Women's Body Consciousness and Political Ideologies in Finnish Exercise Culture

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ABSTRACT

For over one hundred years, women's gymnastics has been one of the most popular sports in the Nordic countries. In the article, two styles of Finnish women's gymnastics will be studied. Of them, the former one was in use from the beginning of the 1900s, and the latter one from the 1930s on. In the article, it will be analyzed, how each style of gymnastics, with the rhythm and spatiality of its movements, has created a model of how the gymnasts have been in time, and in space. In the same time, by exercising the gymnasts have generated and maintained ideas about the use of space and time in social circumstances, in their normal life. This way, gymnastics has been an institution and a form of activity, which has created and maintained values and norms concerning not only the bodies but the personalities of the gymnasts, as well.

KEYWORDS

women's gymnastics, sport history, Finnish exercise culture, psycho physicality, Finnish gymnastics theoreticians at the beginning of the 1900s

For over one hundred years, women's gymnastics has been one of the most popular sports in the Nordic countries. Since the beginning of the 20th century, hundreds of gymnastics festivals have attracted thousands of gymnasts in Finland alone. Gymnastics has been taught weekly, monthly, and from year to year, in gymnastic clubs and at schools around the country. When teaching gymnastics according to the standards of the day, the gymnasts and their teachers considered the norms of gymnastics self-evident; in other words, as if the movements exercised and the body consciousness born out of the movements were neutral and value-free.

Women's gymnastics cannot, however, be examined separately from the political ideology prevailing in the exercise culture. The starting point of this article is the thought that instead of "pure gymnastics", there is good reason to emphasize exercise imbued with different systems of meaning. According to Henning Eichberg (2004), different types of sports and forms of exercise correspond with different political identities. In his opinion, ideologies do not make use of sports and exercise culture, but they are, nevertheless, the same form as the exercise corresponding with the ideology. That being the case, women's gymnastics has also been an institution and a form of activity that has created and maintained values and norms pertaining to the body consciousness of the gymnasts. Through gymnastics, though, women have the kind of movement they are allowed to use in everyday life. In this article, I will concentrate on examining the struggle of women's sports and the development of women's body consciousness. The essential dimensions of all exercise are space and time; in other words, how space is taken over by

movements according to the kind of rhythm and tempo in which the movements are made. Teaching gymnastics usually consists of teaching the desired movements, plus the rhythm of the movements, and the space occupied by the movements. At the same time, gymnasts have learned the possible and recommended spatiality and rhythm of their everyday movements.

I will analyze my subject through the debates in Finnish sporting culture seen at the beginning of the 20th century. I will describe two gymnastics cultures arising from different political identities and their systems of meaning. The first of these, classical gymnastics, was in use from the 1870s to the 1920s, while the second, modern gymnastics and sport, from the 1920s onwards. In addition, I will sketch out the grounds on which the values and norms have been formed in both these styles. My research material consists of works by Finnish gymnastics theorists, and articles in Finnish sports magazines of the time.

Classical gymnastic culture for the gentry

In the late 1800s, classical gymnastics began to spread among the gentry in Finland. Gymnastics was promoted in upper-class schools and gymnastics clubs, of which there were still few in those days, and in the army. Gymnastics was a combination of German and Swedish systems: women's gymnastics emphasized the Swedish system, and men's gymnastics took ideas from the German system. Gymnastics included free, baton, and apparatus exercises. Gymnastics, in the broader sense, included health-promoting games, play and sports, such as riding, fencing, skiing, sailing, rowing, running, swimming and dancing. The standards for both men's and women's gymnastics was high.

