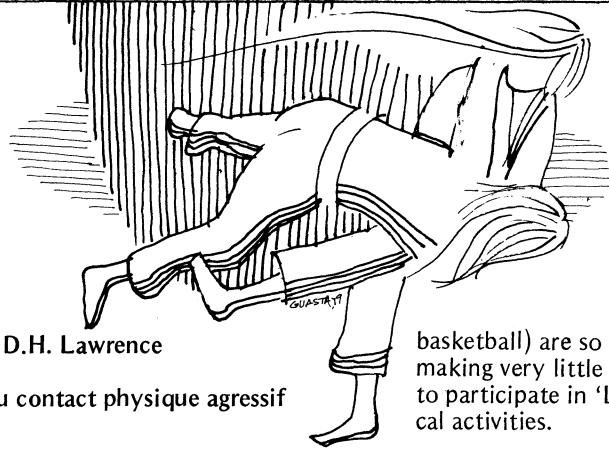


Women and the Lawrentian Wrestle

M. Ann Hall



Les femmes et la lutte à la D.H. Lawrence

Un examen des censures du contact physique agressif entre femmes.

For D.H. Lawrence, as a reading of his novel *Women in Love* soon reveals, there existed a natural repugnance of women toward each other. In fact Lawrence, apparently for reasons of political distrust, professed a 'bitter dread of female alliances of any kind.'² Of consuming interest in both his life and fiction was the male alliance, the *Blutbruderschaft*, characterized by spiritual and mental intimacy and sometimes physical union. Lawrence neither condoned nor was interested in sodomy but he espoused the purity of male bodies locked in natural physical combat. The naked wrestling match between Gerald and Birkin brilliantly described in *Women in Love* is the embodiment of true masculine union:

So the two men entwined and wrestled with each other, working nearer and nearer. Both were white and clear, but Gerald flushed smart red where he was touched, and Birkin remained white and tense. He seemed to penetrate into Gerald's more solid, more diffuse bulk, to interfuse his body through the body of the other, as if to bring it subtly into subjection, always seizing with some rapid necromantic foreknowledge every motion of the other flesh, converting and counteracting it, playing upon the limbs and trunk of Gerald like some hard wind. It was as if Birkin's whole physical intelligence interpenetrated into Gerald's body, as if his fine, sublimated energy entered into the flesh of the fuller man, like some potency, casting a fine net, a prison, through the muscles into the very depths of Gerald's physical being. (Lawrence, 1960, pp. 304-305)

The Lawrentian wrestle, without its homosexual overtones, represents a suitable and acceptable means whereby boys and men settle their differences, have fun, or merely experience the sheer joy of physical contact in demonstrating their strength and superiority, one over the other. Even within a homosexual framework, it symbolizes the final authority of one male over another. Ben, the homosexual academic in Simon Gray's play *Butley*, tries to entice his friend Joey into a 'Lawrentian-type wrestle' to reassert his will and domination over the weaker Joey.³

The Lawrentian wrestle has no relevance for women. For a woman to subdue another woman through physical force and bodily contact is categorically unacceptable, the innuendo sexual, and the act considered unnatural. There exists an age old prohibition against aggressive, physical contact between women; indeed, there is no acceptable female equivalent to the *Brutbruderschaft*, the mental, spiritual, and physical male alliance. The implications for women in sport, particularly contact sports (e.g. boxing, wrestling, football, ice hockey) and even in those sports where bodily contact, although prohibited by the rules, is inevitable (e.g. field hockey, soccer,

basketball) are so serious that even today girls and women are making very little headway in what is their legitimate right to participate in 'Lawrentian wrestle' type sports and physical activities.

As a feminist,⁴ I strongly believe that girls and women must be allowed the right to decide for *themselves* whether or not they wish to take part in contact sports, and when they do so it must be without threat to their gender identity, or without exposure to illegitimate and irrelevant comparisons with the qualitatively different participation by males. Moreover, I agree with Heide (1978, pp. 197-8) when she suggests that prohibiting the male/female integration of contact sports (even after size, strength, weight, etc., have been taken into account) perpetuates the myth that all physical heterosexual encounters are implicitly sexual. In this essay, however, I wish to focus solely upon females participating in body contact sports and to expose some of the mythology which surrounds even their segregated participation.

