



FORUM: SPORTS IN THE 1970s

Women's Movement: Sport, Feminism, and the Torch Relay of the 1977 National Women's Conference

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It made for a great photograph. Icons of the feminist movement, stars of women's sport, and amateur athletes joined in a show of solidarity, rallied around the torch that would inaugurate the 1977 National Women's Conference in Houston, Texas (Figure 1). It was the first federally funded meeting of its kind, and 20,000 people cheered the arrival of the flame and the illustrious if motley crew that bore it aloft. The moment was, according to the official proceedings, "one of the most dramatic features of the Conference."¹

It made for a great photograph, but the image is misleading. It suggests that 1970s feminists embraced women's sport as a central cause, that sports advocates pledged their allegiance to the women's movement, and that activists from the two spheres regularly rubbed sweaty shoulders. The suggestion is part of a broader tendency to celebrate sensational moments of an ephemeral alliance between sport and second-wave feminism: the 1972 passage of Title IX; Billie Jean King's victory over Bobby Riggs in the 1973 "Tennis Battle of the Sexes"; and the National Organization of Women's lawsuit that allowed girls to play Little League Baseball.² However, a closer investigation reveals fissures, if not antipathy, between the contemporary women's movement and the women's sport movement. To understand that divide, one might start with an occasion that temporarily brought them together—the 1977 torch relay.

The United Nations General Assembly designated 1975 as International Women's Year (IWY). In response, President Gerald Ford established the National Commission on the Observance of IWY and appointed thirty-five members to advise on issues related to gender equity.³ The commission's report presented 115 recommendations as "most imperative to eliminating the 'barriers' to full justice," including those related to the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), reproductive health, equal employment, and sexual violence.⁴ Recommendations 67 through 71 concerned sport. Behind those five recommendations stood IWY Deputy Coordinator Catherine East, whom activist Betty Friedan once referred to as "the midwife of the women's movement."⁵

¹National Commission on the Observance of International Women's Year, *The Spirit of Houston: An Official Report to the President, the Congress, and the People of the United States* (Washington, DC, 1978), 193.

²See, as examples, Deborah L. Brake, *Getting in the Game: Title IX and the Women's Sports Revolution* (New York, 2010); Susan Ware, *Game, Set, Match: Billie Jean King and the Revolution in Women's Sports* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2011); Douglas E. Abrams, "The Twelve-Year-Old Girl's Lawsuit That Changed America: The Continuing Impact of *NOW v. Little League Baseball, Inc.* at 40," *Virginia Journal of Social Policy and Law* 20 (2012): 241–70; and Jaime Schultz, *Qualifying Times: Points of Change in U.S. Women's Sport* (Urbana, IL, 2014).

³Shelah Gilbert Leader and Patricia Rusch Hyatt, *American Women on the Move: The Inside Story of the National Women's Conference, 1977* (Lanham, MD, 2016).

⁴National Commission, *The Spirit of Houston*, 9.

⁵In Cynthia Harrison, "Creating a National Feminist Agenda: Coalition Building in the 1970s," in *Perspectives on Second-Wave Feminism in the United States*, ed. Stephanie Gilmore (Urbana, IL, 2008), 34.



Figure 1. Inauguration of the 1977 National Women's Conference. Photograph by Diana Mara Henry.

East was not an athlete, but “she saw what sport did for young women,” according to her daughter Betsy, a decorated college gymnast.⁶

Congress allocated \$5 million to organizing the national conference. Leading up to the event, approximately 130,000 people attended state and territorial conventions to elect conference delegates and identify the planks on which those delegates would vote in Houston. The results would then be submitted to the President and Congress for legislative action. Conventioneers selected twenty-six planks; sport did not make the cut. Instead, its presence on the national stage took a more circuitous route.

