

---

## BOOK REVIEWS

---

*Journal of Intercollegiate Sport*, 2010, 3, 200-203  
© 2010 Human Kinetics, Inc.

### ***Playing With the Boys: Why Separate Is Not Equal in Sports***

By Eileen McDonagh and Laura Pappano, Oxford University Press (2008), Paperback, 384 pages, ISBN 978-0-19-538677-6

*Reviewed by Jan Rintala, Professor, Kinesiology and Physical Education, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, IL.*

In *Playing with the Boys: Why Separate is Not Equal in Sports*, Eileen McDonagh and Laura Pappano present theoretically provocative analyses and critiques of Title IX as a just and effective piece of legislation as applied to sport. Their fundamental assertions are that through allowing, perhaps even championing, sex-segregated sport, Title IX has served to essentially limit the full advancement of girls and women in sport. More significantly, through continuing to separate athletes on the basis of sex, the assumptions of female inferiority in sport are reinforced and become even more deeply entrenched. Given the importance of sport in culture (the focus here is on sport in the United States), women's access to social power is restricted. The authors argue that a commitment to true equality of opportunity would necessitate an additional sport option—a coed option, where the best would play with the best regardless of gender.

The book is divided into seven chapters. The first chapter, entitled “What’s the Problem?” presents an overview of the importance of sport as a social institution. The authors summarize the connections among sports, masculinity, and power—not just sports power, but social and political power as well. They also present their initial criticism of coercive sex segregation. They contend that this segregation in sport is based on three faulty assumptions, which they label the “Three I’s”: “(1) female *inferiority* compared to males, (2) the need to protect females from *injury* in competition with males, and (3) the *immorality* of females competing directly with males” (p. 7). A presentation then follows of the ways in which sports are organized on a sex-segregated basis in a manner that largely renders invisible coercive sex-segregated practices. These organizational patterns include (1) different sports for females and males (volleyball and football, for example), (2) same sports but different teams (soccer teams for both boys and girls), (3) same sports with different rules (basketball), (4) same sports, but gendered expectations in performance (gymnastics), (5) same sport but with specific and different roles based on sex (pairs figure skating), and (6) a sex-segregated structure even when they compete together (reporting marathon results by sex). McDonagh and Pappano assert that this coercive sex-segregation not only sets females up as inferior to males, but it also runs counter to American values. The groundwork has thus been laid for their arguments that Title IX, rather than working towards fixing the problem of gender inequality in sport has actually, through codifying sex-segregated sport, served to reinforce inequality and limit the full participation of girls and women in sport. Their corrective will be based

in providing greater choice in sport: the opportunity to choose sex-separate or sex-integrated sport.

Chapter 2 is entitled "The Sex Difference Question." Here, the authors present a brief history of sex testing and the controversies surrounding the practice. The authors then present a brief discussion of biologically based *group* differences in factors that impact sport performance. These included height, weight, hormones, lean/fat body mass, strength, oxygen consumption, metabolism, endurance, and lactate tolerance. A point made repeatedly is that while there are differences as a group between males and females, there is significant overlap among individuals. These assertions were also made related to psychological parameters. Throughout these summaries, the authors present examples of the closing of the performance gap in several activities, as well as presenting sports, such as open-water endurance swimming, where performances of females actually exceed those of males.

The historical antecedents of Title IX itself are the focus of the third chapter. Title IX is presented within the context of other educational and civil rights legislation. Based on 19<sup>th</sup> century medical views of women's natures and how these natures should be taken into consideration, early education for women was based on helping women to better fulfill their domestic roles. Even as opportunities for education increased, "Such advances, made as they were without establishing women's intellectual equality with men, became vulnerable to setbacks, particularly after World War II" (p. 83). The authors follow this theme through their discussion of the GI Bill and the 1964 Civil Rights Act, with particular attention to Title VII, Equal Employment Opportunities. Within this discussion, they elaborate on the EEOC exception of "bona fide occupational qualification" (BFOQ), which opened a loophole allowing for sex segregation in jobs if being male or female is an essential job qualification. This discussion of BFOQ then leads into Title IX of the Educational Amendments of 1972 and the dilemma over whether sports should be sex-integrated or sex-separate.

Title IX in the courts is the focus of chapter four (Sex-segregated Sports on Trial). Even if one were not interested in the totality of the authors' arguments and book, this chapter and its appendix provide an excellent stand-alone reference on Title IX and equality/equity discussions. Unlike many presentations of legal challenges to Title IX, the authors chose to focus on the conflict between sex segregation as allowed/encouraged/coerced through Title IX and the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. Starting with *Brown v. Board of Education*, the authors present a series of rulings establishing that separate is inherently unequal. Most of the rulings are based on race. The authors assert that the Equal Protection Clause and the inherent inequality of separate programs are as relevant for sex as they are for race. After a fairly non-controversial and factual presentation of sports-specific cases related to Title IX, the authors conclude the chapter by presenting sex-segregated sport as a disability model. They note that despite the courageous few girls and women who have challenged a sex-segregated model and tried to compete, a common response is that females should not compete with males. "The reason, equally predictable, is the belief that women are so inferior to men that they will always lose" (p. 145). Through continuing sex-segregated sport, the authors maintain we are essentially categorizing females "as if they constitute a disabled group: being female is the condition of being physically (if not psychologically) handicapped compared to men" (p. 145). They present the parallel language of the

Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 with Title IX and conclude that just as inclusion has been important in both providing opportunities as well as changing perceptions related to disabilities, sex-based inclusion in sport could do the same. Same-sex sport could still be an option, but should be the exception and not the norm and would be based on individual choice, not based on lack of opportunity or as a result of coercive practices.

