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# Perspectives

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**MAGAZINE OF SCOTLAND'S DEMOCRATIC LEFT**

# WOMEN AND SPORT

Women and girls participate in sport and physical recreation significantly less than men and boys. **Irene A Reid** examines why this is the case and argues that sport should be viewed as a gendered cultural practice.

In 2009 much attention was focused on matters of serious economic, political and social importance. A variety of issues were prominent and many remain on the public agenda in 2010; the global economic crisis, military engagement in specific regional conflicts, international development, climate change and the environment, the extension of political and fiscal autonomy for Scotland, the health of Scotland's population, levels of social deprivation and educational attainment are just some of the issues that have and will continue to exercise public debate. Sport too has provided much food for thought in Scotland.

Sport for many people is "just a game"; it is the apolitical toy-shop of life that offers an escape from more serious matters. Some other popular ideas about sport – and more broadly exercise – focus on the ways in which participation in sport contributes to physical health and psychological well-being. It is also common currency, particularly to justify public investment in sport, to argue that sport can enhance spirit, promote community regeneration and contribute to national pride. These popular arguments serve a purpose, but we should be cautious about the claims that are made about what sport can deliver.

For some scholars however, sport is not just a game. Sociologists (and some historians and political theorists) have undertaken research into the social and cultural space occupied by sport. Sport is not simply a set of physical

**Sport for many people is ... the apolitical toy-shop of life that offers an escape from more serious matters.**



activities to be encouraged because it may improve individual and social health. Sport is a cultural practice that carries a system of ideas, values, meanings and moral codes that are reciprocally confirming of the society in which it exists. In this respect the sociological analysis of sport interrogates the ways in which sport is part of the cultural terrain where dominant ideologies and power relationships are learned, reproduced and sustained.

In broader international scholarship the sociology of sport has examined the ways in which sport is implicated in the construction of deeply embedded hegemonic notions of gender. For women, and for men, sport is a gendering cultural practice. More specifically the organisation, culture and practice of sport is identified as one social activity that contributes to the social construction and reproduction of dominant ideas about femininity and masculinity; sport also reinforces practices and behaviours that tend to value more highly the social, economic and political status and power of men in society. But we should remember also that sport has the potential to challenge taken-for-granted assumptions about gender.

In Scotland, as in other countries, the dominant discourses about sport are largely concerned with male sporting practices. In the media, in everyday conversation, in aspects of organisation and administration, when we get passionate about our nation's repre-

sentatives, and on occasion when political agents talk about sport, most of the time it is men's sport and the male experience of sport that is to the fore. One consequence of this is that, although females – girls and women – may be interested in sport, it can be experienced as a marginalising cultural practice.

## LOCATING WOMEN IN SPORT

At the time of writing sportsScotland, the national agency for sport, is consulting on its draft Single Equity Scheme.<sup>1</sup> Addressing inequality and promoting equity in and through sport is not a new issue. Indeed it has been the focus of a number of public-funded initiatives since the 1970s. Such initiatives have targeted increasing levels of public and commercial funding for women's sport, greater media attention, raising levels of participation in sport and physical activity amongst women and girls; they have also worked to increase the number of women in senior leadership roles in sport such as coaching, management and senior administration. It would be inaccurate to argue that over the last thirty-years there have been no improvements in the numbers of women involved in all of these dimensions of sport in Scotland, but evidence suggests that many females do not participate in sport and physical activity.

According to sportsScotland's draft Single Equity Scheme consultation paper, 34% of adults in Scotland participate in sport and physical recreation at least once a week but women and girls participate significantly less. Evidence collated for the Scottish Household Survey 2007 suggested

43% of women do little or no physical activity and only 23% of girls meet current guidelines of physical activity. Much of the sports coaching that in Scotland occurs through community-based clubs or local development initiatives and is largely carried out by volunteers. In 2002 the Scottish Executive reported that approximately 62% of those who volunteer in society are women, but sport was identified as one of the few community activities in which more men are volunteers.<sup>2</sup> It is therefore unsurprising to note that Sports Coach UK (2004) reported that in Scotland only 34% of coaches are women.

There are therefore clearly limitations with the work that has been done to redress the distributive aspects of inequality in sport. The current objective of equity is a valuable one but it does necessarily address the common-sense ideas, values, beliefs and practices that reinforce assumptions sport – or at least certain sports – are the natural domain for displaying masculinity, but unnatural territory for femininity. These ideas are deeply embedded in Scottish society, and they may explain, at least in part, the reasons why many girls and women still do not consider sport as a meaningful social practice.

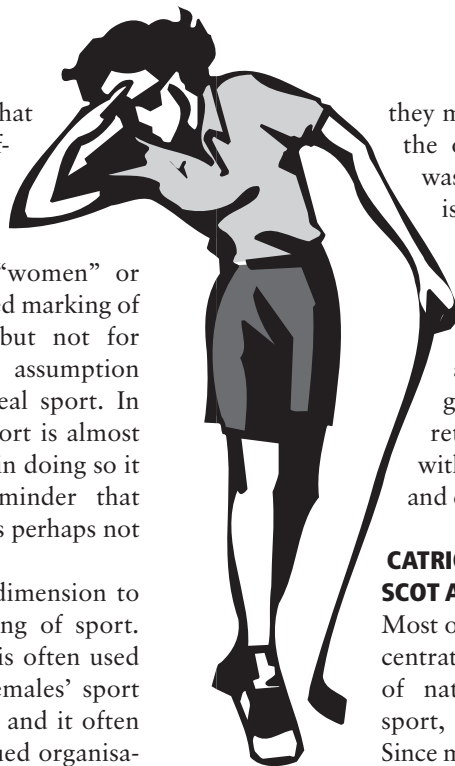
### THE GENDERING LANGUAGE AND STRUCTURE OF SPORT

