

International Journal of Aquatic Research and Education

Volume 6 | Number 3

Article 11

8-1-2012

Fighting the Current: The Rise of American Women's Swimming, 1870-1926

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Recommended Citation

Langendorfer, Anne and Tokola, Ryan (2012) "Fighting the Current: The Rise of American Women's Swimming, 1870-1926," *International Journal of Aquatic Research and Education*: Vol. 6 : No. 3 , Article 11.

DOI: 10.25035/ijare.06.03.11

Available at: <https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/ijare/vol6/iss3/11>

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MEDIA REVIEW

International Journal of Aquatic Research and Education, 2012, 6, 279-280
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Fighting the Current: The Rise of American Women's Swimming, 1870-1926

by Lisa Bier. McFarland, 2011. 220 pp. 26 photos, notes, bibliography, index. <http://www.mcfarlandpub.com>. \$40.

Reviewed by Anne Langendorfer, The Ohio State University and Ryan Tokola, University of Michigan

Fighting the Current is an apt title for Bier's cultural history of American women's swimming. A history of men's swimming in America would read something like "when the temperature rose, men took off their clothes and frolicked in the ocean; when men felt competitive, they organized clubs and raced," but American women have faced obstacles at every step of the development of aquatic sports. Bier does not claim that there were not class or race-based difficulties for swimmers of all genders, but those were mainly problems related to exclusivity. The urban elite did not claim that poor men should not swim; they just didn't want to swim *with* the working class. Women, on the other hand, faced outright challenges to their desire to swim. *Fighting the Current* details the myriad forms of cultural oppression that were used to keep women out of the water entirely.

Drawing primarily from newspaper articles, Bier examines the wretched conditions of mid- to late-nineteenth-century New York beaches; the belief that physical exercise was damaging to a woman's body, femininity, and reproductive ability; the absurdly bulky bathing suits that were required in the name of modesty; the exclusion of women from the facilities and events of the amateur movement; and the gender restrictions placed on regional, national, and international competitions. These obstacles were not unopposed, and Bier is clearly delighted to recount the stories of many remarkable competitors, performers, movie stars, swimming instructors, life-saving rescue volunteers, and leisure-time enthusiasts who fought for their right to swim and demonstrated the folly of those who would dismiss women as inherently unsuited to athletic competition.

The first two-thirds of *Fighting the Current* traces the history of recreational and competitive swimming in America, especially in New York City, for the sixty years surrounding the turn of the 20th century. Special attention, of course, is paid to issues related to women, but thankfully Bier does not ignore the importance of factors such as class in the social and cultural development of swimming. Documentation is extensive, and the contemporary nature of the primary sources helps convey the cultural climate of the time. No second-hand explanation can communicate the prevailing attitudes toward women as effectively as a *Herald Tribune* article in which a father who teaches his daughter to swim is told by a neighbor that it is a "violation of all propriety to have her do exercises that will teach your daughter's legs to become unacquainted with each other" (65). This is also a book about women who rise to meet all challenges; we are glad to find that this father continued to provide his daughter, Adeline Trapp, with ample opportunities to swim

and dive, and she became a successful long-distance competitor, swimming 23 miles from Queens to Staten Island and setting many records in the course of her lifetime.

Unfortunately, the abundance of specific topics and examples leads to a somewhat fragmented narrative. Nothing is unnecessary or uninteresting, but many of the arguments feel a bit disjointed. Several compelling characters follow a trajectory through many of the important issues, and the overall history could perhaps have been more coherent if these issues were explored with an emphasis on the stories of these people's lives, rather than reintroducing a person every time they happen to be relevant to the topic at hand.

The final third of *Fighting the Current*, we are told in the introduction, is the story that Bier had always wanted to tell. The storytelling in this section is tight and powerful, all the previous disconnected pieces coming together in a clear narrative of one woman's swimming achievements, despite all odds. This is the story of the most famous female swimmer of the twentieth century, Gertrude Ederle, the first woman to cross the English Channel and for a few brief weeks the fastest person—man or woman—to do so. An American phenomenon, Ederle's story is a fascinating one, and it is obvious from Bier's clear, argumentative remarks in the book's final chapter that she sees Ederle's success as an unmitigated feminist achievement. The recent publication of several biographies of Ederle persuaded Bier to broaden the focus of her research from Ederle specifically to women's swimming in general. This change led to the many engrossing details presented in the earlier parts of the book but draws attention away from the source of Bier's passion.

It is possibly a testament to the engaging quality of the subject matter that *Fighting the Current* seems to raise more questions than it answers. It provides exhaustive evidence of *what* happened, but the reader is occasionally left to wonder *why*. Bier chronicles dramatically changing attitudes toward women's bodies, abilities, and agency, but rarely attempts to explain the cause of these changes. By the 1920s, women were wearing bathing suits that were substantially more revealing than in the nineteenth century. Was this a result of pressure by women swimmers or a natural by-product of shifting fashion trends? It became slowly accepted that competition does not have a masculinizing effect on women and that strenuous exercise would not damage them. Did this attitude change solely because of the examples set by women athletes, or was medical opinion also changing? *Fighting the Current* also has a nearly exclusive focus on swimming in New York City, but what about the thousands of women who learned to swim in lakes and rivers throughout the United States?

Many readers interested in women's swimming will learn a great deal from *Fighting the Current: The Rise of American Women's Swimming, 1870-1926*. Sport historians, women's studies scholars, sociologists, and swimming enthusiasts of all backgrounds should avail themselves of this book. In a year in which the Olympics will figure prominently, it is good for us all to remember that American women swimmers were not always as celebrated as they are today. The Olympians of today owe much to the first intrepid women swimmers, who braved misogynistic cultural attitudes, dangerous and unhealthy swimming environments, and uncomfortable, restrictive clothing in order to take part in an activity most contemporary American women take for granted.