In popular culture, academia and religious circles, a jumble of beliefs about women’s place in sports proliferares. Here we overview these understandings and representative scholarly criticisms of them. We will then briefly consider Pope John Paul II’s ‘theology of the body’ as a means of reconciling disparate standpoints concerning women and sport. While sports are ‘social constructions’, the realm of sport also has the capacity to be tinged with sacramentalism.

Body culture

One of the societal ways that ‘the body’ is displayed is through organised play/leisure activities, physical games and sports — CLR James’ classic treatise about cricket and culture observed: ‘We respond to physical action or vivid representation of it … because we are made that way.’ Whatever sport is (some comprehend sport as uniquely birthed by the Industrial Revolution; others feel that sport has a ritualised prehistoric essence), the free will gifted to humans by God has enabled wondrous, myriad manifestations of sport, including not only the aspects of physical expression and competition, but sport as a vehicle that is believed to fulfill specific educative, moral and developmental functions in society, such as good citizenship, morals, and solidarity. We have to be cautious though, about embracing/romanticising sport in such approaches.

For example, sport has a long tradition in the West of association with ‘muscular Christianity’, the notion that sport fosters mens sana in corpore sano (‘sound mind in sound body’). From this ethos arise principles, still unfounded, yet deeply engrained in pedagogical practices, which contend that athletes should be role models; that fair play (not winning) is what matters; and that sport may have a missionary, colonising purpose; the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and National Association of United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization’s (UNESCO) policies furthermore understand sport as a cultural instrument that has the capacity to promote peace and development.

CLR James understood sport as innate to the human condition, but he furthermore argued that sport, like the body, is also socially and culturally constructed. That is, sport and the body are emblems of society: they mirror shifting societal practices, beliefs, fears, ideals and norms relative to historical and cultural contexts.

Societal and scholarly understandings of sport

The most taken-for-granted enduring ‘logic’ of sport is that sport is the domain of males and masculinity. Yet, more girls and women now participate in sport than ever before and, indeed, contemporary societal beliefs about sport overwhelmingly assume that sports participation is ‘naturally’ something that women should do; researchers may search for clues as to how to motivate girls into sport participation and to keep them from dropping out of organised sport. Some scholars argue that gender segregation (the norm in sports today) crushes women, and others claim that gender segregation in sport is enlightened. Attitudes linked to women and sport can be rooted in biological determinism (e.g. the perception that women’s nature is not made for activities such as
boxing, running long distances, coaching); other views about sport come from faith or family-based doctrines. Religious fundamentalism, and/or ethnic and cultural beliefs may call for women to maintain decency in sport activities in the midst of the contemporary ‘polarisation’ of women. Some opinion that women should participate in appropriately female non-contact sports which emphasise grace and beauty of form such as tennis, figure-skating or swimming; some believe that virtues and chasteness should overrule sensual body movements and close-fitting garb, violence or aggression, and ‘trash talk’ (vulgar language) in sport. Commentators argue that female athletes and woman-centered sport endeavors are subjugated by masculine hegemonies and sexism. Reformers seek to equalise gender inequities in all realms of sport and athletics, including enabling equitable access to economic-administrative infrastructures of sport and radical transformation of media commodification that represents females as inherently inferior to males. 

Also prevalent in sports-studies literature is an ongoing suspicion of ‘girllishness’ or ‘femininity’. Based on Michel Foucault’s work, female athletes are encouraged to beware of their bodies as a ‘source of oppression’ as they are ‘forced’ to ‘appropriately’ present themselves via ‘body regimes’ and acceptable forms of femininity. This theory, tagged the ‘female apologetic’, holds that women who challenge normative notions of masculinity also apologise symbolically by emphasising their femininity. A sizeable group of sport scholars suppose homophobia and threat of being identified as lesbian are powerful factors that in past centuries discouraged females from playing sports. The updated argument goes that even though millions of women today are absorbed in all aspects of sport, that women’s freedom is diminished, for if they do participate in sports, they feel obligated to engage in, and are often depicted in the media as appearing small, weak and quiet, wearing cosmetics, skirts and dresses, engaged in domestic activities, etc.; watchdog bemoan that everyday sensibilities as well as corporate marketing promote the consumption of ‘cosmetic fitness’ in which women ‘consume’ sport in order to look good and gain approval of males. A 20-year USA study on the media image of female athletes found that ‘men want to think of women as sexual objects of desire, or perhaps as mothers, but not as powerful, competitive athletes’. 

Debates and other viewpoints counter such findings, arguing that sport is to be valued for the potential liberating effect that it can have upon women; in this thought, sport culture is not oppressive to females as they are said to actually negotiate sport in, and are often depicted in the media as appearing small, weak and quiet, wearing cosmetics, skirts and dresses, engaged in domestic activities, etc.; watchdog bemoan that everyday sensibilities as well as corporate marketing promote the consumption of ‘cosmetic fitness’ in which women ‘consume’ sport in order to look good and gain approval of males. A 20-year USA study on the media image of female athletes found that ‘men want to think of women as sexual objects of desire, or perhaps as mothers, but not as powerful, competitive athletes’. 

In sum, most conventional critiques surrounding ‘women and sport’ call for cultural changes to achieve gender equality, focusing specifically on how women are constrained by masculine cultural hegemony.

Theology of the body

Many of the solutions forwarded by secular scholars regarding gender inequity in sport demand for women’s sports to mimic male models of sport, to include women in institutionalised and mediated realms of male sport. What is supposedly radical does nothing except modify the ideal female sport body to copy long-established ideas about masculine strength, power, leadership and athleticism. 

