



MALMÖ HÖGSKOLA

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"Hvor helt fantastisk mange historier der er blevet fortrængt. Altså fx historierne om pigerne, der i 1880'erne cyklede 1.000 kilometer henover nogle dage på hullede veje og hårde dæk, og alligevel blev folk ved med at tro, at kvinder er svage." Else Trangbæk, just 60 år fylda, förundras fortfarande över den aningslöshet som tycks styra synen på kvinnan i idrotten – i Danmark såväl som i resten av världen. Men hon har dragit ett välbehövt, och gigantiskt, strå till stacken med sin senaste bok, *Kvindernes idræt: Fra rødder til top*, som sammanfattar hennes mångåriga idrottshistoriska forskargärning. Boken, som publicerades någon månad före sextioårsdagen, följer en 200-årig utveckling av kvinnors deltagande i gymnastik och idrott i Danmark. Genom intervjuer och biografier får vi en inblick i de kvinnors – och i vissa fall mäns – liv som banade vägen och bidrog till den utveckling som idag innebär att man (som det ibland kan kännas) när som helst på dygnet kan sätta på en dansk TV-kanal och se damhandboll. Gertrud Pfister är imponerad över forskarkollegans verk, som hon finner på en gång underhållande, informativt och nyskapande; en idrottshistorisk klassiker har sett dagens ljus.

## Gymnastics, Sports and Women in Denmark during 200 years

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Else Trangbæk

**Kvindernes idræt: Fra rødder til top**

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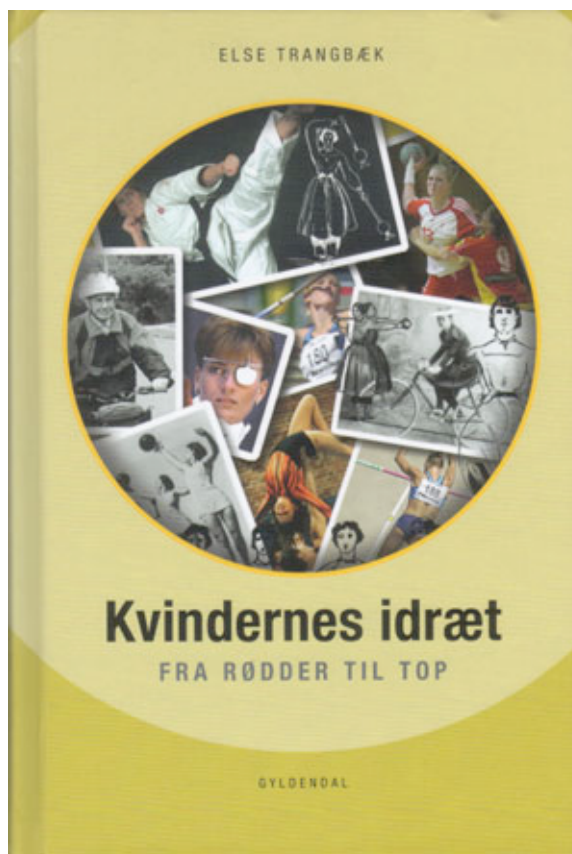
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This book is the first study to appear of the 200-year development of women's sport in Denmark. It is based on many different sources ranging from textbooks to newspaper articles and interviews. Special mention must be given to the biographical sketches, from which the reader learns about a wide variety of people, including gymnastics experts of both sexes as well as women cyclists, glider pilots and distance swimmers. The perceptive descriptions of the relations and disputes between both male and female proponents of the various branches of gymnastics and of sports make up a recurring motif linking the different chapters.

It is instantly obvious that the author has not merely followed the development of sport from the ivory tower of academia but was, and still is, firmly rooted in daily sports practices as a top-level sportswoman, a sports official, a university teacher and a sport scientist.

This first dedicated history of Danish women's sports is not simply a book of facts chronologically ordered and elucidated, but rather a narrative which, while reconstructing the basic principles and interconnections of the



various physical cultures, i.e. *Turnen*, gymnastics and sport, devotes particular attention to their “ideologies”.