According to classical gymnastics, men and women tend to move in the same manner, though women's gymnastics programs were lighter. On the other hand, it was believed that women needed exercise even more than men, as they had to give birth to children and nurse them (Ljunggren 1999, p. 155). Gymnastics became very popular among upper-class women. Difficult apparatus moves were done quickly in large movements. Anni Collan, one of the people who developed women's gymnastics, emphasized the social equality of women and men within the gymnastic movement and more widely amongst the upper class as a whole. She wrote: "*The development of Finnish women has led them to be socially equal with men; in Finland both men and women stand side by side as human beings*" (1912, p. 49). The *habitus* of women gymnasts was the Amazon, with her fine posture, large rib cage, and strong muscles. They abandoned corsets and high-buttoned shoes, and were able to perform difficult apparatus movements. The joy, health, and physical activity transmitted by their gymnastics brought into question the idea of the fragility of women. Women began to use very high beams and horizontal bars which "*called for a great deal more will than normal*". This was also to affect the personality of the gymnasts "*by developing strength of will, decisiveness, the desire to perform, faith in oneself and bravery*" (Collan 1912, p. 45).

As early as the beginning of the 1800s, nationalistic intentions in Germany identified the country with ancient Greece. At the core of neo-humanistic nationalism was the idea that the highest aim of a nation was to be a strong nation. By the end of the 1800s, the admiration for Greek culture that prevailed in German culture became common amongst the gentry in Finland. The model of antiquity became general in university life, secondary-school teaching, and the arts, especially in sculpture inspired by antiquity. The Finnish gymnastic theoreticians Viktor Heikel and Elli Björkstén acknowledged the values of the new humanism. Björkstén described the culture of the ancients as *the well of living water*. Heikel's ideal was a humanistic gymnastic culture combining the psyche, aesthetics, intellect, and heart. They both believed in the spirit of the ancients and the power of civilization to enhance humanity. The upper-class ideal was to develop society and education by imposing development from above. The intention was to create a national movement around bodily exercises according to German models. In the opinion of the gentry, gymnastics was more suited than any other form of sport to building Finnishness, a strong and powerful national identity. Heikel, the developer of men's gymnastics, wrote:

“The native country is promoted to a great extent by the fact that most of the citizens, especially when young, train their bodies to become healthy, animated and fit for work, although they achieve rather modest results in sporting events” (Heikel 1915–1916, p. 102).

Working-class and rural gymnastics clubs began to be established in order to promote the bodily culture of the entire adult population (Hallila 1959, pp. 23–37).

Psychophysical effects as reasons for neo-humanistic gymnastics

Heikel and Björkstén considered the connection between exercise and the development of the individual's identity as the reason for teaching gymnastics to everyone. In their works, both of them wrote about the psychophysical effects of neo-humanistic gymnastics. The essence of their ideas was the inseparable connection between body and soul, a human being as a psychophysical whole, in other words *“what is good for the body is also good for the health of the soul.”* In Björkstén's opinion, bodily exercises, which expressed nobleness, sublimity and briskness, influence the gymnast in the same way. She wrote:

“If there existed perfect harmony between body and soul, the ideal concept of a human would be fulfilled, a human who is not only intellectually and bodily at the peak of development, but also possesses joy of life and warmth of heart” (Björkstén 1920, p. 2).

Heikel and Björkstén were convinced that comprehensive gymnastic exercises developed the gymnast's character provided they were in perfect harmony with the development of the gymnast's bodily and mental development. Björkstén considered joy to be the basis of man's physiological well-being. They compiled a long list of psychological equivalents of exercise. According to them, comprehensive exercise in gymnastics increased not only energy, willpower, courage and decisiveness, presence of mind, calmness, resourcefulness, alertness, discipline, creativity and independence, but also punctuality, helpfulness, and good manners. In Björkstén's opinion, apparatus movements and games created liberated and relaxed joy. She had noticed how in these bodily exercises gymnasts shone unchained and showed a cheerful will to act (Björkstén 1920, p. 21). On the other hand, she considered ascending exercises to inspire courage and willpower; disciplinary movements developed attentiveness and discipline. Björkstén wrote:

“What great attentiveness, vigilance, discipline, and speed of thought, disciplinary exercises require when well executed. How much concentration of will and self control is needed in lifting exercises at a certain specific moment” (Björkstén 1920, p. 2).

