

## Considering Gender in Canadian Sport and Physical Activity

William Bridel

Sport, Identity and Social Division in Canada  
Sport, identités et clivages sociaux au Canada  
Numéro 35, 2007

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/040769ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/040769ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Conseil international d'études canadiennes

ISSN

1180-3991 (imprimé)

1923-5291 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Bridel, W. (2007). Considering Gender in Canadian Sport and Physical Activity. *International Journal of Canadian Studies / Revue internationale d'études canadiennes*, (35), 179–188. <https://doi.org/10.7202/040769ar>

**William Bridel**

*Considering Gender in Canadian  
Sport and Physical Activity*

One need not look much further than daily sports coverage in print, on television or the Internet to recognize that male sport rests atop a hierarchy that relegates female athletes and sports to subordinate status. This inequity presents itself in other ways as well: limited or restricted opportunities for participation, differences in funding and prize money, and gendered/sexualized media representations of female athletes are but a few examples. Beyond reproducing the traditional gender order, sport (and most physical activity spaces) also works to create a hierarchy of certain gender performances—traditional forms of masculinity are privileged over “alternative” masculinities and femininities. It has been, therefore, largely argued in academia that sporting and physical activity spaces, problematically, reproduce traditional gender ideologies. At the same time, throughout the history of sport in Canada, there has been some evidence of resistance to these dominant gender norms.

Recently, a handful of Canadian scholarly books have set out to deconstruct the “problems” of gender and sport. The three texts included in this essay explore the constructions of gender within varying sporting and physical activity spaces in mostly complementary ways though from varying theoretical perspectives. Each, however, works nicely with the other to provide a rather sweeping perspective of contemporary issues of sport and gender in Canada, painting a picture at once bleak and yet (at points) cautiously hopeful. It would be impossible to address each of the many important issues raised within the three texts. Rather, I will focus on the larger arguments made in each text and the contributions made to socio-cultural studies of sport and physical activity.

It makes the most sense to begin with Kevin Young and Philip White’s *Sport and Gender in Canada*. Of the three, this text covers the largest scope, presenting a collection of 15 scholarly articles from leading Canadian academics in the fields of cultural studies and sport sociology. The stated goal of the text, while recognizing the vastly different theoretical and methodological approaches adopted by the contributors, is to put forth one main argument: “that gender is a central way in which sport is

stratified and, reciprocally, that sport assists in the gendering of the wider community” (xviii). An important point made by the editors is that gender issues within sport are not something new; since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century sport has served a divisive purpose between men and women. In one of the socio-historical contributions to Young and White’s collection, Wamsley notes in this regard that, “sport helped construct and reinforce the idea that men were expected to be strong, physical, and active in public affairs and that women were expected to be weak, passive, and involved in domestic or charitable activities” (75). This constructed difference between men and women, both on and off the field of play, resonates throughout the various chapters in the book but is not solely restricted to gender-based differences. Importantly, and reflecting the move toward intersectionality within the studies of sport and physical activity, many of the contributions consider issues at the intersection of gender with race, class, sexuality, and age. Each of the texts included in the second edition of this textbook, then, moves beyond liberal feminist ideology, though the theoretical approaches adopted do vary considerably. However, it is important to note that all of the authors have moved well beyond a universal, homogeneous notion of “women” and an “add women and stir” approach toward gender issues in sport and physical activity.

The editors have usefully organized this text into three different sections: (1) theoretical, methodological, and historical issues; (2) stratification and power; and (3) problems and controversies. The four articles that comprise the first section provide an effective introduction to the collection. In particular, the chapter entitled “S/He Plays Sport? Theorizing the Sport/Gender Process” by Parker and White proves an excellent starting point as it outlines the various theoretical approaches adopted by sport academics throughout the field’s rather young history in Canada. Within this text a few key points are made that resonate throughout the remainder of the articles: (1) the case for intersectionality, noting that “systems of oppression are interlocking” (10); (2) the important role of feminist theories from the 1970s onward in the deconstruction of sport; (3) the growing application of queer theory to sport; (4) the notion of multiple masculinities and femininities; and (5) not monolithic, the possibility of reading certain sport practices and/or bodies as resistant.

