

**HER-STORIES IN SOUTH AFRICAN SPORT:  
GENDER AND SPORT IN THE CAPE COLONY 1806-1910**

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**Abstract**

**Introduction:** The gendering of South African sport has a point of origin which is not explicitly evident until one examines the impact of the combined effects of the masculinity-sports relationship during the Victorian era, British imperialism and colonization in Southern Africa, and the institutionalisation of sports in England and her colonies. The question that emerges is "how did this shape the sports(s) practices of women at the time?"

**Objectives:** The objective is to highlight the way the sporting culture of Victorian England and the associated ideals of womanliness and manliness shaped the initial construction of gender and sport in South Africa.

**Methods:** Review of literature on sport in the history of South Africa, 1806-1910. The article has been written within the framework of subsequent emerging themes.

**Discussion:** In this article the focus is on (1) the way the importance placed on the reproductive role of women promoted the view that females were physically more vulnerable than males and therefore their participation in sports put them at risk; (2) how female sports participation was both liberating and restrictive and led to a redefinition of femininity; and (3) the scant reference to sporting females in the Cape media of the time.

**Implications for practice and research:** It is not possible to obtain an understanding of the way sport constructs unequal gender relations without some knowledge of how they evolved over time. Scholarship in sports history should incorporate gender relations as an analytical category of historical research.

**Keywords:** gender, sport, history, South Africa

**Introduction**

"Histories of women have virtually ignored the physical dimension of the struggle of female emancipation" writes McCrone (1987), while sports historians have paid scant attention to sporting

females in their endeavours to highlight the achievements of sportsmen and the history of their sports. Sports historian and sociologist Pfister (1993) adds "there has been no shortcomings of *history* of sport, but very little of *herstory*". Jones

(2001), Nauright (1997) and Hargreaves (1997) note that this is especially true for most of the accounts of colonial sports history in Southern Africa.

By the mid-nineteenth century Britain had exported many of its cultural practices (including sports) to its colonies. Gradually a more formal British sporting culture was introduced to the Southern African region (Black & Nauright, 1998). The model, according to which modern sport was formulated, reflected British imperialist notions about social hierarchy and public school education. It combined a pseudo-aristocratic ideology of sport with colonialism which emphasised class, race and gender differences. British Colonial expansion in Southern Africa between 1806 and 1910 was therefore accompanied by a belief in the superiority of the British (White male), and a notion of developing manliness and Christian muscularity through sports. A claim to British superiority was accompanied by a simultaneous belief in the inferiority of people of colour and in the incompetence of women regarding their sporting ability. In addition, her role as a woman was largely defined by her ability to give birth. Her exclusion from physical activities was deeply rooted in Western cultural perceptions of physical weakness and lack of physical ability. One of the Victorian ideals was that the domestic world was seen as the natural dominion for women and therefore any intrusion by them into the world of sport and games represented a major transgression of society's expectations. This article focuses on women and sport in the history of South Africa during the Second British Colonisation of the Cape between 1806 and 1910. The objective is to highlight the way the sporting culture of Victorian England and the associated ideals of womanliness and

manliness shaped the initial construction of gender and sport in South Africa.

In this article, literature on sport within the early historical developments of the Cape (British) Colony and related literature was reviewed. The article has been written within the framework of subsequent emerging themes. Consistent with the approach of feminist sports historians such as Struna (1994) and Vertinsky (1994), gender was utilized as a category of analysis of this literature. The intention was not to simply "add" women to existing sports history, but to offer new insights of the historical relationship between sport and the construction of gender within that.

### **Sportswomen transgress society's expectations**

*"Limiting women's participation in sport and exercise functioned both to control women's unruly physiology and to protect them for the important job of species reproduction"* (Balsomo, 1994:324).

Hall (1996) explains that the "unruly physiology" to which Balsomo (1994) refers, touches on the way women were discouraged from participating in sport through "culturally defined facts" about the female body. The commonsense belief was that women were "eternally wounded" McCrone (1987) because they bled during part of their reproductive years (menstrual cycle).

Physicians in the 1800's, influenced by societal views on the status and ability of females, claimed that a woman was distinctly different from the male species. It was generally believed that the female body was physically weaker, the skull smaller and the muscles more delicate and the nervous system more prone to exhaustion than that of the male. A woman was supposed to possess qualities such as

gentleness, compassion, intuitiveness, nurturance and a capacity for expressing emotion. It was claimed that these were a natural consequence of her childbearing capacity. She was viewed as the product and prisoner of her reproductive system with a "uterus and ovaries which controlled her body and her behaviour from puberty to menopause" (Smith-Rosenberg & Rosenberg, 1987).

Although the Victorian ideal of the sexual division of labour was not possible for the majority of working class families, the woman's role as mother and wife was always of primary importance despite being a wage earner. Confining women to the domestic sphere marked their bodies as female and shaped their performances according to existing patterns of biological and social reproduction (Hargreaves, 1987). On the other hand, true manliness combined the growth of the physique and the character. Masculinity was neither "intellectual" nor "genital" but "physical and moral" (Holt, 1989). This belief system and accompanying values placed women antithetical to sport and shaped views on the appropriateness of female and male participation in sports activities. Formal sports especially, played a huge role in upholding, reflecting and perpetuating this ideology of binary opposites.

