



Women, Sport and Modernity in Interwar Britain

Fiona Skillen

Peter Lang

This book offers a unique examination of women's increasing involvement in sport during the period 1919–1939. Focusing primarily on sites of participation, it analyses where and how women accessed sport and their participation across class, age and marital groups. It also demonstrates the diverse ways in which sport was incorporated into women's everyday lives, with particular emphasis on the important and yet often neglected area of informal participation, so fundamental to understandings of women's sport. The unique combination of in-depth studies, drawing on the voices of the women themselves through oral testimonies, and the tracing of broad national and international trends, contributes to an innovative and comprehensive exploration of the evolution of women's sports participation across Britain during this significant period.

Fiona Skillen completed her PhD in the department of Economic and Social History at the University of Glasgow. She is currently a lecturer in Sport Management, Glasgow School for Business and Society, Glasgow Caledonian University.



Women, Sport and Modernity in Interwar Britain

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Acronyms and abbreviations

AEWFHA	All-England Women's Field Hockey Association
<i>BMJ</i>	<i>British Medical Journal</i>
B of E	Board of Education (England)
HMSO	Her Majesty's Stationery Office
IWS	Industrial Welfare Society
LGU	Ladies' Golf Union
LTA	Lawn Tennis Association
NAS	National Archives of Scotland
SED	Scottish Education Department
SLGA	Scottish Ladies' Golf Association
SLTA	Scottish Lawn Tennis Association
SWHA	Scottish Women's Hockey Association

Introduction

Girls have been rushed to the goal posts and wickets, and not to carry a hockey stick or a net ball is regarded as a sign of decadence and eccentricity.

Women first became actively engaged in sport from the late Victorian period, however this participation was largely confined to the elite. It was not until the years immediately after the First World War that sport was truly opened up to women of all classes. The interwar period was a remarkable time for women's sport: during these years educational, municipal and work-based sports provision became established across Britain. The growth of these types of provisions ensured that there were local, affordable and accessible sports facilities available to women across the United Kingdom for the first time. Private provision, in the form of suburban clubs, was also increasing with the number of clubs and membership levels rising throughout the interwar period. While sports organizations and associations established at the end of the nineteenth century also took on a new importance. Organizations such as the All-England Women's Field Hockey Association grew from 10 clubs in 1895 to 2,100 by 1939, while the Lawn Tennis Association grew from 1830 clubs affiliated in 1926 to 2,874 by 1938.¹ *Women, Sport and Modernity* offers a detailed exploration of these developments in women's participation in sport in interwar Britain.

Over the last decade there has been a growing body of research around women's sport and leisure.² This research has raised questions about the ways in which we think about leisure in relation to gender. *Women, Sport*

1 See Chapter 2 for detailed discussion of this growth.

2 Jennifer Hargreaves, *Sporting Females: Critical issues in the history and sociology of women's sport* (London: Routledge, 1994); Mike Huggins, 'And Now, Something for the Ladies': representations of women's sport in cinema newsreels 1918–1939', *Women's History Review* 16/5, November (2007), 681–700.

and Modernity builds on and develops this research by inserting the voices of women themselves. By drawing directly on women's own experiences this study probes the role of agency, choice and negotiation within the realm of everyday life. Uniquely, this book questions how gender influences the ways in which people engage in sport. It also questions traditional approaches to studying sport, through examination of organized participation, and instead puts forth the novel approach of studying involvement through an examination of 'sites of participation'. While existing studies have sought to provide a broad chronology of female participation, they have overlooked the importance and value of in-depth local studies. *Women, Sport and Modernity* addresses this by examining the development of women's participation in sport in Britain between 1920 and 1937 drawing on case studies from across the central belt of Scotland.

Gender roles and relations

The two decades following the end of the First World War were marked by years of severe economic decline and uncertainty, dominated by high levels of unemployment and sporadic political unrest with wide regional variations. Against this backdrop it seems unlikely that sports participation should have increased. However as Howkins and Lowerson as well as Hargreaves, have demonstrated, the rapid growth of consumerism, and with it leisure provision, ensured that many people were, for the first time, gaining access to new activities across Britain.³ They have shown that although participation and spectatorship across a range of sporting activities increased, levels and equality of experience varied across region, sex and class. There has been little detailed exploration of the ways in

3 Hargreaves, *Sporting Females*, 112; Alan Howkins and John Lowerson, *Trends in Leisure, 1919–1930* (London: The Sports Council and Social Science Research Council, 1979).

