Part 3: Women in Sport

The limited access of girls to athletics—which teach boys the values of aggressiveness and winning—may be one reason why females often are underachievers. Now the second sex is tired of being . . .

PROGRAMMED TO BE LOSERS

by BIL GILBERT and NANCY WILLIAMSON

The arguments most often used to justify discrimination against women in sports—that athletics are bad for their health and femininity, that women are not skillful enough or interested in playing games—have on the surface a nice paternalistic, even altruistic, quality. Recent studies indicate such assumptions are incorrect and self-serving nonsense. It simply happens to be in the best interest of the male athletic establishment to maintain the existing situation. Anything beyond token sexual equality in athletics represents a formidable threat to male pride and power. “The status of the female athlete is not something implicit in the nature of the female but rather a manifestation of the ego of the male,” says Dr. Ken Foreman, the head of the Seattle Pacific College physical education department and a track coach. “Males simply cannot tolerate a serious challenge from a woman.”

Any discussion of collective egos is tricky and extremely speculative. But there are numerous incidents that suggest, at least in competitive sports, the masculinity of males is a more tender and perishable commodity than the femininity of females.

• Charles Maas, secretary of the Indiana State Coaches Association, commented glumly on a recent decision by his state’s Supreme Court permitting girls to compete with boys in noncontact sports, such as golf, tennis, track and swimming: “There is the possibility that a boy would be beaten by a girl and as a result be ashamed to face his family and friends. I wonder if anybody has stopped to think what that could do to a young boy.”

• Ellen Cornish, a senior at Frederick (Md.) High School, is one of the best distance runners among American women, good enough to have been
The boy she beat was embarrassed to death. It ruined him. I really wish I hadn’t done it.”

Male defensiveness about female athletic prowess is not restricted to head-to-head confrontations. Accomplished women athletes, even when they are competing against another, seem to ruffle the psyches of many men. That there are many women athletes superior to men is indisputable. There surely are a hundred or so male tennis players who could defeat Billie Jean King, but there are hundreds of thousands who would be fortunate to win a set from King. The same situation prevails in most sports. “For obvious reasons it is often the more sedentary, unathletic, spectator-oriented man who has the most derogatory things to say about outstanding sportswomen,” says Ken Foreman.

A frequent ploy used to maintain the illusion of total male athletic superiority is to compliment a skillful woman by saying, “She plays almost like a man.” (There is a barb in the compliment—the insinuation that this babe’s hormones are probably so weird that she is or nearly is a man.) Not long ago a male coach commented on the style of Micki King, the only American diver to win a gold medal at the Munich Olympics. The coach said King “dives like a man,” a statement that drew a sharp comment from Jack Scott, the athletic director of Oberlin College: “My reaction on reading the quote was that she sure as hell does not dive like me or any other man I ever met. In fact, she does not dive like 99% of the men in America. What she obviously does is dive correctly.”

Just as many men feel menaced by the athletic activities of women, many organizations are becoming nervous over the rising expectations of women in sport. Long-standing by-and-for-male principles are being threatened, as are by-and-for-male budgets. “I know the men who head the high school athletic associations in all 50 states, and I don’t think there are more than three or four of them who genuinely want to see a girls’ program comparable to that of boys,” says Wayne Cooley, the aggressive director of the Iowa Girls’ High School Athletic Union. “Some are hostile; a more common attitude is apathy. Right now some state associations are getting a lot of heat from parents and from courts, so they are putting in token programs for girls. They will hire a woman assistant who is not aggressive and schedule a few so-called state championships and then they let the whole thing go.”

The bedrock reason for this institutional fear—and the fierce resistance to improving girls’ athletics—has been pinpointed by Harvard’s Dr. Clayton Thomas: “Women traditionally have not been allowed the same share of funds for athletics and recreational equipment. The appearance of girls’ teams to utilize sports facilities not previously required by them will have great economic impact on schools, colleges and communities. If, by some miracle, women suddenly began using public and private athletic facilities to even half the extent they are used by men, then the overcrowding would be catastrophic.”

Whether or not the situation would be a catastrophe depends on one’s outlook. But a marked increase in participation by girls and women certainly would bring about radical change. Most organized sport in the U.S. falls into three categories, that which is sponsored by colleges and universities, by public-school systems and by community recreation organizations. It is a guess—and probably a conservative one—that no more than 1% of all college and university athletic funds are spent on women. In junior and senior high schools, girls get perhaps 5% of the funds and facilities. In community recreation programs the figure may be as high as 20%. If females were given as little as 25% of the resources, the shape of the athletic system would be altered far more drastically than it could be by all the designated pinch hitters, franchise shifters, NCAA rulemakers and carping reporters rolled together.

