

CALENDAR

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So, when will women get their 'Field of Dreams'?

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In the opening moments of "The Wolves," Sarah DeLappe's highly acclaimed one-act play, members of a high school girls soccer team warm up for an indoor game. As they stretch, they talk. Some argue about whether an elderly Cambodian leader found guilty of genocide should be punished so late in life, others about the effectiveness of tampons over pads.

The juxtaposition of the two topics in an overlapping



roundelay of conversation is supposed to be a bit funny, a bit alarming and very unexpected, and in the Echo Theater production I recently saw, it was all of those things.

Though not as unexpected as seeing a women's sports team depicted in a play.

As the mother of two young female athletes, I was surprised less by what I heard than what I saw: Nine young women in uniform running, passing and doing squats, lunges, grapevines and suicides. Yes, they talk about politics, periods or, later in the play, activism and parties, but they also recount past games, analyze

[See Sports, E5]



DARRETT SANDERS

DONNA ZADEH, left, Ellen Neary and Connor Kelly-Eiding star in Echo Theater's production of "The Wolves," about members of a girls soccer team.

Where is *our* 'Field of Dreams'?

[Sports, from E1] opposing teams, worry about their ACLs and struggle with envy when some players are scouted but others are not.

Hand to God, I cannot remember the last time I saw a team of female athletes taken this seriously in a scripted piece of fiction.

Oh, wait, maybe I can: 17 years ago in "Bend It Like Beckham." Or maybe "Whip It" in 2009. The characters of "Make It or Break It," which ran on ABC Family from 2009 to 2012, were technically a team, but mostly they competed against one another. And "Glow" is a terrific female-empowering series about professional female wrestlers in the 1980s, but it's more about theatrics than athletics.

No doubt there are a few female sports narratives I missed, but you see where I'm going with this. Male sports drama is a serious and diverse genre, with films—"Field of Dreams," "Hoosiers," "We Are Marshall"—and series—"Friday Night Lights," "Eastbound & Down"—that have become cultural touchstones by exploring the deeply personal, emotional relationship men have with team sports. Women's sports drama, by contrast, is a very short list, padded by stories of romance ("Love & Basketball," "Ice Castles") and a single female athlete breaking into a man's sport ("Million Dollar Baby," "Girlfight").

On IMDB, a list of "female-oriented sports dramas" includes two animated "Barbie in a Mermaid Tale" films.

And scripted stories do not have to be explicitly about men's teams to feature male characters who are/were athletes, whose lives were shaped/ruined/saved by some team.

Name a female character in a non-sports film who was/is a hotshot athlete in high school or college in a way that impacts her adult life.

(Cue elevator music.)

No, I'll wait.

(More elevator music.)



CHRISTINE PARRY/Fox Searchlight Pictures

KEIRA KNIGHTLEY, center left, and Parminder Nagra celebrate a team victory in "Bend It Like Beckham."

Well, I can only think of the ladies of "A League of Their Own," which is one of the few stories explicitly about a female team and ends with that team being disbanded because World War II is over and the men want their bats back.

DeLappe, who played soccer as a girl, has said she wrote "The Wolves" in part to explore how removed we can be even from things we care about (the Cambodian genocide, for instance). Even as we approach the Women's World Cup and celebrate the 20th anniversary of the famous "girls of summer" Rose Bowl win, even as we shuttle our daughters to basketball, softball, track, soccer and lacrosse practice, the stories we tell on stage, screen and television remain stubbornly removed from women's sports.

Seriously, far more women have played sports than stripped or tricked for a

living, yet on our screens, female pole dancers and prostitutes outnumber female athletes by approximately 17 million to one.

I understand why, with a few notable exceptions, previous generations of writers avoided stories of female athletes or entirely ignored the possibility of a female character being shaped by her experience on a team... well, actually I don't understand it. Before Title IX, women's sports programs may not have been as widespread as they are now, but many girls and young women did play team sports and were, no doubt, just as affected by that experience as their male counterparts.

Still, it is undeniably true that for many years, most playwrights, screenwriters, directors, artistic directors and studio heads were men, with no personal experience of women's sports. And for many years, female athletes

who were not Olympic gymnasts, Olympic skaters or professional tennis players lived in relative obscurity; few girls could even dream of life in the big leagues.

But now?

According to the Women's Sports Foundation, in the nearly 50 years since Title IX ensured that girls and women have equal access to school athletics, female participation has increased by 900%. At the college level, women's athletics have become increasingly competitive and well-chronicled. (People who are not players' parents even watch women's collegiate games on TV!) There are professional women's basketball teams; in the U.S., women's soccer is more popular than men's; and female athletes like Serena Williams and Mia Hamm experience the kind of beyond-sports-fan adulation once reserved for men.

So where are the stories?

Where are the films and series about women experiencing that special, complicated competitive camaraderie of team play? Of overcoming personal prejudice by getting to know people they would have never met if they didn't play a sport? Of learning confidence and the hard truth that talent will only get you so far without hard work?

The term "soccer mom" has become shorthand for all manner of things, good and bad. But I have yet to see any film or series address the generational divide between women who came of age before or in the early years of Title IX and their daughters, which is, frankly, far more interesting than yet another thwarted father screaming at yet another ambivalent son.

The stories we choose to tell reveal and underscore the things we think are important. Men's sports has

been ritualized, mythologized and idealized not just through fact, but also through fiction. Novels and poetry, plays, films and television series all reinforce the importance of male athleticism, the bonding and conflict, the importance of team, of pushing to victory, overcoming defeat.

But none of that is an exclusively male experience. Female bonding is not limited to teenage friendship, Mommy and Me classes and after-work mojitos. We need to see women's complicated relationships with athletic competition and camaraderie, and not just in gymnastics or skating or tennis. We need to see women's bodies pushed to physical extremes, and not just as working mothers or random pole dancers.

I realize that the sight of women's bodies sweating and straining other than in childbirth, sex or super-cute yoga pants might be scary to some. Certainly the thought of women with substantial thighs and serious glutes grimly thundering up and down a court or field defies Hollywood's traditional standard of beauty. Female athletes don't smile until they win, most don't wear makeup when they play. They often say and do things that don't fit with the narrow confines of female heroism.

Year after year, Hollywood claims to be doing all it can to correct its historic lack of female leads and racial diversity while actively ignoring one of the best ways to do both of these things. Women don't need to be superheroes, super spies or trained assassins to kick ass. Watch a Sparks game or the Women's World Cup, go to a college game in virtually any sport, or just stop by any field or court or gymnasium on any given weekend.

And while we wait for Hollywood to catch up, well, at least we have "The Wolves."

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