This is the published version of a paper published in *Idrottsforum.org/Nordic sport science forum*.

Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

(Re)covering sporting women in history.
*Idrottsforum.org/Nordic sport science forum*

Access to the published version may require subscription.

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(Re)covering sporting women in history

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With her book *A contemporary History of Women’s Sport, Part One: Sporting Women, 1850–1960*, Jean Williams explicates an often omitted part of sport history, the history of women’s sports. However, Williams is not content with merely providing an extensive account of women’s sporting accomplishments by means of names in sporting competition result tables. Instead she addresses the very meaning of sport, and more importantly, she critically deliberates the gender-biased perspective so pervasive in traditional sport history research.

Williams starts off by discussing the concepts of sport, leisure, and recreation. What is being problematized is the difficulty in defining the distinctive features of each of these phenomena, which in turn affects the scope of the historical empirical material utilized in the book. For instance, Williams writes in a reference to Hunter Davies, that “…sport can be understood by the power, space, time resources and rules revealed through critical analysis of… boots, balls and haircuts” (p. 2). Consequently, Williams traces sporting women through empirical data consisting of contemporary material from the public domain at that time, as well as personal items of memorabilia and family history, which had been lent or donated. Also, interviews, memoirs and autobiographical sources were used in conjunction with archival research at institutions such as the International Olympic Museum, Lausanne; the FIFA collections in Zurich; and UEFA documentation in Nyon in Switzerland. Also, by including research at locations such as the Adidas archive in Herzogenerauch, Germany and the Fashion and Technology Institute, New York, Williams underlines the close ties between sports and consumerism from an historical perspective.

Thus, with a widened definition of sport, the physical endeavors undertaken by the women recounted in the book are quite varying, ranging from tennis to swimming the English Channel. The topical width is reflected in the titles of the different chapters, such as “Victorian Sporting Variety, Women’s Education and Writing”, “An Age of Speed”, and “Women, Sport and Culture: From the 1948 London Olympic Games to Rome 1960”. And not only does Williams (re)cover sport history from a gendered vantage point, but she also includes an intersectional approach by addressing the issues of class and how social stratification has affected access to physical activities for women. She points out that affluence was a significant but not exclusive enabling factor for athletic success; for instance, health politics made an impact on working women through the creation of all female sports teams in various nineteenth century British companies, such as the Dick, Kerr Ladies football team, based at the Strand Road tram building and light railway works (p. 123).
Even though Williams’ book primarily deals with historical aspects of women and gender issues in sports, the content should be of interest for anyone with a curiosity about sports and gender:

A third meaning of contemporary refers to what is current and still in existence. There is much obvious continuity in the change, not least the ways in which sport for women in the twenty-first century can still be defined by attitudes and customs that appear to be traditional, and may be of long standing. However, these structures and traditions have been constructed and maintained. Understanding how and why this has happened can tell us about how sport has been shaped by, and continues to form, our understanding of society. (p. 21)

Herein lies one of the core strengths of the book, as Williams directs the reader’s attention to what has been omitted in traditional sport history, and gives the contextual explanations for the omissions. Williams also offers a critical perspective on the field of feminist theory as she ponders how we can make use of contemporary sources of sport in order to look afresh at women’s experiences (p. 27). My personal experiences of academic gender studies, I regret to say, is that the topic of sporting women, and even more so, an historical account of women and sports, were completely absent throughout my education. Good news, then, that Williams’ objectives are extended to include critical reflexive accounts within the academic disciplines of both sports history and gender studies.

Continuing the discussion of feminism and sports in chapter 2, “The Olympic Games, Popular Imperialism and the ‘Woman Question’”, Williams addresses the question of sport and women’s emancipation, describing the fight for female inclusion in the Olympic Games as a pragmatic form of feminism and a practical application of feminism resulting in physical action and representation; yet, this leads to questions about different forms of feminism. In consequence, a divide between practical and theoretic feminism is being constructed. Nevertheless, it is my strong opinion that, for instance, writing an academic book about the much-neglected question of women in sports history very much is a feminist practice with practical results.

In conclusion, the first volume of Jean Williams’ A Contemporary History of Women’s Sport is a comprehensive overview of the place and role women in sports between the years 1850 and 1960. However, it is important to note that the spatial context is constrained to a past Great Britain and British Empire and that the diffusion of sports is being contextualized through a mono-directional perspective, originating from Britain and its Empire. But this does not compromise this book’s contribution to the field of sports history, it rather underlines the necessity of further research, which indeed was one of the main motifs for writing it. Thus, by reading Williams’ well conceived and important book and realizing the scope of the empirical material, I become ever more curious as to possible new ways of investigating and comprehending the area of gender and sports.

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