### **Play sport like "gentlemen" but behave like "ladies"**

The desire of women to participate in sports challenged the stereotypes upon which the Victorian interpretations of womanliness and femininity were based. Proponents of women's sport initiated an alternative interpretation of femininity. They argued that "what was good for the brothers, was good for the sisters" and asked "how could the sons be strong if their mothers were weak?" (Holt, 1989). This new identity for females was both enabling and

restricting because females were expected to maintain a balance between liberation of the body and social respectability. Women could play sport like "gentlemen" but should "behave like ladies" (Hargreaves, 1987). The redefinition of the female body for prorecreational purposes in the late Victorian era permitted a more active lifestyle while simultaneously maintaining a distinction between the capacities and character of females and males. For example, the symbolic impact of the female body on a bicycle was more important than their actual act of cycling. Female cyclists challenged the current interpretation of femininity because it allowed them to construct a female body which was "strong, swift and independent" (Holt, 1989). Resistance continued from the medical profession who argued that in young girls the bones of the pelvis were not strong enough to withstand the tension required to ride a bicycle. The purpose of girls' participation was therefore kept distinctively different from those of the boys. Games-playing was to provide some physical and moral benefits for young women, especially to prepare them as good mothers. However, "*rough sports like hockey and cricket were often faulted ... as being physiologically harmful and likely to unsex young women*" (McCrone, 1987).

These early nineteenth century views regarding female domesticity and submission to male authority were brought to Southern Africa by the British colonisers. Many of the British women who immigrated to Southern Africa during the 1800's were unmarried and from the lower middle class or working class. As Walker (1990) points out, social advancement was a primary reason for immigration and if possible they settled into the class of the ruling White elite group. In addition, the involvement of women in sporting activities during the

colonisation of Southern Africa reflected the status of women at the time, as well as the organisation of sport and the political and social developments in that part of Africa. African women suffered the triple oppression of gender, race and class. White women were also discriminated against as women, but their membership of a racial group which was privileged assisted in lessening the impact of their marginalisation.

### **Gender inequalities and the "fair sex" in the cape colony**

If the Cape newspapers in the 19th century were to be believed, only men seemed to play sport. The media contained numerous articles covering (White) sportsmen and their performances. Equally abundant was the inclusion of columns targeting females and their roles in the domestic sphere. Rather than sport, these concentrated on fashion, recipes, and other factors, which could contribute to the effectiveness and efficiency of the Cape housewife. They promoted the education of women as wives and mothers (The South African Illustrated News, 1884).

Any references to the physical activity achievements of females, even in the late 1800's, were mostly limited to White women and usually mixed with an element of surprise. For example, Lady Anne Barnard's excursion up Table Mountain in 1797 raised a few eyebrows, especially when she wore a pair of her husband's trousers to do the climb (de Kock, 1955). Another example was a Miss Viola who apparently "ascended by balloon and then successfully descended by parachute" (de Kock, 1955). Although aerial balloons had made their appearance at the Cape in 1810, it was only in 1893 that the first female pilot is mentioned. A further report on women and sport was the

formation of the "ladies cycling club". The following report of de Kock's (1955) illustrates the way female engagement in physical activity was not taken seriously: "we are told that the fair amazons were in raptures over their weekly spins in the country".

Tennis clubs appear to have been in existence in the Cape since the 1880's, yet it was not until 1893 that reference was made to (White) women's tennis. A local newspaper reported: "*Our portrait supplement this week will no doubt come as a welcome surprise to our readers, for until now our celebrities have been confined to the sterner sex*" (The South Africa Review, 1893). It is worth noting that females were still expected to dress appropriately as women, not as sportswomen, for they wore "ankle-length dresses, with tall collars, long sleeves and stiff straw hats". The compilation of South African sports by Parker (1897) was the first of its kind. Unfortunately, it gives the impression that besides tennis and recreational golf, women in South Africa did not engage in any organised sports. No mention is made of women or men of colour. It is also clear that female golf players were not taken seriously: "*Golf is eminently suitable for the fair sex, for no matter how ignorant they may be of the rules, what other game gives them the opportunities of a gentle stroll over the green turf, laughing and talking between the strokes, enjoying that necessary little gossip and criticism of another's apparel?*" (Parker, 1897).

There is evidence that horse riding as an outdoor recreational activity had been enjoyed by both women and men of the middle and upper class in the Cape Colony. However, hunting on horseback and horse racing were male affairs. The first recorded horse race took place at Green Point Common in 1797 and the South African Turf Club

was established in 1802 (Jarvie, 1985), yet it was only in the 1980's that South African (White) females were permitted to pursue careers as jockeys. Women did not participate in the fox (or jackal) hunt because it was a masculine affair. Hunting was a sporting activity through which manly characteristics like courage and endurance could be developed. For the British (White) male, hunting and horsemanship had to do with power and control (McKenzie, 1987). The hunt, for the British male, was therefore not as de Kock, (1955) suggests just for the adventure. It was seen as an opportunity to foster and demonstrate manliness and masculinity. As more and more women began to participate in hunting during the 1860's and 1870's, other forms of hunting became more exclusively male, for example the hunting of big game, such as, elephant and hippopotamus.

