5 Women and Sport

INTRODUCTION

This chapter examines women’s involvement in sport. It is generally assumed that women do not take part in sport as much as men and are also limited in the kinds of sport they play. The first part of the chapter therefore sets out to examine the extent and nature of female participation in sport in Britain. Then a brief description of the physical differences between males and females prepares the way for consideration of the performance potential of men and women. The main part of the chapter explores various factors that can inhibit women’s involvement in sport. Prompted by researchers with a critical feminist perspective, this topic has generated extensive debate and a dynamic situation is revealed wherein female involvement is affected by a complex interplay of historical, cultural and psychosocial influences. Finally, there is a review of initiatives and developments that aim to improve sporting opportunities for women.

PARTICIPATION RATES OF FEMALES IN SPORT

Sports Participation of Girls

Recently, the Sports Council (1995) commissioned a national survey of over 4400 young people aged 6–16 years to investigate their involvement in sport. In relation to sports participation outside of school PE lessons during the previous year, boys in each age group spent more time on sport, played a greater number of sports and competed at higher levels than girls. Figure 5.1 shows the difference between boys and girls, and it can be seen that a relatively small percentage of girls took part in sport in most age groups, with boys participating approximately twice as much as girls.

Table 5.1 shows sports played most regularly by girls of primary and secondary school ages, revealing that traditional, competitive sports were not popular with either age group. Activities like cycling, swimming, walking and aerobics clearly have excellent health and social benefits, and yet it is unlikely that they
were genuine sporting situations, since very few girls would have been involved, for example, in competitive walking or cycle racing. Interestingly, almost all girls said that they enjoyed sport, both in PE lessons and in other settings, and yet they demonstrated relatively low participation rates. The reason for this anomaly will be explored later in the chapter. The research of Armstrong et al. (1990) demonstrated the disturbingly low levels of physical activity among adolescent girls. These assessments mean that girls could not have been involved in any more than a minimal amount of sport.