Gender and Equestrian Sport
Riding Around the World
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Chapter 1
Introduction – Women, Men, and Horses: Looking at the Equestrian World Through a “Gender Lens”

Miriam Adelman and Jorge Knijnik

Perhaps almost as much a part of world literature as the romantic references to a man and his horse (the warrior, cowboy, or gaucho and his faithful mount) are the numerous narratives on women and horses, from age-old mythology to contemporary popular fiction. Such narratives are diverse in form and content, spanning centuries and cultures, and often employing contrasting metaphors or discursive strategies: some evoke women’s daring, strength, and courage, while others repeat tropes of sensualization, mystification, and sexualization of “woman on horseback.” Historical works also display wide variety, providing a broad and abundant source of evidence of the many ways in which over the centuries horses have been an integral part of culture, society, and everyday life for the women and men who have ridden them, employed them as beasts of burden, and loved them as companions in leisure and work. However, as the epigraph above notes, masculine connotations and experiences of riding have often made horsewomen appear as marginal. Current popular literature, on the other hand – certainly as expression of and response to the increasing feminization of the horse world from the mid-twentieth century onward – acts (whether

L’imaginaire et la mémoire des âges conjuguent la monte au masculin, associant pouvoir et force, prestige et sueur, vitesse et virilité. Oubliant un peu vite tout de même qu’Hippolyte était femme et reine des Amazones, d’hippos, le cheval et lúein, délier. Étymologie qui en dit long déjà sur leur complicité.

Sophie Nauleau
intentionally or spontaneously) to redress such a historic discursive imbalance, so that, at least in English language narratives, girls’ and women’s relationships to horses take center stage, in works that range from fiction to journalism and self-help genres. Yet, all of these diverse sources of discursive production – those that make implicit or explicit reference to the historic partnership of “men and horses” or those that evoke women’s presence – provide testimony of the gendered character of this sphere of historical, social, and cultural practice, an issue that has only very recently begun to generate a specific body of academic research devoted to its further analysis and exploration.

Sport itself has only rather recently come into the mainstream of social scientific production. In their important synthesis of a burgeoning area of research, published in the early 1990s, Jarvie and Maguire argue that “Analytically speaking there has been a sociological debate about sport and leisure for a quarter of a century, maybe longer” (1994: 1). They identify the 1960s as a turning point encouraging new forms of critical thought on sport and leisure as well as on other realms of social practice (1994: 3). With this change came the recognition of the profoundly gendered (and therefore, in this sense as well as others, political) nature of social life and social relations, including, of course, sport and leisure (Lorber 1994; Adelman 2010).

The development of a “gender lens” through which to look at society has greatly impacted the way we understand historical processes shaping bodies and culture, as well as the institutions that emerge as the modern world of sport. Thus, pioneer sport sociologist Eric Dunning has written extensively on sport and masculinity, initially from a perspective that extended the work he did with Norbert Elias on sport in relation to a “civilizing process” that tames men in particular ways, preparing them for a new set of more contained attitudes and behaviors in the public sphere. Identifying “sports and sports-related contexts as sites – whether socially approved or not – for the production and reproduction of masculine habituses, identities and behavior,” Dunning also recognized the need to explore “the relations between femininity and masculinity… as they are expressed through sport” (Dunning 1999: 219). Continuing in this vein and at times moving in different directions are the contemporary gender scholars who have produced a considerable bibliography on sporting masculinities (Dunning and Maguire 1996; Messner andConnell 2007; Anderson 2005, 2008, 2009). Feminist sociologist Judith Lorber, in arguing that gender must be understood as a “social institution” (1994: 1), has also been clear in pointing to the importance of sport and our study of it: “Sports illustrate the way bodies are gendered by social practices and how the female body is socially constructed to be inferior” (1994: 41).