Within the remaining 14 chapters, the reader (who could just as easily be a sport academic or simply a “lay person” with an interest in sport) is introduced to interpretations of a vast array of sport and physical activity milieus and the ways in which traditional gender logic is reproduced or, in some cases, resisted. Importantly (as previously noted) all deal with the intersection of gender with one or more other socially constructed “identities.” For example, while Canada is often considered a “classless society” (i.e., we are all middle class) such is not the case. Thus, socio-

economic class is argued as playing a significant role in the participation in sport and physical activity opportunities: "Class and gender are, therefore, powerful predictors of sport involvement, and these differences, at least for social class, are usually interpreted as being related to economic capital—what types of sport and physical activity participation is a person able to afford, and how often?" (Donnelly and Harvey, 101). In this vein, Frisby, Reid, and Ponc argue that women in poverty are the least likely to be provided with access to sport and physical activity opportunities. Thus, while there may be increased opportunities for girls and women in sport and physical activity in Canada, they are largely restricted to those with the economic means to participate.

The authors of the remaining chapters consider that even when one has access to certain sport or physical activity practices, gender issues remain problematic—and in particular the reproduction of expected performances of masculinity and femininity that become problematic for those who do not "fit." In this regard, adding to a small but growing body of research (that, at present, has almost exclusively been conducted outside of Canada), Davison and Frank's contribution related to the intersection of gender and sexuality in sport is an important one. The authors of this chapter speak to the problematic prevalence of stigma, homophobia, and hegemonic masculinity (at the expense of women and other male athletes) in organized sport.

Though often highly problematic spaces for gay men and lesbians, experiences are said to differ. For example, male athletes are seldom required to declare their sexuality as it is just assumed, within traditional constructions of masculinity, that they are heterosexual. Sport is, without a doubt, an arena in which such traditional notions of masculinity are reproduced. Sport, and team sports in particular, are often considered locations of homophobic discourse where "gay men in sport are often feared, distrusted, and stigmatized" (186). Gay male athletes are considered not to adhere to hegemonic masculinity and, therefore, disrupt the notion of sport as a (heterosexual) male preserve. Due in large part to the unwelcoming environment of sport (and professional sport in particular) there are few examples of openly gay male athletes. Both lesbian and gay males may, in fact, choose to remain closeted for fear of retribution from homophobic coaches or organizations and the potential loss of funding and/or sponsorship. Lesbian athletes are also often oppressed within certain sporting contexts where expected performances of femininity are connected to sexuality:

[W]omen who participate in physically rough and high-risk sport are still commonly seen as "unfeminine" and their (hetero)sexuality is often considered suspect. It is at this point

where gender and sexuality converge and become intertwined.... The goal for an individual woman to do well in sport is eclipsed by the stigma of having to continually defend or publicly discuss how one is gendered and/or sexually defined. (180)

While I have drawn only from a few chapters in *Sport and Gender in Canada*, this is not to say that the remaining chapters are any less important or thought-provoking. If there are criticisms to be made they are few and reflect the absence of certain identities from sport research in Canada in general, namely disabled and transgendered persons. Though each of these identities is mentioned within the context of other chapters, there must be a greater focus given to the experiences of these persons within sport and physical activity. Furthermore, there was a notable absence of race-related literature in this particular collection. Of the 15 chapters, only one addressed race and gender specifically. By and large, however, Young and White (and, more specifically, the contributing authors) make an important contribution to the study of sport and gender in Canada through this text. To borrow from the editors, "this collection of readings shows that one is better able to investigate unequal gender relations and the oppression of women (and some men) if one understands the nature and extent of gender-related power and privilege" (329). This text works as an excellent starting point for such inquiries as the intersections of gender with other social identities, and the ways in which these intersecting identities are central to the construction of sport and vice versa.

