Swarthmore Undergraduate History Journal

Volume 4 | Issue 2 Article 1

2023

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Field hockey is an odd sport to Americans. Take, for instance, the penalty corner: the whistle blows, and suddenly most of the defending team jogs to midfield only to turn around and sprint right back at the next whistle. This is one of many elements that would catch a first-time viewer off guard, especially if they were more familiar with soccer or ice hockey. That hitting-the-puck-back-and-forth action that feels like the essence of hockey on the ice? It would result in an automatic foul on the field. Many Americans have never watched a game of field hockey in their lives, and this is not by chance. For starters, its presence is regionally limited, sticking mostly to the Northeast and the states around the Great Lakes. But most crucial to its limited appeal in the United States is the fact that field hockey is unequivocally a women's sport. This is a particularly American idiosyncrasy. Around the world, hockey is popular for men and women, and attracts far greater interest in general than it does in the United States (Schwartz 2021). The unusual transformation of male-dominated "hockey" from the British Isles to women's-only "field hockey" in the United States reveals a deeper connection between sport, feminism, and society. At the turn of the twentieth century, field hockey is emblematic of a profound shift in societal perceptions of women's social role and biological constitution; by the 1970s, field hockey represented a battleground for debates about the upper limits of female ability.

Regardless of field hockey's current low profile, it was a smash hit when it first hit American shores in 1901. It had already been popular in Great Britain from the 1860s, and in 1894 the first women's league was established in Ireland, one year before the first international match was played between Ireland and Wales (Schwartz, 120–21). The world in which the first female field hockey players stepped onto the eponymous "field" was regulated by a distinctly Victorian conception of femininity, one that thought women were too fragile for any serious physical or mental exercise. Reproduction was considered to be a woman's best way of contributing to society,

which meant that women were sequestered in the home and barred from involvement in anything that might "distract" them from childrearing or "weaken" their bodies for pregnancy (Park 1985, 20). By the end of the 19th century, however, attitudes were changing, and increased participation of women in sport is a symptom of these larger cultural changes. On the one hand, sports in general took off in the States after the Civil War, and on the other, especially as the first women's universities flourished, educators began to realize that complete inactivity results in unhealthy women (Park, 11–12). One such person was Englishwoman Constance Applebee, born in 1873, who had been incapacitated with poor health as a child. Wisdom of the age demanded that she stay at home, because, as a woman, any extraneous exertion was expected to make her sicker ("Constance Applebee" 2005). When she reached young adulthood, however, she realized that physical activity had an unmistakably positive affect on her overall health, and earned a degree from the British College of Physical Education in order to promote exercise for women. Once Applebee traveled across the pond in 1901 to take a summer course at Harvard University (all female, of course), she happily demonstrated field hockey for her enraptured classmates. That very same year, she co-founded the American Field Hockey Association and was named athletic director at the historically women's college Bryn Mawr. The sport quickly spread to other all-female colleges in the Northeast, like Vassar and Mount Holyoke ("Constance Applebee").

Growing female participation in sports, including field hockey, was somewhat controversial. In her research of *The Sportswoman*, founded by Constance Applebee in 1922 as the first magazine in America for female athletes, Lynn E. Couturier discovered conflicting opinions among proponents of women in sports (2012). A big area of concern was the level of competition. Since competitiveness was associated with masculinity, writers were concerned that if girls appeared too attached to winning it would provoke negative backlash from the rest of

society against women playing sports in general (Couturier, 265). It is also important to recognize that many proponents of female participation in sports did not consider themselves feminists, particularly school administrators who were invested in the public's opinion that these institutions were the best place for a well-bred (i.e., of a family who could afford tuition) young woman. Their sympathy for women in sports was related more to the health benefits of physical activity than anything else (Couturier, 271). Another area of controversy was dress: field hockey requires a great deal of running, not to mention the tripping hazards posed by the sticks and ball during play, so some alterations to conventional dress were necessary ("Constance Applebee"). Skirts became shorter (as in, ankle length), and petticoats were replaced with bloomers; much work has been done on the impact of changing clothing on the women's rights movement, particularly clothes for bicycling (Park, 22). This did not, however, precipitate a sea change in women's dress, as sport organizers frequently set boundaries where propriety was considered more important than practicality, and athletes were strongly discouraged from wearing their modified clothing beyond the confines of their all-women's schools – oftentimes, the athletes themselves were more uncomfortable than their instructors with their new outfits. Writing about the history of women's physical education in colleges in 1930, Dorothy S. Ainsworth cites a Nebraska student from the 1890s:

> The new girls when first appearing in gym clothes, were overcome with shame, although no man, not even the janitor, was allowed to enter while the girls were there; most of the new girls were so shy, even before others of their own sex and age, that they could not take a step, but sank down in a heap on the gymnasium floor, huddling together and refusing, almost to tears, to take part. Within a week, however, under the urging of the older girls to 'get over their foolishness,' they exulted in their new freedom (1930, 95).