which women participated in this new trend. This seems rather surprising considering that gender relations in this period have been the subject of thorough scrutiny by historians. The interwar years are regarded as a pivotal and transitional period during which traditional gender relations were challenged and re-negotiated. Historians are divided over the nature of these changes. For some early gender historians, the years immediately after World War One provided greater liberty for women. However, this view was challenged in the 1980s by those who saw greater continuities in women's lives with earlier periods than had previously been acknowledged. It was argued that the interwar years were marked by a floundering of the feminist movement, continued conservatism and an adherence to 'traditional' gender roles.⁴ Far from being liberating years for women, it was suggested that older gender dichotomies were reinforced and 'the ethos of domesticity' was all-pervasive.⁵

Historians such as Susan Kingsley Kent and Martin Pugh have argued that the women's movement faltered during these years because it could not counter the all-pervasive ideal of domesticity.⁶ This 'backlash' model, which highlights the media and government's attempts to reassert the importance of the family unit and women's place within the home, is substantiated from several perspectives. This model indicates that the increased emphasis on domesticity and women's roles targeted all groups of women, although often in different ways, unbound by class, age or marital status. While not an advocate of the 'backlash' model, Soland has acknowledged that, for some, there was an entrenchment of traditional attitudes towards women's roles and an active attempt by these groups to enforce these ideals. Soland has argued that many contemporaries believed that during the years

4 Deirdre Beddoe, *Back to Home and Duty: Women between the wars 1918–1939* (London: Pandora, 1989); Billie Melman, *Women and the Popular Imagination in the twenties: Flappers and Nymphs* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988).

5 Adrian Bingham, "An Era of Domesticity"? Histories of Women and Gender in Interwar Britain, *Cultural and Social History* 1 (2004), 225–33, 225.

6 Susan Kingsley Kent, *Making Peace: The Reconstruction of Gender in Interwar Britain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain, 1914–1959* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1992).

immediately following the war they were 'witnessing the rapid dismantling of all forms of traditional womanhood'.⁷ She believes that gender issues were at the centre of many debates during the early twenties because gender roles were seen as an intrinsic part of society: by attempting to solidify these roles, she argues, it was felt that greater social stability could be achieved. These attempts to regulate gender roles encompassed a variety of areas, many of which have been cited by advocates of the 'backlash' theory, such as the introduction of legislation to protect and unite the family unit, as enshrined in the Married Women's Maintenance Act, 1922 and the Guardianship of Infants Act, 1925.

Similarly, the increase in 'advice' literature concerning child-rearing, housework and cooking, found in newspapers and magazines aimed at readerships of both young single and married women, has often been cited as evidence of a greater focus on women's traditional roles. Such literature sought to emphasize the duties of women to their families and the wider importance of their roles as wives and especially mothers.⁸ In conjunction with an emphasis on these 'special' roles the consequences of neglecting their duties, or worse still, avoiding these roles altogether were highlighted in scandal stories in magazines and paperbacks.⁹ Although magazines and newspapers predominately focused on women's roles within the family unit, the media also dwelt on the 'problem' of women's leisure.¹⁰ However, what has often been overlooked by advocates of the 'backlash' model is the diversity of material and attitudes within these publications. Articles and advice on activities outside the home were often featured. Sport in particular proved a popular topic for comment. Discussions in the press focused on all aspects of women's leisure pursuits, from where and when women chose to pursue their interests, to what was appropriate for them

7 Brigitte Soland, *Becoming Modern: Young Women and the Reconstruction of Womanhood in the 1920s* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 5.

8 For more in-depth discussions of the role of the press see Beddoe, *Back to Home*, 8–9; Melman, *Women and Popular Imagination*, 15–19.

9 Soland, *Becoming Modern*, 5–6.

10 Ibid, 5.

to wear, participate in and with whom.¹¹ Despite this wealth of material few studies have explored women's leisure and, more specifically, women's sports participation.¹²

Approaches to women's sport and leisure history

Recent research has questioned the robustness of the 'backlash' theory. As Bingham has highlighted, it is clear to see why many researchers have seen this period as one of containment and re-emphasis of traditional roles for women. When the focus is solely on certain aspects of employment and politics the picture is bleak.¹³ Yet the work of Alexander, Langhamer, Bingham, Todd and Soland, amongst others, has sought to question the idea of the interwar years as being characterized by domesticity and retreat.¹⁴ These historians have instead pieced together a narrative which suggests

