



THE LEGACY OF SUSAN BIRRELL

# An Introduction to Reading the Past Critically

## *Honoring the Legacy of Susan Birrell*

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This special issue of the *Journal of Sport History* honors the legacy of Dr. Susan Birrell who retired from the University of Iowa in December 2019 as a professor of American studies, although this was certainly not the end to her storied career. As editors of this special issue, “Reading the Past Critically: Honoring the Legacy of Susan Birrell,” we have benefitted from our relationships with Susan in countless ways. She has been our graduate advisor, our coauthor—perhaps even conspirator—friend, colleague, confidant, and role model. We share her love of dogs and cats, the lakes of Montana, and Iowa’s women’s basketball, although we can’t match her skill as a ukulele player. And, like so many readers of this journal, we are the beneficiaries of Susan’s significant and brilliant scholarship. Her sharp research and elegant writing instructs and inspires. It has motivated generations of scholars to take her formative ideas in new and innovative directions.

“Reading the Past Critically” is the result of a long process that began with an open call for contributors in the summer of 2019. At that time, the plan was that selected papers would be presented at a preconference symposium to be held in May 2020, prior to the annual meeting of the North American Society for Sport History (NASSH) in Susan’s own Iowa City, Iowa—and then incorporated into a special issue. However, that conference was moved by NASSH to Chicago due to transphobic legislation passed by the Iowa legislature. Unfortunately, the Chicago conference was subsequently cancelled due to the coronavirus pandemic. Although it is disappointing that we could not celebrate Susan’s work in person,

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the articles in this collection were subject to a comprehensive review process and constitute an important tribute to her considerable contributions to sport studies.

But first, before proceeding, a bit about Susan, who began her academic journey at St. Lawrence University in Canton, New York, where she graduated in 1968 with a degree in English. Not simply a keen student but a talented athlete as well, Susan played every sport available—basketball, field hockey, and swimming—in the era just prior to the massive growth of women's sports in the United States. She did this while serving as president of the Women's Athletic Recreation Association and is now a member of the St. Lawrence University Athletic Hall of Fame. Susan continued her graduate education at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Under the tutelage of John Loy, one of the founders of sport sociology and a doyen of the field, she earned a master's of science in sport studies and then, in 1978, a PhD in human movement, with a concentration in the sociology of sport.

Susan's first academic position took her to Hamilton, Ontario, and McMaster University's School of Physical Education and Athletics. In 1980, she moved to the University of Iowa, where she rose through the ranks of assistant, associate, and full professor, to become chair of the Department of Health and Sport Studies, while simultaneously holding joint appointments—and subsequently serving as chair—in the Department of Gender, Women's and Sexuality Studies and the Department of American Studies. These affiliations, and the interdisciplinary networks they represent, would prove valuable, as Catriona Parratt explains in this issue, as the University of Iowa's prolific Sport Studies program merged with American Studies in 2010.

Susan has been recognized for her service and intellectual contributions to her departments, college, university and to the field, including awards from both NASSH and the North American Society for the Sociology of Sport (NASSS). At Iowa, she was the recipient of the 2002 Michael J. Brody Service Award for Faculty Excellence in Service and the 2018 Jean Jew Award in recognition of her work improving the status of women on campus.

"A significant part of Dr. Birrell's legacy is her outstanding publication record and influence on the development of the field," write Eileen Narcotta-Welp and Dain TePoel in this issue. But, they continue, "we believe her greatest legacy is her students." As the editors of this issue, we find it impossible to weigh one strand of her legacy against another, yet, as her former students, we also find it difficult to argue against Narcotta-Welp and TePoel's conclusion.

Throughout her storied career, Susan taught a wide variety of graduate and undergraduate courses devoted to the critical study of sport and leisure and has mentored a staggering number of graduate students. By our count, she has been the major advisor for over forty doctoral recipients and served as a committee member for an additional fifty-plus dissertation committees and/or qualifying exams in Departments of Health and Sport Studies; Gender, Women's, and Sexuality Studies; American Studies; and others across the University of Iowa. In addition, she has advised more than twenty-five Health and Sport Studies master's students. The time, commitment, patience, and energy necessary for mentorship suggest that Susan frequently placed the needs of her students over her own career. This makes her reputation as a pre-eminent international scholar all the more impressive.

Susan's considerable knowledge and generous sharing of ideas has benefitted not just her own students but the entire field of sport studies—and, by extension—sport itself.

Many of today's leading scholars in sport history, sport management, and the sociology of sport are her former students and share her commitment to expanding understandings of how race, gender, class, and sexuality shape opportunity and reward within sport and the broader U.S. culture. What is more, many of her students also work within the athletic community, especially in intercollegiate athletics. Consequently, we can think of very few scholars, if any, who have had a comparable impact on both the professoriate and the sports industry.

