



EMERALD STUDIES IN SPORT AND GENDER

**THE QUEST FOR SOCIAL
JUSTICE IN SPORT**

HELEN JEFFERSON LENSKEYJ

THE QUEST FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE IN SPORT

Helen Jefferson Lenskyj is one of the world's foremost critical scholars of sports. For decades, her writings have been both destinations and starting points for many of us. *The Quest for Social Justice in Sport* is both a distillation of her work and a new and innovative intervention: a distillation in that it follows on from her established concerns; new and innovative because it takes on sports' most pressing contemporary issues with equally powerful research, theorisation and commitment.

—*Toby Miller, Instituto Tecnológico de Monterrey*

Helen Jefferson Lenskyj is pre-eminent among critical sport scholars – academics who have written and taught about sport as a prism through which to explain the social and political world in all its often ugly manifestations. Most of these ugly manifestations – colonialism, the use of banned drugs, commercialism, violence, corrosive individualism, racism, sexism, transphobia – are considered in this excellent book, along with examples and suggestions of how sport can be reimagined as what the philosopher Ivan Illich called a tool for conviviality. More and more people, as the book recognises, value physical activity for its intrinsic pleasures and not for fame, fortune or the establishment of world records. This, as Lenskyj shows, means not only considering strategies of 'desportification' but also acknowledging the nurturant properties of long-suppressed Indigenous cultures. Way to go.

—*Stephen Wagg, Honorary Fellow,
International Centre for Sports History and Culture,
De Montfort University, Leicester UK*

I used to ask my students to imagine a world without elite competitive sport – and they couldn't. It's everywhere: in schools, on screens, billboards and in our feeds. No wonder it's hard to see past it. In this accessible and thought-provoking book, Helen Lenskyj not only challenges us to imagine alternatives – she shows us what they look like. Through a sharp critique of how colonial norms, binary thinking and the Olympic industry have shaped the last half-century of sport, she outlines the deep inequalities built into the system. But this isn't just critique – it's a reimagining. By centring the voices of activists and scholars, and spotlighting vibrant, community-based forms of movement, Lenskyj offers a vision rooted in joy, justice, and belonging. And maybe – just maybe – it'll help the next generation see beyond the narrow

confines of elite sport and towards something more inclusive, more humane and more hopeful.

—*Janice Forsyth*, Professor, Indigenous Land-Based
Physical Culture and Wellness Kinesiology,
University of British Columbia

The *Quest for Social Justice in Sport* is the provocative book that athletic participants need and that most sports organizations will do their best to dutifully ignore, lest they find themselves questioning the premise of their existence. In an era when sport is being put to work to advance oppressive conservative agendas, at the cost of community, the joys of inclusion and belonging, and the livelihoods and even lives of some of the most marginalized participants, Helen Lenskyj cuts through the noise, delivering an exacting diagnosis of the root problems of the failings of contemporary sport and what can be done about them. In this strident, fearless critique of the social exclusions and hierarchies that have been normalized through sporting practices, and of the corporate and political players that have transformed sport into a win-at-all-costs industry, Lenskyj embodies the best of feminist scholarship, attending to the diverse ways that power and domination compromise sport's promise to celebrate the breadth of human diversity and be a vehicle of social equality. The solution Lenskyj proposes asks of sports lovers to face the notion that the time has come for sport itself—that is, the very word, and the violent practices this word has come to stand for—to be revised, replaced with a liberatory language and practice that allows us to collectively access the joy of movement.

—*Dr Madeleine Pape*, Olympian, Sociologist

EMERALD STUDIES IN SPORT AND GENDER

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Emerald Studies in Sport and Gender promotes research on two important and related areas within sport studies: women and gender. The concept of gender is included in the series title in order to problematise traditional binary thinking that classifies individuals as male or female, rather than looking at the full gender spectrum. In sport contexts, this is a particularly relevant and controversial issue, for example, in the case of transgendered athletes and female athletes with hyperandrogenism. The concept of sport is interpreted broadly to include activities ranging from physical recreation to high-performance sport.

The interdisciplinary nature of the series will encompass social and cultural history and philosophy as well as sociological analyses of contemporary issues. Since any analysis of sport and gender has political implications and advocacy applications, learning from history is essential.