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1Lorber explains, “…I offer a new paradigm of gender -gender as a social institution. Its focus is the analysis of gender as a social structure that has its origins in the development of human culture, not in biology or procreation. Like any social institution, gender exhibits both universal features and chronological and cross-cultural variations that affect individual lives and social interaction in major ways. As is true of other institutions, gender’s history can be traced, its structure examined, and its changing effects researched” (1994: 1).
Today, feminist sport studies constitute a vibrant transdisciplinary field that over the course of several decades has stimulated sophisticated theoretical reflections on gender, power, pleasure, and bodies and encouraged a wealth of empirical work on women’s experiences in sporting milieu that they have often experienced as hostile or at least ambivalent. Feminist historical research on late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century women’s struggles for access to and participation in sport at amateur and professional levels (Hargreaves 1994; Cahn 1994) has also been prolific and quite incisive in demonstrating how sport as masculine prerogative has frequently begotten a hotly contested terrain. Personal narratives (Krone and Richardson 1995; McEvoy and McEvoy 2001; Burke 1997; Smythe 1992) and social research have provided both portraits and discussion of the institutional and interpersonal conflicts surrounding women’s participation in sporting institutions and cultures, and cultural studies perspectives have encouraged the study of representation of women and men as athletes or “sporting bodies,” within mass media and other sources of discursive production.

It is also important to consider how recent shifts in focus – moving from pioneering gender studies literature which until the late 1980s generally advanced a social constructionist framework (the cultural and historical shaping of masculinities and femininities, men and women in works by theorists from Simone de Beauvoir (2010) to Susan Brownmiller (1986) and Susan Bordo (2004)) to contemporary deconstructionist perspectives (de Lauretis 1987; Butler 1990, 1993; Preciado 2007) – have impacted approaches to gender and sport. This has demanded greater reflection on cultural taken-for-granted about who belongs in each (sex/gender) category and how binary conceptions have served as the dubious basis for social thought and practice.

Where sport sociology and sport history have, however infrequently, turned an eye to equestrian sport, the racing world seems to occupy a somewhat privileged position (see Hedenborg 2008, on this point). Perhaps this privilege can be explained by the fact that horse racing so visibly sprawls over a number of different terrains and theoretical (as well as empirical) interests: spectator sport, equestrian activities, and games and gambling, among them. Moreover, from distant history to its modern moment, horse racing has stirred considerable human passion, spanning not only historical time but a range of cultures. Renowned researcher Rebecca Cassidy speaks eloquently of an ontological character of racing, echoing theories of performance to argue that “Horse racing is ancient and modern in outlook, global and local in scope. Something of the drama of human experience is inscribed in every horse race. It is dangerous and to most people, visually arresting. Every race contains the potential to evoke elemental emotions and events: triumph, disappointment, disaster, tragedy, death” (Cassidy 2007: vii).

As a modern institution, the racing world and its incumbent activities have included people of diverse social positions and ranks, and has more recently become an intensely interconnected worldwide industry that employs a diverse, skilled, and often disempowered work force (Winters 2008; Cassidy 2007; Vamplew 2008). Studies of the turf and racing have shed light not only on “sportization processes” and the development of modern sporting and leisure institutions (Bueno 2006; Melo
but also on the paths through which sport becomes a spectacle meant for mass entertainment and consumption (the genesis of a “global sport media complex,” in Maguire’s (1999) terms). As Vamplew points out, “In many respects horseracing is a unique sport. It is highly professionalized with little room for the amateur. It has no grass roots and while many spectators at football and cricket games will have played those sports, few racegoers will have mounted a horse let alone ridden one in a race” (Vamplew, op.cit, viii-ix). Furthermore, racing’s connection to gambling may also render it suspect, associating it with excess, impurity, organized crime (e.g., by offering a convenient channel for money laundering) – fact enough to bring it under public scrutiny in a not so uncommon mixture of repulsion and attraction. More recently, it has galvanized public campaigns against allegations of cruelty and generalized mistreatment of race horses, especially in relation to injury rates of horses in jumps racing.

Brazilian studies on the history of racing have emphasized how, as this modern “English” sport2 made headway on foreign soil, the São Paulo Jockey Club soon became the bastion of powerful local male elites (Melo 2005; Bueno 2006; Adelman and Moraes 2008). Nonetheless, women and members of different social classes and racial–ethnic groups were always a significant part of the throngs who gathered at the race tracks from the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries, period in which, in Brazil as in many other parts of the world, going to the races was a thriving form of sociability and entertainment. Knijnik and Melo (2010) have shown how late nineteenth-century Brazilian cultural production – such as literature and theater – featured the race tracks as a central part of social life in the main Brazilian cities.

