

ONE



INTRODUCTION

There is a full range of social issues that get tied up with sport.

—Jill

Jill¹ is one of the forty-six women interviewed for this book. It is about the work women do that enables others to play sport. When I first met Jill she told me how surprised she had been to receive my letter asking if she would agree to be interviewed. Her initial reaction had been to think how ridiculous it was that someone was doing university-based research about her role as the mother of sports players. She said, "When I got your letter I thought, oh for goodness sake! But then I had to pull myself in and think, no, there is a full range of social issues that get tied up with sport."

We were discussing how sport was frequently dismissed as trivial, a frivolous part of people's lives not worthy of serious attention, and she explained how she had been "guilty" of thinking that way herself. Then she added, "I mean, I should be one who shouldn't be guilty of that," recognizing how her life revolved around sport, specifically the tennis played by her two youngest children who, at the time, were members of a junior state representative squad in Australia. During her interview, Jill said there were days when the demands made by her children's sport left her so tired that she felt she would fall asleep and never wake up. She talked about juggling her paid work with their tennis, and said she considered this paid work to be her "leisure" because it seemed to be the only time she had for herself. She explained that she worried about how important her children's sporting successes had become

to their father, but how the huge increases she saw in her daughter's self-esteem made all of her efforts worthwhile. These were the kinds of social issues she had initially considered not worthy of serious attention.

The contradictions highlighted by Jill's comments are about society's perceptions of both sport and women's lives. On the one hand, despite its colossal global following, sport remains contextualized as separate from the "important" aspects of life, reflecting the nonserious, playful connotations that are popularly thought to characterize sporting behaviors. On the other hand, the work women do, which structures and gives meaning to their lives, is often unrecognized, undervalued, and mostly invisible. Combine these and it is easy to understand why Jill dismissed as unimportant one of the major features of her day-to-day existence.

In this book I focus on women's domestic labor, the work women do that facilitates and services the participation in sport of others, particularly the members of their immediate families. I hope to make visible the extent to which women are incorporated into the institution of sport through their domestic labor, the impact it has on their lives, and how this labor contributes to the maintenance and reproduction of sporting structures and practices.

Worldwide, the greater proportion of those who participate in sport are men and children, mostly male children. Even in countries where large numbers of women do actually play sport, the participation of boys and men is proportionally greater and men's sport invariably dominates. The relationship of adult women to sport, if they have one at all, is far more likely to be through their associations with others who play, such as their husbands, sons, and, less frequently, daughters.

In 1976, in order to explain why more men than women participated in sport and recreation, Ann Hall identified marriage and children as being a key constraint for women. She said,

Married women with families simply do not have the same opportunities as men to participate in recreational activities because the institution of marriage as we know it today does not endorse completely shared roles. In general, husbands are the major breadwinners and wives are entrusted with the prime responsibility of childcare and housekeeping. (Hall 1976, 192)

This recognition of the familial relationships and responsibilities of women, influenced by second-wave feminism, represented a significant shift in the focus of theorizing women's lesser participation in sport from one that had previously been concerned with the socialization of girls into sporting roles and their attitudes toward physical activity. Over a decade later, with inequalities for women and girls in sport still a concern, Margaret Talbot wrote,

Feminist insights from studies of the family have shown how women's relationship with sport is often merely to service it for others, either through their sexuality in glamorizing male sport, or through their labor (washing, preparing food, cleaning, acting as chauffeuse) in enabling other members of the family to take part in sport. (Talbot 1988a, 36)

These two insights draw together the background issues upon which the focus of this study was conceptualized. Women's responsibility for domestic labor and child care constrains their full participation in sport, while at the same time the labor they do in these realms facilitates the participation of others.

As Talbot pointed out, this understanding was not informed by or developed from critical analyses of sport. Rather, it came from feminist analyses of women's familial lives and the conditions by which these were lived. For the most part, the sociology of sport has conspicuously overlooked this particular and significant relationship between sport, leisure, and women's work.

