

SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

# Ugly ambition: “Sportsgirls” and the German press in the 1920s

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## Abstract

This article focuses on the discussions around female athletes and their emotions in the German and Austrian press of the 1920s. In the course of the sports boom of the interwar years, more and more women participated in public sports competitions and demanded their right to be taken seriously as sportswomen. Their public appearance aroused mixed feelings and heated social debates about how much and what kind of sport was appropriate for women, which were reflected in discussions and narratives around the figure of the “sportsgirl.” Sportsgirls were imbued with a novel emotional style to which ambition and audacity – ways of feeling that were cultivated during competitive sports and that contrasted with traditional bourgeois female feeling rules – were key. Sportsgirls and their emotional style were the subject of many stories, reports, pictures, and articles that were published in the growing sports press of the time – and they were judged and evaluated for the emotional style they embodied. The press was a potent platform and site of the formation of feeling rules; as such, discussions around sportsgirls point to the (embodied) experiences of the athletes and indicate how the emotional style that derived from them was turned into a tool to reshape social conventions and feeling rules for women beyond the sports arena.

**Keywords:** Ambition; Sportsgirls; feeling rules; gender; history of emotions

## Introduction

Mimi captured the hearts of Austrian readers. Each week from fall 1926 to early 1927, the audience of an Austrian illustrated sports journal (*Illustriertes Sportblatt*) could look forward to following her journey from untamed swimmer to respectable wife. Told in twenty-four weekly instalments, the story “Hoppauf Mimi!” (“Go, Mimi, Go!”) by Ludwig Lang-Mahler was one of the many real or fictional narratives of a prominent phenomenon in interwar Germany and Austria: women doing sports and being proud of it. The story was also characteristic of the phenomenon’s ambiguities – and of the push-back against it. Mimi’s suitor, a reliable but boring physicist named Dr. Paulsen, begins to live a double life as a boxer to convince Mimi how shallow her beloved world of sports is. In keeping with

classic tales of mistaken identity, it is only late in the tale that Mimi realizes the boxer she now adores is the suitor she had previously spurned. Impressed by his commitment, and overwhelmed by his sporty masculinity, Mimi finally agrees to marry Dr. Paulsen and to pursue her own sports career with less zeal from now on. A happy ending. Or is it?

The *Illustriertes Sportblatt*, which was published weekly in Vienna from 1905 to 1928 and at the time was directed by former soccer player and sports functionary Willy Schmieger, gave its readership a romance that was in keeping with contemporary tastes: it was modern, it was about gender relations, and it was about sports (Sicks 2008). As such, it was constitutive of the social debates around womanhood and emancipation emerging at the time: how acceptable was it for women to become athletes, especially in competitive sports? How did sport affect the clothes and bodies, not to mention the self-understanding, personal goals, and desires of women? How should spectators, families and friends feel about the exhausted, sweating, and enthusiastic “new women” who had become visible in postwar societies? And how should female athletes feel about their hobby and their passion for it? Such questions were of great importance for people of the day and the press was a central site of their discussion (Fulda 2009; Scharenberg 2012). At stake was nothing less than the place women could occupy in the public sphere, their potential, and self-conceptions.

In this article, I will take a closer look at the discussions around female athletes and their emotions in the German and Austrian press of the 1920s. I will focus on the figure of the sportsgirl, an incarnation of a new ideal of femininity. Sportsgirls were equipped with many attributes of modernity,<sup>1</sup> including consumer goods such as sports fashion and motorized vehicles, and of course they partook in sports (Skillen 2012). Besides all this equipment, I argue, sportsgirls were imbued with a novel emotional style to which ambition and audacity were key. This style challenged the established rules about what women were supposed to feel (or not), and it also raised the question of how one should feel about women doing sports. How did the press as a site of the formation of feeling rules shape and regulate emotions of and about sportsgirls? How did the sportsgirls themselves deal with the judgments they were subjected to? How did they use the press to engage with them? And what did these micro-struggles in the seemingly trivial realm of sport contribute to broader reorientations of gender relations? To explore these questions, I examined more than 100 articles from German and Austrian magazines and newspapers. From publications specializing in sport to journals of general interest, from progressive, liberal, and leftwing publications to conservative and rightwing newspapers – women’s sport was widely discussed in almost all political and social realms. By reporting, narrating, depicting, judging, and explaining sporting practices, these publications actively engaged with the emotions of athletes as well as those of their readers and became sites of changing (feeling) rules.

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<sup>1</sup>In cultural and social studies, “modernity” has long ceased to be conceived of as a given and is rather understood as a plural and multiple product of practices of purification, translation, narration, and perception (Appadurai 1996; Latour 1993). In this text, modernity refers to a powerful self-description of the contemporaries, with which they associated the impression of living in a radically changed time characterized by technology, science, acceleration, and rationality.

