

**Book Review**

# Active Bodies: A History of Women's Physical Education in Twentieth-Century America

Martha Verbrugge  
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*Active Bodies* is a thoughtful and thought-provoking look at physical education for women in the United States from the late 19th century to the present. The product of extensive archival and oral history research that took author Martha Verbrugge across the country, *Active Bodies* is a welcome addition to the historical study of physical education. In particular, it contributes to our understanding of the generations of women physical educators who created spaces for women and girls to be active. It also explores the rich entanglements of race and gender in the history of physical education.

*Active Bodies* offers a thematic reading of what the author considers the “most common sites” for physical education, “public schools and undergraduate institutions” (p. 11). The first six chapters examine female physical educators; science and sex difference; menstruation; race; competition; and physical education in public schools before the 1950s. The final three chapters revisit physical educators, sex difference, and reproductive health in the latter half of the 20th century.

Chapters 1 and 7 explore women physical educators. In Chapter 1, Verbrugge sheds light on who was drawn to the profession and what their training likely entailed before turning her attention to educators' experiences on the job. Chapter 7 does similar work, although it is structured differently. Namely, Verbrugge includes four sections that are concerned with public school teachers and college instructors before and after the early 1970s to elucidate how the passage of Title IX—a federal law prohibiting gender-based discrimination in all schools receiving government funding including colleges—affected women's physical education. The irony, Verbrugge notes, is that even as opportunities for girls and women to be active increased exponentially after 1972, women lost ground as administrators, educators, and coaches. Verbrugge writes, “With women's sports heralding career advancement and visibility, more men entered the arena, aided by well-established professional networks and favorable hiring practices” (p. 192).

In Chapters 2 and 8, Verbrugge considers how physical educators' ideas about sex difference measured up against medical science and popular opinion over the course of the 20th century. She further inquires about the consequences of these ideas for students in physical education classes. Verbrugge's treatment of these myriad philosophies of active womanhood is at once balanced and critical. She is clear about both the possibilities and pitfalls of her subjects'

thinking and practices. In this way, *Active Bodies* offers more than an account of physical education in the past; it also provides a suggestive blueprint for a more equitable approach to physical education. It is no coincidence that she titles her conclusion, *Justice in the Gym*.

The subject of Chapters 3 and 9 is menstruation. As in Chapters 2 and 8, Verbrugge is interested in the intersections between medical theories and the ideas of physical educators as well as the implications of gym policies for students. Taken together, Chapters 3 and 9 make clear that attitudes toward physical activity and reproductive health changed markedly in the 20th century but not in any sort of linear way. Verbrugge's research suggests that the 1940s and 1950s were perhaps the most progressive in terms of attitudes toward active women, while the last 30 years have seen reproductive health invoked repeatedly and in increasingly alarmist ways to limit women's access to physical activity.

Chapter 4 takes a closer look at the historically black Howard University in Washington, DC, United States, and the predominantly white University of Nebraska to explore how gender and race shaped the oversight and management of physical education programming for women at institutions of higher education. At both schools, women's physical education was run by "well-known women professionals," and the programs had some measure of autonomy (p. 77). However, as Verbrugge makes clear, this did not ensure equity for faculty or students in these departments. Not only were physical activities gendered but also women's programming was run "with modest budgets and second-rate facilities" (p. 78).

Case studies are also at the heart of Chapter 5, in which Verbrugge considers physical activities for women at college. In this chapter, she engages with a body of literature that has long tried to explain why particular schools developed competitive programming while others favoured recreational activities. Unlike scholars who have deployed race, class, locale, or educational mission to explain these different trajectories, Verbrugge concludes that no single factor is sufficient in accounting for an institutional path. What's more, "whatever direction a school chose, the process was contested" (p. 151). This phrase echoes a common refrain in *Active Bodies*, namely that the history of women's physical education is one of debate and contest.