That is not to say it has gone unnoticed. In contrast to the lack of academic attention, it has been well acknowledged in the popular press. The relationships of women to sportsmen is a relatively common focus in the media, driven mainly by the deemed importance and high profile of men's sport. Jim McKay (1991a), in his analysis of how the "sporting mediascope" is constructed, pointed out the selective ways in which women are portrayed as wives, mothers, and supporters of players rather than as players themselves, linking this to the construction of masculinity through sport. Rather than being problematized, these roles are highlighted to affirm a particular gendered experience of sport.

I became aware of this gendered experience, and its political and economic implications, during 1981 when a sport in my country (New Zealand) shifted from being apparently frivolous to blatantly political. The sport frequently described as New Zealand's "national" sport is rugby union. Until very recently, it was played

almost exclusively by men and has long-standing significance to the construction of New Zealand male identity and nationalism (Crawford 1995; Phillips 1987).

In 1981, a men's rugby union team representing apartheid South Africa arrived in New Zealand at the invitation of the New Zealand Rugby Football Union to play a series of fifteen games. Although sanctioned by the government at the time, this tour contravened an international Heads of States agreement condemning sporting connections with South Africa.² Staging this sporting event in New Zealand resulted in massive and violent protests throughout the country and the continuation of the games was only made possible by government intervention and the deployment of the police force and army. The details of this conflict and their far-reaching impact have been well recorded (Barrowman 1981; Chapple 1984; Fougere 1981; Newnham 1981; Shears and Gidley 1981).

One significant feature of the protest action was the huge number of women involved. Women usually led the marches and took the greatest risks, especially Maori women. Feminist analyses showed a keen understanding of why we were there (Aitken and Noonan 1981; Dann 1982; Hall 1981; Star 1989; Thompson 1988; Waring 1985). We saw how we had been co-opted to support white supremacist, male power and the current relations of capital, race, and gender that the sport of rugby had traditionally played a key role in maintaining. Against this display of amalgamated male power, the significance of decades of women's complicit labor that had traditionally facilitated and supported rugby became starkly obvious.

Even before this conflict, it was apparent that New Zealand women felt a simmering resentment toward rugby. Barrington and Gray recorded one woman married to a rugby player as saying,

I dread the beginning of the rugby season. I hate it, every Saturday. I can't stand anything to do with it. I burnt all his gear once. I put it all out on the back lawn, put kerosene over it and burnt it, boots and all. I had had it. And I used to cut patches out of his rugby pants. I remember lying in the bath one Saturday night and he still wasn't home (he'd dropped off his gear earlier), and I thought, 'Well what can I do?' I thought, 'I'll go and cut a sleeve off his jersey.' So I did these childish things like cutting sleeves off or cutting big holes in his pants. . . . It's all I felt I could do. (Barrington and Gray 1981, 95)

Out of women's protest against The Tour in 1981 grew an organization called WAR, an acronym for Women Against Rugby. This organization called for women to stop doing the labor that serviced rugby for men and boys, such as laundering the clothing, providing food for visiting players, shopping for, driving or coaching young sons who played, discussing it at the dinner table, keeping children quiet while husbands watched it on television, and so on. Through these seemingly simple actions of resistance we came to realize how much women's work had contributed to men's sport. We realized also the extent to which this work had been co-opted and exploited by cultural ideology and "national interests." Thus the political ramifications of women's relationship as servicers of sport became very clear.

While many of the social conditions surrounding that event have since changed in New Zealand, and rugby has had to renegotiate its status of supremacy (Campbell 1985; Jackson 1995), globally the economic and political significance of sport appears to be continually increasing, having an impact at all levels of sporting practices. At the same time, capital relations that keep women on the economic margins have shifted only slightly and divisions of labor in which women do most of the child care and domestic work seem intransigent. The implications of this to women's lives remain salient. What does sport demand of women, and what does this labor mean, both to the women involved and to the sport?

Having been alerted to these questions by the "consciousness-raising" experience of 1981, it was several years before I had the opportunity to research the issue more fully. By that stage I had moved to Perth, Australia, and the only clear picture I had of the project on which I was about to embark was that it was based on a disquieting hunch that the institution of sport demanded and required the work of women for its maintenance and reproduction. Being unfamiliar with Australian society, I had doubts about whether or not my hunch would be applicable to the other side of the Tasman Sea. As it turned out, the process of settling in to a new place and meeting Australian women, particularly those with children, provided me with the best affirmation and encouragement I could have received.

