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Feminism and Sport: Linking the Two through a New Organization

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L'Association canadienne pour l'avancement des femmes et du sport, fondée en 1981, est née de deux rencontres nationales antérieures sur les femmes et le sport. Elle a pour but de mettre à exécution certaines des recommandations faites à ces conférences. En particulier, elle fait le lien entre les préoccupations féministes et celles du sport. L'association a maintenant un conseil d'administration national et des représentants provinciaux, et a réalisé des projets nationaux et locaux. Cette association est également un centre d'aide et d'information pour le public. A l'heure actuelle, elle fait face à des problèmes d'ordre financier, et à un problème de croissance inégale à travers le pays.

The Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport (CAAW&S) was founded in 1981 at a workshop attended by approximately fifty persons from across Canada. The establishment of CAAW&S was an outgrowth of concern expressed at two earlier national meetings. The first National Conference on Women and Sport was held in Toronto in 1974, followed by the Female Athlete Conference at Simon Fraser University in 1980. The outcome of each of these meetings was a series of recommendations to governments, sport associations, educational institutions, and other agencies for action to improve the condition of women in sport.

It was a matter of concern to some of the delegates to the Female Athlete Conference that the recommendations emerging from that gathering were very similar to those issued at the 1974 conference, indicating that little if any progress had been made. Accordingly, several individuals began to discuss the possibility of moving past the "recommendation stage" to the establishment of a national organization concerned with women and sport. A workshop to explore the possibility was held at McMaster University in Hamilton, and the major outcome of that meeting was the establishment of CAAW&S.

The organizing committee for the McMaster workshop was a group of

women who shared a common interest and concern with women and sport. With no national network or structure at the time to aid in the identification of persons to attend the workshop, organizers were forced to rely upon personal contacts or names known to them. The persons selected included athletes and former athletes, sport administrators, women from the educational system, and representatives from other national feminist organizations, including the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC), the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women (CRIAW), and the National Association of Women and the Law (NAWAL). While this diversity achieved the broad representation the organizers desired, it also ensured that a variety of perspectives on women in sport and the relevance of feminism to sport would be present.

The specific mandate of the workshop was "to explore the need for an organization concerned with women in sport." Though the possibility of a self-fulfilling prophecy was present (i.e., the effort expended in organizing and conducting the workshop might ensure a decision to proceed with forming an organization), in fact there was considerable scepticism at the outset. This scepticism was based on doubts about whether such an organization was a good idea and, if it were, concern about whether the time was right for its establishment.

The freewheeling discussions provided varied assessments of the status of women in sport, what the sources of inequality are, and what feminism is and how it relates to sport. Most of the delegates were aware of the underrepresentation of women as participants, organizers, and administrators in all levels and types of sport involvement, from recreational to elite levels. Explanations of the causes of this inequality ranged from the individualist (women who are qualified, work hard, and experience no discrimination) to the structural (sport is male-dominated and women are denied equal access to power and resources in the sport system). The two days of discussions certainly

did not achieve a resolution of these perspectives, but they did expand awareness and appreciation of the condition of women in sport and of varied proposals for improving this condition.

An important turning point in the workshop occurred as the discussion moved to a consideration of feminism and sport. Some of the delegates were actively involved in the feminist movement and readily saw its relevance to sport. Others were uneasy at the very mention of feminism and, among some of them, the stereotype of feminists as shrill revolutionaries persisted. Considerable discussion ensued, with some accommodation of divergent viewpoints. Finally the group endorsed a series of statements asserting that there is inequality in sport based on sex, the sport system is sexist, and an understanding of sex roles and sexism in sport is the starting point for an analysis of sport. The labelling of these statements as a "feminist perspective on sport" was significant, for it indicated that women who formerly shunned an identification with feminism were now able to see its relevance to sport and, in many cases, to call themselves feminists.

After more than a day of intensive discussion, the decision to form an organization seemed less problematic than at the outset. On March 20, 1981, CAAW&S was established. After some debate on the meaning and the merits of the reference to women *and* sport rather than women *in* sport, the former was adopted for two reasons. The first was the belief that the advancement of women in sport will only be achieved as the condition of women in general is improved. The discussions of this point emphasized that CAAW&S should identify itself with the broader feminist movement and work closely with other feminist groups. Second, members felt that sport itself is in need of reform to reduce its current emphasis on commercialism, violence, and performance rather than participation.

In order to provide a clear statement of the goals of CAAW&S, the delegates formulated a statement of the association's purpose: "to ad-

vance the position of women by defining, promoting, and supporting a feminist perspective on sport and to improve the status of women in sport." Toward this end, four activity areas were identified: political advocacy, research, leadership development, and communication both within and outside the association. With the development of these guidelines, the mandate of the workshop was fulfilled. The next step was the development and implementation of an organizational structure and initiation of work in the activity area.