What is the social origin of the prohibition against female 'fighting' female? Why does it persist so strongly? Why are the connotations sexual and the act considered unnatural if not perverse? Why is it different for males? It is unlikely that we will find a parsimonious explanation for the phenomenon, and indeed, the questions themselves may be unanswerable. Further, to trace through history the origin of a social prohibition is extremely difficult, if not impossible, since first and foremost, the transmission of sentiments, beliefs, taboos, and so on varies considerably from one historical epoch to another. Historical explanations, in other words, are never linear and they cannot be isolated from their social/economic/political frameworks. Secondly, by and large women have either been completely ignored in historiography or our historical portrait of women is predominantly a male view; therefore, it is unlikely that the historical and anthropological 'data' exist at present upon which to draw many valid conclusions. Finally, one's search for the truth becomes cross-disciplinary and it is probable that the answers lie in such diverse fields as mythology, anthropology, history, literature, social psychology, sociobiology, and psychoanalytic theory.

The logical starting point appears to be to pinpoint the origin of the prohibition against female fighting female in physical combat as warriors. In his monumental study of the origins of sentiments and institutions within society, Briffault (1927, p. 451) noted that in primitive societies 'the differentiation of the man as warrior and fighter is certainly not due to any constitutional indisposition or incapacity in primitive women, but to economic necessities.' He described the many societies such as those in Australia, in the Canaries, in New Guinea, and among some North American Indian tribes where women accompanied their menfolk to war often engaging in actual battle and other times acting as a helpmate on the battlefield. The ubiquitous Amazons, whether resplendent

in either myth or reality, were legendary women who took part in war among the Aegean populations of Asia Minor and their exploits abound in Nordic, Celtic and Irish literature. We should be cautious before making too much of these Amazon stories because as Lederer (1960, p. 105) suggests: 'it is by no means certain whether reality tried to copy myth, or myth evolved from a reality.'

What is interesting about these descriptions of fighting women among primitive peoples is the lack of any evidence suggesting that females fought females. Generally, these Amazonian women accompanied men to war or they themselves fought against the enemy who invariably were male. As Briffault has expressed it, the male of the species was 'a marauding beast' and 'woman his sexual prey', causing women over thousands of years of primitive history to band together in order to protect themselves and their children. It seems only reasonable to assume that in order to keep themselves in a state of readiness against attack, women would train for battle. It is also important to note that in primitive races there were few physical differences in size and strength between sexes thereby making the task of vanquishing the enemy considerably easier. As Davis (1972, p. 87) suggests: 'the myths of such women as Atalanta who wrestled or raced all male challengers and the worldwide myths of maidens who chose as suitors only those rare males who could best them in physical combat also more than hint at an original physical equality of the sexes'.

For the earliest matriarch fighting was an obvious necessity, but as the transition to patriarchal organization took place, accompanied by much violence and destruction as well as the revengeful subordination of women, we see the first evidence of a prohibition against women fighting.⁵ Jewish culture as recorded in the Old Testament was unmistakably patriarchal, and in Deuteronomy there is a passage which clearly instructs a woman's hand to be cut off if she dares to interfere in a fight between her husband and another man by grabbing the aggressor's genitals.⁶ As Brownmiller (1976, p. 452) in her epic study of rape caustically comments: 'When the patriarchs wrote the law, it would seem, they were painfully cognizant of women's one natural advantage in combat and were determined to erase it from her memory'.

History suggests that after the patriarchal revolution man became the protector of woman forbidding her to enter into combat, presumably for her own protection, and that the few women whose fighting exploits are known in some detail are regarded as freaks and worthy only of derision. It is a strange paradox of history that from time immemorial men on the one hand have conscientiously avoided having women maimed, disfigured or hurt, through combat for example, but on the other hand have consciously intimidated women through the fear of rape. When men fight men they protect themselves where they are most vulnerable. When man fights woman, he often uses his genital 'weapon of terror' to subdue and oppress. For woman to learn how to fight back, by fighting woman with woman, would deprive him of his natural advantage; therefore, the Biblical injunction against women fighting had little to do with a protective spirit among men, it was a means to protect the *status quo* of domination and suppression.

Recently women, especially in North America, have become interested in the techniques of self-defense such as ju-jitsu and karate. There is a growing recognition on their part, most probably kindled by the feminist movement, that women have a basic need and right to protect themselves physically by learning the throws, strangleholds, arm and wristlocks, kicks, chops and punches which constitute any systematic training in self-defense. While researching and writing her chilling and monumental history of rape, Susan Brownmiller underwent extensive self-defense training only to be

thwarted by a crashing fall to the mat which broke her collarbone.