Encroaching too closely on male territory could be considered a serious social transgression with dangerous consequences, and women who wanted to play sports knew they were walking a very fine line (Couturier, 276). Ainsworth notes that schools would say "costume" to mentioning

controversial "bloomers," and would provide the "costumes" after students' arrival to circumvent preemptive objections (1930). The existence of such intense debate over women's health and dress – even to the point of "tears") – shows how radical these changes were.

In this light, it is easy to see why field hockey's marked difference from other socially acceptable sports for women made it an instant success. Deborah Park suggests that it managed to enter the ranks of "respectability" in the United States through an association with elite girls' boarding schools in Britain (1985, 23). One of the reasons for this interpretation is the Constance Applebee story cited above, which is widely circulated as the precise origin of field hockey in America. However, Ainsworth asserts that Goucher, in Maryland, established its field hockey program in 1898 (four years before Applebee crossed the Atlantic), calling this account into question (1930). The exact route of field hockey's American introduction warrants further investigation to get to the bottom of how it became "respectable." Other sports that were considered fit for female participation at the turn of the century included golf, tennis, swimming, and croquet. Field hockey stands out as the only team sport (Xie 2004). In America, basketball was also popular, but it was frequently played with modifications specifically calculated to minimize exertion and contact – as Roberta Park writes, "female hockey players might run nearly the length of the 100-yard field but be confined to half or less of an 80-foot basketball court" (Park, 23; "Constance Applebee"). Whatever the exact circumstances that precipitated this, field hockey spread primarily through all-women's educational institutions, and in a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy, women's colleges association with field hockey reaffirmed its position as a strictly female sport; it became the first team sport in America where women were allowed to play hard (Ware 2011, 122). The relative geographic isolation of all-women's colleges probably helped the sport retain its more aggressive elements. Team sports had long carried social value for men,

because they were thought to teach participants traditional masculine values like "vigor," sportsmanship, teamwork, perseverance, virility, etc., which made it particularly difficult for women to argue that team sports could also be beneficial for women without being called "mannish" (Park, 17; Couturier, 276).

As the "New Women," college girls at the turn of the twentieth century were acutely aware of the benefits of playing a team sport, although they intentionally avoided claiming all of the attributes of "muscular Christianity." An article entitled "Field Hockey for Women" appeared in *Harpers' Bazaar* in 1910, declaring:

> While sailing, canoeing, tennis, golf, and horseback-riding have always claimed many women devotees, they are all sports depending entirely on one's personal efforts. Field hockey, however, brings each girl on the team into closer athletic relationship, and develops a companionship free from petty jealousies and small things generally. This is because each is dependent on the other, and all must work together for the success of the team. It teaches quick response, trust, and unselfishness (Mange).

Certain words and sentiments found in traditional, masculine rhetoric around team sports are acutely missing from this article. For example, this article praises "unselfishness," – as opposed to the more traditional warlike language used for sports, like "sacrifice" – and "free[dom] from petty jealousies," something decidedly associated with feminine stereotypes. But the importance of playing on a team should not be underestimated. It proved to anyone watching, and to the players themselves, that women could be friends with each other. The women themselves can attest to this. For Eleanor Roosevelt, the day she "made the first team…was one of the proudest moments in [her] life." She further commented, "I liked playing with a team and winning their approbation. It was a rough enough game, with many hard knocks" (Cook 1993). Suffragette Alice Paul played field hockey at Swarthmore, and her fellow activist Inez Milholland played at Vassar (Fry 1972). Milholland's former classmate described her in an interview after her death:

> …I shall always remember her as the girl who played the fairest and squarest game of [field] hockey I ever witnessed. That is where I got an insight into her real character. She displayed the traits there that dominated her whole career, and showed her love of fair play ("Women's Suffrage: United States" 1916).