Contributors to the series are encouraged to develop an intersectional analysis where appropriate, by examining how multiple identities, including gender, sexuality, ethnicity, social class and ability, intersect to shape the sport experiences of women and men who are Indigenous, racialised, members of ethnic minorities, LGBTQ, working class or disabled.

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BY

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United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India
Malaysia – China

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

CONTENTS

<i>About the Author</i>	<i>xi</i>
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>xiii</i>
Introduction	1
1. Sport in Society	5
2. Sport Studies and Activism	17
3. Science, Sex and Gender	29
4. Disability	47
5. Global North and Global South	59
6. Violence and Abuse	73
7. Doping	83
8. Outlaw Sports	95
9. Movement for Joy	105
<i>Appendix</i>	<i>117</i>
<i>References</i>	<i>119</i>
<i>Index</i>	<i>143</i>

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Helen Jefferson Lenskyj (she/her) is a Professor Emerita, University of Toronto. Her work as a researcher and an activist on gender and sport began in the 1980s, and her critiques of the Olympic industry include seven books, most recently *The Olympic Games: A Critical Approach* (Emerald, 2020).

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INTRODUCTION

Twenty-twenty-four was a very good year to write a book on the quest for social justice in sport, to look back on a half-century of developments in sport research, policies and practices, and to propose a new and radical approach.¹

Paris hosted the 2024 Olympics and Paralympics, the first edition of the Summer Games to feature regular in-person audiences since 2016, with a new focus on youth sports. Candidates were lining up to compete in the 2025 International Olympic Committee (IOC) presidential election. FIFA rolled back governance-related reforms of 2016 and selected Saudi Arabia, the sole bidder, to host the 2034 World Cup. The World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) continued its aggressive ‘war on drugs’, with mixed results. International federations were establishing policies on transgender athletes after the IOC handed that responsibility to them. In the broader global context, trans women in sport became a political issue in the so-called culture wars, as played out in disturbing detail during the US presidential election campaigns. So, in many respects, it was a very bad year for social justice in sport.

In the face of these significant challenges, activists continued their work on the front lines and behind the scenes. Sport leaders, including those in lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer + (LGBTQ+) communities, pioneered alternative models that focused on participation and fun, rather than achievement and medals. Research reports documented discrimination and abuse in sport at every level from local to global, while ‘safe sport’ initiatives continued to recommend reform measures, leaving the social structures of sport largely unchanged.

As agents of change, we are encouraged to focus on the future, but learning from history is crucial if we are to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past. For that reason, the book looks back as well as forward. As a community activist for more than 40 years in feminist and LGBTQ+ advocacy work, I draw on personal experiences and reflections throughout. I use an intersectional analysis in order to examine the ways in which systems of oppression work. This approach requires a departure from a format that focuses on a single identity

1 The cut-off point for research was 30 November 2024.

group or a single issue and then moves on to another group or issue. As a result, my approach weaves together identities and themes, as well as juxtaposing past and present events in order to identify historical legacies played out in contemporary sport. I situate these developments in the broader cultural and geopolitical context, one that was particularly volatile in 2024, by drawing on examples from higher education and popular culture as well as sport and recreation. Inevitably, the Olympic industry is a central player in any analysis of sport, and its impacts feature throughout the book.

The first three chapters set the stage for the more specific discussions that follow, with *Chapter 1: Sport in Society* covering a wide range of topics and concepts, including intersectionality, binarism and othering. Global North views of *difference*, the foundation of sport research, policies and practices, are contrasted with inclusive ways of thinking practised by Indigenous peoples. Finally, an analysis of the sport/politics binary and the autonomy of sport, with a specific focus on the Olympic Games, serves as an introduction to these recurring themes. *Chapter 2: Sport Studies and Activism* reviews the history of sport studies and women's studies since the 1980s and the university-based systems that generate sport research, and critically analyses the feminist organisations that use that research to develop programmes and interventions. Continuing those critiques, *Chapter 3: Science, Sex and Gender* looks at the use and misuse of science and sports medicine to create male/female binaries in sport, and the resulting injustices experienced by gender minorities, specifically LGBTQ+ individuals, as well as the differential impacts on women in the Global South.

In the next two chapters, I focus on two specific binaries: disabled/non-disabled athletes and Global North/Global South (GN/GS). *Chapter 4: Disability* uses insights from critical disability studies to examine the impacts of disablism and to critique the categories within disability sport. *Chapter 5: Global North and Global South* examines how athletes and sport workers experience the impacts of GN/GS differences, most notably the hidden labour and widespread exploitation of GS workers in the sport industry. Acknowledging the unique experiences of Indigenous peoples and ongoing legacies of colonisation, this chapter presents a review of historical and contemporary developments in the decolonising of sport.