- 11 The only detailed discussion of this is my own work, "‘Woman and the Sport Fetish’: Modernity, consumerism and sports participation in interwar Britain", *International Journal of the History of Sport* 29/15, (2012), 750–65; "‘It’s possible to play the game marvellously and at the same time look pretty and be perfectly fit’: Sport, Women and Fashion in Interwar Britain", *Costume* 47, May (2012), 165–79. Also see Adrian Bingham, *Gender, Modernity, and the Popular Press in Inter-War Britain* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004).
- 12 The notable exceptions to this are Clare Langhamer, *Women's Leisure in England 1920–1960* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), which has explored women's leisure broadly, and the short studies of Jennifer Hargreaves, *Sporting Females*, 119, and Huggins, 'And Now, Something for the Ladies'.
- 13 Bingham, 'An Era of Domesticity'.
- 14 Sally Alexander, 'Becoming a Woman in London in the 1920s and 1930s', in *Becoming a Woman* (New York: New York University Press, 1995); Clare Langhamer, *Women's Leisure in England*; Soland, *Becoming Modern*; Selina Todd, *Young Women, Work and Family in England 1918–1950* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Bingham, 'An Era of Domesticity', 232 and David Fowler, 'Teenage Consumers? Young wage-earners and leisure in Manchester, 1919–1939', in Andrew Davies and Simon Fielding, eds, *Workers' Worlds* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992).

that the period was one in which women self-consciously articulated a new female modernity by drawing 'upon real changes in the political, social, economic and sexual position of women'.¹⁵ This new body of research stresses the importance of age, class, marital status and geographical region in influencing women's experience of 'modernity' in the interwar years. Such an approach has much to offer to an understanding of the growth of sports participation. Many of these studies have indicated that participation in the newly developing consumerism and leisure activities took on a new significance for many women during the interwar years.

Several studies have focused broadly on the growth and development of leisure during the interwar period in Britain.¹⁶ The idea of 'social levelling', whereby people could experience the same events and pursue the same leisure interests regardless of background, through the growth of mass consumerism, has been given a significant place in recent studies.¹⁷ Indeed this work has highlighted that the growth of consumer culture during the interwar period had the potential to allow people of all classes to pursue similar interests. The growth of the cinema, radio and spectator sports are frequently cited as indicators of shared cross-class interests. However other studies, such as those of Langhamer, Davies and Holt, have refuted this, instead indicating that although the growth of leisure provisions did hold the potential to allow a wider audience of people to pursue a range of activities, in reality class remained an important factor in shaping the location, frequency and quality of the experience.¹⁸ Class could, and did, affect experience. This book will explore the ways in which this was true of sporting experiences for women in interwar Britain.

15 Bingham, 'An Era of Domesticity', 230.

16 Davies and Fielding, eds, *Workers' Worlds*; Andrew Davies, *Leisure, Gender and Poverty: working-class culture in Salford and Manchester* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1992); Stephen Jones, *Sport, Politics and the Working Class: organized labour and sport in inter-war Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988); John Benson, *The Rise of Consumer Society in Britain 1880-1980* (London: Longman, 1994).

17 See Davies and Fielding, *Workers' Worlds*.

18 Langhamer, *Women's Leisure in England 1920-1960*; Davies, *Leisure, Gender and Politics*; Richard Holt, *Sport and the British: A Modern History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 132-34.

Despite a number of studies focusing on a range of aspects of women's lives in the interwar years, few have explored women's leisure patterns in detail.¹⁹ Amongst those that have, little attention has been paid to the wide range of pastimes being taken up during this period. Davies and others have dwelt on the impact of the rapidly developing consumerism of the period and its social levelling effects on leisure habits but have paid little or no attention to their impact on sports participation or spectatorship amongst women.²⁰ Rather, focus has been centred on the rapidly expanding market of cinema-going and to a lesser extent dancehall attendance.²¹ Indeed, recent research has tended to concentrate exclusively on the importance of these two activities for working-class women, and the role of sport as a pastime for this group has barely been considered. However, not only have Langhamer and Soland illustrated that this period was one of growing access to leisure and changing expectations of all women across the classes, but their research highlights that the female body was an important focal point for discourses of modernity.²² It is perhaps unsurprising therefore that the few studies which have touched on female sporting participation during the interwar period indicate that there was a marked increase in levels of active participation amongst women across Britain.²³ Unprecedented numbers of women were not only taking up 'traditional' sports, such as golf and tennis, but they were also entering into hitherto 'male' activities, such as football, hockey and motor racing. Studies by both sports and