According to the official conference report, Sey Chassler, an IWY Commissioner and the editor of *Redbook*, first suggested the torch relay.⁷ Betsy East and Carole Oglesby remembered it differently. East was working on a graduate degree with Oglesby, a professor of sport psychology at Temple University and the president of the National Association for Girls and Women's Sports (NAGWS). “Catherine was visiting Betsy and telling us both about the wonderful upcoming event,” Oglesby recalled. The three women were frustrated that “the one thing that wasn't anywhere in what was being talked about as a part of this meeting in Houston was where is sport? We're really missing women's bodies and physicality and all the empowerment that athletics offer.” They concluded that a torch relay would serve as sport's “symbolic” replacement. “It needed to be a marathon to demonstrate that women's progress was not going to be a sprint; it was a marathon,” Oglesby explained.⁸

Regardless the relay's origin, the IWY commission supported it. At the time, Eva Auchincloss served as the associate publisher of *womenSports* and executive director of the Women's Sports Foundation—two important conduits for sporting feminism. Auchincloss assessed that although most IWY commissioners “didn't get why women running was

⁶Betsy East, interviewed by the author, May 11, 2015.

⁷National Commission, *The Spirit of Houston*, 193.

⁸Carole Oglesby, interviewed by the author, Apr. 3, 2015.

important,” they understood that the relay “would generate publicity for the event in ways that the state conferences or other measures could not.”⁹ To that end, the commissioners appointed Patricia Kery to handle public relations while Oglesby planned the relay’s logistics. With assistance from the Road Runners Club of America, Oglesby plotted the 2,610-mile course from New York to Texas, and recruited coordinators in each state, relying heavily on NAGWS members: “I knew they were people I could count on. Those people do not fail.”¹⁰

The relay began on September 29, 1977, in Seneca Falls—the site of the first U.S. women’s rights convention of 1848. Over the next fifty-one days, a succession of 2,000 runners moved the torch through fourteen states and the District of Columbia. Clad in blue t-shirts emblazoned with the conference slogan, “Women on the Move,” they embodied the articulation of physical activity and political progress.

Things went relatively smoothly until they got to the Alabama border on October 30. There, scheduled runners failed to show up in what seemed to be a coordinated effort to derail both the relay and the conference. The conference report attributed the obstruction to ERA opponents. Kery speculated that state and local politicians told runners, “You can’t associate with these people. They’re lesbians and anti-prayer in school.”¹¹ *The Chicago Tribune* likewise commented on “the populace’s inordinant [*sic*] fear of lesbians.”¹²

Interviews with Alabamans indicated additional if related prejudices. “Now why would a woman want to get involved in something like that for?” asked one Prattville resident. “There’s no law against it... But it sort of takes her femininity away. I mean, if she wants to climb telephone poles for a living, well let her do it. But that sure doesn’t make her a woman. I mean a real woman.”¹³ Another woman told reporters, “I want men to open doors for me and pull out chairs and tell me I’m pretty. Why should I want to run half way across this country with some old torch? I don’t want to be a man.”¹⁴ Critics aimed the same sexist, homophobic barbs at the broader women’s movement, making it even more curious that feminists and women athletes of the 1970s rarely found common ground.

For Oglesby, East, and many of the other torch bearers, there was no distinction between the women’s movement and the women’s sport movement—both sought equal opportunity, equal pay, respect, and bodily freedoms. As writer Stephanie Twin explained in 1979, “Sport is part of a larger movement for female physical autonomy, a movement in which efforts to gain control over pregnancy, birth, family size, and individual safety figure prominently.”¹⁵ Tennis champion Billie Jean King recounted telling Gloria Steinem that it was a mistake for feminists to ignore sport. “You should use us more,” King urged. “Billie, this is about politics,” Steinem remonstrated. “Gloria,” King replied, “we are politics.”¹⁶

Yet, Steinem, activist Florynce Kennedy, and others denounced what they called the prevailing “jockocracy.”¹⁷ Sport was exemplary of “the most aggressive, dog-eat-dog patterns of male

⁹Eva Auchincloss, interviewed by the author, Apr. 16, 2015.