With a more specific focus than the previous text, M. Ann Hall, in the introduction to her 2002 socio-historical text *The Girl and the Game: A History of Women's Sport in Canada*, proposes that sport remains a space considered by many as a male preserve. She states that, "sport in our culture is still viewed by many as a 'masculinizing project,' a cultural practice in which boys learn to be men and male solidarity is forged" (1). This leads to the subordination of women (and gay men) that reproduces the dominant gender ideology that typically constructs women as the "weaker" sex. The notion of the "weak and passive" female echoes throughout the history of women's sport participation in Canada and thus female participation in physical activity and/or sport has often been met with great resistance—both from men and from other women:

Women continually resisted popular notions of their biologically restricted bodies through their involvement in male-defined sport, but at the same time their physical emancipation was rarely without opposition, certainly from men, and sometimes from other women. As time went on,

women became more welcome on the playing fields, but they were never viewed as men's equals there. (1)

Hall goes on to argue that this mostly remains true today. Women's involvement in sport and physical activity is marked with open resistance from others, often rooted in medical-related "concerns." From the time of the introduction of the bicycle in North America in the 1880s, concerns were raised about the appropriateness of physical activity for women on medical "grounds." This, according to Hall, continued well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century and, likely, even today: "Cultural messages that overstate the negative rather than positive effects of exercise and physical activity on women's health continue to act as a deterrent to women's enjoyment and participation" (207). This notwithstanding, there were significant gains made throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century in terms of opportunities for girls and women to participate in sport.

Importantly, Hall's text, rather than providing a discourse of victimization by oppressive sport structures, traces the evolution of women's involvement in Canadian sport, highlighting individuals and organizations that openly contested the male-dominated world of sport and physical activity. She also notes the ways in which gains made in sport worked to challenge gender relations/norms within the broader social context. For example, returning to the introduction of the bicycle, Hall comments on the changes in women's fashion in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that resulted from necessary modifications to clothing to make it more feasible to ride. She also points to the ways in which changes within the broader social context impacted on sport participation (e.g., the two World Wars were both of great significance in increasing sporting opportunities for girls and women). In this regard, sport is seen not in isolation but rather as both being influenced by and having influence on the broader social context.

In contemporary times Hall notes that there is an increased respect for female athletes, increased participatory opportunities at many levels (i.e., municipal, provincial, national, and professional) and an increased commodification of female sport that allows (some) women athletes to earn a living through sport participation (e.g. the WNBA). Such changes are both reflective of the changing role of women in society and can also likely be considered in part as assisting in the changing role of women in society. Such is the reciprocal nature of sport and society. However, this move towards equity in the sporting terrain is not unproblematic. Along with the increased prevalence of sporting opportunities for girls and women in Canada come a myriad of problems that make gender a continued issue. Hall is succinct in expressing some of the negatives, most of which tend to "model" male sport:

Among the issues and problems are an increased use of performance enhancing drugs among women athletes, the continuing exploitation and abuse of female athletes by male coaches, an often dangerously hostile environment for lesbians in sport, unhealthy practices and body abuse, and the sexualization of female athletes strictly for marketing purposes. (195)

The notion of modeling is one of the central themes to Hall's socio-historical account of women and sport in Canada. Not only receiving resistance from men in terms of sport participation, women athletes were also subjected to divisions created by the opposing views of women holding organizational roles. On one side of the argument were those that suggested women could participate in sport just the same as men—with a focus on competition, skill acquisition/perfection, and performance. On the other side was the proposition that women should participate in “less strenuous” types of physical activities so as to gain physical benefits solely to become healthy women in order to aid in reproduction and child-rearing. Beyond physical concerns, there also emerged (even in the early days of women's sport participation) the idea of “appropriate” femininity. This was distinguished not only in arguments between approaches to sport and physical activity, but also in the consideration of some sports as more “masculine” than others. In an example specific to mountaineering, the often contradictory nature of women's sport participation is highlighted:

Despite the ACC's official policy of sexual equality and enthusiastic support for women's climbing, there were unwritten codes of conduct and structure whose purpose was to perpetuate a gender-based hierarchy of skill, ability, and authority.... As more and more climbers gained experience and skill it soon became clear that women were not considered to have the mental and physical qualities necessary to lead climbs, nor were they thought capable of making high-altitude first ascents. (27)

As such, the history of women's involvement in sport has been plagued by paradox. On the one hand, women have been included into various sporting spaces (though undoubtedly to greater and lesser extents). Such inclusion, however, does not come without a caveat. Even in the most “masculine” of sports (such as hockey, rugby, etc.) female participants are expected to maintain a certain degree of femininity. The paradoxical nature of women's involvement in sport remains as problematic in contemporary times as it was in the latter stages of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Hall does well to highlight this continued paradox, challenging the often assumed ideology of sport as an unquestioned good. Such speaks to the

continued prevalence of gender ideology reproduced within sporting and physical activity spaces.