If they found it necessary to provide something more than token programs for girls and women, athletic executives would have only two alternatives. The first would be to raise funds to be used for women’s facilities, coaching salaries and other operating expenses. But faced with financial crises and taxpayers’ revolts, most schools and communities are looking for ways to decrease sports expenditures, not increase them. Therefore, the prospects of upping athletic budgets by an across-the-board 25% are slim to nonexistent. So the only practical way to finance substantial new programs for girls is to take resources from the programs now operated for the benefit of males.

The present system is able to function
as it does—providing elaborate, perhaps even excessive, facilities for boys and men—only because half the population has been excluded from participating. But most of the funds are public ones, contributed by both men and women, and in this rests the seed of the change that may come.

What many athletic administrators fear is what has happened in Iowa City. In the spring of 1971 some parents and daughters there began protesting against sexual discrimination in the athletic programs of the city school system. (Until last year the larger cities in the state had held out against rural Iowa's unique program that has brought sexual equality in athletics to the small towns.) There were only two competitive sports for girls in Iowa City schools, tennis and swimming. Officials did not know, or would not say, how much money was being spent on the girls' program, but it was known that some $60,000 a year was devoted to boys' sports. The athletic director of the school system, Robert White, said that nothing could be done to change the situation. He said all available funds and facilities were being used. The parents' group did not accept this answer and engaged an American Civil Liberties Union lawyer. In the fall of 1971 the school board, under legal pressure, agreed to allot $2,000 more for girls' sports and sponsor additional teams in gymnastics and golf. This token victory did not satisfy parents, and the battle has continued. If there is only X amount of funds available for sports, the parents and their legal advisers say, then the girls are entitled to something approaching one half X dollars. If the only way this sum can be collected is to take it from existing boys' programs—then so be it.

At one point during the controversy, White admitted that his athletic department had a cash reserve of some $4,500 that was being held “for a rainy day.” This prompted a school board member to remark, “It looks like the precipitation is about to fall.”

It appears that many institutions and agencies are in for a spell of wet weather. The discriminatory regulations of high school athletic associations in California, Connecticut, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, Nebraska, Nevada, New Jersey, New York and Ohio have been or are being challenged in the courts. In all but a very few cases judges have sided with the women and ordered that existing practices be changed.

But an even worse storm is brewing. The U.S. Education Amendments of 1972 include an adjunct labeled Title IX. Title IX forbids sex discrimination in any institutions using federal funds (the majority of schools in the country). A young, brisk lawyer named Gwen Gregory, who works in the Office for Civil Rights of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, is charged with drawing up government guidelines for the implementation of Title IX. Gregory's overwhelming concern at the present time is the sex discrimination in sport.

"We have been talking to individuals who are concerned about the problem," Gregory says. "Two approaches have been suggested. The first is backed by the more active women's groups. They feel we should push for straight equality. That is, if a school plays football, then any girl who is interested should be permitted to try out for that team. Legally, of course, that is the easiest approach." It is also the approach that would most please male coaches. If the fight is made on the grounds of strict equality, it will give champions of the status quo a beautiful defensive opening. For example, an athletic director would open the football team to girls. When none or only an occasional girl came out for the team he could then say, in all honesty, that he had done his best. So far as girls' soccer or field hockey was concerned, he could argue that there was no need for such programs since girls had the same opportunity as boys to play football.

"Many people are opposed to this plan," says Lawyer Gregory. "Because there seems to be a real difference in physical abilities between men and women, equal mixed competition presents problems. The other approach calls for facilities and funds to be more or less equally divided between the sexes. If, for instance, you have football for boys, then you should have soccer or field hockey, say, for girls, and these teams should be given equivalent support.

"One of the big hangups in this is that 'separate but equal' is a dirty phrase to anyone involved in civil rights. Realistically, separate but equal may be the best answer in athletics. But," concludes Gregory, "there is no doubt about the need for equality or the fact that it does not exist now."

The HEW Department's plan to deal with sex discrimination in sports probably will be completed in July. Then the Feds will be ready and apparently willing to go into action. "I presume," says Gregory, "we will proceed as we have in other civil rights cases. That is, we will act on complaints submitted to us."

Which reduces the issue to the following dialogue:

"You mean if there is a school where they spent $30,000 on boys' sports and $500 on girls' sports and a girl or her parents don't like the situation, she can complain to you?"

"Exactly."

