Being and Playing: Sport and the valorization of gender

Howe

Strategy

• To argue that women are redefining themselves in sports
• To use hockey as a backdrop for examining women in sport
Hockey and Masculinity

- Howe's essay uses the sport of hockey in two ways
  1. It is the sport she loves
  2. It is a particularly masculine sport
    - "at the most fundamental level, hockey excludes as antithetical to itself any trace of the feminine, and exalts itself as the pinnacle of purely masculine attainment." (332)

Differing Perceptions

- Howe notes that men and women view hockey differently
  - When watching the same game, Howe reports that what men said they saw in the action or a player differed radically from her own assessment
  - What Howe concludes with that observation is that men do not think women are qualified to comment or assess hockey
    - "It seems as though the male players come to the game with a pre-formed readiness to see the women as unqualified, compared to men, even when they do in fact play as well or better." (334)
Epistemology of Respect

- Men's pre-formed conceptions about hockey and women in hockey reflect an underlying epistemology of respect, or lack thereof.
  - We see what we expect to see.
  - We make judgements about situations and people based on many presuppositions about what we are likely to experience.
  - If we expect a person to act in a certain way, then we "see" them act in that way.

Failure to Recognize Our Bias

- Failure to recognize our biases results in us making mistakes about the way the world really is.
  - We develop patterns of understanding based on incomplete evidence.
  - If we do not revise and correct these patterns, they are likely to mismatch with the world.
  - Applying inappropriate and incorrect patterns leads to oppression and the inability to change with the times.
  - Howe writes that women on the ice constantly confront these misconceptions.
  - Women are not supposed to be any good at hockey and all men are competent.
Female Athleticism and Sexuality

- Female athleticism challenges male sexuality
  - Females athletes are seen as active agents
    - They are no longer passive, receptive bodies
    - Women athletes challenge and supplant men's role as the active, aggressive and dominant one in sexual and social roles
  - Howe thinks some of the hostility toward female athletes is because their role as athlete conflicts with social expectations of the feminine

Validation

- It is assumed that only "real men" play hockey
  - The assumption is that there are no gay men in hockey
- But, competent female hockey players (along with many female athletes) are labeled as homosexual
  - Howe comments that "one never gains status as feminine for playing hockey," rather one is likely to lose feminine validation
  - The effect is for some women athletes to become "aggressive heterosexuals" to prove they are "normal girls"
The Missing Element

- Once Howe began playing on women's hockey teams she noticed a difference
- "When I started playing with women, everything changed. All of a sudden, I was aware of the assumption of respect, that I was being taken seriously. I had nothing to prove, only myself to live up to. The game itself was the only thing at issue." (340)
- The missing element is respect and self-respect

Self-Respect

- "Self-respect is the first step in the respect for others, and trust in others, that is the real basis of female bonding. This is the crucial step in forming an effective team, but it is also crucial to becoming a person who can be herself, taking the responsibility for that self and for her relations to others. Without self-respect one does not make decisions for oneself. Without self-respect one does not say no. Self-respect is the beginning of moral autonomy, it is the beginning of active self-determination, and it is the beginning of effective cooperation…. Self-respect, then, is the first thing needed for mutual respect between players and athletes as for anyone else." (341)
Freedom from Gender Validation

- Howe thinks that once women can validate themselves independently of gender validation, then they will be free to become themselves
  - Women, literally and figuratively, need to play their own game
  - Women need to make hockey their own independently of the traditional male conception
    - The traditional male game is a "deeply distorted and, indeed false, ideal of human organization"
  - Women's hockey will emphasize skill over power, highly cooperative play over violence and "goon tactics"

Redefining Themselves

- Howe thinks that women engaged in male-defined sports are redefining themselves
  - What it means to be feminine is influence by what we conceive as being masculine
  - Women who play men's sports are not trying to become men
    - "What they want is to be able to develop their own abilities and potential just as men have…what they want is the chance to become themselves, not someone else." (343)