Undoubtedly, *The Girl and the Game* makes a significant contribution to the field of Canadian sport sociology and cultural studies, hence its inclusion in this particular review even though it was published four years ago. Not only does Hall present the voices and stories of marginalized athletes who have largely been left out of Canadian sport history, she also considers these experiences through a feminist lens that provides a rich exploration of the ways in which gender is both produced within and by sport and physical activity. If there are any shortcomings to the work, they are noted by Hall herself in terms of the lack of histories of women of colour and the need for further research specific to disabled female athletes. However, the stories, anecdotes, and theoretical considerations that are offered throughout the text highlight the many ways in which male hegemony in sport has been challenged over time and yet continues to remain problematic in many regards. Finally, the text works as an excellent starting point for all feminist sport researchers, a starting point alluded to in the closing commentary: “[M]y approach has been to paint the broader picture in the hope that others will fill in the missing details through regional and local stories, more specific studies in depth, and tracking down former athletes and competitors. Who now will take up this challenge?” (215). Who, indeed?

Though not taking up Hall’s challenge, Gamal Abdel-Shehid makes another significant contribution in his 2005 publication, *Who da Man? Black Masculinities and Sporting Cultures*. Abdel-Shehid’s text addresses the intersections of race and gender, focusing specifically on the construction of black sporting masculinities within Canadian culture—importantly filling a void in cultural studies/sport sociology literature (King 2005). There are two main arguments in *Who da Man?* The first is that sporting cultures and nations act as normalizing powers that are repressive insofar as they seek the production of “conformity and sameness, and disavow difference and inequality” (3). The second argument is that theorizing identity using the concept of “nation” is problematic. Rather, Abdel-Shehid proposes a theorizing of identity (and specifically, black masculinities) drawing on the notion of “diaspora,” arguing that identities are formed across territorial boundaries (i.e., beyond geographically-constituted nations). Thus, it is not as simple as looking at the experiences of black males in sport within dualistic notions of inclusion and exclusion (or, a Manichean model) as has been the case historically. Drawing on this notion of diaspora, Abdel-Shehid explores many different Canadian sport figures, teams, and events noting the necessity of recognizing that many of Canada’s black athletes have “histories and attachments outside the geopolitical space defined by Canada” (7). Such explorations include the Ben Johnson “scan-

dal," the narrative of Olympic wrestling champion Daniel Igali, the Toronto Raptors, and black Canadian Football League quarterbacks.

In investigating these various figures and scenarios, Abdel-Shehid exposes the problematic nature of sporting cultures and nations that seek the production of sameness and homogeneity, thereby effectively erasing social differences (i.e., race). Bodies that disrupt this sameness within such homologous cultures or spaces are often punished or disavowed. Abdel-Shehid argues that the, "repressive nature of sporting cultures and nationalism result in the need for social difference to be constantly managed. Those marked as 'different' are encouraged or rather expected to, assimilate or fit in to the existing frameworks of team or nation" (4).

While there are many excellent arguments made in this regard in *Who Da Man?*, it is the reading of the Ben Johnson 1988 Olympic gold medal win and subsequent failed drug test that provides the most poignant illustration of the production of "sameness." As the author comments:

[P]erhaps the most lasting and insidious form of "retribution" regarded Johnson's "citizenship." In what became known as a national infamy, there was a progression in the representation of Ben Johnson from one of a "Canadian hero" in victory to one of a "Jamaican" after disqualification. (73)

Such constructions of Johnson work within what Abdel-Shehid considers as the "whitening" of the Canadian nation. In effort to create the illusion of a "clean," "pure," "racism-free" nation, Johnson—upon the failure of the drug test—immediately becomes non-Canadian, thus distancing him from the nation itself.

