

## *Chapter 1*

### *The Blades, Women's Ice Hockey, and Paradoxes of Gender*

In April 1994 the third women's world ice hockey championship was held in Lake Placid, New York. During the banquet held at the conclusion of the competition, a series of speakers gave testimony to the success of the event. A representative of one of the championship's commercial sponsors enthused to the audience about how much he had enjoyed the tournament and how impressed he was with the quality of play. In an effort to indicate just how remarkable he found the players' abilities and the overall competition, the speaker said that when he got home, he would tell people "not that I had seen women's hockey but that I had seen great hockey."

This comment, offered during the celebration of a showcase event in women's hockey and clearly intended to be complimentary, captures the contemporary cultural struggle around gender and sport. Historically, femininity and athleticism have been constructed in opposition, yielding the conventional wisdom that great sport was men's sport and the corresponding view that women are intruders in the world of sport. The current era is witnessing important challenges to the association of masculinity and athleticism and to the maintenance of sport as a male preserve. This book explores these challenges through an account of a Canadian women's hockey team that competes at an elite level of the sport.

#### *Women's Hockey in Canada*

Canadian women have been playing hockey for more than a century. The first recorded game took place in Ottawa in 1891.<sup>1</sup> In subse-

quent decades, the sport enjoyed steady if uneven development, including a brief period of prosperity in Northern Ontario mining towns, where public interest rivalled attention given to men's games. The 1920s and '30s saw further advances. University and club teams were well organized and championship matches involving teams from across the country brought the sport a measure of credibility and legitimacy.<sup>2</sup>

The development of women's hockey took place in the context of the broader debate over women's involvement in sport that occurred early in the century.<sup>3</sup> In some communities, audiences were prohibited from viewing the spectacle of women playing hockey. Where observers were admitted, play was criticized on sometimes contradictory grounds. In some cases, the sport was ridiculed and dismissed as "frivolous entertainment."<sup>4</sup> In other instances, women were reproached for playing too seriously. Notwithstanding debate about the "proper" practice of the sport, historical accounts make clear that women's hockey during the early decades of this century was an exciting and physical sport played by skilled and committed athletes.<sup>5</sup>

The retrenchment that occurred throughout women's sport in the following decades dealt a powerful blow to women's hockey. As Brian McFarlane put it, "a long time-out" began in the 1940s.<sup>6</sup> While some teams and individual women managed to continue to play, there was little public support or interest in women's hockey.

The modern era of women's hockey in Canada began with the revival of women's sport that took place in the 1960s. This renewal began with the establishment of programs in community-based clubs and universities and the organization of invitational tournaments. Growth continued through the 1970s. One of the most significant developments of this decade was the formation of the Ontario Women's Hockey Association (OWHA) in 1975 by players and coaches from across the province.<sup>7</sup> The OWHA has grown to become the largest women's hockey association in the world.

The 1980s were an especially significant period for women's hockey. Programs expanded across Canada, particularly in Ontario where the OWHA provided structure and support. A national championship was inaugurated in 1982. This decade also saw the beginning of international play. The first women's world hockey tournament was held in 1987 near Toronto, with teams from North America, Europe, and Asia. Organized and sponsored by the OWHA, the event forced both the Canadian Amateur Hockey Association (now the Canadian Hockey Association or CHA) and the International Ice Hockey

Federation (IIHF) to take notice of women's hockey.<sup>8</sup>

Attention generated by the world tournament, along with continued pressure from supporters, led the IIHF to sanction the first official world championship in Canada in 1990.<sup>9</sup> This was followed by subsequent championships in Finland (1992), the United States (1994), and again in Canada (1997) and in Finland (1999). The culminating event in development at the elite level occurred in 1992, when the International Olympic Committee added women's ice hockey to the Olympic program after another vigorous lobbying effort by supporters.<sup>10</sup> While this happened too late for inclusion in the 1994 Games, women's hockey appeared in the Olympics for the first time in Nagano in 1998.

