

**IMAGES OF THE IDEAL:
SPORTS, GENDER, AND THE EMERGENCE OF THE
MODERN BODY IN WEIMAR GERMANY**

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In a 1928 essay, the social commentator Willy Meisl imagined himself looking back on the tumultuous changes of the 1920s from the vantage point of the year 4000. "It was sports that cleared the way for the emancipation of the woman," Meisl wrote in mock retrospection. "It made her more similar to man and also gave her the opportunity to make man more similar to her, until ultimately they met on that middle ground where humankind truly becomes one."¹ Meisl predicted that athletes would one day be recognized as the agents who most dramatically altered the social landscape of early twentieth-century Germany. He presented sports first of all as a physical equalizer that enabled women to achieve both athletic performances and physical bodies more comparable to those of men. Moreover, Meisl depicted sports as a social equalizer, directly linking sports to women's emancipation and to the convergence of masculine and feminine ideals on a "middle ground."

In sports-crazy Weimar Germany, popular representations of male and female athletes did, indeed, shape new ideals of masculinity and femininity. My dissertation explores this process through the examples of three sports—tennis, boxing, and track and field—each of which posed a different challenge to gender norms after the First World War. Tennis represented a sport in which women's participation had gained full acceptance by the 1920s, so much so that many commentators, advertisers, and players themselves had come to view it as a primarily feminine sport. Not only did tennis provide numerous examples of strong, talented women for the popular press, it also presented images of self-made, independent, and financially successful ones. The presence of the professional female player, with her contingent of trainers and her lucrative endorsements, suggested economic as well as physical power. At the same time, the gentlemanly persona that many of the male players cultivated ran counter to the robust masculinity projected by most competitive sportsmen at the time.

If tennis occupied the feminine end of the sports spectrum, then boxing had clearly established itself as the quintessentially masculine

sport by the 1920s. Nevertheless, women actively participated in this sport, too, albeit to a more limited extent than men. Moreover, images of female boxers circulated widely during this period in advertising, films, songs, and popular literature, and they celebrated female strength and aggression. Just as women in the Weimar period were presenting a more active image of themselves through pugilism, male boxers were steadily evolving into objectified, even eroticized figures for the consumption of adoring male and female fans, a trend that boxers themselves often consciously encouraged. Precisely because of the boxer's ambiguity, representing both an active fighter and a passive object, the sport of boxing reconfigured masculinity and femininity during the Weimar Republic.

With tennis and boxing forming the two poles of the sports spectrum, track and field represented the contentious middle ground. Because of the sport's international reputation, the press celebrated male runners and shotputters as the embodiment of national strength and prowess, explicitly linking masculinity, athleticism, and Germanness. For many officials, too, track and field served as a forum for men to demonstrate their heroism and erase the humiliations of the Versailles Treaty, and it provided a surrogate for the military training so tightly restricted under the terms of the peace. At the same time, as female track stars achieved increasing prominence during the 1920s, commentators and officials launched heated debates over the social ramifications and medical consequences of vigorous running, jumping, and throwing. They argued that female athletes needed to reconcile competition with motherhood, and they worried openly about the sport's impact on women's reproductive health and the fulfillment of their maternal obligations to the nation.

With regard to German conceptions of manhood, the male champions in all three sports injected a distinctive element of individuality into a hitherto quite regimented Wilhelmine ideal. The male athlete's unabashed willingness to pursue his own glory captured the self-interested spirit of modern business and republican democracy, and it stood in stark contrast to the synchronized uniformity of communal forms of physical culture such as *Turnen*. Whereas Walter Schönbrunn in 1930 criticized this latter program of exercises as best suited for "the subjects of a monarchical government," he hailed competitive athletes, such as boxers and sprinters, as reflecting the values of "republican men."² Even an athlete like Otto Peltzer, who preached a self-sacrificial sense of duty, embodied the willful pursuit of self-interest by virtue of his own success. He also represented a new breed of national hero, who served his *patria* not by defending its territory on the battlefield, but by defending its honor on the playing field.