## Feeling rules, sport, and gender in post-war Germany and Austria

Sport was en vogue in 1920s Europe and North America. Hygiene and health ideologies and new rhythms of life led to a veritable sports craze across all classes and genders (Eisenberg 1999; Hau 2017; Jensen 2010). This craze also affected the press; in the 1920s, sport journalism became an “indispensable section of the daily newspaper” (McChesney 1989: 55). While in the late nineteenth century women already claimed their place in sports of all kinds (Ebert 2010; McCrone 1991), it was only after the First World War that women’s sport really took off (Cahn 2015; Fenner 2001; Skillen 2012). The First World War changed everyday life and its constituent structures in Europe: not only had it significantly altered the political statutes, but it also unsettled the bourgeois gender order established in the long nineteenth century. The Weimar Republic, that succeeded the Wilhelmine Empire after the end of the First World War, as well as the First Republic of Austria, which followed the Habsburg Monarchy, were politically fragmented societies. In addition to the loss of political power and territorial influence of the two states, the social order had also been shattered – developments that were accelerated and catalyzed by the war, but had already been foreshadowed beforehand (Canning 2016). While “war heroes” were celebrated for their courage and strength, the First World War had, in fact, left many men and their bodies fragile, trembling, and vulnerable. An estimated more than 2.7 million men returned “war-damaged” (“kriegsgeschädigt”), their presence directly contradicting the idea of an “iron masculinity” (Kienitz 2002: 187). In Austria and Germany alike, disabled men were the subject of public debate and great concern (Healy 2006).

Many women, meanwhile, had taken over the duties of men ordered to the front during the war (Davis 2002; Healy 2002) were now actively involved in the economy, and unwilling or unable to give up their occupations to make space for those returning home. Moreover, in Germany and Austria, women had, since 1918, won the right to vote and to stand for election. Although the thesis that the “Great War” fluidly transitioned into a “war of the sexes” cannot be sustained, the postwar years nevertheless provided an opportunity to renegotiate gender relations (Jensen 2010) and were perceived by contemporaries as a tipping point (Kundrus 2002). Sports fields and gymnasiums were sites of such renegotiations: the presence of disabled male bodies in the public sphere contrasted sharply with female bodies perceived as healthy and socially strengthened which increasingly conquered public sports spaces and thus heightened the discussions about a new kind of femininity.

Women’s sport was seen ambivalently. As a contribution to fertility, turning women into stronger and healthier mothers, it was welcome, but as a threat to female grace, elegance, and softness, it was considered unhealthy and dangerous – even ugly. Advocates on both sides leveraged scientific arguments, and much effort was put into finding just the right amount, extent, and form of exercise considered suitable for women. Psyche was as much at the center of the debates as physique, and thus so were the emotions women experienced during sport and what they would do to athletes. Opponents of female (competitive) sport feared that sporting successes would be dearly purchased “with the loss of important female qualities,” Hartwich 1936: 7)<sup>2</sup> and that sport would “crush, even kill” the “feminine sensibility”

<sup>2</sup>All quotations from German primary sources have been translated into English by the author.

(“Frauensport und Aesthetik” 1926: 1) of athletes. Did, they wondered, the sight of sweating, muscular female athletes not offend the viewers’ “sense of beauty” (ibid.)?

But changes to the bodies of female athletes were not the only concern of the detractors. They also worried about women’s mental, moral, and emotional constitution, such as an unwomanly taste for ambition or desire to win – feelings that were at the core of the sportsgirls’ emotional style. On the other side, feminists and female athletes referred to the empowering emotions developed by sport to argue their case: “successful sporting achievements generate a feeling of satisfaction,” (Deutsch-Kramer 1929: 11–13) they claimed, and “many women will experience in themselves that when they do sports, they also become more courageous and self-confident” (ibid.). If and how women should exercise and how women’s sports could be done tastefully became a hotly debated question, and feeling rules were right at the center.

Feeling rules, understood in the spirit of this special issue as “historically and culturally contingent norms and expectations that manage the expression of emotions, judge their appropriateness, and sanction divergences” (introduction in this issue) are crucial for practices of self-fashioning and “emotion management” (Hochschild 1979: 551). For women athletes, refusing to play by old-fashioned feeling rules became a political practice of self-fashioning and helped them to develop an emotional style of their own. Emotional styles are shared and shaped by a group and emerge in distinction to or in connection with prevailing feeling rules and emotional regimes (Fürst 2014; Gammerl 2012). Like feeling rules, emotional styles are situated in a certain time and space; they are historically contingent. As William Reddy (2008: 85) has put it, they “come and go, develop or decay, according to whether they work for communities.” As contingent styles and as a means of (group) distinction, they are vehicles of taste in the Bourdieuan sense (Bourdieu 1984).