### *The Blades and the Provincial Women's Hockey League*

This book examines some general questions in feminist sociology and the sociology of sport through an investigation of a specific team, the Blades. The book details the experiences of the team over the course of the 1992–93 and 1993–94 seasons. The Blades play in the Provincial Women's Hockey League.<sup>11</sup> By virtue of the number of teams and the caliber of play, the PWHL is likely the most competitive women's hockey league in the world. Within Canada, the quality of play is matched only at the national championships. Internationally, play in the PWHL is rivalled only in the medal rounds at the world championships. As evidence of the dominance of the PWHL, the league has been well represented on each of the Canadian national teams, from the 1990 world championship to the 1998 Olympic and 1999 world championship teams.<sup>12</sup>

The PWHL has been marked by instability, with the number of teams ranging from four to eight. In 1992–93, when I began my research, the league included four teams. In 1993–94, three teams joined and one folded (with a number of players from the defunct team joining one of the new teams), for an increase to a six team league. In 1995–96, league membership increased to seven teams, followed by a decline to six in 1996–97. Because of the Olympics in February 1998, 1997–98 was an exceptional year. For the first time in Canadian women's hockey, the national team trained together in Calgary from September through the Olympic Games in February. In part because of the absence of some of the province's best players, in addition to continuing instability in the organization of women's hockey, membership in the PWHL in 1997–98 declined to an all-time low of three teams.

Turnover in the PWHL has resulted from the related problems of

financial constraints and lack of junior player development. The minimum cost of entering a team in the league is approximately \$20,000 a year. Admission to games is free and there is no gate revenue.<sup>13</sup> Nor is there any media coverage or media revenue. Teams meet the costs of league membership through player registration fees (generally on the order of several hundred dollars a season) and a variety of fund-raising efforts.

During the two years of my research, twenty women played on the Blades. In 1992–93, there were eighteen players. In the following year, five left and two joined, for a reduction to fifteen. These women ranged from sixteen to thirty years of age, with most in their twenties. The majority are heterosexual and the team includes several lesbians. Two players are married. Several are students and others work at a variety of occupations, including teaching, recreation administration, office work, and health professions. One commonality among the players is a high level of education. All but one (excepting those still in high school) have some postsecondary education and the majority are university graduates or university students.

All of the Blades began playing hockey as children. While a few played ringette or figure skated, they did so only briefly and left these sports in favor of hockey. The players followed several routes to the Blades. Two joined the team in early adolescence. Others came to the Blades from age group hockey or after playing for one or more other teams in the PWHL. Several players had some experience in boys' hockey although only two had played the majority of their age group careers in boys' hockey.

Collectively, the women on the Blades represent the evolution of women's hockey over the last two decades. One veteran has competed in ten national championships with the Blades and other teams; other veterans have played in nearly as many. Three members of the team played in the 1987 world tournament and on the 1990, 1992, and 1994 world championship teams. Another played in the 1987 tournament and on the 1990 and 1992 national teams. Still another veteran was on the 1994 national team. All of these women began playing elite level hockey in the 1980s when the sport was a well-kept secret. They nurtured their passion and skills into the 1990s, when women's hockey entered a new level of world and Olympic competition. With the passage of time, there was no guarantee they would still be at the top of the sport when 1998 came around.

Younger players came to the Blades with world championships established and the Olympics soon to be a reality. One joined the Blades

in 1991 at age nineteen and made impressive strides in her game that enabled her to make the Canadian national team in 1992. Another joined the Blades in 1992 at sixteen years of age and made the national team in 1994. Others in their age group came to the Blades with hopes of qualifying for world championships and the Olympics in 1998 and 2002. These women were the beneficiaries of the groundwork laid by their teammates and others in the 1980s.

Another group of Blades players were not involved with the national team program but were firmly established in the sport. Every member of the Blades, regardless of her relationship to the national team program, was a dedicated and skilled hockey player.

In addition to the players, the key figures on the Blades were Stephen, the president and general manager, and John, the coach. Stephen formed the team in the early 1980s and for a time served as coach. In 1984 he recruited John, then coaching elite boys' hockey, to come to the Blades. Since then, Stephen has confined his involvement to off-ice roles, serving as chief administrative officer and fund raiser.