Cultural and feminist studies assume women and men to be identical in given nature — that from birth it is cultural relativism that constructs ‘woman’ to be a deviant binary of ‘man’. These theorists shy away from acknowledging or explaining what seem to be natural tendencies to have special caring ways, holistic spirituality, ‘sisterhood’, purer or more beautiful way of playing sport, etc. 

A Christian vision of sport begins with the premise mostly disputed in modern popular and feminist views of sport: that man and woman have unique masculine or feminine characters, endowed by God with a goodness and balance of humanity — humans on earth journey and cultivate their characters in the light of the mystery of Christ. 

In Christian belief, sin shattered the original integrity of the person and the unity between male and female. In this fallen state, the body is no longer subordinated to the spirit and so its capacity to express the person is radically diminished; ‘the unity between man and woman is replaced by suspicion and alienation’. Thus discrimination against women in sport echoes Genesis 3,16, ‘He shall rule over you’ — words to the woman following original sin. Domination and discrimination diminish the dignity of both sexes, but have more serious consequences for the woman who is made the object of male control. 

In what has come to be known as his ‘Theology of the Body’, John Paul II emphasised that even with original sin, what a human does with his or her body makes a radical difference in the world because the body is understood as gift from God. Because feminine nature affords women distinct physical and spiritual capabilities with which to participate in the social order, the criticism of modern dualism concerning women in sport is rejected. Thus, instead of focusing specifically on how women can develop their strengths and disrupt masculine cultural hegemony in sport cultures, ‘femininity’ in light of John Paul’s ideas is not a falsity of personhood, but a gift of true self; John Paul calls this the ‘genius of woman’. No matter one’s state of (dis)ability, fitness or intellect, the person’s existence is ‘legitimate and

Notes

2. DC Young, A Brief History of the Olympic Games (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2004), pp. 80–91 forwards a crucial exegesis on mens sana in corpore sano.
charged with meaning.10) Being a human person in the philosophy of John Paul is about fulfilling longing for beauty, excellence, and truth by living in God’s transforming power, as a part of Christ’s body on earth. Christians should therefore strive to ‘honour God’ with their bodies (1 Cor 6.20).

For John Paul, femininity is clearly a ‘specific charism’: ‘women should transmit the “genuine” meaning of faith and apply it to all circumstances of life … in the family and the realms of work, study and leisure.’11 So gender identity does not oppress the question of who a person is, but rather emancipates it. The theology of the body dares us to imagine sport in a way that differences between male and female bodies/sport styles no longer matter in a modernist sense; as John Paul states, ‘the body in its masculinity and femininity assumes the value of a sign — in a way, a sacramental sign.’12

Marian sport

Over his pontificate, John Paul II developed his teaching that Mary helps all the faithful ‘to seek persistently the path to perfect unity of the body of Christ … the spirit of truth and love.’13 He puts forward that the human body becomes dignified by doing the will of God as Mary did when she gave her fiat to the angel bearing news that she would conceive the Son of God. Nowadays the human body, especially within the realms of sport celebrity, is exalted as the purpose of human existence. When Pope John Paul II’s Mariology teaches that the human body becomes glorious by doing the will of God, the tenets of Opus Dei come to mind as a blueprint for sport culture: ‘work and the circumstances of everyday life are occasions for growing closer to God, for serving others, and for improving society.’14

In the Pope’s teachings, with Mary as the model for a new kind of feminism, women are all mothers, whether physical or spiritual: ‘In transforming culture … women occupy a place, in thought and action, which is unique and decisive … Women first learn and then teach others to accept the other person: a person who is recognised and loved because of the dignity that comes from being a person and not from other considerations, such as usefulness, strength, intelligence, beauty or health. This is the fundamental contribution that the Church and humanity expect from women. And it is the indispensable prerequisite for an authentic cultural change.’15

The theology of the body paradigm agrees with the emancipation of women and their right to equality in political and economic life. And like cultural studies, this framework interprets gender as a social construction. The difference in understanding gender and sport in the context of the theology of the body versus secular cultural studies is that the ongoing social construction of gender in the mystical body of Christ is liberating, not constraining: ‘Christ has entered history and remains in it as the Bridegroom who “has given himself.” “To give” means “to become a sincere gift” in the most complete and radical way: “Greater love has no man than this” (John 15:13). According to this conception, all human beings — both women and men — are called through the Church, to be the “Bride” of Christ, the Redeemer of the world. In this way “being the bride,” and thus the “feminine” element, becomes a symbol of all that is “human,” according to the words of Paul: “There is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3.28).16 [italics original]

Reconceptualising sport

Corporeal understandings of strength, aggression, boldness and masculinity can be understood to take feminine or masculine form and work on the phenomenology of bodily movement or humanistic inquiry into the beauty of sport may also be illustrative of a Christian vision of sport. Sociologist Jay Coakley suggests creation of sport ‘programs that embody an ethic of care and connection between teammates and opponents’.17 Mortification, asceticism and fasting practices of Christianity that inspire towards the good (not narcissism) as saints have used them can perhaps be revisited in sport culture. Parkour (a physical discipline that focuses on efficient movement around obstacles) and new sport forms emerging from ongoing folk traditions not yet subsumed by the mainstream are also examples of the ‘theology of the body’ tenet. John McClelland applies Christian notions of eros to sport: ‘the erotic dimension of sport … is part and parcel of what raises us above the animals and makes us truly human: ruling ourselves, using language effectively, feeling strong emotions for another person, acquiring knowledge for its own sake, and improving our bodies by exercise and sport.’18

Theology of the body teachings revitalise understandings of embodiment and philosophy of difference and it is fascinating to think about sport, the body and women in regard to such prophetic teaching.

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