Heikel noticed in his practical work that thoughts became clear when they were converted into action. Björkstén's ideas were based on modern science when describing the psychological effects of bodily exercises as developing thinking. Björkstén wrote:

“Modern science has shown that the whole of the cerebral tissues occupied by the motor-centers, are the centers of perceptions received through feeling and muscle sense. They are perceptions that give us general ideas about our body – the position of its different parts, the strength of its muscle contraction, the extent and direction of its movements. To these primary perceptions, man owes his first abstract ideas of time and space”.

She based her views on the texts of Jean Demoor (1867–1941), a Belgian neuropsychologist of her day. Demoor is still an acknowledged pioneer in the field. According to Demoor, the expression of our will, the highest and the most characteristic expression of our personality, has its origin mainly in the influence of movement centers. Björkstén cited Demoor as follows:

“‘Movement (...) constitutes our original psychological material’. It creates in the brain both the most elementary and the most complex perceptions, and so it is one of the essential factors in the association of ideas by which thought and will exist. ‘We can assert (...) that the manifestations of the will – the highest expression of psychological life and the most characteristic expression of the personality – are due especially to the centers of movement’”.

According to Demoor, exercise is the only means of developing these brain centers, and if the stimulation ceases, the centers will shrink (Björkstén 1920, pp. 7–8).

Political ideologies and women's body consciousness

In Finland, the political and social changes of the 1910s affected the weakening of the classical gymnastics tradition and its takeover by competitive sports. Classical gymnastics was upper class and did not unite the different strata of the young Finnish nation. Young, working-class men in towns, as well as young men in rural areas, favored sports, including competitive sports. Running, walking, and wrestling were their principal exercises, as they did not require long training or special training facilities. Competitive sport was practiced only among men, while women functioned as background support for them. Physical as well as psychological differences between men and women were given as reasons for displacing women from competitive sports. There was strong opposition to women's classical gymnastics both in Finnish male gymnastics culture and in society in general. It was not 'correct' for men and women to exercise using the same movements, as this would have meant the same corporal, spatial and temporal bodily perception, and body consciousness of the same kind. Ivar Wilskman, a major figure in the men's gymnastics and sports movement, expressed these opposing views. He wrote:

"Because a woman's body, structure, form, strength, stamina, and above all a woman's character, are all so utterly different from those of a man, a system which permits precise equivalence in the physical education of both genders must clearly be classified as unnatural" (Wilskman 1909).

The spread of competitive sports was the intention and manifestation of the Finnish middle class, their views, and values. To the Finnish middle class, the portrayal of Finland as a unique competitive sports country was an important part of building Finnishness. With the help of competitive sports, Finland gained access to the foreign press more easily than by any other means. The representatives of the middle-class sports culture took the view that the medals won in international competitions helped Finland 'shine' in the eyes of the rest of the world. Finland was the first nation in the world to use victories in international sports competitions as a national show of strength (Hentilä 1992, p. 140). The relationship between nationalism and success in international sports culminated in the Olympic Games. Finnish long-distance runners, to quote one Finnish expression, "ran Finland onto the world map". In addition, medals of sporting events, such as wrestling, javelin and rowing, brought fame to Finland.

Middle-class nationalism focused on achievements and production, growth, and expansion. A nation was understood as an economic unit competing in the market with other nations. This was the reason, in Heikel's opinion, for the national passion, the envy and outrageousness apparent in the Olympic Games, the original idea of which was to lead sports on the right track. He thought that it had no bearing on the nation or on nationality that a few individuals could reach outstanding results with an excellent jump or throw, which does not avail anybody else. Heikel severely criticized the top performances of professional-like sportsmen, as well as amateur sportsmen striving for records. He disparaged sport, the main goal of which was to acquire applause, fame, and prizes for some individuals and their clubs. Heikel compared a long-distance runner to a machine and considered the marathon a one-sided show of strength. He wondered why the marathon was more appreciated than the pentathlon, with which the ancient Greeks tried to develop body and soul harmoniously. In Heikel's view, Olympic sports were conducted not to grow and refine a human being, but to arouse wonder in spectators and the press. In his opinion, a true sports country is a country where most people make comprehensive gymnastics and sport as their lifestyle without striving for any records. He accepted competition in gentlemanly sports way, in pleasant circumstances (1916, pp. 170–175).