Following John's arrival, the Blades began their ascent, winning the provincial championship for the first time in 1989. When I began my research in the fall of 1992, they were the dominant team in their league, having won the provincial championship four straight years. In that period, they had won the national championship once and finished among the top three every other year. This dominance remained in effect during the two years of my research, as the Blades won the provincial championship in both years and finished first and third at the national championship.

The Blades staff included two assistant coaches. In 1992–93, the assistants were Ray, a university student and Jerry, an instructor at a community college. For reasons detailed below, the coaching staff changed for the 1993–94 season. The new head coach was Glenn, a recent graduate of teachers college. The assistants were Mike, a high school teacher, and Ron, the husband of a retired player, who worked in a retail store. In 1992–93, the team also included a chiropractor who served as the team therapist. He left the team at the end of this season. In 1993–94, the team was without medical support staff, except during the national championship when an athletic trainer joined the team for this competition.

Stephen, the coaches, and trainers all served in volunteer capacities. Their involvement with the Blades was grounded in a passion for hockey, which had led them to women's hockey. Stephen's attachment to the team had an additional basis. Married and with two grown sons,

Stephen and his wife lost their only daughter in an auto accident some years ago. Had she lived, she would have been the age of some of the veteran Blades. Players who are old enough to remember Stephen's daughter understand that they are in some ways surrogate daughters to Stephen.

The Blades community also included a diverse group of supporters, comprised of players' families, partners, and friends. A core group of partners and parents came to most games and practices. A larger group, including these and other parents, partners, and friends, typically came to games.

### *Transition in Women's Hockey in the 1990s*

For most of the past century, women played hockey for the fun and satisfaction it provided. With the exception of brief periods when women's hockey had a limited commercial basis, they played in obscurity and with little recognition or support. With the development of international play culminating in entry into the Olympics, the conditions of involvement have changed dramatically. Etue and Williams identify the 1990 world championships as a key turning point. In a profile of members of the Canadian team that won this event, they describe the contrasts among players:

Women in the past had played for the sheer love of the game and the fun and sense of community that came from belonging to a team. The newer players, however, were less drawn by the social aspects of team play and more by the athletic heights it allowed them to reach. This distinction would emerge fully with future world championships and, eventually, the long-dreamed-of Olympics.<sup>14</sup>

The defining feature of women's hockey in the 1990s was expansion of international play, bringing with it an emphasis on player development at the elite level. Over the course of my two years with the Blades, two events occurred that highlighted the team's involvement in this process. The first was a national junior championship (officially titled an Under-18 Championship) in February 1993. This tournament was an important manifestation of the heightened emphasis on player development. The championship was won by an Ontario team coached by John, the Blades coach.

Through their participation in the national junior tournament,

some of the Ontario players had moved into the ranks of elite players. Following the tournament, many were looking to play at higher levels, including the PWHL. The Blades, in turn, were interested in bringing them on board.

This posed a dilemma in that established Blades players, coming off a 1993 national championship, were not yet ready to cede their places. Nor were Stephen and John about to abandon these players. The dilemma was resolved through the formation in the 1993–94 season of a second Blades team, which John coached, comprised of players under twenty and called the Junior Blades. (For this year the established team was called the Senior Blades.) The Junior team included the two youngest members of the 1992–93 Blades and several others recruited from the national championship under-18 team.

In 1993–94, the Senior Blades were coached by Glenn, who had played and coached at the higher levels of men's hockey. He was well known to Stephen, John, and the players because he was the boyfriend of one of the veteran players and had for years been part of the community of supporters. Although the choice of a player's boyfriend to coach the team might have occasioned criticism or dissension, there was little evidence of this. Both Glenn and his girlfriend made an obvious effort to separate their relationship from their positions on the team and in this they seemed successful.

The second event that highlighted the Blades' place in women's hockey was the 1994 world championship in Lake Placid, New York. Blades players had different relationships to the national team program. While a core group of three Blades had been named to the 1990, 1992, and 1994 teams, others had made the team in some years and not others. When I began my research in the fall of 1992, five players had been members of the Canadian team that won the world championship the previous April. Others who had never made the national team were among final cuts in different years.

