexuality." This led to the 'lesbian stigma' of women's sports which persists today. The perception of the masculinization of women through sport also sparked fears of 'gender transference'; if women were involved in masculine interests, would men have to become interested in female interests like raising children and running a household? This type of reasoning fed preexisting fears of the 'feminization' of men.

Michael Messner traces the negative reactions to female athleticism to two major crises of masculinity in the 20th century. In the 1890s to 1920s, he argues, fewer men owning their businesses or farms, and urbanization all led to increasing fears of 'social feminization' and a crisis of masculinity. Attempts to compensate for this perceived feminization are also discussed by Howell, and include a focus on physical strength and toughness, warfare, and the creation of spaces and rituals where boys and men would develop traits of 'true manliness'. Sport was central to this masculinizing project, as it was constructed as a male cultural space where men's natural superiority over women could be symbolically proven. The second crisis of masculinity occurred in the post WWII years due to the further undermining of the breadwinner role as a basis for male power through the rationalization and bureaucratization of work, the shift from physical labour to a service sector economy, increasing structural unemployment, and women's increasing involvement in public life.

This second crisis, Messner argues, in part explains the popularity of professional televised sports as a means of linking men to a more patriarchal past and asserting male physical superiority as inequalities in other areas of life were contested.

If sports were central to attempts to assert male superiority and prop up historical masculine hegemony, then female participation in sports, especially particularly 'masculine' sports like hockey, would be perceived as a major threat to the dominant masculine hegemony. This had led to what Nancy Theberge refers to as the 'feminine apologetic' whereby the perceived contradiction between women and athleticism and the threat that this poses is diminished by focusing on feminine characteristics and appearance of female athletes. Indeed, most reports on female sports in the early century included a description of what the players were wearing and their physical appearance. This was true of both those who were critical of women in sport, and those who supported female athletes, as they sought to reassure audiences that women could be athletes and still be feminine. This defence was also in part an attempt by women athletes and others to combat the 'lesbian stigma' associated with women in sports. Describing the opposing Ottawa team in the championship LOHA title in 1929, Alexandrine Gibb of the *Toronto Star* wrote, "they must have picked all the beauties from in and around Ottawa and taught them how to play hockey. From the tiny Olive Barr in goal, with her fair hair and innocent, child-like face to the tallest defence girl, they were all easy to look at." Gibb, writing again in 1937, sounded as though she was describing a beauty pageant more than a hockey game: "the prettiest girl on the ice was Margaret Topp of the visitors. Miss Topp, 18, is not only a tip-top player but she excels as a dancer and a musician. She occasionally flicked long eyelashes covering her big blue orbs at the crowd but not sufficient to injure her game." Another *Toronto Star* reported article described the players in a 1907 game: "the Waterloo ladies appeared in white sweaters and black skirts...the Toronto girls were nattily clad in white sweaters with blue and white shoulders and collars with a 'W' enclosed in a maple leaf on their breasts. All wore blue and white toques."

Another tactic employed to reduce the threat that women's hockey posed to the dominant hegemony was the trivialization of their athletic abilities. Anne Hall describes such

tactics as attempts by dominant power groups to “incorporat[e] elements of resistance into the existing hegemonic structures,” by portraying women in a sport like hockey as not ‘real’ sport (i.e., by criticizing or trivializing their abilities) or as not ‘real’ women (i.e., by calling their sexuality into question). While we have no alternate record of the 1901 game between Victoria College students to determine the actual conduct of the players involved, it seems likely that the reporter set out to intentionally make women hockey players appear ridiculous by turning the game into a comedic spectacle in the following account:

“During the next attack on goals, the Picture Hats’ point player was knocked down in front of the goal. This jar disarranged her hat and she calmly sat on the ice, removed her hat pins, rearranged her tresses, and replaced the hat. Down the ice came a Tam with the puck. “Is my hat on straight?” asked the young lady on the ice when the player with the puck tried to lift the disc through the goal...” Half time, Mr. Referee, gasped a young woman, very much out of breath and throwing her arms around a convenient fence post. The game had only progressed five minutes. Mr. Referee tried to explain this, but the young lady said she was out of breath and that settled it.”

Women’s media and advertising for new consumer products also reinforced this trivialized perception of the female athlete. Sport clothes were often seen as a fashion statement, rather than a matter of functionality. For example, a *Chatelaine* article in 1928 observed that, “today, fashion decrees that sports’ clothes and especially bathing suits must be practical as well as decorative,” implying that practical sports clothes were the result of fashion, not function, and would again pass out of fashion again.

Advertisements for new products like deodorants and sanitary napkins also served to portray rigorous athletic activity as incompatible with feminine beauty and decorum. For example, an advertisement for mum deodorant declared, “the whole charming effect of feminine daintiness can so easily be destroyed by the faintest suggestion of perspiration odour.”

Further, the rules of the game of women’s hockey itself reinforced these ideas of women as more dainty and feminine. For example, excessive physicality was discouraged by officials, and, after a 1905 game, one reporter wrote, “Miss Janet Allen was ruled off for

being a bad girl. She checked one of the Richview girls real hard.” This type of attitude still persists today, as intentional bodychecking is prohibited in women’s hockey leagues, while the men’s game is full-contact. While such rules reduce injuries and are seen by many players and fans as producing more ‘clean’ play, the physicality of the game is obviously reduced, lessening the challenge or threat to masculine hegemony in sport, and causing women’s hockey to be viewed as an inferior version of the ‘real’ (male) game. Messner also points out that the structuring of major sports around the “extreme possibilities of the male body” means that the rules and nature of a game such as hockey are constructed to automatically position male physicality as superior to women’s. In this way, the game of hockey itself is constructed to make the existing gender order appear natural and static, rather than socially constructed and changing over time.

Parr explains that discourses are the ways we make experiences meaningful, by connecting them to social institutions, ideologies, political structures, belief systems, and popular culture. By analyzing discourses, we are studying how experiences are constituted and how power works. Through analyzing discourses, we can also examine how “power is dismantled [and] how hierarchies are subverted.” According to Hall, the history of women in sport should be seen as a history of cultural resistance, whereby women resisted masculine hegemony through their participation in sports like hockey, and refused to accept normative notions of their physical capabilities, even when their athleticism was opposed by men, and often by other women.

The early decades of the 20th century were a period of great social change and upheaval, when beliefs, values and social structures were challenged in many ways. Women’s desires to be involved in the sport of hockey along with their male friends and relatives may seem relatively innocuous. But the reactions that women’s hockey and women’s involvement in sport generally provoked was part of a much larger struggle about gender and the social order. Studying the history of women’s hockey and the discourse surrounding such a seemingly innocuous leisure activity provides us with a greater understanding of how ideas about masculinity, femininity, power and sexuality were constructed and maintained.

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***Note from the Media Editor:** The print version of this paper originally came with endnotes written at the end of piece; however, none of these endnotes were actually incorporated into the written format of the paper, making it difficult to assume where they would have been originally placed. They have been left out as a result.