The structure of CAAW&S is now in place and includes a national executive board and provincial representatives. A main focus of activity to date has been the development of a membership base through the organization of local chapters. Concurrent with this has been the initiation of several projects either by local groups or the national executive. Three national projects have been implemented: a quarterly newsletter containing information, discussion, and analysis of issues concerning women and sport; a leadership-development workshop held in March, 1983; and a facility-utilization study, currently underway. The workshop provided CAAW&S members with an orientation to federal and provincial policy-making procedures as well as training to enable them to influence decision making at all levels of government. The facility-utilization study involves an investigation of public recreation-facility use in Vancouver and Hamilton to identify discriminatory practices and policies. After pilot studies are conducted in these two cities, the project will be extended to other locations in Canada.

Additional activities undertaken by local groups include consultation with the Ontario Task Force on Sex Equality in Sport by Ontario members of CAAW&S and a campaign by the Manitoba chapter to expand opportunities for girls to play ice hockey in that province. The Vancouver chapter has undertaken several projects concerned with community organization and development. These include preparation of an organizational handbook for

women wishing to establish athletic leagues, development of a slide/tape presentation on women and fitness programs, and consciousness-raising seminars to generate community awareness on issues affecting women and sport.

In addition to the above projects, CAAW&S has come to act as a public clearing house for assistance and information. As word of the association has spread, it has received requests ranging from information on how to find a soccer league or road race, to advice on training for an event, to assistance in dealing with a recalcitrant sport organization that refuses to admit girls.

As this review of the development of CAAW&S indicates, the association has embarked on several projects in accordance with the statement of purpose formulated at the founding meeting, projects that fall under the four areas of emphasis identified at that time. These activities and a gradually growing membership base attest to the interest and need for such an organization. An assessment of the organization's development over the past two years must begin with a recognition of these accomplishments. At the same time, however, CAAW&S continues to experience growing pains. A major problem is a lack of funding. The association's membership base is still too small to provide operating funds through membership fees, and fund-raising work is still in its infancy. Accordingly, CAAW&S is dependent upon grants from other agencies. To date, the major sources of funds have been the Women's Program at Fitness and Amateur Sport and the Secretary of State.

Though awards from government agencies have been instrumental in supporting several CAAW&S projects, reliance upon these funding sources presents a dilemma to the association. Much of organized sport in Canada is supported by government funding, either federally, provincially, or locally. Some members argue that to be an effective critic, CAAW&S must be independent of sport's sponsoring agencies. The majority, however, believe that government support is not only acceptable but necessary,

at least for the present. Proponents of this view also argue that some of the activities the association wishes to pursue fall well within the purview of government funding programs, and little harm is done by accepting project-specific support.

The lack of funding has impact in other ways. CAAW&S maintains a post office box in Ottawa, but its office presently is spread among the homes and workplaces of executive board members. Without paid staff, co-ordination and management of projects and even answering the association's mail places a heavy burden on the leadership.

Another problem has been an imbalance in the association's growth across the country. While some areas have seen considerable interest and activity, many others have yet to be organized in any fashion. This recruitment problem is due in part to a misunderstanding of what CAAW&S is and does. The title's reference to sport has apparently caused some to assume that its activities are concerned exclusively with organized, competitive sport. In fact, CAAW&S is concerned with sport and physical activity broadly defined, encompassing everything from fitness programs to unorganized physical activity to elite sport. This misperception of the association's concerns has discouraged the involvement of some women who wish to be physically active but not through organized, competitive sport.

A more extensive assessment of CAAW&S's activities and impact upon Canadian sport must await a longer period of time. Perhaps the most significant outcome to date of the association's establishment has

been the formal recognition of the relationship between sport and the feminist movement. Until recently, feminists have been relatively silent about sport, despite the fact that it is among the most patriarchal and male-centred institutions in our society. This inattention is likely caused by several factors. For some, the fact that sport is patriarchal and male-centred may justify its dismissal by feminists. For others who have never experienced the pleasures and benefits of athletic activity, sport simply has not been relevant.

The establishment of CAAW&S represents another assessment of the importance of feminism to sport. This viewpoint agrees with the criticisms of sport but, in response, seeks to change rather than dismiss the institution. These efforts to redeem sport are grounded in the belief that it is a meaningful and valuable experience for women. For some, the value of sport lies in its capacity to provide enjoyment through physical activity. For others, sport offers a means of expression by which they may become more familiar and comfortable with their bodies. For still others, the advancement of women in sport is important as one among many approaches to the improvement of the condition of women generally. The purpose of CAAW&S is to seek change so that all these interests may be realized.

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CANADIAN ASSOCIATION FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF WOMEN AND SPORT

The Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport (CAAW&S) has been set up to advance women's position at all levels of sport, physical fitness, and recreation. A national organization, funded by members and specific project grants, we have representatives in each province and territory. Our quarterly newsletter can keep you informed of the activities of Canadian women in all aspects of sport and recreation. Write us at P.O. Box 3769, Station C, Ottawa, Ontario K1Y 4J8.