In addition, male athletes marketed their appeal on the model of the era's much-celebrated self-made businessmen. Boxers not only turned

professional, they also promoted themselves as heartthrobs, in the pursuit of media attention, endorsements, a fan base, and movie roles. By consciously placing his body on display, the Weimar boxer turned Wilhelmine man on his head, transforming the viewing subject into the object on view. Just as importantly, women as well as men happily accepted this invitation to gaze. Ladies' handbooks encouraged their readers to sit ringside for better views, and a literary and cinematic subgenre featured female protagonists in pursuit of their favorite sportsmen. Even tennis players, despite a genteel reluctance to reveal their bodies in short pants or shirts, flirtatiously elicited advances from their more assertive female partners.

The female athlete also exploited the business opportunities inherent in competitive sports. Tennis players, like male boxers, often turned professional in the 1920s, and translated their celebrity status into paid exhibition matches and commercial endorsements. And, like male boxers, female boxers clearly marketed a titillating appeal. More importantly, female athletes in all sports stood out as public figures at a time when women, or at least middle- and upper-class women, had just begun to venture out of the home in large numbers. These athletes provided visible examples of self-reliance and independence, and their aggressive competitiveness subverted notions of female passivity.

The anxious debates surrounding women's sports in Weimar Germany also illustrated how these athletes unsettled the maternal ideal. Officials worried that female track and field competitors in particular might jeopardize their reproductive health as a result of intensive training and busy schedules. This concern generated a flurry of commentaries on both sides of the issue, and it ultimately led to the elimination of the women's 800-meter race, despite Germany's 1928 gold medal in this event. Meanwhile, female tennis players, by virtue of their sexual assertiveness for the sake of pleasure alone, and female boxers, by virtue of their engagement in the most stereotypically masculine activity, seemed to reject motherhood altogether.

Elite male and female athletes in the 1920s recast the physical bodies of men and women as well as their roles in German society. The lean, muscular ideal for both men and women reflected their shared pressures and ambitions, and it indicated that both sexes needed to cultivate the same physical qualities in order to succeed. Female boxers purposefully built their biceps with daily workouts on the punching ball, and their counterparts in track and field developed sleek, wiry builds as a consequence of rigorous training regimens. In tennis, meanwhile, women helped to make the straight-hipped, anti-hourglass body into the defining physical characteristic of the new woman. Male athletes moved toward a streamlined ideal, too, and displayed slimmed-down physiques that, in

the case of middle-distance runners, bordered on scrawny. On the tennis circuit, men had similarly trim frames, and even boxers, who prided themselves on the force of their punches, nevertheless cultivated a lean look, lest the extra pounds push them into a higher weight class.

Commentators charged that competitive sports had not simply changed the human body, they had reengineered it. The emphasis on measurement, record-keeping, and head-to-head rivalry in modern sports motivated athletes and trainers to incorporate cutting-edge techniques and the latest technologies to improve the efficiency of hearts, lungs, and biceps, and these methods received widespread coverage in the press. Athletic bodies represented some of the most prominent examples of Taylorism at work in Weimar Germany, and they demonstrated that the modern efficiency imperative penetrated to the level of flesh and bones. Furthermore, unlike the prewar research on human performance, Taylorism in its athletic application during the 1920s looked only to the next championship fight, international tournament, or Olympic race, not at the longtime health of the individual. This marked a clear break from the scientific agenda of Imperial Germany.³ Elite athletes, then, embodied not just the era's physical androgyny but also its technical advances, which prompted the media to equate the highly rationalized body with a quintessentially modern one.