The aim of the book is above all to establish and record the importance which women accord to gymnastic and sporting activities. In doing so, the author not only sheds light on the role which sport plays in the particular circumstances of women’s lives but also takes into consideration the discourses on women’s sport in the public sphere.

Depending on language and culture, sport can mean many different things. Its essence has changed more than once in the course of history. When examining the history of sport, therefore, one must deal with the various concepts of physical culture. The author thus begins by describing the different systems, or, as she calls them, “arenas” in which physical activities take place and acquire their meaning. Here, Trangbæk discusses the relations between the various concepts of physical culture, German *Turnen*, Swedish gymnastics and English sport, and describes the influences, conflicts and divisions which in Denmark, a country at the interface of a variety of physical cultures, were of quite different significance than in England or Germany, for example. On account of the prevailing political and social circumstances, typical “sports” organisations arose in Denmark such as the Danish Rifle and Gymnastics Society, the precursor of the DGI, and the Danish Sports Confederation (DIF), in which diverse physical activities reflected the various ideological orientations.

As everywhere else in Europe, both gymnastics and sport were first of all men’s domains. How they also became women’s domains is described in the book not only with scholarly precision but also vividly and often entertainingly. The book is structured chronologically, beginning with the development of physical education in Denmark, which was strongly influenced by the ideas of the Enlightenment and the Philanthropists. While the development of schools and education was generally similar to that of other European countries, Denmark was the first country to see the introduction, by means of a royal edict issued in 1814, of physical education at public schools. Initially, both boys and girls had physical education lessons; from 1828, however, the lessons were confined to the boys. It was only many years later that physical education was made compulsory for girls – in 1886 in Copenhagen and not until 1904 in Denmark as a whole. This led, on the one hand, to numerous discussions and disputes, but also, on the other, to private initiatives, including the establishment of gymnastic courses and gymnastic schools.

In the second half of the century, women’s voices increasingly became heard in Denmark. Partly as a result of overall changes in society, the role of women grew in importance in such fields as teaching and education, medicine and politics as well as the labour market. Against the background of this general social transformation the author analyses the development of girls’ gymnastics, which established itself in a variety of forms in private schools. The history of girls’ gymnastics is interwoven with the biographies, activities and ideas of the men and women who were active in the development, fostering and/or diffusion of gymnastic concepts, above all Natalie Zahle, A.G. Drachmann and Paul Petersen.

Gender norms and ideologies as well as specific opportunities and barriers which dictated the practice of girls’ and women’s gymnastics are discussed in a key chapter which forms a link, as it were, between the “pioneering days” and “modern” sport discourses and practices. The author shows clearly how the transformation of medicine into a scientific discipline on the one hand and the intrusion of women into men’s domains on the other led to a discussion of women’s sport in which doctors were intent upon asserting their notions of the “other sex”. At the same time the Danish ‘women’s movement’, which had been active since 1871, began to involve itself in many areas of public discussion, for example in the debate on public morality, in the issue of women’s suffrage and in the hygiene movement. An important role in the debates on these controversial topics was played by Erna Juel Hansen. Here, too, Trangbæk succeeds in elucidating the crucial issues and initiatives with the help of the biographies and writings of the key players. The differing goals, ideologies and practice of physical education are made manifest and comprehensible in the accounts of the disagreements between the experts, for example between Paul Petersen and Erna Juel Hansen.

In the wake of the popularisation of gymnastics and sport, the need arose among active women to form alliances. 1886 saw the founding of the Copenhagen Women’s Gymnastics Union, whose members took up various sports considered suitable for women in the years that followed. In 1906 a Women’s Sports Federation broke away from the Women’s Gymnastics Union. These organisations existed side by side with the Union of Danish Women Gymnastics Instructors, founded in 1888 by Paul Petersen. But there were also many sports clubs that women could join and numerous sports they could take part in. In her account of these early years Trangbæk is able to provide ample evidence, based on a great number of sources, of how gymnastics and sport were intricately interwoven. Paul Petersen, for example, who doubtless wished to offer women an invigorating sporting regimen, founded a women’s rowing club. As in other countries, however, women were confined to “stylistic” rowing, in which it was the aesthetic nature of the rower’s movements that counted rather than the speed of the boat. Cycling and hockey were further sports which “opened their doors” to women before the First World War. Besides quickly developing into a popular

means of self-propulsion, cycling gave women the opportunity of taking part in races and setting records.