The two key issues of abuse and doping are examined in the next chapters, using an intersectional analysis in order to identify the impacts of sex/gender and GN/GS differences. *Chapter 6: Violence and Abuse* examines the long histories of sexual harassment and abuse in sport and evaluates prevention programmes, as well as discussing the related issues of epistemic injustice and violence. *Chapter 7: Doping* provides a critical review of anti-doping

initiatives and identifies GN/GS discrepancies as well as other significant inconsistencies in the ways that sports law is applied in the Court of Arbitration for Sport decisions.

Finally, the last two chapters present alternatives to the dominant achievement model of sport as entrenched by the Olympic Games since 1896. *Chapter 8: Outlaw Sports* documents the ways in which the Olympic industry has taken control of action sports since the 1990s, and the significant community-based resistance to that cooptation globally. *Chapter 9: Movement for Joy* presents examples of alternative ways of doing sport, many of which had their beginnings in LGBTQ+ communities. Based on successful community-based initiatives, I propose a radical alternative that calls for the desportification of sport, a change that requires a new name, *movement*, and a new goal, *joy*.

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SPORT IN SOCIETY

Keywords: Intersectionality; binaries; autonomy of sport; International Olympic Committee (IOC); protest

Comprising a broad spectrum of physical activities that extend beyond the dominant achievement model, sport is a central component of human experience. Whether practised at the recreational or the elite level, it can offer participants significant physical, social and psychological benefits. At the professional level, sport also provides employment and, for many, significant financial rewards. Access to sport becomes a social justice issue when those benefits are withheld from individuals or groups as a result of discriminatory policies and practices, and when economic, sociocultural or other systemic barriers prevent their full participation.

SPORT IS EVERYWHERE

Sport and sporting terminology are part of the social fabric in Global North (GN) society, as well as in many countries in the Global South (GS). Children and adults alike are encouraged to be good ‘team players’ in non-sport contexts, and sporting metaphors like ‘out of bounds’ and ‘game over’ are everyday language. Examples are easy to find. I recently received the Spring 2024 Investment Update flyer issued by a major Canadian bank, which used soccer as a metaphor throughout. Illustrated with images of ethnically diverse male and female soccer players, it explained that, like different player positions, diversified investments play different roles to help your ‘team’ win. Entire paragraphs were devoted to educating the investor about the game of

soccer, the roles of goalie, midfield and defence, striker and general manager, with somewhat stretched analogies drawn to the roles that various kinds of investments play. Clearly, this advertising team assumed that the soccer analogy would work for most clients.

Another example demonstrates how the Olympic Games occupy a special place in popular culture. In a recent informal Zoom discussion on the theme, ‘Starting a conversation’, several of my friends and acquaintances asserted that ‘sport’ was not a topic that they could talk about. I was tempted to join in and say that I, too, would be unable to join in Monday morning chats about weekend football or ice hockey games – because I am a critical sport scholar and advocate for change, not a sport fan. Yet, earlier in this discussion, several people had talked about the Olympics.

Every two years, this sport mega-event appears on our screens and demands our attention, even luring those who proclaim to be uninterested in sport. Not only do the Olympics serve as a distraction from the grim global realities of ongoing wars, racist attacks, fascist world leaders and climate change but they also seem to emerge fully formed in a host city somewhere in the world, while the human, economic and environmental costs of preparing athletes and venues remain obscured. If the full story behind sport mega-events were widely known, the people in the Zoom chat, all of whom were interested in social justice, would probably not hesitate to discuss sport. The dominance of the Olympic model is evident throughout all levels of sport in GN countries, and, increasingly, in the GS. This book will expose the shadow side of the shiny spectacle: the exploitation and abuse of athletes and migrant workers, the cruelty to homeless people, the invisible labour behind the production of elite sport and elite athletes and the injury to the body politic and the environment.