- 19 The three notable exceptions to this are Jennifer Hargreaves, *Sporting Females*; Langhamer, *Women's Leisure in England 1920–1960*; Huggins, 'And Now, Something for the Ladies'.
- 20 Davies and Fielding, eds, *Workers' Worlds*; Davies, *Leisure, Gender and Poverty*; Benson, *Rise of Consumer Society*.
- 21 Fowler, *Teenage wage earners*; Langhamer, *Women's Leisure*. The exception to this is Jones' *Sport, Politics and the Working Class*, although the experiences of women are not explored in detail.
- 22 Langhamer, *Women's Leisure in England*; Soland, *Becoming Modern*. See also Todd, *Young Women, Work and Family*.
- 23 It is worth noting, however, that although these are useful studies, until now there has been very little in the way of statistical evidence to substantiate these studies and highlight the differences in experience in relation to class. Hargreaves, *Sporting Females*, 119 and Huggins, 'And Now, Something for the Ladies'.

gender historians have focused on levels of participation in sport but they have, in the main, neglected to explore the experiences and motivations of women's participation in sporting activities.²⁴

In the gender history research which has focused on women's leisure, few studies have acknowledged the place of sport within women's lives. Nonetheless these studies do offer frameworks in which women's participation within the sporting arena can be examined. The studies of Langhamer, Davies and Todd all highlight the centrality of gender discourses, employment, marriage and children to the ways in which women spent their leisure time. Indeed stage in life cycle, it has been argued, is one of the primary influences on women's leisure choices. Moreover, class has also been argued to have had an important role to play in understanding women's sports participation. Class, Hargreaves argues, 'accentuates' gender difference. Factors such as free time, access to childcare, transport, private clubs and disposable income become even more significant issues when class is taken into consideration.²⁵ It is precisely because of these reasons that working-class women are less represented amongst sportswomen.²⁶ Indeed, Hargreaves has demonstrated that when examining sporting participation amongst women in relation to stage in life cycle, at every stage

24 Although research has been published regarding the trend of increasing participation, few of the studies have any statistical data to corroborate them. See Soland, *Becoming Modern*; Catriona Parratt, *More Than Mere Amusements* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2000); Langhamer, *Women's Leisure in England*; Jane Lewis, *Women in England 1870–1950: Sexual Divisions and Social Change* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1984); Stephen G. Jones, *Workers at Play: a social and economic history of leisure 1918–39* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986); Howkins and Lowerson, *Trends in Leisure, 1919–1930*; Davies, *Leisure, Gender and Poverty*; James Mangan and Roberta Park, eds, *From 'Fair Sex' to Feminism* (London: Frank Cass, 1987); Allan Guttman, *A History of Women's Sports* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991); Hargreaves, *Sporting Females*; Kathleen McCrone, *Sport and the Physical Emancipation of English Women 1870–1914* (London: Routledge, 1988) and Patricia Vertinsky, *The Eternally Wounded Woman: Women, doctors and exercise in the late nineteenth century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990).

25 Hargreaves, *Sporting Females*, 137.

26 *Ibid*, 137.

those from working-class backgrounds were less represented than those from the middle classes.²⁷

Sports history research has traditionally focused on the male experience.²⁸ Women's experiences were either missing from such narratives or marginalized. Studies which do feature sportswomen have been either biographical accounts of exceptional individuals or general histories of specific sports. In the latter, women's participation is often paid a passing reference or sidelined into a small subsection.²⁹ There are a few exceptions to this. Such studies have sought to redress this balance and, by focusing on women's experiences, have partially uncovered the varied and complex development of women's sport. However in an attempt to highlight the long evolution of women's sport such research has often considered vast periods of time and geography. These works provide valuable insights into women's sports but have only scratched the surface.³⁰

Marxist feminists and radical feminists have sought to redress the balance by developing frameworks in which, they argue, women's leisure can be better understood.³¹ Capitalism, and more specifically the class system,

27 Ibid. 138.

28 Carol Osborne and Fiona Skillen, 'The State of Play: Women and British Sports History', in *Women and Sports History*, Carol Osborne and Fiona Skillen, eds (London: Routledge, 2011), 1–7 and Mangan and Park, eds, *From 'Fair Sex' to Feminism* (London: Frank Cass, 1987), 1.