The national team program bears an important relationship to the club system that is the backbone of hockey in Canada. As noted, it is only in the final rounds of international competition that play surpasses the level of that in games between the best teams in the PWHL. To be sure, the finals of the world championship and the Olympics are the pinnacle of play and winning these tournaments is a treasured achievement. At the same time, much of the allure of being on the national team lies in the challenge of making the team, the excitement of participating in the most publicized and prestigious events in the sport, and pride in representing Canada internationally.

Membership on the national team is both short term and precarious. While the CHA has moved to a program in which a team is named and brought together for a period before the Olympics, the teams that represented Canada at all the world championships were named after a selection camp held shortly before the tournament. The selection system is fraught with potential for error. Players might be injured, have a bad camp, or have a good camp and not be fairly evaluated. Selection in team sports is further complicated by the need to consider team chemistry and qualities such as intensity and "heart," which cannot be measured objectively. In hockey as in other sports, stories abound of players unjustly cut from the team or not invited to the selection camp.

The short term and uncertainty of membership on the national team leave club programs as the mainstay of players careers.<sup>15</sup> On the Blades, the interests of national team players and aspirants were respected and supported. But the team's identity was located in its efforts in league play and the goal of winning the national championship.

### *Women's Hockey and Gender Relations of Power*

The examination of women's hockey offered here emphasizes the significance of "patriarchal relations of power."<sup>16</sup> Materially, progress in the last decade has barely dented the continuing gender gap in opportunities. For the 1998–99 season, registration in male hockey in Canada was 471,088, in comparison to 37,748 in female hockey.<sup>17</sup> While the Canadian Hockey Association and its provincial counterparts annually sponsor ten championships at the regional and national level for boys and men in three age groups,<sup>18</sup> national competition for women is confined to the annual senior championship and a regional championship between teams from Ontario and Quebec. Internationally, men's world championships are held annually at the senior and junior levels. In women's hockey, world championships are held annually with the exception of Olympic years, and there is an annual three nations tournament involving Canada, the United States, and Finland.

Inequality also persists in the distribution of resources. The most critical resource in hockey is ice time. In their discussion of equity in hockey, Etue and Williams offer numerous examples of discriminatory practices in the allocation of ice time in public arenas across Canada, in large and small communities alike.<sup>19</sup> The resistance of community hockey associations and rink managers to providing access to girls and women's leagues is one of the most blatant indicators of the continuing



view of women as intruders in hockey.

The organization of hockey in Canada is a mix of gender-integrated and -separate structures. The CHA and all the provincial organizations save in Ontario are gender integrated, with one association responsible for serving male and female players. In Ontario, the OWHA is formally affiliated with the provincial male governing body but functions independently. The philosophy in other provinces and nationally is that the struggle to advance women's hockey is best pursued within the dominant structure and the material and human resources it provides. In contrast, the OWHA maintains a resolutely separatist position, believing that an organization devoted exclusively to the advancement of female hockey will better meet the needs of girls and women. At the heart of the OWHA's separatist philosophy is the belief that officials in men's hockey will never fully embrace the cause of women in the sport.<sup>20</sup>

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of these different approaches is their common failure to challenge significantly the historical dominance of men's hockey. In their profile of women's hockey in Canada, Etue and Williams describe its subordinate status within the CHA and its provincial branches. They suggest that the governing bodies operate on a

little sister principle, a principle that informs the way most male-identified sports function. Like the legions of girls who have played in goal for their brothers when an extra player was needed, women in the game today are more tolerated than respected. Female players are still largely looked upon as the little sisters who don't really belong in hockey.<sup>21</sup>