Chapter 6 considers how race and gender shaped physical education programming in Washington, DC, schools from the late 19th century until de-segregation. This chapter reveals how the colour line affected physical education curriculum as well as activity spaces for white and black children. This was possibly the most compelling chapter in the book. I found it particularly interesting for the ways in which Verbrugge situates "unskilled boys," a term the author uses to refer to boys perceived as having below average athletic abilities, alongside girls (p. 157). This not only reveals the complex hierarchies produced at the intersection of gender and skill but it also provides a welcome counterpoint to what in other chapters can at times feel like undifferentiated masculine power. I also appreciated the close attention paid to black physical educators' efforts to create opportunities for their pupils in the face of policies that positioned white and black children as *separate and unequal*.

As this brief overview suggests, difference is a central theme in the book, and Verbrugge is methodical in her efforts to understand how it has functioned historically in physical education for American women. Difference, she illustrates, was a physical reality that educators encountered and negotiated in the gym as they worked with students of varying abilities from diverse backgrounds. It was also a powerful if capricious rhetorical device, which educators deployed to carve out a space for themselves as professionals and for their female students as active subjects. In some cases, difference provided the necessary justification to institute physical education for girls and women. However, it just as easily could be used to limit the

opportunities available to women desiring to be active, often by constructing them as inferior to men.

In the introduction to *Active Bodies*, Verbrugge observes, “Binary structures dominated teachers’ ideas about physical activity in the twentieth century” (p. 7). They also dominate the book’s analysis. For example, brief mentions of Native American residential schools and activity programming for immigrants aside, race refers to the most visible colour line in American history, between white and black. That Verbrugge does not justify this decision suggests that her choice should be self-evident. This not only naturalizes a dichotomous view of race but it also further obscures what are already marginal groups in writing on the history of sport, including Hispanics, Asians, and Indigenous Americans.

In addition to gender and race, Verbrugge considers sexuality, although here her analysis is less developed, receiving particularly limited attention in the chapters concerned with the first half of the 20th century. Even in the second half of the book where she pays more attention to the contested place of lesbianism in physical education, Verbrugge could have provided a more detailed account of how heterosexuality was reproduced as dominant. Although I don’t doubt the import of compulsory heterosexuality to physical education in the latter part of the 20th century, it would have been nice to see more concrete examples, not least because this is a subject that has received limited attention in historical work in the field.

As one would expect from a monograph spanning more than a century, *Active Bodies* is broad in scope. Verbrugge’s use of short biographies, case studies, and personal anecdotes from educators and athletes alike tempers the impersonality that such work can produce. Equally appealing are the sections of the book that shed light on the everyday lives of educators and pupils. The opening chapter, for instance, takes the reader on a journey through a physical education teacher’s training, from application to graduation. Although Verbrugge “focuses on the work and ideas of women who taught gym class, rather than their students’ experiences” (p. 10), we still catch glimpses of girls and women engaging in and at times charting their own path through the thorny terrain of physical education. These fragments invite further consideration and study.

This is perhaps a minor criticism but I found Verbrugge’s use of the term “Great White Mothers of Physical Education”—it first appears without any explanation on page 105—heavy-handed and distracting. Although I do not disagree that physical education leaders in this period were predominantly white women, I wonder what analytic work a term like this does, especially because her discussions of these women’s sexual and racial politics is otherwise nuanced and critical.

To conclude, *Active Bodies: A History of Women's Physical Education in Twentieth-Century America* is an enjoyable read and an important addition to the history of physical education. Verbrugge shows that physical education for American women in the 20th century was not monolithic. Diverse ideas about bodies and gender, in conjunction with race, class, and sexuality produced disparate access to and experiences of physical activity. Likewise, women physical educators, although predominantly white and middle class, were no less easily compartmentalized. Although they may have been linked by their subordinate position in the educational hierarchy, they could just as easily be differentiated by their diverse philosophies of active womanhood and their different approaches to women’s physical education in the gym. As I read the book, I could not help but wonder how these debates about women and physical activity played out in spaces such as community centres and YWCAs where physical education was not compulsory in the way it often was in school settings. Overall, one hopes that the rich

histories relayed in *Active Bodies* will inspire further study of school-based physical education programming as well as physical education in non-school settings.

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