Adding to Pierre Bourdieu’s theories, sociologist Antoine Hennion (2007: 109) has emphasized the practical and productive work of taste: “Taste is a making, a ‘making aware of’, and not a simple act of sensing.” Stressing the active, embodied and sensory quality of tasting as a practice that is central to subjectification, Hennion underscores the close intertwining of tasting and feeling. Not only can emotions serve as an object of taste; they are, moreover, actively involved in the formation of certain tastes, shaping the feeling rules regarding taste, but also what is considered a tasteful feeling. Emotions, through the role of bodies, experiences, and subjectifications, connect structure and context to the actors implementing practices of social distinction. To understand changes in feeling rules means to understand changes in the possibilities of becoming a subject. They are active in one’s shaping one’s self as a potent part of society and highlight the agency the seemingly mundane and profane can unfold in these kinds of changes. When women in the postwar period advocated for their right to play sports and, in the process, for their right to experience and display feelings such as ambition, the will to win, excitement, or fury, they paved the way for new ideas of female subjectification that had an effect far beyond sports.

The reasons why the discussions about new female emotional styles nevertheless focused so much on sports were manifold. Doing sports was popular, and as a particularly visceral emotional practice, sport provided feelings with a public stage. Most importantly, the feeling rules of sport had initially been established primarily

by and for men and in relation to a martial idea of masculinity (Burstyn 1999). The set of rules crystallizing in the concept of “sportsmanship” did not incidentally include its target group in its very name. By the end of the nineteenth century, the establishment of many popular sports was motivated by “the reaffirmation of an idealized form of masculinity” (Magrath et al. 2020: 3). Training and representation foregrounded male virtues, including aggression, competitiveness, but also obedience to leadership and discipline, and was often framed as preparing men for wars to come (Cronin 2022). German gymnastics, in particular, developed specifically as a school of masculinity where these virtues were practiced and male bodies were prepared for military service (Goltermann 1998).

Such links between competitiveness, sports, and masculinity were particularly visible in the modern Olympic Games and their founder Pierre de Coubertin, who conceived of life as a permanent struggle and sports as means to prepare for it. In his vision, the games would provide a “solemn and periodic exaltation of male athleticism with . . . female applause [as] a reward” (Cayleff 1996: 12) – except for clapping, to him women’s participation was “against the law of nature” (Woolum 1998: 35). However, Coubertin did not go uncontested and female athletes took part in the Olympic competitions, albeit unofficially at first (Pfister 2013). Yet, competing, ambitious sportsgirls challenged the emotional regime of the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie (Frevert 1989; Habermas 2000) that had informed Coubertin’s reasoning and still prevailed in many parts of society, which did not envisage a competitive, fierce emotional style for women.

Disagreement with the changing feeling rules for women was a pivot of Mimi’s story. It was personified by Mimi’s Aunt Mathilde, who complains about her niece’s “horrible” behavior. When, after winning a swimming competition, Mimi publicly celebrates, she is heavily reproached: “You behaved like a harlot, yes, like a harlot,” (Lang-Mahler 1926a: 14) Mathilde says. It was not only that Mimi turned herself into a spectacle; worse, her conduct was documented and is there for all to see: “in the newspaper a picture has also been published in which three men carry you, the half-naked one, on their shoulders. Appalling, I tell you, it is appalling” (ibid.).<sup>3</sup> Her niece’s expressive elation – Mathilde comments on Mimi’s “frenzy” mixed with total exhaustion – led to physically intimate moments with men, pictures of which were then circulated by the local press. This stokes very strong emotions in Aunt Mathilde herself: shame, sadness, anger, concern, and a strong distaste for her niece’s display of ambition, which appears ugly to her. Mimi, of course, takes a different stance. For her, expressing joy and triumph after a hard-earned athletic victory is part of her self-image as a “modern sportsgirl.” In fact, Mimi is entirely unbothered by Aunt Mathilde’s indignation. It amuses her, and she even makes fun of her relatives’ outdated views by overexaggerating the scandalous moment.

It is probably no coincidence that Mimi and Mathilde’s fictional conflict, in a story published by the press, is also *about* the press: it not only addressed the current fashion for women’s sport, but also, self-reflectively, incorporated the role the press played in it. Female athletes were an increasingly prominent topic in newspapers,

<sup>3</sup>In the German original: “Du hast dich bei einem eurer sogenannten Wettschwimmen betragen wie eine Dirne, jawohl, wie eine Dirne . . . [I]n einer Zeitung ist auch ein Bild veröffentlicht worden, auf dem drei Männer dich, die Halbnackte, auf den Schultern tragen. Entsetzlich ist das, sage ich dir, entsetzlich . . .”

revealing both the popularity and relevance of the question of the feeling rules that should apply to the sportsgirl and women's sports and the central role that newspapers and magazines played as platforms for such discussions.