The separate structure in Ontario, home to the Blades and the PWHL, has not succeeded in reversing this trend. While the OWHA is the largest women's hockey organization in the world, with more than half the registered female players in Canada,<sup>22</sup> critics argue that it wields little power within the broader context of the sport. Etue and Williams suggest that the success of the OWHA is both enabled and limited by the association's unwillingness to challenge the male power structure. To illustrate, they cite the association's "timid approach" to challenging discriminatory policies on the allocation of ice time in municipal arenas, which consists of meetings and appeals to arena managers and boards of directors. The OWHA rejects more aggressive strategies, such as legal challenges, for fear this will alienate the men's

hockey establishment and perhaps prompt a backlash. Etue and Williams argue that the OWHA's greatest fear is that men's hockey will try to gain control of the women's game. Commenting on this conservative strategy, they note that "male organizations have no problem allowing women to manage the female game when its membership and influence are insignificant."<sup>23</sup>

The analysis also highlights cultural ambivalence about women's athleticism. The association between gender, power and athleticism is at the heart of the historical struggle over women's participation in sport. As Jennifer Hargreaves indicates, "the acquisition of strength, muscularity and skill has always been empowering for men, whereas for women it is valued far less and in some cases is denigrated."<sup>24</sup> Ambivalence about women's athleticism, in historical contexts where women were powerless, led to strategic accommodations.<sup>25</sup> These accommodations have included adapted models that diminished the physicality of women's sport, thereby minimizing the threat to the association of sport and masculinity, and assertion of what has come to be known as the feminine apologetic. This is a term introduced by Jan Felshin some twenty five years ago to refer to efforts by women athletes and administrators to resolve the apparent contradiction of women in sport by emphasizing the feminine appearance and characteristics of women athletes.<sup>26</sup>

Cultural preoccupation with the gendering of athleticism is at the heart of the homophobia that pervades sport. In *Coming on Strong*, Susan Cahn provides an account of the rise of the lesbian stigma in women's sport. During the early decades of this century, debate about the propriety of women's sport was focused on fear that sport would make women more like men sexually. Key to this concern was a presumption of heterosexuality; the fear was that the masculinizing effects of sport would make women "passionate, uncontrolled, assertive"—not desirable outcomes for women but unrelated to issues of same-sex attraction.<sup>27</sup>

The 1920s and '30s saw a shift in beliefs about the allegedly masculinizing effects of sport. Social change in the 1920s, including challenges to traditional gender constructions and relations, prompted retreat to more restrictive definitions of gender that privileged men's position and interests. In this context, women's sexuality was acknowledged as legitimate, so long as men retained exclusive access. By the 1930s, in a context of emphasized heterosexuality and heightened sanctions against deviations from normative prescriptions, "female athletic mannishness began to connote failed (rather than excessive) heterosex-

uality."<sup>28</sup> This connotation crystallized into a lesbian stigma associated with all women who transgressed gender boundaries by venturing into sport. This stigma is at the heart of the feminine apologetic and the homophobia that persists in sport.

Like other women athletes in the contemporary and earlier eras, the Blades are a strategic accommodation to gender relations of power in sport.<sup>29</sup> Playing hockey is at the core of the team's identity and the defining feature of relations between players, management, and other members of the Blades community. But in pursuing their passion for hockey, players negotiate the barriers to women's full membership in sport and the cultural contradictions that mark their experiences. Their efforts confirm Hargreaves's observation that "the power relations of gender in sports are complex, contradictory and controversial."<sup>30</sup>

### *Research Procedures*

The research for this book began in May 1992 with a phone call to the offices of the Canadian Amateur Hockey Association (now the Canadian Hockey Association). In response to my request for information, the manager of women's programs suggested I attend the Annual General Meeting of the Ontario Women's Hockey Association to be held later that month in Toronto. During the course of that meeting, I met a woman who played on the Blades and operated a girls' hockey camp, to be held in July on the campus of the university where I teach. I asked if I could spend some time at the camp and she readily agreed.

During this week I met players and coaches, observed the on-ice sessions and generally received an orientation to the world of women's hockey. I also was welcomed to the instructors' change room, where I spent time chatting with people about the sport.

The key contact I made at the camp was with John, the coach of the Blades. In an example of what I later learned is his passionate interest in hockey, John had taken holidays from his job as manager of a retail store in order to work at the camp as an instructor. I told John of my interest in women's hockey and asked if I might learn more about the Blades. Like most people I dealt with in the course of working on this project, he was supportive. In November, shortly after the season began, I went to a game and saw the Blades play for the first time. I spoke with John and arranged to come to another game the following week and to meet the team.