Within this special issue devoted to the work of Susan Birrell, authors focus primarily on her ontological, epistemological, theoretical, empirical, and methodological contributions to sport studies. These contributions include four coauthored and coedited books and a fifth in progress, all of which point to important junctures in her scholarship, as well as in the field writ large. The titles include a 1978 monograph with Peter Donnelly, *Motivation and Sport Involvement: The Need for Stimulation and Achievement*; an anthology coedited with Maria Hart, *Sport in the Sociocultural Process*, 1981; *Women, Sport, and Culture*, coedited in 1994 with C. L. Cole and among the first anthologies devoted to feminist analysis of sport; and a 2000 anthology coedited with Mary G. McDonald, *Reading Sport: Critical Essays on Power and Representation*, which recognizes the narrative turn in the social sciences and draws on cultural studies, feminism, and critical race theory to offer the first collection to explore intersectionality—the entwined workings of race, class, gender, and sexuality—in sport. Her manuscript in preparation, *Reading Mt. Everest: History, Narrative, Power* will no doubt make an equally substantial contribution to the literature.<sup>1</sup>

The trajectory of Birrell's scholarship traces a brilliant arc that bends from her initial psychological and sociological inquiries to sophisticated interdisciplinary analyses best described as critical feminist cultural studies. This sweep is perhaps most evident in her influential work on women, gender, and feminist theories. From her 1978 "Achievement Related Motives and the Woman Athlete" to her 1984 "Separatism as an Issue in Women's Sport" to her 1988 "Discourses on the Gender/Sport Relationship: From Women in Sport to Gender Relations" to her 2000 chapter "Feminist Theories for Sport," she has shaped the ways scholars think about and study women, gender, and sport for over five decades.<sup>2</sup> It is no surprise then that the contributions in this issue by Mary Louise Adams, JoAnn LoSavio, and Murray Phillips and Gary Osmond continue in this feminist tradition of interrogating normative assumptions as a means to illuminate the complicated workings of gender and sport.

Indeed, as Adams recognizes in this issue, "Susan Birrell is well known in sport studies for introducing politically astute and theoretically robust forms of critique that aim to advance social justice." Her commitment to the critical study of power is evident in "Race Relations Theories and Sport: Suggestions for a More Critical Analysis," which appeared in the *Sociology of Sport Journal* in 1989 and is among the most notable of her publications.<sup>3</sup> Drawing on work from within Black and Chicano studies, Birrell was among the first critics to urge sport scholars to move away from commonsense conceptualizations of race as biological category. Instead, she mapped out a much more profound approach "to conceive of race as a culturally produced marker of a particular relationship of power, to see racial identity as contested, and to ask how racial relations are produced and reproduced through sport."<sup>4</sup> She further argued that cultural studies frameworks that blended materialist and

cultural perspectives offered the most promising model for scholars to reveal the complex processes of dominance and resistance at play in the structuring of race including in the ways in which race is (re)made through sport. Consistent with her theoretical and political commitments, Birrell also implored scholars not simply to theorize about race but to investigate the complex ways in which race, gender, class, and sexuality interact. “Race Relations Theories and Sport,” thus, offered yet another early call for scholars to apply an intersectional lens to the study of sport and power.

Birrell’s 1990 chapter “Women of Color, Critical Autobiography and Sport” demonstrated the critical, theoretically grounded scholarship for which she advocated in “Race Relations Theories and Sport.”<sup>5</sup> Informed by Chicana and Black feminist theorizing about difference, she proposed ways to understand women of color’s unique experiences in sport, which were, at that time, largely absent from the literature. She not only suggested the need to theorize about this absence but also introduced sport studies audiences to some of the “home truths” or important issues expressed in the writings of women of color, further illuminating the “tensions between identity, experience and consciousness” of oppression.<sup>6</sup> This type of writing serves multiple ends as “an act of recovery, of survival, of resistance, of revolution” where women of color are “writing themselves out of a tradition of enforced silence and absence, and they intend their writing to be read as theory.”<sup>7</sup> As such, embracing diverse and shifting positionalities offers significant points of access to capture the complex articulations of sexism, racism, and classism in sport as women of color themselves experience and articulate such important issues.