"And where should the complaint be sent?"

"The address is: Director, Office for Civil Rights, Department of HEW, Washington, D.C. 20201."

"And then what might happen?"

"Based on past procedures we would first try to determine if the allegations were substantially correct. If they were, we would initiate conversations with the school involved. Often nothing more than this is necessary."

"But if talking did not produce any action, what would happen?"

"Our final recourse is to recommend federal funds be withheld from the institution until the discriminatory situation is cleared up."

"And this might happen in the case of a school that discriminated against girls in athletics?"

"Oh, yes, of course."

The women's liberation movement has stirred up interest in athletic equality even though the most active women's rightists have paid little attention to sport. The most aggressive leaders of the movement have been more cerebral than physical types. Robin Morgan, a poet, editor and former child actress (Dagmar in the TV series Mama), is what is often called a radical feminist. She was a founder of WITCH (Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell) and an organizer of the anti-Miss America demonstrations. "We were slow getting into sports because many of us didn't know the field," says Morgan. "But now the movement is becoming active in this area. We've become conscious of the body. It is a woman's right to control her body, be it wanting an abortion or wanting to strengthen it through sports."

Another far more conservative group, women physical education teachers, is
beginning to agitate, if in a very genteel way, for better girls' athletic programs. In the past many members of this profession have been strongly opposed to females taking part in competitive sports.

Until a decade ago the Division for Girls' and Women's Sports, a National Education Association affiliate made up of female physical educators, advised against interscholastic sports. Though this bias has been abolished as an official policy, many older DGWS members now teaching in schools remain cool toward out-of-gym-class games for girls.

"This profession is still dominated by women of my age group [fortyish]," says an active leader in physical-education affairs who for obvious reasons wishes to remain anonymous. "A good many of these people still are afraid of what competition will do to girls. I think they also are afraid of what competition will do to them. For years they have had easy jobs. They bring in the girls for a class, let them spend 15 minutes putting on their gym suits, then spend 15 minutes with some ladylike archery or volleyball, and the last 15 minutes of the period are devoted to taking a shower. Marks are given out on the basis of how often a girl remembers to bring her gym suit and how well she showers.

"These women, who have been sitting on their fannies for years, know that if girls' teams are organized, they are going to be expected to coach them. They are going to have to get out after school and compete for the girls' interest, compete against band, the dramatic club, boys and all the rest. Also, if they are going to coach, they are going to have to teach the girls something. As coaches, they themselves are going to be judged, because at the heart of competitive sports there is the win-lose situation, how well you do. All of which terrifies women who have not been challenged or challenged anybody in a long time. Many of the older teachers are retiring and their places are being taken by girls who have an interest in competitive sports and may even have been competitors themselves. Girls in their 20s now entering teaching are much more aggressive. They enjoy the risks that go along with sports."

To give the devil his due, not all men are chauvinists when it comes to women's athletics. Men who by accident or design have come to be coaches of women's teams—Ken Foreman in Washington, Harmon Brown in California, Doyle Weaver in Texas, Ed Temple in Tennessee, Jack Griffin in Maryland—and many others are effective campaigners for improved girls' programs. Throughout the country there are a number of school administrators who believe that improving girls' sports is desirable and necessary.

One is James Bergene, principal of the 2,000-student C.M. Russell High School in Great Falls, Mont. Bergene feels that his $15,000 girls' program needs to be upgraded. "If athletics have a place in education, then they are as important for girls as boys," he says. "If they have no general educational value, if they are just something for boys and to entertain townspeople and alumni, then we should get rid of them. Any principal who is willing to support a strong boys' athletic program and is content to have a weak girls' one has no business calling himself an educator."

Jack Manley, the athletic director at Catonsville (Md.) Community College, holds similar notions: "We have eight girls teams here and 10 for the men. Except for that difference, we divide everything down the middle. Men and women coaches are paid the same for the same sports. The girls get the same kind of uniforms and equipment. They travel the same way that the men do and get the same use of the same practice facilities. In fact, the biggest single expense we've had since I've been here [1959] is the $3,400 we spent this February to send our girls' volleyball team to Utah for the college championship. Some men on our staff said I was crazy to spend that kind of money on girls. I told them it was an honor for our girls to be good enough to play in the championship against big schools. After all, the chances aren't very good that our men's teams will ever compete against the likes of USC or Kansas."