The female athletes also contributed to this discourse. They presented themselves as experts in the press – such as an unknown author with the enigmatic acronym “ter.” (1927), who mused at length about the landscape of German women's hockey in the *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*. Other proponents argued eloquently in favor of women's sport and pulled out all the stops, such as Elsa Matz, a doctor of philosophy, member of the Reichstag, and director of a lyceum. In addition to the “body control” achieved through exercise, Matz' (1929: 2) comments emphasize above all the more general “strong life-enhancing moments” and “strengthening” of “willpower” achieved through sport, highlighting the effects that sport had on the inner lives and self-images of the female athletes. Some sportsgirls additionally used the press as a platform to popularize “their” sport, presenting the emotions generated by the chosen discipline as a strong asset. Handball player Lucy Fuchs reported in the *Wiener Sport-Tagblatt*:

But the displeasure [after a defeat, H.A.] never lasts longer than until the next game, which you finish victorious. Then we're all “sky high” again, and the enmities turn into great friendships. It's pure joy to see a victorious women's team leave the field. Everyone is as excited as little kids and completely happy, at least for that day. (Fuchs 1927: 3)<sup>4</sup>

The press provided the proponents of female exercise with the opportunity to advocate for their concerns and to display the ways of feeling offered by sport in a beneficial light – it also allowed their opponents to speak up.

### The press as a site of the formation of feeling rules

Mimi's story itself reveals a variety of opinions, feelings, and judgments about the emotional component of women's sports, thereby reflecting the public discussions that existed outside the literary world of Mimi and her misogynist contemporaries. The story's characters were overdrawn and clichéd, yet they related to readers' lives, providing a ground for identification and friction. Readers were confronted with a certain stereotype of the sportsgirl and were invited by the story to judge whether Mimi's behavior was in keeping with decorum or not. The story also provoked feelings of sympathy and antipathy for the protagonists and gave insights into the characters' emotions that made them relatable to the reader. Identification with the characters made people realize what appropriate feelings for certain situations might be and how these emotions and their displays might then be evaluated by their contemporaries (Zunshine 2006). In this regard, Mimi's story, alongside the many

<sup>4</sup>In the German original: “Aber der Mißmut [nach einer Niederlage] dauert nie länger als bis zum nächsten Spiel, das man siegreich beendet. Da sind wir wieder alle ‘himmelhochjauchzend,’ und die Feindschaften verwandeln sich in dicke Freundschaften. Es ist eine reine Freude, eine siegreiche Damenmannschaft vom Felde ziehen zu sehen. Alle freuen sich wie die kleinen Kinder und sind für diesen Tag wenigstens restlos glücklich.”

