Women and Sport

Sport:A Philosophical Inquiry. Paul Weiss. Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969. Pp. 274.

The Library Journal has called Paul Weiss's book Sport: A Philosophic Inquiry a "stimulating, important contribution" and has recommended it "for public, high school, and college libraries." As the book was published in 1969, one can assume that it is now upon the shelves of public, high school and college libraries across the land, especially since it purports to be the only exploration of sport by a "philosopher." I bought it in paperback in a university bookstore. Perhaps it might be well for women to have a look at what is passing for philosophy in the library these days.

In the first sentence of Sport, Weiss informs us, "I am not an athlete." However, Weiss has done some research into sport, much of which strikes one as being along the lines of George Plimpton's researches. Besides discussing "questions in this area with a number of coaches, athletes, and devoted spectators," and reading "articles and books," Weiss has also "chatted with players in locker rooms." One needn't ask the gender of the locker rooms. Weiss habitually refers to the athlete as "he;" one of his chapters has the stirring title "Dedicated Men," and it is not until Chapter 13 (out of 15) that he reaches the topic "Women Athletes." This chapter is most interesting.

Weiss begins his discussion where one would expect him to begin--with physiological differences between men and women. As countless feminist writers have pointed out, physiological differences are the favorite argument to justify almost any kind of sexual discrimination,whether it is related to physical activity or not, so we would surely expect to find it in a work on sport, and Weiss does not fail to fulfil our expectations. In discussing physiology, Weiss does not recognize at all the role of cultural pressures in determining physical differences--it never occurs to him that muscles may be undeveloped because they are unused. At the same time, he fails to recognize that many of the physiological differences he cites--"narrower shoulder girdle," "smaller chest girth," "smaller bones and thighs," "wider and more stable knee joints," "heavier and more tilted pelvis," "longer index fingers," "greater finger dexterity," "shorter thumbs" (!)--are totally irrelevant to performance in many sports in which men and women are nonetheless segregated. And finally, he states as gospel that women are "more prone to injury"--a matter that is surely difficult to discuss outside of a cultural context.

Throughout his "philosophic inquiry" into women's athletics, Weiss demonstrates a remarkable naivete about the crucial significance of cultural pressure against women's athletics. He allows that women have, in recent years, exceeded former male records--an example he gives is the fact that in

1896 the best male time in the 100 meter race was twelve seconds, while in 1952 Marjorie Jackson won the 100 meter race in eleven and one-half seconds. But he consoles himself with the observation that "when women compete in the same years with men, the women's records are not better than the men's," and finally concludes, "women are unable to compete successfully with the best of men, except in sports which emphasize accuracy, skill, or grace." Weiss does not bother himself with the question, "What had changed between 1896 and 1952?" In his first chapter he had looked at the continual breaking of records and had made the usual remark: "An amazing number of what we once thought were the absolute limits of achievement have been discovered to be but momentary stops which better health, greater dedication, more favorable circumstances, more appropriate equipment, and new training methods have enabled men to pass beyond." But he is incapable of entertaining the possibility that the lapse of years between the setting of a record by a man and the breaking of that record by a woman could be occasioned by a cultural lag rather than immutable physiological differences. Surely many of the improved conditions which have enabled men to achieve greater heights are still in the slower process of improving for women. Most women have yet to benefit from "new training methods," since the overwhelming bulk of the training budget goes to men, along with the best coaches. How many coaches worry about "appropriate equipment" for women? And "greater dedication," "more favorable circumstances," and even "better health" are all too often preempted for women by the enormous cultural bias against women's sports. (One might add to these factors women's lack—also occasioned by cultural bias against women's sports—of a broad base of competition.) Given their devastating cultural handicap, it is remarkable that the "record lag" between men and women is only a few decades. Can Weiss really chalk the inequities up to immutable physiology?

One must not be unfair to Weiss, however. He does have some things to say about cultural issues. Here is one of them: "It is part of our cultural heritage to make an effort to avoid having women maimed, disfigured, or hurt. That is one reason why they do not usually compete in such contact sports as boxing, wrestling, football, and rugby, with inexplicable exceptions being made for karate and lacrosse." (He does not mention the inexplicable exception of skiing.) An admirable chivalric attitude, and certainly in keeping with our cultural heritage! One might ask why, when many women willingly choose to run the risk of being maimed, disfigured, or hurt in such inexplicable sports as lacrosse, karate and skiing, they should not be allowed the chance to bash themselves up at any sport if they so desire. One might ask whether our laws governing

women's employment and industrial safety have always been governed by the same protective cultural heritage which applies to sport. One might ask whether it isn't her status as sex object that makes men prefer Woman Unmaimed, or why it is that women are not invited to protest against the maiming and disfigurement of their men.

Weiss does not linger too long with science and culture, however; he soon gets down to some concrete suggestions: "One way of dealing with these disparities between men and women is to view women as truncated males. As such they could be permitted to engage in the same sports that men do (except where these still invite unusual dangers for them), but in foreshortened version. . . . In a number of cases the performances of males can be treated as a norm, with the women given handicaps in the shape of smaller and sometimes less dangerous or difficult tasks." Weiss is not quite satisfied with the delightful epithet "truncated men," however, so he soon suggests another "Women can be dealt with as fractional men."

