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# Part I

## Claiming Space in Sport

### Opening Wide the Doors to Sporting Success

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With a new millennium comes time to reflect on where we have been and where we are going. There are many stories of New Zealand sportswomen's success that should be celebrated, and there is little doubt that visibility, opportunities, public support and recognition have improved over time. In this first section of the book, we focus on research that highlights some of those achievements.

The early 2000s feature a generation of young Kiwi women who are succeeding in sports their mothers and grandmothers never imagined; snowboarding, downhill mountain biking and kite surfing, to name a few. At the same time, their mothers are charting new territory, learning how motherhood can enhance their abilities to act as sport leaders. Female athletes rank highly among New Zealand's most trusted people, and their successes at Olympic and Commonwealth Games are celebrated by the whole nation.

The success of today's sportswomen comes on the heels of previous generations who fought to ensure better opportunities and increased acceptance for the sports-minded females who followed them. Not surprisingly, each generation tends to take for granted the opportunities their mothers gained for them and looks ahead to the next challenge. As Holly Thorpe's chapter points out, young sportswomen today may be employing a new brand of activism – called Third Wave Feminism – that looks and feels markedly different from what has gone before. Rather than pursuing mass movement-based activism, younger women reflect the postmodern world in which they have grown up by embracing contradiction and playing with gendered expectations. They understand that athleticism is no longer seen as automatically incompatible with femininity. Indeed, in the 2000s, United States snowboarders, Indy

car racers and tennis players have been voted amongst the world's sexiest women in international polls.

To reach this point, and in order to participate in competitive sport, New Zealand sportswomen have had to take on the powerful medical and scientific establishments, to challenge entrenched cultural beliefs about female weakness and the unsuitability of physical exertion and fight for respect in male-dominated sport organisations. It has not always been easy.

A century ago, New Zealand women "were constrained by notions of what constituted ladylike behaviour" (A. Simpson, 1999, p. 63). Females who expressed interest in sports strongly associated with masculinity, such as cricket, boxing, soccer and rugby, were "fiercely resisted" (Thompson, 2003, p. 253), as were those who embraced the independence and mobility provided by cycling at the start of the 1900s (C. Simpson, 1999). Indeed, "to partake in vigorous sport and emerge red-faced and sweaty did not square with male perceptions of how women should behave" (A. Simpson, 1999, p. 63). Yet women were undeterred by such views and persisted in breaking down cultural stereotypes one by one.

Sportswomen across the Western world have come a long way since a male United States judge pronounced in the early 1970s that "athletic competition builds character in our boys. We do not need that kind of character in our girls, the women of tomorrow" (Dyer, 1982, p. 109). Luckily, 'the women of tomorrow' paid little attention to this viewpoint as they strove to gain access to more and more areas of sport. The chapter by Sarah Leberman and Farah Palmer highlights women who have turned their sporting success into a career, by focusing on females in sport leadership positions, both voluntary and paid. These women have forged new roles in sport which allow them to balance motherhood and sport leadership and draw upon the skills and attitudes they developed after having children.

From a New Zealand perspective, Ferkins (1992) reports that New Zealand actually produced more female than male world-ranked, world record holder, Olympic medal or Commonwealth Games gold medal athletes in the 1980s and early 1990s. *The Best of the Best* list that precedes this section is clear evidence of women's ongoing success on the world stage. The chapter by Toni Bruce considers the complex relationship between international success

and media coverage, emphasizing that New Zealand women become highly visible when they win for the nation, especially in global, multisport events such as the Olympic or Commonwealth Games. Netball, long seen as the most appropriate sport for females (see Nauright, 1999), has regularly outranked men's rugby in terms of national television ratings in recent years. Its popularity means that during the 2007 World Netball Championships, held in New Zealand, Sky TV provided live broadcasts of 32 games and a nightly primetime highlights package, while Television New Zealand focused on live coverage of the Silver Ferns and live highlights of other matches. Both the Sky TV and TVNZ productions had a similar format and production set up to rugby broadcasts – with expert female netballers as commentators, studio hosts and sideline interviewers, pre-game and post-game interviews, and profiles of the Silver Ferns players that provided the audience with the opportunity to 'get to know' the players better which is a key element in building fandom and popularity.

The start of the trans-Tasman ANZ Netball Championship in 2008, underwritten by major television channels, is likely to increase sports coverage for women, at least on Sky TV which sees netball potentially contributing to increased Sky uptake ("Netball set," 2007). In part, the increased interest may relate to recent extremely close trans-Tasman netball clashes and New Zealand's sporting rivalry with Australia, in which wins over Australia invoke nationalistic feelings (see Wensing, 2003) – an aspect which leads to increased visibility for female athletes.

However, not all sports or sportswomen are the recipients of such media interest. Having finally battered down the doors of rugbydom, the New Zealand women's rugby team, unlike the men, are undisputed world champions. The Black Ferns won the first International Rugby Board-sponsored Rugby World Cup in 1998 and have refused to give it up; winning again in 2002 and 2006. Yet, despite this dominance, the Black Ferns have struggled to gain the kind of media coverage that the All Blacks take for granted. The initially fierce resistance against women playing rugby may have died down somewhat (Chu, Lieberman, Howe & Bachor, 2003; Thompson, 2003) but the New Zealand media does not appear ready to embrace women playing 'the national game'.

Sportswomen have achieved visibility in other ways, however. Some high profile female athletes, including rugby players, have turned their visibility into sports media careers. Recent examples include former Silver Fern netballers April Ieremia and Jenny-May Coffin, and Black Ferns rugby players Melodie Robinson and Farah Palmer. Every national news channel has featured female sports news readers in recent years. Sportswomen are just as, if not more, popular than sportsmen in the annual Readers' Digest 'Most Trusted' poll. We even see our top female athletes such as Silver Ferns team members, Susan Devoy, Bernice Mene, Allison Roe, Hayley Holt, Rosara Joseph, Barbara Kendall, Irene van Dyk, Sarah Ulmer and Caroline and Georgina Evers-Swindell on our TV screens in advertising campaigns. Discus champion Beatrice Faumuina attracted enough popular votes to reach the final of *Dancing with the Stars* in 2006.

While celebrating female sporting success, the research in this first section does highlight the ongoing effects of a culture based on assumptions about fundamental differences between women and men – effects that will be further explored later in the book. Each chapter emphasises female success but also acknowledges the ongoing contradictions and ambiguities that are inherent in how New Zealand culture makes sense of gender difference.

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