In any gathering of new acquaintances I would inevitably be asked why I had come to Australia and what I was doing. Usually I said something self-consciously vague about research looking at the work women did that enabled others to play sport. Men would often shuffle in discomfort, but without exception women under-

stood exactly what I was talking about and were often emphatic in exclaiming its underrecognized "universality." They would invariably engage me in further conversation to tell me about their own such experience, or that of women they knew.

It was in this context that Pamela told me about sitting in her car trying to do the required reading for a university assignment while waiting for her daughter who was playing netball, and feeling guilty about not being on the sideline to watch. It prompted Bonnie to show me a wardrobe full of costumes she had made for her daughter's figure skating competitions. I met a woman who told me that she and her husband had bought a van that quickly became the "bus" for transporting their sons' entire soccer teams, and Gayle, recently separated from her husband, explained with anger and sadness how he had spent so much time sailing that he had no time for her or their children.

These casual conversations confirmed for me that Australian women did have personal relationships with sport that far exceeded their experiences, or lack thereof, as players, and that these relationships had everyday consequences. Then two bumper stickers appeared for sale in my local news agency. One said simply, "Mum's Taxi." The other said, "If A Mother's Place Is In The Home, WHY AM I ALWAYS IN THE CAR?" Australian popular culture had affirmed my research—at least one aspect of it!

This study, therefore, investigated how women's labor serviced and reproduced the institution of sport and what this meant to the women involved. It was motivated by the astonishing paucity of information on, and recognition of, women's contribution to sport other than, and as well as, being players, and the dearth of attention paid to the impact on women's lives of having family members who play sport. It is founded on the hypothesis that sport is maintained and reproduced by women's work through unequal and usually exploitative gender relations. These relations have at their core divisions of labor by which women are disproportionately responsible for domestic work and child care. Such divisions of labor serve both to maintain and reproduce sport and are further reproduced by sporting structures and practices. For many women, the impact of this has considerable everyday and long-term consequences. This study offers a perspective on women's relationship to sport that has not been thoroughly investigated. While feminist theorists have been aware of women's caring and servicing labor, in the analyses and accounting of sport as a social institution it has remained invisible. Consequently, the con-

tribution sport makes to the maintenance and reproduction of domestic and labor relations also has been ignored.

The research reported here is based on qualitative data derived from semistructured interviews with women in Western Australia. It focused on these women's various relationships to one sport—tennis. The women in this study are mothers of junior tennis players, domestic partners/wives of adult male tennis players, and women who are themselves long-term players of the sport. Collectively, they illustrate the multiple ways that women's labor contributed to the sport and show how this multiplicity can strengthen the ideological foundations upon which the contribution is made. Further details of the methodology and the women involved can be found in the Appendixes.

Tennis was chosen as the focus because it provided the opportunity for investigating these various possibilities. Large numbers of men, women, and children play tennis in Australia, mainly in volunteer-based community clubs. Further details of its cultural significance are presented in the Appendix, along with a description of how it is structured.

The study investigated the forms of labor demanded of women by the sport of their husbands and children, and through their own membership in volunteer-based tennis clubs. It examined the ways in which the sport was organized and the impact of these on the women's lives. It also looked at the implications of domestic work and child care to women's participation in sport. The analysis considers these issues in the context of the women's relationships to capital resources and gender relations, institutionalized through heterosexuality and marriage. It considers how these relations help maintain gendered divisions of labor and how they are reproduced within and by sport.

While it is inappropriate to generalize unconditionally beyond this group of women or this sport, I believe there are insights and implications that would apply, to a greater or lesser extent, to other sports and cultures. These insights are derived from an investigation that has as its core the analysis of women's work in Australia, a capitalist patriarchy where sport is considered to have great cultural importance. Throughout our world, there are many other similarly based societies where sports are closely or equally as significant, especially sports played by men.