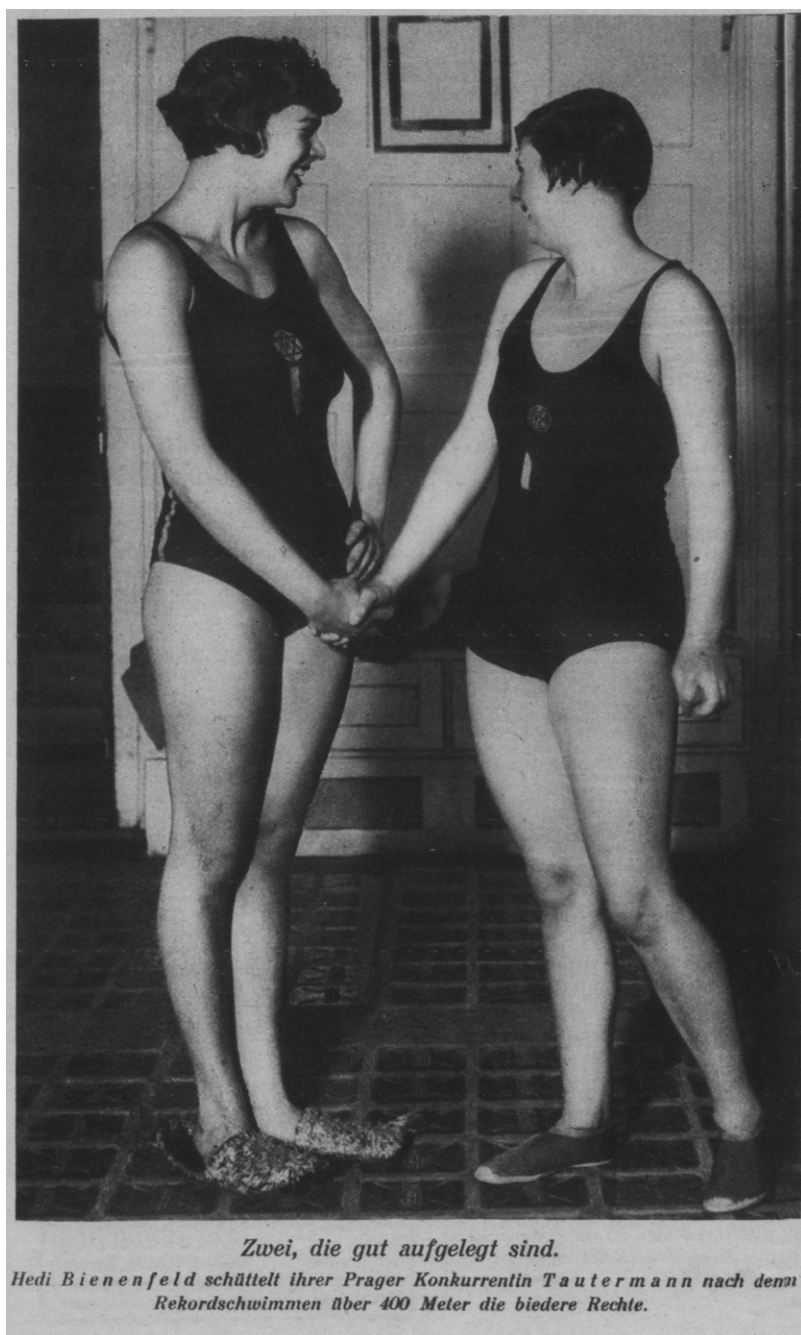
others written in the same vein, followed the tradition of the classic novels of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which had changed literature and the way the audience related to characters: readers wanted to identify with fictional people, not admire them from afar (Richter 2017). Following the characters on their adventures was part of an emotional education (Ablow 2010; D'Arcens 2021; Frevert et al. 2014) that enabled readers to engage with and figure out (new) emotional styles. As a platform for discussing, narrating, and transmitting emotions, the press was an educational agent that offered readers guidance on what to feel, as well as when and where to feel it.

Thus, magazines and newspapers can be considered potent platforms and sites of the formation of feeling rules – particularly in the 1920s when they were among the most important and widely consulted sources of information (Fulda 2009; Hakkarainen 2022).<sup>5</sup> At that time, the press was increasingly giving space to sports and related events and issues; indeed, sometimes the 1920s are referred to as the “Golden Age of Sport Journalism” (cf. McChesney 1989: 55). In Weimar Germany, sport journalism co-evolved with the establishment of sport as a mass activity and the press became a crucial site of the formation of a *Sportverständnis* – a deeper understanding for the rules and benefits of sporting practices (Scharenberg 2012).

There was a growing number of magazines dedicated purely to sports. In addition, general newspapers, which circulated in great numbers – in 1925 three million newspapers flooded Berlin over the course of just one day (Fulda 2009: 17) – reported sports news regularly and had separate sections for it. Newspapers, magazines, and journals were largely involved in establishing, and then spreading, the language used to talk about sport events and exercising in general. They presented differing points of view, quite often in a literal sense because the sports sections were particularly richly illustrated (Bonah and Laukötter 2020; Veder 2011). Mimi's story was illustrated with pictures of real-life athletes, often well-known ones, blending fiction with the very reports that the magazine published in another section (Figure 1).

Thereby, the press played a major role in setting standards for how doing sports should look, feel, and be perceived. It fueled expectations and shaped the experiences of athletes and spectators alike, providing templates for expressions, opinions, attitudes, and, thus, for what one should feel while doing or watching sports. Reading and engaging with (non-)fictional texts as emotional practices (Flannery 2016) also played a role in this. Readers may have felt pleasure while following Mimi's story, a thrilling outrage at her behavior, or anger at her mother's and aunt's reactions. They may have been touched and affected by the written emotions, as well as by the attitudes toward the emotions of female athletes expressed elsewhere in the magazine. Perhaps they stopped buying the magazine or recommended it to friends, wrote letters to the editor, or sent in jokes to the humorous section.

<sup>5</sup>“In early nineteenth-century German-speaking Europe, the press was a key cultural forum, in which emotions were discussed in public through newly emerging journalistic practices and discourses” (Hakkarainen 2022: 465). The function of the press as a cultural forum retained its validity into the first third of the twentieth century.



**Figure 1.** “Two who are in a good mood”: A photo of two well-known real-life swimmers was used to illustrate the fictional story of Mimi, giving it a semblance of reality.