The author deserves particular credit for having reconstructed the participation of Danish women gymnasts in three Olympic Games and the significance of their appearance in the Olympic “arena”. She rightly points out that the gymnasts did much to build a bridge between gymnastics and sport and made women’s sport visible to a much greater extent than did the few women athletes who took part in the Olympics.

As Trangbæk is able to demonstrate quite clearly, the processes of modernisation that took place between the wars had an influence on the gender order, so that the “natural” predestination of women was now put on a biological footing and thus based on scientific arguments. According to the author sport provided women with the possibility of (albeit limited) freedom, and the fact that women made use of this possibility is revealed in the statistics that have been assiduously collated from a variety of sources. In club sports, for example, roughly 30% of the members were women. This figure does not, of course, include the numerous women who took part in gymnastics, which continued to be the most important physical activity for women. And in the interwar years new styles of gymnastics were developed by women and for women, with new gymnastics institutes being founded. The author deserves great credit for having reconstructed the biographies and the contributions of such gymnastics experts as Agnete Bertram, Ann Krogh and Jørgine Abilgaard and Helle Godved since the biographical experiences of these founding figures were closely intertwined with the development of the different gymnastic concepts.

In the interwar years, however, an increasing number of women began to take an interest in sport, and the list of “women’s sports” grew apace. While gliding and distance swimming helped sportswomen to attain stardom, track and field was a very controversial issue in Denmark, as was the case in many other countries. However, as Trangbæk has been able to show, even prominent women were among those who argued against women’s taking part in athletic contests. In order to examine this question, the Danish Sports Federation set up a commission which was made up of several doctors and a greater number of women than men. The studies presented on the effects of contests on the female body were more in favour of women’s competitive sports than against them, yet the federation was unwilling to sanction women’s athletics. The debate on the participation of women in contests is an excellent illustration of the close links between gender and power.

A further important chapter on the role of the different physical cultures in women’s lives is based on narrative interviews with women from different “sporting” backgrounds. Here, Trangbæk has used her expertise in women’s physical activities and has supplemented her knowledge, based on written sources and pictures, with statements and stories from eyewitnesses. This combination of methods is very fruitful, offering as it does new insights and interpretations. The interviews give excellent information not only about the role and meaning of sport in the lives of the persons interviewed but also about the different physical concepts, along with their philosophies and their practices, in the period between 1920 and 1950. The analysis and interpretation of the interviews shows, on the one hand, the different aims, practices and ideologies of education (*dannelse*) in Ollerup and Snoghøj, training (*uddannelse*) in Paul Petersen’s gymnastic institute and the special training of Olympic athletes; on the other hand, the author reconstructs the role of these different institutions in the socialisation and identity formation of her interview partners.

The final section of the book comprises three chapters which lead up to the present era and are concerned with crucial questions of women’s sport. Chapter 9 deals with women’s intrusion upon a great number of male domains from football to boxing, focusing upon women’s initiatives and the successes they have achieved in these domains in the face of much opposition. Here, the author also touches upon the significance of the mass media in the development of women’s sports in Denmark. In Chapter 10 she analyses the role of women in the decision-making bodies of sport, reflecting on the possible causes of the lack of women “at the top” and discussing perspectives.

In conclusion, the author takes up again the image she invokes at the beginning of the book of a tree which has its roots in the 19th century and which, branching out in different directions, namely into sport and gymnastics, has developed numerous other branches by the time it reaches modern times. After her long years of work on this book, Trangbæk concludes that women’s sport today is marked by diversity, a diversity which, she is firmly convinced, has concealed, or rather replaced, the traditional contradiction between gender equality and gender differences.

It is diversity, too – the diversity of people, of orientations and opinions as well as of activities – which make this book so engrossing. The way different physical activities have developed side by side, whether in mutual respect or with indifference or even downright hostility to one another, is described in each case in the context of the gender order, and it becomes patently clear that women’s sport is not only a product but also a driving force of social developments.

There is no doubt that this book will become one of the standard works of sports history.

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