Interestingly, theses on the initially “homosocial” nature of modern culture (Sedgwick 1985; Kimmel 1996),3 and of the sport and leisure cultures that are a part of them, are both upheld and uniquely challenged by studies of the equestrian world. Lagier’s (2009) history of the relationship between women and horses evokes vivid and moving portrayals of how, through horses, women in diverse moments in history sought – and quite often gained – access to public sphere activities and recognition, even under circumstances in which the latter required taking up male attire and identity. Restrictive social and cultural norms were apparently never able to hold back all the women who actively desired and sought excitement and adventure (Lagier 2009; Hodgson 2002) or simply those who were not able or willing to sit on the sidelines in times of frontier challenge and economic hardship (Walls 2009; 2

See Lemon’s interesting discussion of just how English horse racing really was (Lemon 2008).

2Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1985) brilliantly introduces the notion of homosociality as modernity’s common format for public sphere relations. Michael Kimmel has used the concept artfully in portraying, for the North American case, the historical unfolding of the notion of the self-made man and the social construction of masculinity through specific forms of homosocial interaction, among which sporting and outdoor activities took center stage. He argues, “Masculinity is largely a homosocial enactment. … Masculinity defined through homosocial interaction contains many parts, including the camaraderie, fellowship and intimacy often celebrated in male culture” (Kimmel 1996: 105).
Roach 1990). Sociocultural norms impacting women’s riding also varied from one part of the world to another, as well as among different social classes. For example, while in the American West, women readily and customarily rode astride for work and transportation purposes, in Europe, where horses were similarly a fundamental part of the daily lives of the population, they were largely associated with an elite culture. Thus, wealthy or aristocratic women who were accomplished horsewomen were constrained by “lady’s riding” (Lagier 2009). In a particularly telling fashion, European modernity was ushered in along with symbolic conflicts over whether or not women should ride sidesaddle – à la amazone, in French – or astride and over what type of feminine attire could be considered appropriate for this sort of “public appearance.”

Studies focusing on the change in the position of the horse within twentieth-century Western society and culture – from work and military to sport and leisure uses – have also captured the deeply gendered dimensions of these changes (Régnier et al. 2012a, b; Hedenborg 2007). “Feminization” has been identified as a worldwide tendency, but with differing degrees of intensity, affect, and effect. Statistical evidence depicting the phenomenon in equitation is available for certain parts of the world such as France (where Lagier reports that, as of 2007, “78.8 % female, equitation is first on the list of women’s sports in France and the only sport in which men and women are rivals in the same competitions, abiding by the same criteria”) (Lagier 2009: 14, our translation), Sweden (where 84 % of all members of the Swedish Equestrian Federation are female, 65 % of whom are under 25) (Hedenborg 2007: 4), and the USA (where “female equestrians represent over 80 percent” of all those who are devoted to the field, a shift from a previously male-dominated sport that has taken place over the last 30 years or so) (Rice 2003). In her attempt to explain the shift from a masculine to feminine equestrian world in her country, Hedenborg (2007: 1) examines two hypotheses: the effects of the state’s involvement in equestrian sport (could public policies have favored feminization?) and another based on the new opportunities for women that would be provided once “the army, farming, forestry and transportation – four settings in which horses were previously of great importance” (p. 1) were no longer dependent on them. She also draws attention to the changing symbolic order of the equestrian world in which a historic code has been unsettled – “a hundred years ago, a real man was a ‘horse-man’ and masculinity was connected to horse riding” (p. 4). Plymoth (Chap. 9, this volume) has shown how, in the Swedish case, the feminization tendency not only appears overwhelming but has stirred up considerable concern within the equestrian sport milieu, leading to concerns about how to maintain men interested in equestrian activities.

France, another country that stands out both in terms of its longstanding equestrian tradition and current State and popular interest in its maintenance, has been a fertile climate for studies on equestrian industry and practice. Patrice Régnier has sketched the French passage of equestrianism from military and elite to popular sport and leisure practice, a democratizing process that comes to fruition in the latter part of the twentieth century. It culminates in 1987 with the fusion of several equestrian sporting organizations into one FFE – the French Equestrian Federation.