

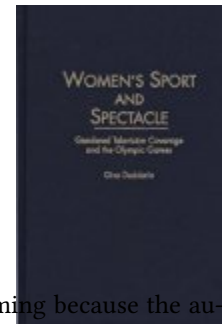
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Gina Daddario. *Women's Sport and Spectacle: Gendered Television Coverage and the Olympic Games*. Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1998. ix + 174 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-275-95856-5.

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It's only been in the last twenty years that women's athletic competitions have been widely televised. This has been largely due to Title IX legislation, which in 1972, mandated that federally funded educational institutions must provide the same athletic programs for women that they do for men. While this may lead the average television viewer to conclude that the playing field has been leveled for female athletes, Daddario signals that we have yet to reach parity on the ball court, track field, swimming pool, and ski sloop. In *Women's Sport and Spectacle*, she shows how the media, sports organizations, and educational institutions are complicit in keeping women in "sex appropriate sports" by not considering them serious athletes.

First Daddario interrogates the assumption that men are naturally better athletes than women. Because men and women are physiologically different—women have less upper body strength for example—there has been a tradition of seeing some sports as suitable for women, swimming and figure skating among them. Sexual difference has been the reasoning that women can not compete in the same sports that men do. But women's natural strengths have been ignored. For instance because they have more stamina than males, females are better suited to endurance sports like the marathon and triathlon. That televised programming showcases men in some sports and women in others makes 'sex appropriate sports' seem like a 'natural' extension of biological difference rather than a media driven decision. Unfortunately Daddario's wording of this concept is not always clear. In places, it seems Daddario agrees that the differences in physiological mean men and women should be playing different sports, even though she does not.

Along with this, Daddario examines the male hetero-

sexual initiative in sports programming because the audience for televised sports is assumed to be male. Viewing women as sexual objects in the media carries over into the sports arena because the producers of sports coverage are mainly men. And the chauvinism does not stop there. Great athletes are assumed to be masculine—otherwise why would be necessary to put the appendage of woman on titles like Women's National Basketball League or Women's World Cup. When a woman is a particularly good athlete she is accused of "playing like a man." To add injury to insult, the Olympic organization tests female athletes to make sure they don't have Y-chromosomes, which, it's reasoned, would give them an unfair advantage.

Because of this partiality to male athletes, Daddario demonstrates that female athletes are subject to a strict media critique and that gender stereotyping abounds. Commentators saddle sports women with pet names; put a disproportionate emphasis on their status as wife, girlfriend, sibling, or daughter; and paint them as over emotional or little and sweet. Their athletic strengths are played down. If they don't live up to media-generated expectations to win Olympic medals, they are often the targets of "compensatory rhetoric," a questioning of their value as athletes, while similar male athletes are seen as just unlucky.

To put the games in an historical context, Daddario provides an overview of the Olympic games from Ancient Greece to 1996 from the perspective of female inclusion. One interesting item is the created of the Federation Sportive Feminine Internationale by French women in the 1920s to sponsor international games for women when the Olympics barred track and field events for women. When these women's games became popular,

the modern Olympic organization solicited female participation in the Olympic games.

Robert Allen's definition of text as "a dynamic relationship between texts and interpretive communities" serves as Daddario's basis to analyze the "texts" of the summer and winter Olympic games from 1992 to 1996. In this way she can include the audience of female sports viewers in her study rather than relying on studies that focus on the sports audience as males from a male perspective. This opens the possibilities of other readings of the televised Olympic games since the meaning depends on the audience.

For the televised coverage of Olympic games Daddario studies, she explains how the producers began to consciously court woman viewers since more women than men watch the Olympics. One way they hoped to attract a female audience, as Daddario's original contribution to the analysis shows, is by structuring the competition like a soap opera using melodramatic elements. This structure, a montage of competition footage, the athletes' lives off the playing field and interviews, transforms the competitions into compelling stories. Here, for example, the Tonya Harding-Nancy Kerrigan 'rivalry' is exposed as a media hyped event.

There are problems with the book. The most glaring is repetition. Daddario repeats examples and handfuls of information, although thankfully mainly by paraphrasing. But in at least two places, paragraphs on facing pages are verbatim! She also glosses over details that need definition. She writes about the various Olympic games as if she knows readers viewed the televised coverage—but what of foreign readers or future readers who will be too young to remember the specifics of 1992 Summer games? Careful editing would have reigned in the repetition and over-familiarity. Luckily these deficits are overshadowed by her intelligent arguments.

This text would be a good introduction to the subject of gender, media and sports for undergraduates. It's an easy read, accessible and the tone is even-handed, intelligent, and chummy. But if this text is used, it would be important to stress that the differences in male and female bodies are not a basis for deciding what sports they practice.

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