If a woman could be valuable to another woman in a sports setting, it also figured that a woman could have value outside of her reproductive potential. Most importantly, field hockey taught women that they could rely on each other – an important lesson, because the women at these elite eastern colleges would go on to lead the first wave feminist movement in the United States, which culminated in the ratification of the 18th Amendment in 1920.

In the early 20th century field hockey was protected from public scrutiny by its seclusion in women's colleges, but this would have negative implications for the sport down the line. By entering the country via women's colleges, field hockey had absorbed a few significant connotations that would become important later on. The biggest consequence is the obvious one, but it bears explicit mention: when women "feminized" field hockey in order to protect their right to play, they also imparted onto the sport the same position of inferiority within society that they occupied (Brake 2010, 61). This is why not a single college or university in America today funds a men's field hockey scholarship (Schwartz, 121). The geographic distribution of the all-female Seven Sisters schools maps remarkably well onto field hockey's limited regional reach. Lastly, as a result of field hockey's origins in costly and elitist institutions, participation is noticeably skewed on class and racial lines. Private schools are much more likely to have offer field hockey than public schools, not to mention that there are costs to entry (an average field hockey stick costs at least fifty dollars, and cheaper ones can be dangerous because they shatter), a problem field hockey shares with sports like ice hockey and lacrosse (Conrad et al. 2014, 11). Because of structural racism that makes it more difficult for people of color to amass flexible resources, field hockey's elitist tendencies have also made it one of the least diverse sports. The story of field hockey is not

so different from that first thrust of feminism, when white suffragettes secured women the vote but ignored the reality that Jim Crow laws would prevent Black women from exercising that right for decades after.

In the present day, field hockey's unique role as one of the only overwhelmingly female-played sports in the United States makes a singular case study for how arbitrary gender norms continue to be reproduced in society (Fields 2004, 132). One of the biggest wins for the 1970s' second wave feminist movement was the passing of Title IX, which "prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex in education programs and activities that receive Federal financial assistance."[1] After 1972, female athletes persistently fought through courts for the opportunity to try out for traditionally male sports like football, wrestling, and ice hockey when equivalent female teams did not exist (Brake).[a] However, when boys attempted to follow that precedent in order to play field hockey, they were overwhelmingly dismissed. There were factors at play beyond the legal justifications for these rulings. Specifically, courts felt that letting boys play field hockey would be: (a) unsafe for the girls (or, in other words, assuming that gender is an appropriate proxy for size and strength); (b) unfair for the girls (which assumes that gender is an accurate predictor of skill); and (c) damaging to female participation in sport in general, because field hockey teams would suddenly become flooded with boys (who the court has already accepted will all be bigger and better than the girls) and push girls out, or at the very least take a spot that would otherwise have gone to a girl (Fields, 135–38).

Arguments (a) and (b) are based on generalizations, while argument (c) is a bit more complicated. The issue of safety is an easy trap, because males *are* bigger on average than females,

[a] From here forward, I will refrain from using gendered classifiers such as "female sports," even if it takes more words to do so. It is important to not use language that implies that something inherently belongs to one particular side of a socially constructed gender binary.

but there are flaws with using averages. If a five foot two inches, fourteen-year-old boy tried out for the football team, why is he any safer than a five foot eleven inches, one-hundred-and-forty-pound girl? If the issue was truly about safety, teams would be divided by height and weight, not sex. Picture a female field hockey player, at five foot two inches, one hundred and sixteen pounds, finding herself defending a five foot eleven inches, one-hundred-and-forty-pound boy playing his very first game. The size issue is not a factor, because anyone who is five foot two inches will almost always be the smallest player in the game no matter the gender identity of the opponent.[2] Beyond size advantage, is there any particular reason to assume that this male player – who just learned how to hold a stick – would suddenly transform into the best player on the pitch (Fields, 141)? In truth, there is no particular reason besides the sexist belief that genitals are directly related to skill. Notably, these points have negative implications for the prospect of transgender and non-binary participation in the sport because of their reliance on sex-based "biological" measures.[3]