Sports heroes became models whose victories in the eyes of the Finnish people exhibited the moral capability of the Finnish nation. The middle-class approach gained strength from the spread of the ideal of the self-made man. Competitive sports offered a means for the social rise of able individuals. The self-made man tried to distinguish himself from other men by competing to gain power and position in his community

and, more broadly, in society. Masculinity was a symbol of being able-bodied and strong, and could be demonstrated through competitive sports, which placed one man in a hierarchy above another (Tieder 2002). However, success in competitive sports required practicing more and more specific and aggressive movements. Heikel and Björkstén could not accept this orientation. They appreciated the quality of exercises and opposed the paucity and machine-like quality of specific, one-sided exercises. They assumed that it hindered the positive physiological and spiritual effects of exercise. Björkstén wrote: *“Every disproportion in bodily functions leaves a dark shadow in mental functions in one way or another”* (Björkstén 1920, p. 3). Heikel’s attack was directed at *the adoration of raw physical strength*. He was irritated by the fact that competitive sports did not develop the mastery of the body in a sufficiently comprehensive way. In a competition, the individual’s result – often in a single event – was evaluated in fractions of seconds and centimeters without regard to worthwhile posture, harmonious development of body and soul, and beautiful performance. He recommended competition in multiple-sport events, comprising three, five, six, or even ten separate disciplines, because it promoted comprehensive control of the body (Heikel 1916, p. 171).

The ideal of the self-made man was linked with emerging militarism and Darwinism. Sports leaders acknowledged Darwinist social doctrines and believed that competition between individuals refines the individuals themselves, as well as society as a whole. The doctrine of the self-made man was almost entirely homosocial; in other words, competition was practiced only among men, while women functioned as background support for them. This was defended using theories of the history of human development where the man was given the role of warrior and conqueror. Reasons for men having ability in exercises requiring power, speed and skill, while women were totally unskilled in bodily exercises, were found in the history of human development, where the women’s place was near the hearth with the children (Laine 1992, p. 118). In 1924, Tahko Pihkala, an outstanding leader of male sports in Finland, bitingly expressed this view. In his opinion, the principle of the Hellenic Olympics, according to which the presence of women even among the spectators was forbidden under penalty of death, should still be applicable (Pihkala 1924, p. 125).

The swell of opinion against women’s comprehensive classical gymnastics became even stronger during the 1920s. Martti Jukola and Lauri Tanner, important opinion molders in Finnish sport culture, appealed to women on the basis of natural choice. Jukola thought that only men’s sport and only women’s soft gymnastics had an improving effect on the qualities of race and family. He considered exercises that were suitable for women to be those that promoted their health and looks, but above all those that promoted the happiness and success of future generations. He thought that *“only a healthy woman with a well-developed body is justified in becoming a mother. For others it is a crime – against the happiness of humanity.”* Jukola advised women to demand top achievements of men in sports,

“otherwise the high level in the mutual relationship between men and women, which stimulates natural choice and eventually has an improving influence on the qualities of race and gender cannot be maintained” (Jukola 1925, p. 87).

Tanner summarized these ideas as follows:

“It is quite clear that there is no need for women to compete with men in strength, stamina and difficulty of movements, but that female gymnastics has to adapt especially to the female character, that is, to contain smooth, beautiful and graceful movements” (Tanner 1927, p. 140).

At the beginning of the 1930s, Kaarina Kari, the leader of the biggest women’s gymnastic organization in Finland, gave in. She was convinced that strength, physical skills and speed were typical to the male body, and that competition was characteristic of men, almost a condition of their existence. In her opinion, it was not suitable for women to adopt exercises similar to men’s (Kari 1932, p. 172). Kari recommended that the Finnish women’s gymnastic movement adopt reformed pedagogic ideals. According to these, girls had to be taught to provide home education, which would promote the civic education of their future families. Thus they would learn to function as caretakers of home and family, and devoted mothers as well (Veikkolainen 2002, p. 75).