... I gained a new identification with the New York Mets injury list, a recognition that age thirty-eight is not the most propitious time in life *to begin* to learn how to kick and hit and break a stranglehold, and a new and totally surprising awareness of my body's potential to inflict real damage. I learned I had natural weapons that I didn't know I possessed like elbows and knees. I learned how to kick backward as well as forward. I learned how to fight dirty, and I learned that I loved it. (Brownmiller, 1976, p. 453)

On the other hand, great significance has been attached to the fact that only women can bear children. Throughout history, the assumption is made that there is something special about the female mainly because of her reproductive capacity. Strangely, 'special' often translates as physically inferior, or at least so during the 19th and 20th centuries. From the perspective of sport and physical activity, the notion that women are physically inferior to men and require special consideration has held women back for a very long time indeed. Man, therefore, becomes the 'protector'.⁷ We see man the protector as the International Olympic Committee (all male) which refuses to allow women to compete in anything more than the 1500 meter race when thousands of women are showing themselves quite capable of running a marathon! We see man the protector raging against contact sports for females on the grounds that they will irreparably damage, among other things, their *naturally* protected reproductive organs, whereas the fact that the exposed male genitals *have* to be protected is never considered problematic!

It is only in very recent years that the universal prohibition against women participating in sports where the object is to physically subdue one's opponent by forceful bodily contact is being relaxed, but not without a good deal of trepidation on the part of *both* women and men. Superficially it would seem that the sanctioned participation of women in the martial arts is the exception to this stringent prohibition. For instance, although women have a past history of participation in judo it was, up until a few years ago, restricted to a performance of *kata*, a form of imaginary fighting with a fixed sequence of basic defense and attacking techniques. American women began competing in *shiai*, the same free style fighting engaged in by men, a few years ago although their tournaments were not sanctioned by the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) until 1973. Very recently, there has been a move by the Women's Committee of the U.S. Judo Federation to convince the parent body, the AAU and the International Judo Federation to endorse the idea of women's participation in judo at the Olympic level with little apparent support from either men or women. For the male judoists, it is a question of irrelevance, and among the women there is a concern that if they are too outspoken their promotion (controlled by men) to higher belt levels will be severely curtailed. (*Women Sports*, June 1976, p. 56.)

Another of the martial arts, kendo, has been practised by Japanese women for at least two centuries apparently on an equal basis with men. By the end of the eighteenth century, kendo or sword fighting was no longer the exclusive domain of the Samurai warrior, nor even a preparation for battle. It has been transformed into a sport and the sword replaced by staves of bamboo held together by a leather sheath. One hundred years later, the Japanese Ministry of Education decided that kendo would become a compulsory activity in public and private schools hence explaining why it is part of the cultural sporting heritage of Japanese women. Moreover, all *kendoka* wear the traditional protective equipment: a head guard consisting of steel visor and padded cloth, a breastplate, a groin protector, and heavily padded gloves covering the hands and forearms (Arlott, 1975, p. 569).

With very few exceptions women have always been prohibited from boxing and wrestling at least under the auspices of organized competition. Even the legend of Atalanta, a mythical heroine who fought and grappled on an equal basis with men, does not prove that women in antiquity were able to pursue the ultimate body contact sports. Although the evidence is scanty, Hellenic women, certainly in the first century A.D., participated in their own athletic meetings at ancient Olympia as well as at other crown festivals such as Delphi, Isthma, Nemea, Epidaurus and Athens. Classicists tell us that in the Olympic Games at Antioch in Syria girls competed in wrestling and running but unlike their naked male counterparts they were clothed in tunics or shorts (Harris, 1972, p. 41). However, no woman was allowed to participate in the *pankration*, a gruelling event the object of which was to force an opponent to submission or else suffer a broken limb or possibly strangulation. Sadly the advent of women's sport in antiquity was probably due more to the growth of sport as public entertainment than any real desire to encourage women to participate. (Plato's advocacy of athletics for women in *Laws* notwithstanding.)

Prohibitions, unless legislated, are rarely a deterrent and even then there are always the recalcitrant few. The problem is that nowadays prohibitions are becoming increasingly more difficult to legislate especially if their ultimate aim is to prevent women from entering the boxing arena. In 1975 a twenty-three year old female karate champion managed to box in the Arizona Golden Gloves competition making it to the featherweight quarter finals where she was finally out-pointed, not outclassed. Unable to bear this obvious intrusion into an exclusively male domain, the AAU banned her from all further competition 'until hell freezes over' (Sandusky, 1976, p. 14). In the same article Sandusky describes a girls' boxing programme which apparently was the first of its kind in the United States, the Missy Junior Gloves. Despite repeated attempts the organizers of the all-girl boxing club have been unsuccessful in obtaining sanction from the AAU who have always been opposed to women in contact sports. More specifically, they insist that boxing predisposes a young girl to eventual breast cancer, which, they claim, can be caused by continuous blows to the chest, even though there appears to be no medical evidence to support the contention. If, however, a cancer was already in existence (something highly unlikely if not impossible in undeveloped breasts) trauma to the tissue could possibly accelerate its growth, but even for women under thirty medical authorities state that the risks are minimal.