Source: *Illustriertes Sportblatt* Nr. 41, 9.10.1926, p. 14, © ANNO/Österreichische Nationalbibliothek.

In the issue containing the first episode of Mimi's story (the first and only serial story the journal published), the *Illustriertes Sportblatt*, which at that time reported on female athletes in every issue, printed a poem presumably submitted by a reader entitled "Women's Sports." The poem mocks female athletes and describes how a sportsgirl neglects her duties as a wife to exercise and how her husband, threatened by her new strength, does not dare to talk back: "If he grows tired of it,/he'll be in for a knockout;/If the husband complains: 'It's not right,'/Then he'll really be in trouble!" (Ali 1926: 16).<sup>6</sup> While it is impossible to reconstruct readers' responses to fictional as well as non-fictional tales, it is safe to assume that they were fueled and shaped by the emotions they experienced while reading. Small details, such as this poem, serve as clues indicating that Mimi's story was related to ongoing debates that moved the readers beyond the fictional.

Through their active engagement with feelings and their evaluation, the press and its audience aimed at preserving or altering feeling rules, at solidifying or reworking taste. Emotions are mixed into the work of tasting, as Hennion (2007: 101) puts it: "to taste is to make feel, and to make oneself feel, and also, by the sensations of the body . . . , to feel oneself doing." Feelings are the agents of taste in all its nuances, thus feeling rules are deeply involved in the processes of tasting. By engaging their readers' emotions and inviting them to re-live a sports game or follow an athlete's story – be it fictional or not – the authors and readers as well as the newspapers and magazines participated in the practices of creating not only an understanding of sports (Scharenberg 2012) but also a specific taste for sports. In addition, they provided the opportunity for self-reflexivity: to re-evaluate the feeling rules that applied in this realm of everyday life and were acted out in the stories and reports they published. Writing and reading about, evaluating, and classifying emotions is not divorced from feeling those emotions oneself. Feeling rules underlay the writing of press releases and the press releases themselves added to these rules – implicitly and sometimes explicitly. In naming, describing, locating, and judging emotions the press was involved in creating, differentiating, and communicating emotional styles of all kinds.

### Methodological reflections

The more than one hundred snippets on which this study is based can serve as the basis for a thick description (Geertz 1973) of the affective realm of sport. Thus, they make accessible the emotional experience of engaging with sports and the feeling rules that were involved at the time, be it through reading, writing, or exercising. Coming from cultural and historical anthropology, I have employed an approach sometimes called historical ethnography in the German-speaking academy (Fenske 2006; Ingendahl and Keller-Drescher 2010; Wietschorke 2010). Ethnography is not just a method, but an epistemic attitude. It does not necessarily refer to concrete methods, such as conducting interviews or participatory observation, but rather to a fully comprehensive research program, which is characterized by the will to draw as near to the actors of the researched field as possible and to give validity to their

<sup>6</sup>In the German original: "Wird er mal der Sache müd',/dann ihm gleich ein Knock-Out blüht;/muckt der Gatte: "S ist nicht recht,'/Na, dem geht's dann wirklich schlecht!"

experiences and self-interpretations (Ehn et al. 2016). While such a research program obviously affects the choice of methods, it is not limited to a particular set of methodologies. Cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973: 5) coined the term *thick description* to characterize this approach, conceiving of cultures as self-spun “webs of significance.” The task of ethnographers is therefore the interpretive – that is, thick – description of what they find in search for this significance and the connected processes of meaning-making. Thick description has become the defining characteristic of ethnographic work. Geertz did not have historical, archival research in mind, but his idea of ethnography has proven to be eminently applicable to the past. Darnton (1999), in particular, a teaching collaborator of Geertz, is known for popularizing the ethnographic method in the historical sciences. Working through the archive is akin to working in the field and historical sources are surviving testimonies of past significance-web weavings. As such, they allow insights into meaning-making practices as well as to the lived experiences which make up the raw material for the weaving. Part of these lived practices condensed into historical sources are the feeling rules that mold the lived life and are performed, consolidated, and changed by it.

Key to this approach is practice theory (Wietschorke 2010). It recognizes not only the practices of meaning-making, such as writing, narrating, or interpreting, but, crucially, also the practices encompassed in them that have condensed into discourse in the surviving sources – the embodied experiences of sport in our case. The ethnographic will and claim to make the involved actors speak – the journalists as well as the sportsgirls they write about, the readers that engage with their writings, and so on – to put their experiences, emotions, perspectives, interpretations, and their expertise at the center of attention and to take them seriously can be applied to historical actors. Of course, classic ego-documents such as letters and diaries, may initially be considered the optimal sources of information for such an endeavor. Yet precisely because the press played such a key role in shaping and negotiating sport in the 1920s, because it gave rise to trends such as the taste for sportsgirls, and because it was often (ex-)athletes who wrote about sport as journalists (Scharenberg 2012: 191), journalistic products are especially well-suited for pursuing the questions posed in this article. Particularly in view of the fact that the authors who spoke out in the newspapers were often athletes, newspaper readers, sports spectators, and much more at the same time, who interpreted their experiences and adventures in a meaningful way and with a variety of intentions to imprint events on the sports fields themselves, it becomes clear that the texts can indeed be regarded as nodes of everyday life practice and the feeling rules involved in it.