In preparation for the meeting, I wrote a letter of introduction outlining my interests and requesting permission to spend time with the

team. After the game, John brought me to the change room, introduced me to the players, and left the room. I passed out the letter and spoke a little about myself and the contents of the letter. There was little in the way of comment and what did occur was in a friendly vein. One player joked that she was impressed with the formality of the introduction on university letterhead. Another player, in reaction to my promise to ensure anonymity, said she wanted her name included in anything I wrote. Another player, taking advantage of my stranger status, said she is X., one of the best players in women's hockey, who had recently left the team amidst some controversy. Despite my stranger status, I caught on to this scam and took it as friendly banter. When X. returned to the team some weeks later, I introduced myself, briefly described my work and gave her a copy of the letter.

Following my initial meeting with the team, I began to attend games, practices, and other events such as the annual Christmas party. My routine on game and practice days was to arrive at the rink at the same time as the players, or approximately a half hour before they were due on the ice. Normally I went into the change room, and so far as this was possible in cramped quarters, I positioned myself in a place that was out of the way so that I would not interfere with players as they dressed. With occasional exceptions I did not make notes in the presence of the team. On these few exceptions, I would jot some notes on a piece of paper and put it in my pocket.

In my first year with the team I watched games from the stands, usually sitting with players' parents, partners, and friends. In the second year I stood at rinkside in the area that housed the timekeeper and penalty boxes and was adjacent to the team bench. Standing in the team penalty box afforded a wonderful opportunity to be close to the action. While players in the penalty box often had little to say, they sometimes commented to me about the game and the play that had landed them in the box. Depending on the context and the player involved, I would pick up on this and seek clarification of some point. During practices, I alternated between watching the team's activities from a position alongside the rink and moving around to chat with others who were present, including Stephen and players' parents, partners, and friends.

I also accompanied the team to the provincial and national championships, where I stayed at the tournament hotel and attended team meetings and other events. Travel to out of town events was an especially useful experience, not only because these were the highlights of the team's competitive season but because they were the few occasions when the team was together over a period of several days.

Following each game, practice, or other event, I wrote field notes. As these events usually took place at night and I (like the players) arrived home late in the evening, I wrote these notes early the following morning. I found that my recollections were fresh and I was able to recall events and conversations in detail. I conducted formal interviews with all but one of the women who played on the Blades over the 1992–93 and 1993–94 seasons, or nineteen in total. About six weeks after I began the research, I interviewed two players. While these interviews were helpful in clarifying some issues, I determined that it would be more useful to focus on the field work during the season and then try to conduct formal interviews on the completion of the season.

Following the 1992–93 season I analyzed my field notes in order to identify issues to investigate in player interviews. I then designed an interview schedule that explored players' biographies and other topics, including issues that had emerged over the course of the previous season. In May and June I interviewed all but three of the remaining players on the team. The players I failed to interview had agreed to meet with me but because of scheduling conflicts, we never got together. I interviewed one of these in October 1993 and another in July 1994. I never managed to connect with the third, who left the team after the 1993–94 season. In the summer of 1994, I interviewed the two players who joined the team for the 1993–94 season. The interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed.

In addition to the structured interviews, I had numerous informal discussions with players, Stephen, John, and the other coaches. I recorded detailed accounts of these conversations in my field notes.

During the course of my work, I came to be seen by most members of the team community as an unofficial member of the Blades. In this capacity, I developed friendly relations with players and others associated with the team, while maintaining some distance. When I was with the team in the change room, I generally took part in conversations only when specifically addressed. Players occasionally remarked on my presence. One instance of this occurred when I had been with the team for a couple of months and a player asked "So, are you figuring us out?" I responded by offering some general comments on my observations to date. On another occasion, some players were teasing a teammate and one of the participants in this incident called to me to "put this in your book." On a few occasions, a player known for her use of foul language apologized to me for this practice, as though I as a nonplayer should not be subjected to it. For the most part, however, players made few comments about my work. While I can never be com-

pletely certain of the extent to which this was the case, I believe that my routine presence fostered a degree of comfort and familiarity that not only facilitated but enabled my work.