Women have been and continue to be excluded from sports where body contact is a necessity. Even where it is unnecessary, but likely, rules have evolved to prevent it. In fact it is usually pointed out that these sports when played by women emphasize skill, elegance and finesse. Women's lacrosse is a good example: blocking and bodily contact is not allowed but a player may place her body between a player with the ball and her objective; she may also cross-check by hitting an opponent's crosse or stick when she is in control of the ball but if it is rough or uncontrolled it will be penalized. Late in the nineteenth century when women took up field hockey, a non-contact sport, they were forced to play in secret 'such were the prejudices and prohibitions of the Victorian era' (Arlot, 1975, p. 594). It has only been in recent years that women's basketball has virtually eradicated 'women's rules' the essence of which were to lessen the likelihood of bodily contact by restricting player movement and ball handling.

It is of the utmost importance to the future of women's sports that the 'Lawrentian wrestle' becomes relevant for girls and women. Females can no longer be denied the opportunities to subdue another (either female or male) through physical force, and to learn, perhaps to their astonishment, that aggressive physical grappling can be healthy, natural and

fun. For too long the prohibition against body contact sports for girls and women has stood in the way of bodily freedom for all females. Boys learn to assert themselves through their bodies, to gain confidence in their physical beings and thus in themselves—'not to have confidence in one's body is to lose confidence in oneself' wrote Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* thirty years ago. There is nothing wrong with being physically aggressive, except that it has never been accepted as 'feminine', and therein lies the rub.

This article was first published in *Arena Review*, May, 1979.

- 1 This essay is a much revised version of a discussion paper presented at the Congress of the Canadian Society for Psychomotor Learning and Sport Psychology, Toronto, Canada, November 2-5, 1978.
- 2 For a fascinating discussion of Lawrence's attitude towards women, see Millett (1971, pp. 237-293).
- 3 See Simon Gray's *Butley*, Act Two, p. 51. In fact, the idea to investigate the 'Lawrentian wrestle' and its implications for women came to me some years ago after seeing the play on a London stage.
- 4 Feminism is, in my view, a perspective or a particular stance one takes if you become angry about the oppression of women resulting from our androcentric world which defines certain social and economic roles as being more prestigious for males than for females. For a more complete explanation of my feminist viewpoint and its application to sport, see Hall (1978).
- 5 The reader should be aware that whether or not there actually existed a matriarchy has been one of the most hotly debated issues in anthropology for at least the past one hundred years. Some say the matriarchy theory is pure myth with no historical basis, whereas others affirm that a maternal clan system was the original form of social organization. See, for instance, books by Reed (1975) and Goldberg (1973/74) for interesting discussions of this debate.
- 6 Deuteronomy 25: 11-12. I am indebted to Susan Brownmiller (1976, p. 452) for pointing out this Biblical injunction.
- 7 A point Heide (1978) also makes in her futuristic essay 'Feminism for a Sporting Future'.

References

- Arlott, J. (Ed.). *The Oxford companion to sports and games*. London: Oxford University Press, 1975.
- Briffault, R. *The Mothers*. Volume I. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1927.
- Brownmiller, S. *Against Our Will: Men, women and rape*. Bantam Books, 1976.
- Davis, E.G. *The First Sex*. Penguin Books, 1972.
- de Beauvoir, S. *The Second Sex*. Bantam Books, 1961.
- Goldberg, S. *The Inevitability of Patriarchy*. New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc., 1973/74.
- Gray, S. *Butley*. London: Methuen & Co., 1971.
- Hall, M.A. 'Sport and gender: A feminist perspective on the sociology of sport'. *CAHPER Sociology of Sport Monograph Series*, 1978.
- Harris, H.A. *Sport in Greece and Rome*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1972.
- Heide, W.S. 'Feminism for a sporting future.' In C. Oglesby, *Women and Sport: From Myth to Reality*. Philadelphia: Lea & Febiger, 1978.
- Lawrence, D.H. *Women in Love*. Penguin Books, 1960.
- Lederer, W. *The Fear of Women*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1968.
- Millett, K. *Sexual Politics*. Abacus Books, 1971.
- Missing: Judo. *WomenSports*, 1976, 3 (June), 56.
- Reed, E. *Woman's Evolution: From Matriarchal Clan to Patriarchal Family*. New York: Pathfinder Press, Inc., 1975.
- Sandusky, S.A. 'Girls' boxing: A hit and a Ms'. *WomenSports*, 1976, 3 (January), 14-17.