Birrell’s dedication to feminist cultural studies and the importance of investigating intersectionality is central to her work with Mary McDonald. The interdisciplinary theoretical and methodological lens they call “reading sport critically” suggests the significance of highly visible sporting events, incidents, and celebrities as important sites of cultural meaning where “power lines” cross and intersect.<sup>8</sup> Popular discourses about celebrity sport stars such as Billie Jean King and Michael Jordan are thus conceived as texts ripe for critical analysis for the cultural work they perform. Birrell and McDonald engage with poststructuralist theories, diverse conceptualizations of power, and the “crises in representation” to discuss the ideological importance of cultural narratives that are too often encoded into highly visible sporting texts and to think about what might produce counternarratives or “narratives infused with resistant possibilities.”<sup>9</sup>

Extending the concept of “reading sport critically,” Birrell later argued for the value of locating it within an intertextual framework, which, she explains, is “an approach that explores the interrelationship and interdependencies of meanings as they travel among different texts.”<sup>10</sup> In this regard, she shows perhaps her strongest contributions to sport history. She brought this inventive approach to the attention of NASSH in her 2006 Seward Staley honor address, “Approaching Mt. Everest: On Intertextuality and the Past as Narrative.”

Birrell continued her intertextual analysis of Mt. Everest and the narratives that circulate around it in a 2012 article, coauthored with Theresa Walton. There, they juxtapose the stories of Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay, who ascended the “Holy Mother” in 1953, with those of Roger Bannister, who famously broke the four-minute mile the following year. As Walton and Birrell contend, these are “two of a triad of potent texts—the coronation of Elizabeth II on June 2, 1953, is the third—that are linked together intertextually through

synchronicity, media narratives, and cultural imperatives.”<sup>11</sup> This line of work culminates in Birrell’s book project on Everest, which continues her interests in exploring narrativity and issues of power. Articles in this special issue written by JoAnn LoSavio and by Eileen Narcotta-Welp and Dain TePoel draw from Birrell’s insights on intertextuality to explore the contexts surrounding such diverse subject matter as Burmese sportswomen, and the sports film *Rudy*.

## IN THIS ISSUE

In the first contribution to this special issue, “Feminist Softball as Everyday Utopia: Sport as a Site of Political Transformation,” Mary Louise Adams pays special attention to Birrell’s influence in feminist sport studies. Adams centers her analysis on Birrell’s 1987 article “Is a Diamond Forever? Feminist Transformations of Sport,” coauthored with Diana Richter and published in *Women’s Studies International Forum*. In this formative study, Birrell and Richter interviewed and observed feminist participants in two women’s recreational, slow-pitch softball leagues who actively resisted “the male preserve of sport” and the often harmful values it promotes and sustains. The softball players, argue Birrell and Richter, successfully transformed sport “from a mechanism for the presentation and reproduction of male values to a celebration of feminist alternatives.”<sup>12</sup>

In regarding “Is a Diamond Forever” as a historical artifact shaped by the politics of late twentieth-century women’s liberation movements, Adams contends that Birrell and Richter’s work still has much to offer, even in the face of more recent intersectional and antiessentialist critiques. Namely, the article serves as a reminder of the transformative power of sport and the importance of collective struggle for social and political change. Adams draws on the work of theorists Sara Ahmed, Davina Cooper, and José Esteban Muñoz to maintain that Birrell and Richter’s analysis of softball “reminds us of the history of feminist efforts to transform conventional models of sport and to engage the ‘potentialities’ of sport in the project of making a better world.”

Next, Murray Phillips and Gary Osmond highlight the sporting experiences of the women of Cherbourg, an Aboriginal community in Queensland, Australia. The authors raise epistemological, methodological, and ontological issues regarding how non-Aboriginal scholars might investigate and highlight such histories. By working reciprocally with community members to tell the story of the Cherbourg “Marching Girls,” Phillips and Osmond also discuss long-standing feminist issues of insider/outsider positionalities, as well as the need to explore complex issues of intersectionality and counternarratives, as aligned with Birrell and McDonald’s call to “read sport critically.” Phillips and Osmond thus demonstrate the power of counternarratives and the necessity of historians’ engagement with local communities to revise simplistic colonial accounts “to facilitate Aboriginal people telling their histories on their own terms.”

In the third article, JoAnn LoSavio investigates the trope of the “Burmese Sports-woman” as a key figure used to promote nationalistic sensibilities in postcolonial Burma. Drawing on Birrell’s notions of intertextuality, LoSavio offers a visual analysis of the sportswoman’s significance in communicating Burma’s alleged forward-thinking gender relations that presumably signify the nation’s entry into modernity and simultaneous break from its colonial past. In this way, LoSavio’s scholarship reveals the continuing salience of

Birrell's analytic and conceptional contributions including their applicability across time and space.