As indicated, Abdel-Shehid's unpacking of the media representations of Johnson is but one example in a text ripe with considerations of the constructions of black masculinities in sport that move beyond the dualistic notions of inclusion and exclusion and that further highlight the socially constructed nature of gender—in this case when intersecting with race. Specific to the creation of black masculinities, Abdel-Shehid offers his conceptualizations of blackness in sport in terms of the black man as criminal, the "spectacularized" black male athlete, the production of Raptor morality within the city of Toronto (coinciding with the expansion of the National Basketball Association into Canada), and black male athletic identity and "hardness"—each presented within solid theoretical considerations and empirical "evidence." In his concluding chapter, Abdel-Shehid offers a particularly intriguing idea of re-considering sport through a lens of black queer theory. Such consideration, he argues, would provide opportunity to:

re-read many of the figures in the nation's stories and histories much differently including those of Ben Johnson, Daniel Igali, etc. In addition it would involve drawing a connection between narratives of nation and narratives of sexuality, an area of inquiry that needs further exploration. (149)

As noted in the discussion of Young and White's text, the interconnection of sport, race and sexuality in general is an area in need of further exploration. Abdel-Shehid's suggestion of a black queer theory could make an important contribution to the field should he or other scholars take up the challenge. The strength of *Who da Man?*, in my opinion, lies in the theoretical approach he has adopted. In considering identity through the concept of diaspora, he furthers critical race theory within the field of sport studies insofar as his thinking moves well beyond inclusion/exclusion approaches (his critique of the prevalence of stacking-related literature in the sport field is a particularly poignant argument to be considered). Like the other texts included in this review, *Who da Man?* emphasizes the complex nature of the construction of gendered (and raced) subjectivities and, again, demonstrates the ways in which sport both influences and is influenced by the broader social context.

In similar and different ways each of the three texts reviewed herein suggests that because of the highly stratified nature of sport and (most) physical activities along a biological sex/gender divide, these terrains serve as important locations from which to deconstruct the reproduction of (and resistance to) gender ideologies. However, it remains necessary to conceptualize the issues of gender and sport beyond a simple male/female, masculine/feminine dichotomy, taking into consideration that the constructions of masculinity and femininity are multiple and always intersecting with race, class, sexuality, ability, age, and contextually specific regulatory power relations. As it has been noted, such conceptualizations do not remain static although many have remained mostly consistent over the history of Canadian sport and physical activity. Such is the problematic nature of dominant gender ideology.

Each of the three texts reviewed above make significant contributions to sport studies and offer different theoretical and methodological approaches that could be taken up by other researchers. However, just as Hall offers her own work as merely a starting point for the socio-historical research on women's involvement in sport in Canada, Young and White note that their compilation of scholarly research is meant to serve as an introduction to the many different considerations of gender and sport. Finally, Abdel-Shehid offers a potential new way of thinking about black sporting masculinities through the concept of diaspora and (for future work) the lens of black queer theory. As such, given the articulations of

the authors themselves, inquiries into gender and sport—and their intersections with class, race, sexuality, age, and ability—remains terrain open to study and deconstruction away at the oft unchallenged assumption of sport as an unquestioned good within neo-liberal discourses of health, sport, and physical activity.

## References

- Abdel-Shehid, G. *Who da Man? Black Masculinities and Sporting Cultures*. Toronto: Canadian Scholars Press, 2005.
- Davison, K., and B. Frank. "Sexualities, Genders, and Bodies in Sport." *Sport and Gender in Canada* (178–193).
- Donnelly, P., and J. Harvey. "Social Class and Gender: Intersections in Sport and Physical Activity." *Sport and Gender in Canada* (95–119).
- Frisby, W., C. Reid, and P. Ponc. "Levelling the Playing Field: Promoting the Health of Poor Women through a Community Development Approach to Recreation." *Sport and Gender in Canada* (120–136).
- Hall, M. A. *The Girl and the Game: A History of Women's Sport in Canada*. Toronto: Broadview Press, 2002.
- King, S. "Who da Man? Black Masculinities and Sporting Cultures." Book review. *New Dawn: The Journal of Black Canadian Studies*, 1:1 (2005): 99–102.
- Parker, M., and P. White. "S/He Plays Sport? Theorizing the Sport/Gender Process." *Sport and Gender in Canada* (4–31).
- Wamsley, K. "The Public Importance of Men and the Importance of Public Men: Sport and Masculinities in Nineteenth Century Canada." *Sport and Gender in Canada* (75–92).
- Young, K., and P. White. *Sport and Gender in Canada*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press, 2007.