Catonsville is one of an increasing number of small colleges experimenting with intentionally mixed teams, i.e., squads which, by regulation, have so many girls and so many boys. Its intercollegiate badminton and bowling teams are organized in this way, and the tennis and golf squads soon may be. It is a relatively simple administrative maneuver that might do more to bring about sexual equality in high school and college athletics than an army of lawyers. "Forget all that stuff about men and women playing against each other; that wouldn't be much of a game," says one fearless observer of the athletic scene. "Let's just say you have men's and women's teams, and you score them together like the Russians do in track meets. Take basketball as an example—the NCAA championship. Instead of one game, you have a doubleheader, the UCLA men playing the Memphis State men and the UCLA women against the Memphis women. You add up the points from the two games and the college that has the highest total wins the national championship, wins the big trophy, wins Coach of the Year and all the rest. You can be sure that John Wooden and Gene Bartow are going to have girls' teams and good ones. Those girls are going to get everything in the way of help that the boys do, maybe more. Do that down the line and things are going to become equal quickly. Whether or not that would be good for the Republic is something else again."

Given the climate of the times, the reexamination of the female role and the apparent willingness of courts to back demands for better athletic opportunities for girls, it appears that many of the policies of the past are due for a change. The changes will affect not only the athletic system but society as well.
If substantially larger numbers of females take part in competitive athletics, the quality of interest in and status derived from this play will increase appreciably. Sports previously thought too "difficult" or "physical" for girls may be opened to them. The demand for coaches and trainers, as well as for equipment specifically designed for females, will increase. In time, women's sports will attract greater public interest. The press will cover women's athletics more frequently and seriously. Sports heroines will be discovered. Women's professional sports will become more popular, more lucrative and thus more attractive in career terms.

Any large increase in participation by girls and women will radically affect boys' and men's sports. Resources allocated to male sports will be reduced, but there are many who do not regard such a cutback as a disaster. Some of the extravagant features that have come to characterize—and often corrupt—men's athletics will be cut away, too. Such enforced moderation may be in the best interest of both sexes.

What will athletic equality mean for females? One can only guess. David Axtor, an iconoclastic educator, former collegiate football player and coach, says "In America we use athletics extensively to teach, not fact so much as attitudes. Above all, we value athletics because they are competitive. That is, they teach that achievement and success are desirable, that they are worth disciplining oneself for. By keeping girls out of sports, we have denied them this educational experience. Our male-dominated society prefers females to be physically and psychologically dependent. Denying them athletic opportunities has been a good way of molding girls into the kind of humans we want them to be. Better athletic programs will develop more aggressive females, women with confidence who value personal achievement and have a strong sense of identity. I think that would be a good thing for us all."

Ellen Cornish, the distance runner who was pulled off the track when it was thought she might beat the boys in the high school dual meet, says, "Yes, I think I am more aggressive than most girls and maybe more aggressive than a lot of boys. I definitely think sports have helped to make me what I am, and I'm not sorry about it. I have some strong ideas about what I want to be and I don't feel that I have to fit into a role which other people assign me."

For most of the last seven years Cornish has devoted two or three hours a day, seven days a week, in an effort to develop her talents as a runner. Now, at 18, she is in the process of "retiring" from track. Next fall she will enter college as a pre-med student. Despite her years, she is a remarkably forceful, articulate and thoughtful human.

"I love to run and decided I was going to become the best runner I could," Cornish says. "People may have thought I was freaky, but that hasn't bothered me. What they want to think is their business and what I want to think and be is mine. I don't want to offend anyone, to put them down, but I want to be what I think is honest, I'd like to live my whole life that way. I probably won't run much anymore, but I do want to be something exceptional. I know I'll have to work at it and may have to live differently than most girls do, but now that doesn't frighten me at all. If I had not spent the time in track, I think I would have been frightened."

Certainly not the last words to be heard on the subject, but some persuasive enough to make a good conclusion to any discussion of what participation in sports may mean for girls and women, are those of Dr. Kathryn Clarenbach, professor of political science at the University of Wisconsin: "The overemphasis on protecting girls from strain or injury, and underemphasis on developing skills and experiencing teamwork, fits neatly into the pattern of the second sex. Girls are the spectators and the cheerleaders. They organize the pep clubs, sell pompons, make cute, abbreviated costumes, strut a bit between halves and idolize the current football hero. This is perfect preparation for the adult role of women—to stand decoratively on the sidelines of history and cheer on the men who make the decisions. Women who have had the regular experience of performing before others, of learning to win and to lose, of cooperating in team efforts, will be far less fearful of running for office, better able to take public positions on issues in the face of public opposition. By working toward some balance in the realm of physical activity, we may indeed begin to achieve a more wholesome, democratic balance in all phases of our life."