Now down to the nitty-gritty: "philosophy." Weiss presents to his philosophic brain the perplexing question of why "comparatively few women make athletics a career." For the first time he entertains briefly the notion that "social custom, until very recently, has not encouraged them to be athletes." This, however, does not detain him long. Of more importance is "fear of losing their femininity." Of course, the femininity argument is circular. Feminist writers now see what is usually called femininity as a crippling social construct that has to do with helpless passivity and delicacy of constitution. To say that a woman's becoming active, aggressive, and physically strong represents a reduction in femininity is to say nothing, for these things are opposites. We cannot blame Weiss for seeing fear of femininity-loss as a factor in women's distaste for sports, for indeed it is such a factor. What we can blame Weiss for is his assumption, at such a late date as 1969, that infantile passivity and delicacy are the natural attributes of womankind, and for his kindly reassurances that an athletic woman need not desist from being cute. He paints a heart-warming picture of the "right" kind of women athletes, who, "while making enormous efforts and sacrifices to become highly skilled. . . emphasize their femininity." Lilacs in the locker-room?

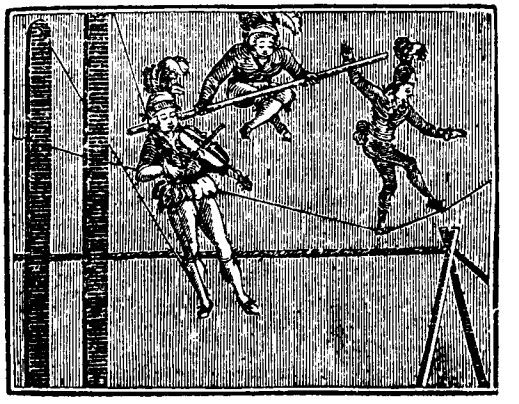
But to the heart of the "philosophy." Weiss believes that women do not go in much for athletics because "a young woman's body does not challenge her in the way in which a young man's body challenges him. She does not have to face it as something to be conquered, since she has already conquered it in the course of her coming of age. Where a young man spends his time redirecting his mind and disciplining

his body, she has only the problem of making it function more gracefully and harmoniously than it natively can and does." The drift of Weiss's tactfully-phrased argument is that men are intellectual and women are physical. "A woman is less abstract than a man because her mind is persistently ordered toward bodily problems," he informs us, growing somewhat less tactful. "There are times when she will give herself wholeheartedly to intellectual pursuits, and may then distinguish herself in competition with men. But easily, and not too reluctantly, she slips quite soon into a period when her mind functions on behalf of her body." Exactly what Weiss means by these insulting euphemisms is perhaps given away by his unconscious use of the word "period."

The reader may wonder how Weiss can use the idea that men are intellectual and women are physical in support of his contention that women are not innately athletic. The answer is that, with the help of some amazing mental gymnastics (who says Weiss is not an athlete?), Weiss undertakes to establish that men are led into athletics by the very effort required to overcome their natural intellectuality. This remarkable circularity is not unlike Freud's argument, aptly satirized by Kate Millett in Sexual Politics, that man (rather than woman) discovered fire because only he could renounce his

natural impulse to extinguish it by urinating on it. The question of why women did not discover fire or engage in athletics by default seems to be answered by the assumption that anything that comes naturally to a person is despised. But the astonishing silliness of the argument should not allow us to dismiss it with laughter before we take note of the seriousness of the insult: to Paul Weiss, woman is an animal.

Although Weiss thinks that the concept of women as "fractional men" has "considerable appeal," he is too convinced of the vast gulf between men and women to finally approve of women taking part in men's games. Ideally, according to Weiss, "there should be sports designed just for them," to take into account women's physical inferiority as well as a difference in "attitudes toward exhaustion, injury, and public display." (This last, the becoming shyness he ascribes to women, is a positive advantage in Weiss's eyes, as it helps them to avoid the egotism of men who have been the objects of hero-worship: "Women are fortunate in that few of their games come to the attention of the public.") Weiss suggests that "other new sports could be created; some of these should be built around the use of a woman's body." (One is tempted to say that we all know about that kind of sport.) As Weiss does not suggest any possible women's sports, one's imagination can



run riot. What sort of sports might make the most creative use of tilted pelvises, long index fingers and short thumbs? Some sports now prohibited to women seem ideally suited to them--my colleague James Marino suggests that perhaps what Weiss has in mind is that pole-vaulting might be particularly appropriate to a woman's natural talents, since it involves falling backwards onto a mattress. But he fears that Weiss might see the pole as too phallic for a woman to cope with.

At the end of his chapter on Women Athletes, Weiss magnanimously disclaims: "General discourse of this sort deals with idealized types of men and

women, and is rooted in speculations for which there is little empirical warrant." The part about the "little empirical warrant" is too true, but it is misleading to dignify with the imaginative title of "speculations" what is no more than an uncritical acceptance of some of the most tired stereotypes of our culture. One of Weiss's paragraphs says it all:

> Comparatively few women interest themselves in sport, and when they do they rarely exhibit the absorption and concern that is characteristic of large numbers of men. They do not have as strong a need as men to see just what it is that bodies can do, in part because they are more firmly established in their roles as social beings, wives, and mothers, than the men are in their roles as workers, business men, husbands and fathers, or even as thinkers, leaders, and public figures.

With this, Weiss secures for himself a position in the forefront of nineteenth-century philosophers.

Paul Weiss is a man to be reckoned with. Before the publication of Sport, he had published 15 philosophic books of his own and nine in collaboration. I contributed to Weiss's royalties by buying a copy of Sport, but I would not recommend, as does Library Journal, that anyone else do so.

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