INTERSECTIONALITY

Since the 1980s, critical sport scholars have documented how sport has the dubious distinction of being the last bastion of sexism/misogyny, racism, classism, homophobia, transphobia, disablism and other discriminatory systems. These interconnected ‘isms’ are described as interlocking systems of oppression, and a critique of these systems constitutes an intersectional analysis. Intersecting systems can be conceptualised as a Venn diagram. For example, an individual or group whose identities lie at the intersection of misogyny, transphobia and racism will experience the combined negative impacts, as captured by the term *transmisogynoir*.

As Anders et al. (2024) observed, while sport scholars frequently cite the pioneering work on intersectionality developed by law professor Kimberlé Crenshaw in the 1980s, some analyses focus solely on identity rather than engaging with structural, political and representational intersectionality. Quoting Crenshaw, Anders et al. emphasise that ‘intersectionality was always about structures and how structures apprehended identities in ways that created different forms of discrimination’ (Crenshaw, 2021–present, cited in Anders et al., 2024). Applied to sport, they point to the importance of research approaches ‘beyond single-category analyses’ that can lead to ‘the creation of more inclusive and complex diversity initiatives, actions plans, and strategic planning’ as well as identifying ‘initiatives, teams, institutions, and organisations that have successfully integrated intersectional policies and practices’ (Anders et al., 2024). It is this approach – an intersectional analysis with a focus on structures and a forward-looking agenda for change – that the following discussion will take.

BINARIES

Developments throughout the 20th and into the 21st century illustrate how binary thinking has permeated sport, from everyday sporting practices to scholarly analyses. At every level, from national teams to community fun runs, the rigid categories of male/female, competitive/recreational, participation/performance, able-bodied/disabled and others binaries serve to privilege certain individuals and groups while excluding others, and thus perpetuate social injustice. Such sharp differences and divisions based on sex/gender are difficult to imagine outside of sport. The world of STEMM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics and medicine), for example, has long been an unwelcoming environment for girls and women, but the barriers are rarely institutionalised in the same way. There is no equivalent of an actual rule book that spells out the exact hormonal level required for young women to be eligible to apply for a Bachelor of Engineering degree, whereas World Athletics enforces precisely this kind of rule.

In many other sectors of society, including education, health and the workplace, exclusionary regulations based on gender and dis/ability binaries have been challenged and, in some contexts, replaced by more inclusive policies and practices. More importantly, progressive organisations have made changes to the systems and the material conditions in which people work or study in order to further the goal of inclusion. Although education, health and

employment-related issues are, in fact, key components of sport, the fiercely protected ‘autonomy of sport’ principle, discussed below, serves to exempt sports governing bodies from many of the regulations and protections that govern other organisations and workplaces.

Over the past 50 years, sport administrators have been slow to join broad-based social justice campaigns focusing on equal rights for women, Black, Indigenous and people of colour (BIPOC) and LGBTQ+ people. These progressive social movements have been met with conservative and reactionary voices within sport, as those in power resist threats to the status quo and promote the myth that sport requires its own unique rules and regulations. In fact, the IOC and international sports organisations and federations fiercely protect ‘the autonomy of sport’ to the extent that the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) – not a court, but an arbitration tribunal, or, more accurately, a ‘forced arbitration’ tribunal – remains the first, and in most cases, the only recourse for individual athletes seeking legal remedies in cases involving eligibility, doping and other alleged offences.

OTHERING

Like binarism, the concept of ‘othering’, first applied to discursive and political processes of racialisation and GN dominance, also provides a window into the lived experience of women, gender minorities and people with disabilities. Othering is ‘a process in which, through discursive practices, different subjects are formed, hegemonic subjects – that is, subjects in powerful social positions as well as those subjugated to these powerful conditions’ (Thomas-Olalde & Velho, 2011, p. 27). In short, othering reinforces a wide range of binaries based on power differentials. Applied to sport contexts, members of dominant ethno-social-sexual groups are well-positioned to develop policies and practices that serve the interests of athletes who share those identities. Thus, ‘insiders’ enjoy the sense of belonging to a sporting community, while ‘others’ – BIPOC, LGBTQ+ and disabled people – are excluded.

Because the discursive practices that reinforce othering and binaries rely on the language patterns of GN peoples, as Indigenous philosopher Lavonna Lovern (2022) explains, they ‘reinforce the idea that one term or position is superior, and the other term or position is inferior, allowing biases and prejudices to infiltrate dialogues.’ In contrast, in Indigenous languages, “‘different’ does not carry any necessary relationship to normal/abnormal, good/bad, or right/wrong’, because ‘all things are in a constant flux and exist