¹⁰Oglesby interview.

¹¹Patricia Kery, interviewed by the author, May 13, 2015.

¹²Edith Herman, “Ordinary People Keep the Women’s Movement Running,” *Chicago Tribune*, Nov. 19, 1977, G1.

¹³Quoted in B. Drummond Ayres, “A Relay for Women’s Rights Runs into Southern Chivalry,” *New York Times*, Nov. 4, 1977, 14.

¹⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁵Stephanie Twin, ed., *Out of the Bleachers: Writings on Women and Sport* (New York, 1979), xxxix.

¹⁶Quoted in Sally Jenkins, “Title IX Opponents a Bunch of Sad Sacks,” *Washington Post*, June 24, 2002, D1.

¹⁷Gloria Steinem, “Introduction,” in *The Decade of Women: A Ms. History of the Seventies in Words and Pictures*, ed. Susanne Levine and Harriet Lyons (New York, 1980), 19; Flo Kennedy, *Color Me Flo: My Hard Life and Good Times* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1976), 91.

competitiveness,” wrote the authors of the influential *Our Bodies, Ourselves*.¹⁸ It was “fascist,” “frivolous,” “a male trip,” and the “product of a capitalistic, patriarchal society.”¹⁹

The antagonism cut both ways. Some athletes were vehemently “against women’s lib.”²⁰ They found it polarizing and angry. “They fear being labeled unfeminine or lesbian,” wrote scholar Hollis Elkins in 1978; “they fear losing their jobs for ‘radical’ activity; they fear being ostracized by men and other women in the sports world.”²¹ Decades later, Sylvia Ortiz, one of the relay’s final three torchbearers, recalled that there were “these negative ideas about the women’s lib movement and all this talk about women being gay.” In fact, she disclosed, “I was gay,” but the fear that her future employers would find out kept her from becoming more involved with feminist causes: “As much of a wonderful and exciting and great movement it was to me, it was also the opposite: a very scary and intimidating time as well.”²²

Organizers scrambled to cover the Alabama route by recruiting athletes from local track clubs and colleges. “Somebody called up and asked our athletic department to come up with some runners,” explained one Auburn University student. “It’s fun to run. But women’s lib is no big deal for us. We’ve still got Southern gentlemen down here. That’s the way we like it.”²³ A captain at McClellan Army Base volunteered cadets to assist. Even Kery joined the cause, explaining, “I was not a runner, but I did at least a mile to just move it along and I think I did two or three segments.”²⁴ When it became clear these efforts would not suffice, Kery enlisted Peggy Kokernot, a twenty-five-year-old physical education teacher and marathoner from Houston, who flew to Alabama to cover sixteen miles. With the relay back on track, runners continued their mission through Mississippi, Louisiana, and into Texas.

A steady rain fell in Houston on the morning of November 19, 1977. Despite the weather, a large crowd gathered outside the Albert Thomas Convention Center to welcome the torch. The procession began gaining momentum three miles away, when approximately fifty women, including Olympic gold medalists Donna de Verona and Suzy Chaffee, who both completed earlier legs of the relay, gathered around the three final torchbearers. Organizers carefully selected the trio to represent the diversity of American womanhood. As described in the conference report, “The bronze torch [was] held aloft by the pale arm of Peggy Kokernot, marathon runner; the golden arm of Sylvia Ortiz, a senior at the University of Houston; and the dark-skinned arm of 16-year-old high school track star Michele Cearcy.”²⁵

As the group arrived at San Filipe Park to begin the relay’s last “celebrity mile,” their ranks swelled to 1,000. Several high-profile conferees joined in the pageantry, including Presiding Officer Bella Abzug, clad in her dress, heels, and trademark hat. At the convention center, Abzug addressed the crowd: “Some of us run with the torch. Some of us run for office, some of us run for equality, but none of us runs for cover.” She then handed the torch to Billie Jean King, who “accepted it for women in sports.”²⁶

The whole thing made for “great theater,” the official report read; the resulting photographs “were so striking that they appeared on the front pages of newspapers in which the Conference

¹⁸Boston Women’s Health Book Collective, *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (New York, 1973), 86–7.