Superb female gymnasts came to be considered as unfeminine in the Finnish gymnastics movement. A woman was supposed to move “like a woman”; she was not supposed to behave ‘like a man’ in any way. Graceful movements had to be part of a woman’s everyday behavior, and appearance. Kaarina Kari advised that “*masculine women have to satisfy their need to move with exercises that strengthen their feminine physical features and qualities.*” With modern gymnastics, women and girls were taught that they should aim for slenderness and flexibility rather than strength, skill, and speed (Kari 1932, p. 173). For example, apparatus that could be used for strengthening the upper part of the body was removed from girls’ schools. *Kisakenttä*, the leading women’s sports magazine in Finland, gave reasons for the ban on girls’ and women’s apparatus gymnastics. It was believed, that because of the narrowness of a woman’s chest, her heart and lungs worked less vigorously than a man’s, so that rapid exercises requiring strength were harmful to a woman’s heart. It was also thought that a woman’s narrower shoulders made it dangerous for her to exercise on parallel bars. Hanging from a bar by the arms was also considered dangerous, especially when women slowly lifted their outstretched legs while hanging (Hoffa 1931, p. 186).

There was even wider discussion in the magazine *Kisakenttä* about the effect of apparatus gymnastics on the build of a woman’s body. Apparatus gymnastics was assumed to make women’s hips smaller and their bones stronger and coarser, thus make the female build approach the male build. The question was asked whether it was desirable for the sexes to become more alike, or whether accentuating opposite gender traits was more favorable to culture. The problem was whether the lessening of outward gender differences would reduce the woman’s desire for motherhood. It was supposed that the growth of bodily capacity influenced the glands on which the mental basis of the will to motherhood depended. In addition, ample apparatus gymnastics was supposed to harden the bones, in which case the flexibility important in childbirth would suffer (Hoffa 1931, pp. 186–189).

This ideology was in sharp contrast to the ideas of the developers of women’s classical gymnastics. As late as 1932, Anni Collan defended women’s apparatus gymnastics in the magazine *Kisakenttä*. She wrote:

“Apparatus gymnastics provides exercise for the will, for instance in ascending movements, as well as in balance exercises on the bar, and especially in difficult ones. It is therefore a good thing that we have started to use a higher balance bar in gymnastics” (Collan 1932, p. 70).

At that time, however, the values of women’s classical gymnastics were considered dated and out-of-touch in gymnastics and sports culture, and in society, too. Men’s competitive sports had made a breakthrough and become part of the Finnish national identity because they offered a means for a national show of strength. From 1912 to 1936, the Finnish team won as many as 142 medals in the Summer Olympics and 24 medals in the Winter Olympics.

Some conclusions

Gymnastics has exemplified the kind of femininity and the manner of moving that has been favored by women’s gymnastics federations and, more generally, by society as a whole. I have described how different ideological systems have defined what kinds of kinetic abilities and techniques women have been allowed to learn through gymnastics. At the same time, each style of gymnastics and sports has formed, by its norms of time and space, the body consciousness of the person who practiced it.

Through this article, I want to draw attention to the oft-forgotten psychological aspect of exercise, as a majority of people now sit for hours everyday, in a car and in front of a computer, and exercise less and less. Later generations even ridiculed the ideas of the early gymnastics theoreticians, those about the psychological emphases of bodily exercises and their criticism of competitive sports. Heikel’s and Björkstén’s thoughts were forgotten in Finnish sports culture for a period of about a hundred years – when competitive sports were predominant. Nowadays, the ideas of Heikel and Björkstén are actualized, when the significance of Finnish national glory in competitive sports has decreased. According their thinking, a person’s action and movements create his/her body consciousness, in other words, a person’s actions determine the sense of being an agent.

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