


BOOK REVIEW

## Sporty Girls: Gender, Health and Achievement in a Postfeminist Era

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Sheryl Clark's authored volume, *Sporty Girls: Gender, Health and Achievement in a Postfeminist Era*, is one of nine titles comprising an ongoing Palgrave Macmillan series under the umbrella concept of New Femininities in Digital, Physical and Sporting Cultures (NFDPSC). The series—co-edited by four scholars in sociology, health, sport, and public policy—is international in scope (UK, New Zealand, and Australia) and ranges over topics that philosophers may find compelling even if they are not interested in either amateur or professional sports activity and competition. Many of the authors, like Clark, are concerned with the way that girls grow into adulthood with complex identities formed through adolescence by choices that affect their health, physical ability, sexuality, and school achievement. Worldwide, these girls may be encouraged to move their bodies, compete in contests, and excel on the field and off, but not all strategies succeed. Indeed, not all girls are empowered by sports participation and in fact, some rebel and withdraw. It is enlightening to place Clark's analysis of girls in London within the wider scope of topics in the series to assess her project of qualitative research that contributes to gender insights on the expectations and pressures placed on girls, their bodies, and imposed measurements of success.

The first volume in the series, *New Sporting Femininities: Embodied Politics in Postfeminist Times* (2018), was edited by three of the four series editors: Kim Toffoletti, Jessica Francombe-Webb, and Holly Thorpe (the fourth editor is Aarti Ratna). It tracks the emergence of innovative ways of looking at the female body (recall 1970s discussions of “the male gaze”) and how it is experienced—both physically and within the parameters of political realities and attending postfeminist discourse—what is called “sporting femininities.” Two volumes published in 2020 explore fitness, the moving body, and sport sociology (*Feminist New Materialisms, Sport and Fitness: A Lively Entanglement*) as well as global politics with a focus on ancestral knowledge as a form of resistance to settler colonialism (*Indigenous Feminist Gikendaasowin (Knowledge): Decolonization through Physical Activity*). Two 2021 publications (in addition to Clark's) tackle *Sportswomen's Apparel Around the World: Uniformly Discussed* (2021) and *Sportswomen's Apparel in the United States: Uniformly Discussed* (2021). How to dress may initially seem an unlikely topic within the scope of new femininities until one realizes that women's uniforms and clothing choices are often dictated by the

rules of competition that can clash with local laws. For example, in contrast to the International Olympic Committee's more permissive rules, France has announced a ban on the wearing of hijabs for female athletes at the 2024 Summer Olympics in Paris. Subsequent volumes in the series consider soccer—*Women's Football in Latin America: Social Challenges and Historical Perspectives Volume 1, Brazil* (2022), and *Volume 2, Hispanic Countries* (2022)—as well as rugby—*Tackling Stereotype: Corporeal Reflexivity and Politics of Play in Women's Rugby* (2023)—which offers ethnographic vignettes, interviews, and an analysis of power and resistance that seeks to mediate tension between individualized and collective forms of feminist change. *Building the WNBA: From "Dunking Divas" to Political Leaders* (2024) explores the growing popularity of the American women's basketball league that has persisted, with some difficulty since 1997, within the heavily male-dominated environment of sport. (The lasting impact of record viewer ratings due to the recent phenomenon of college player Caitlyn Clark at the 2024 NCAA Women's Final Four Basketball Championship will be studied even more closely now.) Authors in history, sociology, gender studies, and education utilize qualitative methodologies to augment their conclusions and offer prescriptions for future improvements for girls who grow up under pressures from parents, teachers, peers, and increasingly, from digital influences and influencers. Studying the athletic activity of girls who may grow into serious competitors or simply healthy, fit adults includes the ongoing scrutiny of institutions of power in which they compete and the gender dynamics that inform their decisions beyond traditional binary limitations.

It may be useful to work backwards with the subtitle of Sheryl Clark's volume—"Gender, Health and Achievement in a Postfeminist Era"—to uncover the meaning and intent behind the study of her overall term, "sporty girls." Writing prior to the lockdowns and social restrictions of the Covid-19 pandemic, Clark challenges claims by parents, educators, and the media in England who claim that girls "have it all" in terms of athletic and academic opportunities, that there are no barriers to achieving success, and that girls—like boys—are free of self-limiting impediments. She objects to gender claims of equity, most notably the claim that there is no longer a need for feminism in an era we call "post-feminist"—as if all rights have been won—calling those claims inaccurate, dangerous, and misleading: resulting in public policy that can mislead girls into making bad choices in terms of health and well-being. Within the current socio-political context, girls may have more opportunities than in the past, but they are also required until age 16 within British schools to participate in sport and physical education: primarily cycling, football, and playground games of chase. They do not always conform to what adults deem appropriate, as Clark's qualitative study of sport shows. As a hands-on coach, she studies and observes girls who either wholeheartedly adopt, reject, or struggle to negotiate conflicting goals embedded in an adopted identity of "sporty girl" as each tries to "prove herself" while negotiating adolescence, peer pressure, and the rigors of school.