The first recorded (male) cricket match in the Cape took place at Green Point Common as early as in 1808. While the Dutch Settlers played rural sports (boeresports) on festive occasions such as New Year, auctions, agricultural shows, Holy Communion, the British celebrated their special occasions such as the Queen's birthday by playing sports like cricket (Van der Merwe & Venter, 1987). However, as previously mentioned, for the colonisers at the time, sports were also a means for promoting and demonstrating manliness and superiority over others as highlighted by Parker (1897) "*Hail cricket, glorious, manly British game; First of all sports, the first alike in fame*".

Notwithstanding the above, cricket had another role to play in British colonies. Odendaal's (1988) detailed research on the topic shows that cricket had an important socializing and ideological impact on the emergent African and Coloured elite,

especially in the Cape. According to him, participation in the game was a public declaration of allegiance to the British Empire and success in this "most gentlemanly and Victorian of games" was a way of asserting "their own self-conscious class position" and a vehicle for demonstrating their ability to gain acceptance as full citizens in the Cape society. Male cricket in particular provided opportunities for the "aspiring Black (male) petty bourgeois" to be assimilated into colonial life during the late 1800's. Despite the social, political and sporting successes of the African élite it still left them Black. And it was as Black men that they were excluded from representing South Africa, from having access to key resources for the development of their sporting careers (and lives) and from being part of organisations which controlled South African sport, including the sport they played. All of this impacted in the following way on gender relations and especially for the way in which females could relate to sport:

Firstly, Victorian adages such as "playing fair", and "its not cricket" might have had symbolic value for cricket playing and spectating males, but the thought of females transgressing into this hallowed domain was an intolerable notion. There is some evidence that "ladies played cricket in Victorian country-house games". There had apparently been an "Original English Lady Cricketers" touring team in the late 1800's. However, in general, "... Lady-cricketers were regarded as engaging oddities" (Holt, 1989).

Secondly, the African élite to which Odendaal (1988) refers, were male. While his work makes an extremely significant contribution to the history of South African sport, it does little to broaden our understanding and knowledge of the role of sports

in the lives of different women. The opportunities available to Odendaal's (1988) Black Victorians, especially regarding sports participation, were not open to females irrespective of race, ethnicity or class. Furthermore, while missionaries used team sports to educate African males about the British values and customs, African females were taught domestic skills and prepared for roles as domestic servants (Gaitskell, 1988). In this way "home life" rather than team games was used to mould their characters and shape their future. The combined philosophies of imperialism and colonialism educated African females especially, for domesticity while males were schooled to serve the British Empire through the military and administrative services.

The Second British Occupation of the Cape came to an end in 1910. This concluded a chapter of *herstories* in South African sport. In 1910 Britain handed over the government of the Union to White South Africans and it left behind a legacy of racial segregation upon which Afrikaner Nationalists could build the social engineering of their official apartheid policy. It was against such a backdrop that the next chapter of South African sporting females began.

By 1910 most of the major British sports had made their appearance in the Cape Colony. Yet, despite Britain's long sporting tradition, women did not feature much in this legacy of sport. In addition, the second British occupation of the Cape had exposed the southern tip of Africa not only to sporting activities which were part of the British middle class culture, but also to the same forms of domination which were prevalent in the British Empire at the time. An integral aspect was the Victorian ideal about manliness and womanliness which formed the basis of their gender relations in Britain and

which impacted significantly on expectations about and the appropriateness of the participation of females in sporting activities. Furthermore, the missionary education of Black women supported and enhanced, rather than challenged, the race-class discrimination which was prevalent at the time. Indigenous recreational activities had been discouraged and replaced with English sports such as cricket, in order to educate African males about the British values and customs. African females were prepared for the "women's mission", which was characterised by "femininity and domesticity" (Gaitskell, 1988). Finally, the Women's Suffrage Movement, although continuing to agitate for women's voting rights, was still on the periphery of South African politics as the formation of the Union, together with the emergence of race and language as forms of domination, were the focus of attention. Consequently, different notions of woman remained "the other", and the status of different women and their access to sporting activities remained coupled to perceptions of their subordinate social roles which were linked to class and race as much as it was to being female.

### **Implications for research and practice**

There are a number of reasons for reconstructing and discovering *herstory* in South African sport. Firstly, historical studies of sporting females are important because they allow us to highlight the process through which a set of beliefs, such as that of female physiology, intersects with another discourse regarding views about appropriate female sports practices. Secondly, it is not possible to fully understand the way sport constructs unequal gender relations without knowing how they evolved over time. Thirdly, females are not a-historic beings. Their life-circumstances change and these changes impact on the way they relate to sports and

the choices they can (not) make in this regard. Finally, insights into the current situation in South Africa with regard to sporting females will only be gained if scholarship in sports her/history includes gender relations as an analytical category of that research.

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