The next two chapters are primarily historical. In "Inventing Barriers," McDonagh and Pappano present the development of sex-segregated sport for both men and women. In the section on sport for ladies, the importance of the beliefs of the medical profession and the social expectation of modesty, especially in clothing, were highlighted. Another important point here was the class-related conflict between sport for competition promoted by the AAU and sport for fitness and socializing espoused by women physical educators in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The emphasis is on the way these actions and beliefs both reinforced and institutionalized segregation in sport based on sex. Chapter 6 is entitled "Breaking Barriers" and briefly presents the stories of girls and women who have ventured into playing with the boys. The stories are ones of courage and a simple desire to just play. The stories are also ones of institutional and societal push-back against these athletic interlopers.

The final chapter, "Pass the Ball," reiterates the arguments from the preceding chapters. The authors more fully develop the relationships among sport, economics, politics, and social power, including a critique of free market economics as a justification for the gender-based inequality in sport. They provide ten recommendations for reform: (1) accept a new, gender-neutral view of sports; (2) increase opportunities for coed sports; (3) gender-blind sports rules; (4) require parity in ticket prices, promotions, and salaries at educational institutions; (5) equal television time for women's sports; (6) better print and online news coverage for women's sport; (7) women must "speak" sports; (8) feminist power play: bring athletics into the network; (9) if you can, buy the team—or at least a ticket; and (10) strengthen Title IX (without permitting coercive sex segregation) (pp. 254-256). Their final paragraph seems to sum up their ultimate goal. As they discuss the future for Tiger Woods' daughter, Sam Alexis, they state: "Females playing sport with males must become standard practice not the exception....Playing with the boys should be an option if not the norm for her and for all girls and women, if we are to become *what we ought to be*" (p. 260).

As I indicated at the beginning of this review, I found this book to be theoretically provocative. Additionally, the materials are well-documented and the critiques are insightful. The index allows this work to be used as an easy-to-access reference as well as a text. Those things being said, as I read the book, I often found myself saying, "yes, but..." For me, there was a constant tension between the "principled" view the authors were promoting and the "pragmatic" that many of us have lived. As the authors presented their conceptual analyses, the rationale made sense; on further reflection, however, the nice line that had been drawn began to look like it was drawn in the sand of a wind-blown dune as one contemplated the implications of implementing their goals. I will use one example to illustrate my conundrum. In the recommendations for change, the authors advocated for governing bodies to "eliminate rule differences between male and female versions of a sport which reflect outmoded beliefs about male and female capabilities or that merely serve to differentiate male and female play. Wherever reasonable, the size of the play areas, the length of games and races, the points needed to win or

other measures in a sport should be the same for males and female" (p. 254). Of course, we would say that a women's tennis match should be determined by the same number of games and sets as one played by men. But the authors open the door with, "whenever reasonable,..." What determines that "reasonable-ness"? Is it based in the sex differences that the authors want to take out of the equation? For example, females use a basketball that is slightly smaller than that used by males. The reason is based on statistical differences in the average hand sizes of men and women. The slightly smaller basketball enables a greater proportion of females to skillfully handle the ball and execute the techniques important to quality play in basketball. How would we apply their recommendation regarding rules for males playing basketball, females playing basketball, and for both playing coed? What would be the performance-related implications? If it disadvantages or advantages one group more often than another, how does that affect the goal of changing societal values towards accepting the quality and equality of girls and women in sport?

I had other questions, many of which centered on the *bona fide occupational qualifications* (BFOQ). While the authors introduce this principle to assert that sex is not a BFOQ for sex-segregated sport, could it just as easily be used a rationale for sex-segregated sport? Are we "equally protecting" when we ignore what may be relevant physical and physiological differences? Is there a strict parallel between race and sex-based differences as a basis for integration/segregation in sport? There are differences that we may not be able to eliminate through practice and training. Admittedly, there is much overlap between male and female characteristics and performances related to speed, strength, flexibility, endurance, and sport-related skills; the differences are insignificant for those who are prepubescent. This may provide a reasonable argument for greater coed involvement in youth and adult recreational sport. But there are statistical differences, especially at the extremes of the distribution, and it is at the extremes where professional and elite amateur sport are played. How is sport for all girls and women advanced if a coed model is pushed, but the possibilities of involvement and success at the elite levels are minimal? Does it empower women if these few highly talented leave women's sport to play with the boys? What happens to the "importance" of sport for those women who choose to play with the women? Does it become even more of a minor league than women's sport is now? If coed sport becomes the norm, and if the physical and physiological differences we currently see aren't minimized, does sport become even more male than it is today? Is there a conflict between greater opportunity for the few and the greatest good for the greatest number when it comes to sport for girls and women?

I'm not yet convinced that coed sport is the solution. However, that's not to say I don't recommend this book. The authors have raised some points not usually made in gender-equity discussions and have raised them in a way that encourages thought and discussion on another level. The implementations of their arguments require that we examine this complex issue with the integrated approach it deserves. The "solution" to gender inequity is not simply based in application of the law, implementation of the philosophical principles of fairness and justice, remediation of gender-based socialization practices, or mitigation of current physiological and biomechanical performance differences. All of these need to be considered in the solutions. Although this may not have been the intent of the authors, through their presentation of gender inequity in sport, we are challenged to examine the issue in a more comprehensive manner.