### *Themes and Chapter Outline*

When I began my research with the Blades in November 1992, I had little sense of what to expect from an association that would continue through the remainder of the 1992–93 season and the entire 1993–94 season, ending in April. As it turned out, my observations in the first week foreshadowed the interests that define the project. In my notes from the initial games I attended, I remarked on the “hurtling” of bodies, and wondered about the background and lives of women who play the sport at this level. I also noted the presence in the arena of a number of Blades supporters, most but not all men, in team jackets. In my field notes, I mused, “Who are these guys?” I commented on the involvement of the crowd, and one man yelling a criticism to a player about a pass she had made, following this with “maybe it’s your girlfriend.” This was by far the most blatant instance of homophobia I witnessed in two years of field work. And in a memory that stands out particularly, during my first session with the players in the change room after a game, I looked around and, sensing the excitement, camaraderie, and the presence of women athletes, imposing in their equipment and skates, thought to myself, “The world needs to know about this.”

This hyperbole no doubt reflected the bias of my own interests and excitement that I was in the midst of a championship caliber women’s team. This, it seemed, was heaven for a feminist sport sociologist. At the same time, the sentiment reflected my immediate recognition—if not yet full appreciation—that I had gained access to a research setting that would allow the exploration of some key issues in the study of gender and sport.

These initial observations suggest two themes that inform the discussion. The first is the analysis of women’s sports teams as communities. In one of the first commentaries on this issue, Boutilier and SanGiovanni noted that the historical ambivalence around women’s participation in sport is intensified in the case of team sports, which offer the especially threatening possibility of women bonding in a group setting.<sup>31</sup> Mary Jo Kane has argued that team sports have a particular potential to enable women’s empowerment because “at their best, they foster a sense of community based on cooperation, mutual

support and group identity."<sup>32</sup> This book examines the manner in which the Blades fashioned a community that was grounded in a common passion and commitment to hockey and the strains that periodically challenged this process.

The second theme addressed in the book is women's experience of skilled bodily practice and the conditions that structure this practice. In their analysis of hockey and cultural politics in Canada, Gruneau and Whitson trace the historical roots of hockey to the late nineteenth century, when sport became a means of "speaking metaphorically about relationships between identities, status and power."<sup>33</sup> They indicate further that "the most encompassing, and most traditional, of these identities was the obsessive concern for manliness in sporting competition."<sup>34</sup> Through a century of dramatic social change, including changing gender relations, hockey's ability to express an ideal of masculinity that is grounded in toughness and force has remained firm: "Hockey has come to occupy the place it holds in Canadian culture in part because it provides a public platform for celebrating a very traditional masculine ideal."<sup>35</sup> This book examines the experiences of a group of women who challenge that ideal in a most profound way.

The analysis of women's experience of community and physicality is placed in the social context of the 1990s. While the development of world championship and Olympic competition gave promise of increased support and respect, for most of the decade women hockey players pursued their passion in obscurity and with little support. And they did so in a cultural setting of continuing ambivalence over women's athleticism. In hockey, the struggle to negotiate material and ideological barriers to women's participation is powerful and ongoing.

In exploring this struggle, the book examines contemporary manifestations of a number of historical paradoxes, or apparent contradictions, in women's sport.<sup>36</sup> For example, the myth of female frailty, the idea that women are weak and incapable of strenuous physical activity, has been both challenged by the accomplishments of female athletes, and confirmed by the assessment that "real" sport is men's sport. The association of men's sport with real sport has meant that women seeking full entry into the dominant model of sport have risked taking on the problems of this model, including violence and excessive commercialism and elitism. The alleged contradiction between femininity and athleticism has been countered by the feminine apologetic. The lesbian stigma attached to all women athletes has led to an effort to deny the lesbian presence in sport. While conditions for women in sport have changed considerably over the course of the century, each of these para-

doxes continues to mark the experiences of women athletes, including the women on the Blades.

