

**Fields, Sarah K. *Female Gladiators: Gender, Law and Contact Sport in America*. Chicago, University of Illinois Press: 2008 (Reprint edition), 212 pages.**

Fields' *Female Gladiators* is a rich empirical investigation of the legal tribulations of girls who wanted to participate in contact sport in the U.S. After a brief overview of women's sport participation, of feminist legal history in the U.S.A., and of the main legislative changes that made it possible for women to participate in contact sports, Fields studies the specific legal histories of girls' attempts to play baseball, football, basketball, soccer, wrestling, and boxing, as well as boys' attempts to play on girls' field hockey teams. While there was indeed an increase in girls' participation in school athletics after Title IX in 1972, the empirical materials reviewed in this book clearly show that this particular piece of legislation had little to do with women's legal victories, as cases were almost universally won on the bases of the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment.

Fields provides more than a mere enumeration or summary of legal cases in her book; she makes two important theoretical claims. First, the author argues forcefully that the "range of decisions" on girls' sport participation was "influenced by the cultural significance of each sport" (Fields 16), and thus tightly connected not only to the American national identity, but also to American conceptions of manhood and manliness. As a rich literature in history and sociology of sport has shown, sports in America were and are still seen as privileged spaces for the teaching of masculinity to boys, and sporting skill and sporting values are at the core of the definition of hegemonic masculinity. Fields argues that girls' and women's inroads into the sporting domain were (and are?) perceived as a threat to the very definition of American manhood. In Fields' analysis, the public and legal responses to girls' access to boys' teams reflect cultural anxieties over girls' and women's increasing participation in all domains of social life. Thus, she explains, girls never had to sue over their participation in sports like ice hockey and rugby, while cases dragged for years in the case of the more "American" sports of baseball and football.

Second, Fields makes an argument about the "separate but equal" social consensus that has upheld the gender segregation of most sports even as girls were legally allowed to try for boys' teams. On the one hand, she shows how defendants in court cases have often used arguments that maintain gender stereotypes about size, strength, motivation, and athleticism to advocate against the admission of girls' on

boys' teams and how the media has supported these stereotypes through their coverage of the cases and portrayal of the girls who tried on boys' teams. On the other, she shows how while courts rejected many such arguments as archaic and harmful overbroad generalizations, and judges stressed that these types of arguments ignored the fact that there are many small boys and many girls who are stronger and taller than boys (Fields 46), their view that "separate but comparable or separate but equal sports teams for boys and girls are both reasonable and constitutional" (Fields 164) actually upheld gender stereotypes in order to protect girls as a class, but also girls' sporting programs. The irony, then, is that while girls and women have won the legal battle that allows them to play contact sports in America, the cultural battle that would encourage women to participate in contact sport has not yet been won: at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there are still very few women who take advantage of the new possibilities afforded by contact sports and who play on co-ed teams.

Fields' book will provide students of law, sport, and gender with a gentle introduction to the field of legal sports studies. The preface, first, and last chapters of the book certainly provide compelling arguments for a cultural analysis of the legal history of sport. The empirical chapters, however, will appeal more to scholars of each specific sport than to generalists. The former will find socio-historical and legal materials within which to ground their own analyses; the latter will find the chapters somewhat repetitive. Readers with strong feminist inclinations will regret the absence of a more grounded theoretical approach to the materials, and those familiar with the masculinity literature by Connell et al., Halberstam, Kimmel, Messner, Sabo, and others will deplore the lost opportunity to connect this strong legal analysis to more critical studies of masculinity, femininity, and sports. Fields' analyses provide many rich examples of the dynamic process that reproduce men's privilege, and uncover yet another area where masculine domination was challenged and showed its chameleon-like nature.