Point (c) is trickier because there *are* reasons for preserving gender identity-segregated sports. The most popular and prestigious sports developed in male-dominant society to suit male physical excellence, not to mention that female athletes are systematically denied the support and resources that male athletes receive (Brake). The detainment of Brittney Griner in Russia has illuminated for many the precarious position of professional female athletes: even the highest paid WNBA players must play *two* basketball seasons every year in order to make enough money to justify all the time and energy that went into honing their craft in the short time they have before their abilities inevitably start to decline.[4] Until gender inequality can be addressed at deeper levels, it is important that female-identifying persons have spaces to excel without being penalized for structural obstacles that are out of their control. Unfortunately, the most troubling implication of blocking males from field hockey under gender equality legislation is also the subtlest, and it

speaks to the relative prestige given to "male sports" and "female sports" (Fields, 148). It's not just that schools only have girls' field hockey teams – it's that field hockey is a girls' *sport*, and courts consistently established that there had to be an overall pattern of gender- based discrimination at the athletic program in general in order for Title IX to apply to any one sport (Fields, 151). The argument is framed as if to say that boys had always *had* better opportunities, so giving them even more would not contribute to achieving gender equality; what it actually says is that boys always *have* better opportunities. Why would a boy who could play football choose field hockey instead? Implicit in this argument is the perception that being barred from playing field hockey is no loss at all for the male athlete, whereas being barred from football is a distinct injustice.

There's still an elephant in the room when talking about field hockey and gender: from middle school to the Olympics, most female field hockey players take the field in a skirt. At first glance, it is hard to imagine that athletes of this particular sport, which is played in a low, wide stance and requires a great deal of running, would perform best in a garment that is not conducive to any of those activities. Shorts, to wear underneath the skirt, might as well be part of the uniform except that they must be self-purchased, because the only way to play a full game of field hockey without exposing oneself is to spend the whole time sitting on the bench. This is about more than inconvenience, however – research shows that mandating restrictive and revealing sportswear has a real impact on young girls' desires to be active in a body-obsessed world (Howard 2021). Within the past decade, what female athletes can and cannot wear, and why, has become a serious topic of discussion, but people have been questioning the place of skirts in field hockey for far longer. As a curious high schooler, I was told that our uniform included "kilts" (if any skirt is a kilt, then I guess they were kilts) to honor the sport's Scottish heritage. This sentiment was echoed in a 1998

interview with the then-women's athletic director at Iowa State about another team's choice to (temporarily) leave the skirts behind, saying, "I was a bit dismayed, but I'm Scottish – I can't help feeling some misgivings" (Bostian 1998). But aren't kilts for men? Outside of the United States, male field hockey teams are well-established and thriving, but none of them wear "kilts" to honor Scotland (Xie 2004).[5] An op-ed by Tess Howard, a player on the women's British national team, doesn't mention Scotland at all, instead summarizing that skirts "derive from Victorian public schools where long skirted uniforms were used to ensure 'femininity' was not compromised whilst girls played 'masculine' sport" (2021). This is exactly what happened to create skirt mandates for women in tennis and golf, and it is the likeliest path for field hockey as well (Schultz 2014). The invented tradition that calls skirts, "kilts," cloaks an enduring presence of sexism in the sport.

Like tennis and golf, field hockey suffers from carrying too much of its past into the present, whether that be skirts or exclusivity. For every attempt to hide baked-in sexism by calling skirts, "kilts," there is an athletic scholarship given out to a rich white girl from New England (Thompson 2019). In over a century it has not managed to reach much beyond its original stomping grounds of the Northeast and what is now the Rust Belt (Schwartz, 122). Twenty of thirty-five players currently on the national team's roster are from the state of Pennsylvania. All thirty-five present as white (Gill 2007). The skirt is a vestigial nod to "respectability," but the kind of "respectability" that lives on in school dress codes that have zero sympathy for girls with body types that don't fit the Anglo- American standard, particularly women of color (Perry 2020). The complicated feminism of field hockey is reflective of the complicated historical legacy of feminism itself. Field hockey is a case study in progress: there is good, but progress is always more complicated than it appears.

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[1] https://www.federalregister.gov/d/2020-10512/p-313
[2] If the numbers seemed oddly specific, that is because I am speaking from a personal experience. I admit that he was bigger and faster than I, but then so was everyone else I played against. Read more about his story (https://www.lohud.com/story/sports/columnists/nancy-haggerty/2021/11/12/haggerty-female-athlete-victims-join-colin-ives-victims-his-ban/6386639001/) and a recent similar situation at my high school (https://tower.mastersny.org/7867/sports/co-ed-field-hockey-team-defends-against-pushback-from-other-schools/).
[3] https://www.cbsnews.com/news/transgender-athletes-rights-rebekah-bruesehoff-14-year-old/
[4] https://www.cnn.com/2022/03/31/us/brittney-griner-race-deconstructed-newsletter/index.html
[5] It isn't even remotely clear that field hockey is a Scottish invention.