Following LoSavio, Eileen Narcotta-Welp and Dain TePoel ruminate on Birrell as a scholar, teacher, and graduate mentor in "Tuesdays with Susan: *Rudy*, Race, and Reflections on the Lessons and Legacy of Birrellian Approaches to Sport and Film." Over several semesters during their doctoral studies at the University of Iowa, the authors both served as teaching assistants for Birrell's undergraduate "Sport and Film" course. Through personal reflections and critical analysis, Narcotta-Welp and TePoel present what they call a "Birrellian legacy" that involves "cultural studies perspectives and intertextual approaches to cinematic narrative sport films." Based on that legacy, and the pedagogical insights they developed during their time working with Birrell, the authors engage in an intertextual exercise involving the 1993 sport film *Rudy* and its recent references in commercial and popular culture.

Finally, Catriona Parratt closes this section of the issue with her musings on some lesser-known aspects of the legacy of Susan Birrell: as a supportive colleague, as a dear friend, and as a woman who "enchanted" and ultimately converted Parratt's father into a champion for LGBTQ+ rights. Parratt's reflections further illustrate Susan's sincere influence on the lives of those she touched.

Taken together, the articles in this special issue point to Susan Birrell's incalculable contributions to sport history and affiliated fields of study. They also reveal the generous collaborative spirit that is a hallmark of her legacy. In our view, it is an indelible legacy defined by selfless service, profound mentorship, and cutting-edge research; and each facet glows with her intelligence, political commitment, fluency, kindness, grace, and good humor. It is a daunting but rewarding task to put together a collection that honors all this and more—and we are grateful for the time and thoughtfulness the contributors devoted to the task. Above all, however, we are grateful to Susan Birrell who emboldens and empowers all of us to read the past critically.



## NOTES

In this essay we use "Susan" when discussing our personal reflections, her degrees and academic honors, and her teaching and mentorship. We use "Birrell" when examining her scholarship.

1. Peter Donnelly and Susan Birrell, *Motivation and Sport Involvement: The Needs for Stimulation and Achievement* (Ottawa: CAHPER Sociology of Sport Monograph Series, 1978); Marie Hart and Susan Birrell, eds. *Sport in the Sociocultural Process*, 3rd ed. (Dubuque, IA: Wm. C. Brown, 1981); Susan Birrell and C. L. Cole, eds. *Women, Sport and Culture* (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 1994); Susan Birrell and Mary G. McDonald, eds. *Reading Sport: Critical Essays on Power and Representation* (Boston: Northeastern University, 2000).

2. Susan Birrell, "Achievement Related Motives and the Woman Athlete," in *Women and Sport: From Myth to Reality*, ed. Carole A. Oglesby (Philadelphia: Lea & Febiger, 1978), 143–71; Susan Birrell, "Separatism as an Issue in Women's Sport," *Arena Review* 8.2 (1984): 21–29; Susan Birrell, "Discourses on the Gender/Sport Relationship: From Women in Sport to Gender Relations," *Exercise and Sport Sciences Review* 16 (1988): 459–502; Susan Birrell and Cheryl L. Cole, *Women, Sport and Culture*; Susan Birrell, "Feminist Theories for Sport," in *Handbook of Sport and Society*, ed. Jay Coakley and Eric Dunning (London: Sage, 2000), 61–76.

3. Susan Birrell, "Racial Relations Theories and Sport: Suggestions for a More Critical Analysis," *Sociology of Sport Journal* 6.3 (1989): 212–27.
4. Birrell, "Race Relations Theories and Sport," 214
5. Susan Birrell, "Women of Color, Critical Autobiography, and Sport," in *Sport, Men and the Gender Order: Critical Feminist Perspectives*, ed. Michael Messner and Don Sabo (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 1990), 185–99.
6. Birrell, "Women of Color, Critical Autobiography, and Sport," 190.
7. Birrell, "Women of Color, Critical Autobiography, and Sport," 192–93.
8. Susan Birrell and Mary G. McDonald, eds. *Readings Sport: Critical Essays on Power and Representation* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2000; Mary G. McDonald and Susan Birrell, "Reading Sport Critically: A Methodology for Interrogating Power," *Sociology of Sport Journal* 16.4 (1999): 283–300.
9. McDonald and Birrell, "Reading Sport Critically," 283.
10. Susan Birrell, "The Loneliness of Learning to Labor," *Journal of Sport History* 41.1 (2014): 6.
11. Theresa Walton and Susan Birrell, "Enduring Heroes: Hillary, Bannister, and the Epic Challenges of Human Exploration," *Journal of Sport History* 39.2 (2012): 211–26.
12. Susan Birrell and Diana M. Richter, "Is a Diamond Forever? Feminist Transformations of Sport," *Women's Studies International Forum* 10.4 (1987): 408.