As Meisl predicted, the physical and social transformations ushered in by competitive athletes in the 1920s had long-lasting consequences, and ones that extended beyond the demise of the Weimar Republic itself in 1933. The Nazis' promotion of certain women's sports with the explicit goal of producing healthy, fit mothers represented a more systematic implementation of an aim first articulated by German officials prior to 1933, and the Nazis drew heavily on the debates that had swirled around track and field and other competitive women's sports in the 1920s. On the one hand, trainers and medical authorities in Weimar Germany had raised concerns over female participation in endurance sports precisely because of the feared consequences for the athletes' reproductive potential. On the other hand, as Gertrud Pfister has noted, the Nazis actively encouraged a number of sports, given that the medical community at the close of the Weimar Republic no longer viewed most of them as inherently antithetical to motherhood, and it actually encouraged many as beneficial.⁴ The Nazis coopted a number of Weimar impulses in the realm of men's sports, too. Thomas Alkemeyer, for instance, describes the National Socialist celebration of athletic male bodies, particularly as seen in the monumental sculptures of Arno Breker and Josef Thorak, as the further evolution of an essentially Weimar aesthetic.⁵

Following the Second World War, men and women continued a pattern that had begun after the earlier conflagration, participating in sports

in ever-greater numbers. East Germany, in particular, nurtured sports at all levels, and it elevated elite female athletes to a national priority.⁶ As a result, sportswomen accounted disproportionately for that country's success in international athletic competitions between the 1960s and the 1980s, so that the image of a burly, shot-putting *Mädchen* became an easily recognizable stereotype. The East German dominance in many women's sports unquestionably derived from the systematic use of performance-enhancing drugs.⁷ It also, however, owed something to the fact that East Germany was one of the few countries to train female athletes seriously, a legacy of the relative acceptance and support that women's sports had received during the Weimar Republic. One could even argue that the East German use of pharmaceuticals to improve the efficiency of its athletes drew on the rationalizing and technophilic impulses that enjoyed such prominence in the 1920s.

Competitive sports offered a physical expression of the rapidly modernizing, increasingly permissive, and socially unstable Weimar society, and they formed an element of cultural modernism that has had an important and long-overlooked impact on the nation's subsequent development. Through sports, men and women articulated a response to the changes around them and presented new standards of manhood and womanhood. Above all, the elite athlete, whose every move received widespread media attention and almost instant trend-setting status, helped to reshape notions of masculinity and femininity and to reshape the physical body itself to better fit the demands and expectations of the modern age.

Notes

¹ "Der Sport war es, der den Weg für die Emanzipation der Frau ebnete. Er machte sie dem Manne ähnlicher und gab ihr so Gelegenheit, den Mann auch sich ähnlicher zu machen, bis man sich auf jener Mittellinie traf, die die Menschheit erst wirklich zu einer Einheit macht." Willy Meisl, "Vorschau in Vergangenheit," in *Der Sport am Scheidewege*, ed. Willy Meisl (Heidelberg, 1928), 83.

² Walter Schönbrunn, "Körperliche Ertüchtigung," *Die Leibesübungen* 14 (July 20, 1930): 415.

³ See Anson Rabinbach, *The Human Motor: Energy, Fatigue, and the Origins of Modernity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1990).

⁴ Gertrud Pfister, "Biologie als Schicksal. Zur Frauen-, Gesundheits- und Sportpolitik im Nationalsozialismus," in *Frauen-Räume. Körper und Identität im Sport*, ed. Sabine Kröner and Gertrud Pfister (Pfaffenweiler, 1992), 41–60.

⁵ Thomas Alkemeyer, "Normbilder des Menschen. Der männliche Sportler-Körper in der Staatsästhetik des 'Dritten Reichs,'" *Sozial- und Zeitgeschichte des Sports* 6, no. 3 (November 1992): 72–73.

⁶ See Molly Wilkinson, "Sports, Mass Mobilization, and the Everyday Culture of Socialism in East Germany" (Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, 2003).

⁷ With regard to the former German Democratic Republic's legacy of illegal steroid use, see Steven Ungerleider, *Faust's Gold: Inside the East German Doping Machine* (New York, 2001).