29 Osborne and Skillen, 'The State of Play', 2–3. For example, as Kay has also highlighted, women's sport is only paid 'fleeting reference' in one of leading books in the area, Richard Holt and Tony Mason, *Sport in Britain, 1945–2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). Joyce Kay, 'A Window of Opportunity? Preliminary thoughts on women's sport in post-war Britain', in *Women and Sports History*, Carol Osborne and Fiona Skillen, eds (London: Routledge, 2011), 196–218, 198. Also see Holt, *Sport and the British*.

30 Ibid, Guttman, *A History of Women's Sports*; Hargreaves, *Sporting Females*; McCrone, *Sport and the Physical Emancipation of English Women 1870–1914*; Vertinsky, *The Eternally Wounded Woman*.

31 For a detail critique of these approaches see Mary Boutilier and Lucinda Giovanni, eds, *Sporting Woman* (London: Human Kinetics, 2000) and Hargreaves, *Sporting Females*, 16–35.

are identified by Marxist feminists as the cause of female oppression.³² Women's access to sport and leisure has traditionally been understood in direct relation to their 'place' within society. In turn access to leisure time had been viewed in direct relation to paid work; leisure was viewed as the rightful reward for hard paid labour. Thus, it is argued, women's role within the home has traditionally resulted in their access to leisure being subordinate to men's. A man's participation in the economy as breadwinner for his family ensured that he had an 'earned' right to leisure time. Women by contrast have traditionally been associated with the roles of wives and mothers and are thus 'non-earning' members of the community. As such they do not 'earn' the right to leisure time. Working women should, in this model, have been allowed leisure time, having 'earned' the right through their active participation in the formal economy, but they were often saddled with the double burden of having to work and fulfil domestic duties.³³ Yet this rigid approach fails to offer any explanation for the many working women who did manage to pursue their sporting interests.³⁴

In contrast, radical feminists have argued that it is not capitalism per se that has oppressed women, but rather patriarchy enforced through politics, economics and cultural and social discourses.³⁵ Thus they argue that, regardless of whether a woman worked within the formal economy or not, gender discourses placed women firmly within the home. Therefore, whether or not a woman had 'earned' the right to leisure, the notion that her proper place was in the home dominated and influenced what she could and did do in her spare time.³⁶

32 Hargreaves, *Sporting Females*, 35.

33 Lynne Jamieson, 'Limited Resources and Limiting Conventions: Working-Class Mothers and Daughters in Urban Scotland, 1890–1925', in Jane Lewis, *Labour and Love: Women's Experience of Home and Family, 1850–1940* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986).

34 This will be discussed in more detail in chapters three, four and five.

35 Feminists still have difficulty agreeing on an adequate theory regarding the dissemination and definitions of patriarchy as explored by Sally Alexander in *Becoming a Woman* (New York: New York University Press, 1995), 271–5. In general terms, however, patriarchy can be defined as the practices and social systems used to ensure male domination in society.

36 Langhamer, *Women's Leisure*, 134–7.

Existing research has suggested that levels of participation in sport amongst women increased during the interwar years.³⁷ This book seeks to do more than merely chart the growth of levels of participation. Rather, it explores women's experiences of participation in sport, and probes the motivations and limitations faced by women who sought to engage in sport in these years. While existing studies have sought to understand the growth and development of specific sports within the well-defined framework of organized sports through examination of clubs and teams, the everyday, and often informal, experiences of many women are generally masked by such specific research. *Women, Sport and Modernity* explores the ways in which women chose to incorporate physical activity within their lives and in doing so seeks to understand the way sport could be used by women not just as a form of physical recreation but also as a form of social interaction. This will be considered through the examination of organized sports groups, the expansion of council and work-related sports provisions and changes to the education system. Levels of participation amongst women in relation to these areas and in a range of physical activities will be identified. This study will address broad participation, and will not be limited to examining formalized participation through organized clubs. Its approach will be to explore and analyse the motivating factors and developments which led to increased levels of participation of women in physical activity, rather than to chronicle the evolution of specific sports or organizations. Moreover, through this approach, the impact and influence of everyday factors, such as employment and household duties, on women's ability to pursue their sporting interests will become evident and a broader understanding of the very different ways in which sport was incorporated into women's lives will be provided. Significantly, the ways in which individuals viewed their own and others' participation in particular activities will be explored. Throughout, changes and continuities will be identified within women's experiences of sport and related activities in the period.

37 Hargreaves, *Sporting Females*; Huggins, 'And Now, Something for the Ladies'; Howkins and Lowerson, *Trends in Leisure, 1919-1930*.