There are aspects of this focus, however, which should be noted for their specificity. Tennis culture in Western Australia is conspicuously white and middle class. "Race" is an issue to the

extent that the impact of colonization has largely excluded Australia's Aboriginal people from this aspect of social life. There were no identified Aboriginal women amongst the group interviewed, and only one non-Caucasian immigrant family.⁴ On the other hand, amongst white Australians, both men and women, tennis has traditionally been played in very large numbers, making it a sport of mass popularity not commonly matched in other parts of the world. The majority of the women in this study were middle class, especially those interviewed as mothers. Most marriages represented were intact, and the majority of children were in two-parent, heterosexually-based families. In this respect, the research sample was a homogenous group, but not necessarily representative of Australian society.

I have approached the research as a feminist social scientist whose critical concern is for women's experiences of sport and leisure. I am not an Australian citizen, and my investigation was not done as an "insider" to tennis culture. The limitations of this position are explored in Appendix A. In reporting the findings, every attempt has been made to tell this as the story of the women who were interviewed and to have their voices speak loudly and clearly. The purpose is to make them visible within the institution of sport.

This book follows the three groups of women and their specific associations with tennis. It begins with the mothers of junior players, detailing what was demanded of them and highlighting, for example, the amount of driving required to support a child playing tennis at an elite level. It shows the extent to which these women's lives were constructed by their children's sporting schedules indicating how difficult, if not impossible, it would be for a child to succeed in the sport without the labor devoted by this parent. The anomaly of the term *parent* in this context is exposed to show how it can mask asymmetric contributions to children's sport from mothers and fathers and how it helps preserve male-serving associations between sport and men's contribution to child care. The ways in which mothers related to tennis administration show how they were marginalized within the culture and how their labor was undervalued and exploited.

The wives/domestic partners of adult male tennis players are introduced in chapter 3. Again, they highlight what this role demanded of them, showing in particular how their greater responsibility for child care created the space for their husbands' sport. Clear differences emerged between the experiences of the wives

who were also tennis players and those who were not, which also tended to be the line differentiating the women who spoke positively about their husbands' tennis and those who did not. The women who played tennis alongside their husbands were more content and usually found themselves immersed in the sport that had become an all-engrossing, family-centered activity.

The focus then switches to women who were tennis players themselves, most of whom had played for decades. Their stories of having facilitating their own participation, often going to extraordinary lengths to do so, provide a stark contrast to the conditions experienced by the sports men highlighted in the previous chapter. Again, there were differences between the players whose husbands also played and those whose did not. The women in the latter group tended to keep their sport hidden from their families, not allowing it to detrimentally affect their ability to maintain their domestic responsibilities. The voluntary labor done by women players within their tennis clubs is also discussed. Predominantly an extension of gendered domestic roles, their work ensured the organization's continued viability and helped provide satisfactory experiences of tennis culture for other players. Meanwhile, their tennis was structurally and conceptually marginalized.

It is appropriate next for the women to talk about why they did all of this work. In chapter 5 they speak of the rationales that motivated their actions and the rewards they identified. These are necessarily framed according to differing expectations of each of the three groups interviewed. For example, motherhood encompassed the expectation of self-sacrifice, and rewards were expressed in relation to perceptions of their children's best interests. Wives, however, had reason to expect some reciprocity for their labor and presented rationales in terms of how it contributed to a marital partnership. For the women players, their participation in the sport was in itself a reward negotiated out of their expected domestic duties and appreciated for its contribution to their own satisfactory lifestyles.

In the final chapter, as a way of making sense of how and why these women service tennis in the manner described, I attempt to draw together my own analysis of the overriding structural and ideological factors that I see as shaping their lives. I discuss the economic relations and ideologies of normative motherhood, wifehood, and heterosexuality, which I think underpin the gender relations embedded in this sport. The women interviewed would

probably not explain it in these terms. Their words are the lived response, not the cerebral theorizing. They would not necessarily conceptualize the sport to which they donated their labor as a patriarchal construction that exploits and denies them. Nevertheless, they deliver a clear message about what this means on a day-to-day basis and why it cannot be ignored.