¹⁹Jan Felshin, “The Social Anomaly of Women in Sports,” *Physical Educator* 30, no. 3 (1973): 124; Hollis Elkins, “Time for a Change: Women’s Athletics and the Women’s Movement,” *Frontiers* 3, no. 1 (1978): 22–4.

²⁰Paula Krebs, “At the Starting Blocks: Women Athletes’ New Agenda,” *off our backs* 14, no. 1 (1984): 1.

²¹Elkins, “Time for a Change,” 22.

²²Sylvia Ortiz, interview with the author, May 20, 2015.

²³Ayres, “A Relay for Women’s Rights.”

²⁴Kery interview.

²⁵National Commission, *The Spirit of Houston*, 65. On the racial politics of the torchbearers, see Alyssa A. Samek, “Mobility, Citizenship, and ‘American Women on the Move’ in the 1977 International Women’s Year Torch Relay,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 103, no. 3 (2017): 207–29; Amira Rose Davis, “Michelle Cearcy: Carrying the ‘Torch of Equality,’” in *It’s Our Movement Now: Black Women’s Politics and the 1977 National Women’s Conference*, ed. Laura L. Lovett, Rachel Jessica Daniel, and Kelly N. Giles (Gainesville, FL, 2022), 40–9.

²⁶Quoted in Judith Coburn, “Houston Journal: Up Among the Women,” *Village Voice*, Dec. 5, 1977, 35.

was otherwise ignored.”²⁷ Although the relay garnered the publicity the commissioners wanted, Oglesby was bitterly disappointed that sport was not on their agenda. She and Auchincloss had prepared a platform statement to read during the meeting, but rigid adherence to parliamentary procedure, based in part on fears that conservative delegates would derail the democratic process, made it impossible for her to present any new issues for consideration at the conference.

Still, Oglesby was proud of what the relay accomplished: “It was for its own sake, and I think it had all kinds of effects, especially for the people who ran the torch.”²⁸ Kokernot, for example, reflected that she “had never been exposed to activism before.” She found it “exciting to know you could make a difference,” and after the experience, she “definitely identified” as a feminist.²⁹ Another participant, who did not “consider herself a women’s liberationist,” told reporters that after running, she would “be a lot more aware of women’s issues from now on.”³⁰

It took a bit longer for mainstream feminists to appreciate sport. “They didn’t get it,” said Auchincloss. “I don’t think it was being mean, or selfish but they didn’t get the tie [that sport] is a training ground for leadership and for learning to take knocks and for a lot of things that guys knew....They didn’t get that connection because they’d never had it for themselves.”³¹ Steinem later regretted her “years of fierce pride in spurning sport” and came to understand that “bodily freedom wouldn’t be accomplished only through reproductive issues.”³² For too long, women had been denied the value, beauty, and joy of moving and building their bodies—held back by the same restraints that circumscribed other aspects of their lives. Although not immediately apparent in 1977, the torch relay of the National Women’s Conference illuminated the possibilities of close, if unrealized, alignment between the women’s movement and the women’s sport movement.

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²⁷National Commission, *The Spirit of Houston*, 65.

²⁸Oglesby interview.

²⁹Peggy Kaplan (previously Kokernot), interview with the author, Apr. 2, 2015.

³⁰Ken Allen, “31 Women, 5 Men Carry a Torch for Rights,” *Charlotte Observer*, Oct. 24, 1977, B1.

³¹Auchincloss interview.

³²Gloria Steinem, *Moving Beyond Words* (New York, 1994), 98.