Chapter 1 sets the stage; Clark sees the assumption of equality as a myth and a "problem" as she offers a counternarrative that critiques oversimplified stories about the choices girls make. She contends that "go girl" policy initiatives—intended to instill confidence, develop leadership skills, and promote a healthy lifestyle amid problems of obesity and inactivity—often fail in their mission, particularly when sports goals conflict with classroom goals. Her data show that girls often drop out of school sports after age 16, abstain from (typically under-funded) community sports, and are encouraged to pursue STEM (Science, Technology, English, and Math) curricula to achieve success while also remaining "sporty" and fit: thereby serving conflicting goals. They

attempt to engage in projects of “successful girlhood”—to construct identities whereby success equates with “fit, toned heterosexuality femininity” (p. 14) based on traditional gender binaries—obstructing the freedom to pursue less restrictive categories of self, ability, and sexuality: what are considered “wider-gendered schooling trajectories” (p. 1). They are told that being healthy and feeling good about oneself involves being good at sport but also excelling in school: the formula for successful femininity. Chapter 2 notes the shift within the last century from marriageability to capability, thereby establishing a postfeminist ethic based on personal responsibility for one’s health and achievement. Policy intervenes—in the form of the several laws against sex discrimination (1975), education reform (1988 and 1991)—that offer a contrast to Title IX legislation passed in 1972 in the United States—but fail to alleviate expectations for girls. In Chapter 4, we learn what constitutes a good education for Clark—school achievement, sport, and becoming a successful girl—through the stories of three girls engaged in specific projects. Issues of ethnicity and social class extend the examination of gender, particularly for “problem girls” who struggle with imposed strategies of success. Chapters 5 and 6 flesh out what it means to be “good at sport,” i.e., participating in competition, which is not necessarily fun for girls, often due to their lack of athletic abilities and the inability to cope—at ages 8–14—with “healthism” that involves being gazed at and judged in terms of slenderness, verging toward anorexia. Muslim girls who lack trust in their teachers often experience difficulty with such expectations. Chapter 7 surprises the reader with the strategy of implementing “feminist rage” to combat hostility and alienation felt by girls under scrutiny; it is prescribed as an antidote to pressures and a method of creating gendered and racialized “feminist possibilities” that extend “sporting girlhoods” into “responsible body projects” involving health and moral hierarchies. Chapter 3 focuses primarily on “Becoming a Sporty Researcher,” revealing the author’s strategy to combine her methodological and theoretical perspectives and establish her credentials as one who listens to the stories of girls after gaining their trust. Informed by the writings of Judith Butler, Clark’s longitudinal research tracks the complex construction of gender over time. For instance, Clark records 46 observations gleaned from 36 interviews of girls at 2 schools over 2 years. Chapter 8 challenges prevailing sports models dominated by “elite physical performances of white masculinity” (p. 16) by promoting less constraints and more freedom of choice for girls to exercise, compete, and grow. Community clubs that offer opportunities for sport participation often fail to attract girls who experienced feelings of hierarchy and exclusion, while the lone activity of running continues to function as one solution to personal fitness fulfillment and a form of resistance to male domination of sport.

The author’s emphasis on the lived experiences of girls, their stated reactions—both positive and negative—to sport participation, and a recommendation for more input from girls going forward, is exemplary. Within the broader scope of issues in the philosophy of sport, the problem of time management—balancing sports with academics—surfaces and persists. The benefits of sports participation and physical activity, including competition, weigh heavily on the choices girls make. This book, along with others in the series, is worth reading for scholars’ data-driven perspectives that can inform future feminist philosophical theorizing on the body.

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*Journal of Intercollegiate Sport* entitled, “The Myles Brand Era at the NCAA: A Tribute and Scholarly Review” (2021). Forthcoming is the Oxford Online Bibliography entry, “Feminist Aesthetics” and an essay entitled, “Holding Institutions Responsible for Student-Athlete Well-Being,” in *College Sports and Ethics*.