Chapter 2 provides an account of the social organization of women's hockey and the Blades' location in the sport. In a context of limited interest and support for women's hockey, the Blades are committed to providing a "first class" experience for players. This commitment, and the team's emphasis on competitive success, define the Blades' relationship with their on-ice competition and others in the sport. While admirers praise the Blades for their commitment and success, critics deplore their wholehearted embrace of an elitist and competitive approach.

Chapter 3 examines the internal dynamics of life on the Blades. Although the players take pride in their accomplishments as a team, the effort to forge team unity was on occasion marked by struggle. This struggle unfolded over the course of the two years of my research. The discussion shows how the instrumentalism that marked the Blades, captured in the view that players come to the team "for the hockey," conditioned their responses to internal tension.

Chapter 4 examines the everyday world of elite women's hockey. The chapter begins with a chronicle of the team's 1992-93 national championship season. The regular routine of practicing and playing gave structure and meaning to the players' common passion for hockey. The account traces the team through the peaks and valleys of the competitive season, culminating in a national title.

The second part of chapter 4 examines continuity and change in 1993-94. The Blades continued their dominance in league play and won the provincial championship, although they failed to repeat as national champions. The key events in this year were the formation of the Junior Blades and the rivalry that ensued between them and the Senior team, and the world championship in Lake Placid, New York. While the Juniors represented the Blades future, the prominent representation of the Blades on the 1994 national team represented the organization's current prominence in women's hockey. The organization's effort to accommodate both the present and future was the defining feature of this year.

Chapter 5 investigates the dynamics of gender. The chapter begins by examining relations between the players and both the men who control the team and other members of the Blades community. Discussion then turns to the manner in which the Blades negotiate contemporary cultural ambivalence surrounding women's athleticism. One aspect of this is cultivation of an image that safeguards the pri-



mary construction of the players as athletes while protecting them from the stigma of masculinity and lesbianism. The primary construction of the Blades as athletes also is the basis for relations between lesbian and heterosexual players, which are examined in the last part of the chapter.

Chapter 6 continues the discussion of relations on the team with an analysis of the subculture of the change room. The change room is the players' private space and an important site for the construction of community. The analysis contrasts the dynamics of the Blades' change room with findings from related literature on the subculture of the locker room in men's sport.

Chapters 7 and 8 take up the issue of the gendering of physical practice. Chapter 7 explores the ideological and material conditions that structure the expression of physicality in elite women's hockey. The rules of play in men's and women's hockey are substantially the same, with the exception that women's hockey prohibits intentional body checking, that is intentional efforts to hit or "take out" an opponent. The prohibition of body checking is the centerpiece of an effort to construct women's hockey as an alternative to the men's game. The chapter explores this effort as an instance of the broader struggle over the gendering of physicality. The discussion considers arguments about the relationships between body checking, injuries, and the incidence of dirty play. On the Blades, attempts to distance women's hockey from the aggressive physicality of the men's game are compromised by the entrenchment of a sporting culture that emphasizes performance.

Chapter 8 extends the analysis in the previous chapter to a more general consideration of gender, physicality, and difference. The chapter begins with an examination of players' views on the gendering of athletic ability and the significance of gender differences to the practice of hockey. These are contrasted with their accounts of the social processes whereby hockey and hockey players are produced. The issue of gender and difference is explored further in a discussion of the experiences of girls and women in gender-integrated settings. The final section of the chapter provides an assessment of the potential of hockey to challenge naturalized ideologies of gender.

Chapter 9 offers concluding comments on the challenge that the Blades present to the masculine preserve of sport. This is followed by a brief consideration of developments in women's hockey since the research for this book was completed in 1994. The most significant event of recent years and likely in the history of the sport is addition to the Olympic program in 1998. Olympic participation has brought women's hockey more fully into the arena of commercial spectator

sport. Drawing on comparisons with similar developments in women's basketball, the chapter suggests that the effects of Olympic participation and the recognition it provides are likely to intensify ideological debates around the gendering of hockey and the cultural construction of women athletes.