Research about sport as a gendered practice in Scotland has been limited. Nevertheless the established body of international scholarship has examined the ways in which the development of modern sport socially constructed sport as male terrain. Drawing on this broader scholarship some general points can be made which underpin the assertion that sport in Scotland is gendered cultural practice. First in Scotland, as in other cultures, sport is often depicted in a taken-for-granted way as an essentially male activity. It is common parlance for those in the Scottish media to speak and write of “the national team” when it is specifically the men’s national team –

football or rugby – that is referred to. Any references to female sporting practices in public discourses are prefixed either by “women” or “ladies”. The gendered marking of sport for females, but not for males, reinforces an assumption that male sport is real sport. In contrast women’s sport is almost always labelled, and in doing so it is an unspoken reminder that women doing sport is perhaps not the norm.

There is another dimension to this gendered marking of sport. The term “women” is often used when referring to females’ sport practice in Scotland, and it often identifies the continued organisational separation of some national sports associations (Scottish Women’s Bowling Association, Scottish Women’s Indoor Bowling, Scottish Women’s Football and Scottish Women’s Rugby Union). However the persistence of the Scottish Ladies’ Golfing Association – by prefix, rather than the presence of a separate agency – is interesting. The prefix “ladies” is arguably a more laden term; some feminist sport sociologists and practitioners have argued that this term is imbued with connotations of womanhood, modesty and femininity that were associated with and rooted in Victorian and Edwardian middle-class society.

This of course is not a matter of coincidence. It reflects the social background of many of the female pioneers who established sports associations for women in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the twenty-first century when used in the context of sport “ladies” still resonates with meanings that are rooted in a hegemonic middle-class definition of the codes of behaviour and accepted but contained physicality of women. These may be outdated for the modern sporting female in the twenty-first century therefore it is surprising that the terms “ladies” is still frequently used by women, as well as by men – when



they mark their sport. Golf is not the only sport where “ladies” was the preferred prefix, but it is interesting in this sport its use has persisted. There are many important, yet often subtle, ways in which the organisation and practice of women’s golf in Scottish society retains a strong resonance with middle-class norms, social and cultural practices.

### CATRIONA MATTHEW: SUPER SCOT AND SUPERMUM?

Most of my own research has concentrated on the media discourses of nationhood associated with sport, particularly in Scotland. Since most of the media’s attention is focused on male sporting practices it is refreshing when an opportunity arises to consider how female sporting success is incorporated into the national narrative. One memorable moment from Scotland’s sporting almanac of 2009 helps to illustrate one of powerful ways in which dominant gender ideology is manifest in relation to sport in Scotland.

In August golfer Catriona Matthew won the Ricoh Women’s British Open.<sup>3</sup> The prize money for her victory was just over £197,000; in contrast Stewart Cink, winner of the Open Championship, returned Stateside with £750,000. Setting aside legitimate questions about the financial rewards for playing sport, there is a marked contrast between the prize funds and more broadly the sponsorship invested in men’s and women’s sport. The implicit message is that women’s sport is of lesser value than men’s sporting practice.

As expected much was said about Matthew in the days immediately after her maiden victory in a major. Matthew was the first player from Scotland to win one of the women’s majors. It was unsurprising that she was labelled a “Super Scot” in press reports during early August. However rather than concentrating on her status as a national sporting hero (or heroine) the media narratives

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## WOMEN AND SPORT

emphasised the fact that Matthew's British Open victory came eleven weeks after she had given birth to her second daughter. It seems that it was more important to define Matthew as "Supermum", rather than (or at least as well as) a Super Scot.

The gendered media discourse that surrounded Catriona Matthew is not unusual. Indeed there are similarities with social and cultural ideas embedded in media coverage of the five Scottish women who secured a gold medal in curling at the 2002 Winter Olympic Games.<sup>4</sup> A plethora of research has highlighted how "motherhood" is used as a confirming marker of preferred femininity in relation to women's involvement in sport. The public acknowledgement of Rhona Martin's and Catriona Matthew's respective achievements is consistent with the social ideal of femininity. Moreover it is resonant of the ways in which the contributions of other women to Scottish public life have been contained within a framework of nurturing and caring femininity.<sup>5</sup>

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

There are many other ways in which sport in Scotland reproduces and sustains the dominant discourse of sport as a gendered practice. In terms of media cover-

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age it is clear that women's sport receives much less coverage than male sporting practices. Attention might also focus on the ways in which women's sport and women's knowledge of sport can be trivialised by mainstream sports broadcasting in Scotland, including some of the regular radio output. It is worth noting here however that many elements of the media's narratives about sport in Scotland are both limited and limiting not only for women, but also for many men. International scholarship has examined how ideas and values of hegemonic masculinity are closely aligned to particular sports that traditionally understood as male terrain.

In Scotland, although there is some recognition that many females experience sport in ways that reinforce gender ideology, less attention has been given to the ways in which sport, including mediated sport, construct and valorises particular forms of masculinity. If sport in Scotland is to be relevant to all of the nation's people then official discourses must begin to challenge some of the embedded ideas, practices and beliefs that reinforce and sustain its place as a gendered, and gendering the cultural practice.

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### NOTES

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2. Scottish Executive (2002), "Social Focus on Women and Men 2002". Edinburgh, *Scottish National Statistics Publication*, pp.88–k89.
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