### The emotional style of the sportsgirls

Sportsgirls were distinguished by a variety of attributes, including how they felt and dealt with emotions. A unique emotional style was said to characterize the figure of the sportsgirl: they communicated straightforwardly and impulsively, were ambitious, cool, liked to celebrate, and had a will to win – ways of feeling that were cultivated during competitive sports and that contradicted traditional female feeling rules. Nineteenth-century bourgeois ideals saw women, above all, as

guardians of the private domain, keeping the family together with gentleness and prudence, and taking care of its moral (religious) edification (Habermas 2000). Of course, the practice did not always correspond to this ideal, but in the 1920s, it did act as a contrasting foil and as representative of the old-fashioned mores.

It would be too simple, however, to understand sportsgirls only in terms of gender distinctions and as a revolution against conservative gender orders. Rather, the figure and the emotional style associated with the phenomenon emerged from a complex interplay of conformity and subversion. As British sports historian Fiona Skillen (2013: 181) has pointed out, the sportsgirl originated with a change in male tastes. *The Daily Mirror* of April 30, 1921, included a cartoon depicting the “change in taste” in young men’s love interests: bachelors were now looking for “lovely, beautiful” girls with a “perfect shot” and “drive” (instead of “gentleness” and “grace”) (Haselden 1921). Skillen (2013: 182) uses this example to show that, like the “flapper,” the “sportsgirl” became a symbol of “new modernity,” a powerful iconic typus and an object of desire – male and female alike. Skillen also underlines that the press played an important role in making, disseminating, and popularizing this new stereotype of femininity, not only by praising sportsgirls and spreading advertisements that used images of them to promote “modern” products, but also by mocking, judging, and reprimanding them. Sportsgirls were characterized by more than just playing sports. Being a sportsgirl was depicted as a lifestyle which one (but obviously not everyone, as sportsgirls were mostly imagined as economically well-off) could buy into through acquiring certain products such as tennis dresses, bathing suits, cigarettes, or cars. Yet being a sportsgirl was not just about consumer culture; it also meant behaving, speaking, and feeling in a certain way – and, of course, actively participating in sports. Skillen describes how the sportsgirl-stereotype was linked to many established attributes of modernity, such as speed, rationality, health, and naturality, how sportsgirls were equipped with a fair amount of consumer goods, connected to attitudes and opinions, and staffed with activities that suited those accessories. In addition, sportsgirls were linked to a particular emotional style.

According to the historian Benno Gammerl (2012: 163), emotional styles “encompass . . . the experience, fostering, and display of emotions, and oscillate between discursive patterns and embodied practices as well as between common scripts and specific appropriations.” They serve as means of community formation, by engaging with, and sometimes willfully challenging prevailing feeling rules. Using the example of the Soviet hippie community, Juliane Füst (2014) has shown that emotional styles thus can function not only as forms of protest, but also as directed attempts to change common norms and structures.

Mimi is an obvious embodiment of the sportsgirl’s emotional style. She is portrayed as “one of those sportsgirls” with a revealing dress, an Eton hair-cut (the short version of a bob), red lipstick, “hysterical” when it comes to sport, reckless in romance, flirtatious, and with a forthright and sassy mode of speaking. The first pages of her story reveal Mimi’s emotional style in contrast to that of her mother, who, like Aunt Mathilde, serves as a representative of the previous, more sentimental, but also morally stricter generation of women. When her mother is on the verge of bursting into tears due to her daughter’s behavior, Mimi reacts with empathy, but also with wit and irony: “Mom, you’re already at the start of another long-distance crying session; I can’t go along with that, I’ll shut up already and do

what you want.” (Lang-Mahler 1926a: 14).<sup>7</sup> Although Mimi bows to her mother’s will, she does not do so wholeheartedly: she agrees to becoming engaged to the undesirable candidate, but she is acting against her will and her feelings – and in keeping with the candid, fierce, and rough emotional style of sportsgirls, she makes no secret of this. Mimi’s self-understanding as a sportsgirl does not necessarily change her actions, but it definitely changes her feelings about these actions and the way she presents herself. In a letter to her (unwanted) future husband, she explicitly expresses her absence of emotions:

I have told you that I have no use for scholars. If it is absolutely necessary, then I will marry you, but it gives me no pleasure at all . . . I will always respect you, that’s what I had to promise my mother, who always whines so terribly. But I o v e? As a decent human being, I thought it my duty to write all this to you, so that you know where you stand. (Lang-Mahler 1926b: 13, emphasis in original)<sup>8</sup>

Straightforward and cool, Mimi puts her fiancé on notice about her feelings (or rather, her lack of feelings), meeting him, sportsman-like, at eye level. She takes a seemingly rational and unemotional stance toward marriage (she is willing to get married to support her family financially, but also very outspoken about her non-existent romantic feelings) and only feels passion for her club. Her sports emotions, meanwhile, are presented critically in the story, which questions their exuberance and validity. The text raises doubts about the authenticity of sportsgirl-feelings and provides readers – despite all sympathy for Mimi – a critical interpretation of the sport craze. Mimi’s emotional style appears as a delusion, an empty shell, an ersatz for something else, or at least as immoderate, and in its exaggeration, even as morally reprehensible.

Mimi’s story conveys an exaggeration of the new emotional style, infused with an inherent critique that makes it clear that the sportsgirls’ disregard for feeling rules would ultimately be to the detriment of their own happiness. Through Mimi’s story, the resentments against sportsgirls become clear; their style is portrayed as desirable but at the same time in need of constraint and not to be taken entirely seriously. The moral of the story is not hard to extract: the sportsgirls’ emotional style was acceptable as a flirty allure, but ultimately, the feelings women cultivated through sports were harmful to them in their intensity. Sooner or later, they would come around and turn away from sporting ambition and the missteps that came with it. Sportsgirls were thus confronted with the challenge of keeping their athleticism and their athletic emotions within the narrow boundaries of good taste if they wanted to remain socially accepted. This was a task that required a lot of work: work on and

<sup>7</sup>In the German original: “Mama, du stehst schon wieder einmal am Start zu einem Langstreckenweinen; das kann ich nicht mit anschau’n, ich bin schon still und mache, was ihr wollt.”

<sup>8</sup>In the German original: “Ich habe Ihnen gesagt, daß ich für Gelehrte nichts übrig habe. Wenn’s unbedingt sein muß, dann heirate ich Sie ja, aber Freude macht es mir durchaus keine. . . . Ich habe immer davon geträumt, einen Meisterschwimmer oder einen berühmten Tennistar zu heiraten. Jetzt krieg’ ich’s mit der Naturwissenschaft. Ich werde Sie stets achten, das habe ich der Mama, die immer gleich so schrecklich plärrt, versprechen müssen. Aber l i e b e n? Ich habe es als anständiger Mensch für meine Pflicht gehalten, Ihnen das alles zu schreiben, damit Sie wissen, wie Sie dran sind.”

with feelings – their own portrayed sports emotions and the feelings of those who judged them. Only in conforming to traditional feeling rules, at least to a certain extent, was it possible to reform these rules and in doing so create more freedom to engage in sports.

For this, the very journalistic platforms that built up and distributed the sportsgirl image in all its facets were used. The arguments put forward by the sportswomen were not purely discursive, but also aesthetic – and in this, they resembled the criticism directed against the sportsgirls. An issue of the *Illustriertes Sportblatt*, which included a sequel to Mimi's story, also featured a series of photos depicting successful and well-known female athletes doing housework, care work, and wage labor, thus countering the accusation "that our female sports stars are only good at 'playing sports'" ("Sportlerinnen 'in Zivil'" 1927: 13).<sup>9</sup> Starting in October 1927, the *Wiener Sportblatt* even introduced the column "Der Sport der Frau" (The Women's Sports), in which it placed itself – with a paternalistic, patronizing gesture – "in the service of the good cause" ("Für den Frauensport" 1927: 8) and enabled "the ladies" to "fight for women's sports with energy themselves" (ibid.). The column included the series "Die Sportlerin im Bilde" (literally "The Female Athlete in the Picture," but also figuratively "has insights" or "knows her way around"), which set out to provide visual evidence of the usefulness of women's sports, as the editorial for the series indicated:

The still all-too-fearful accuse sport of breeding the type of the man-woman, of making girls lose too much of that softness which is the charm of the woman. But this is true only in very exceptional cases, and we want to prove it by pictures. In the section "Women's Sports" we will bring pictures of women and girls who play sports, pictures of sportswomen who cause a sensation by their achievements, but also pictures of those who give proof that sport sensibly practiced only enhances the beauty of women, that the health, the self-confidence, the balance it gives also find their outward expression in the appearance of the "sportsgirl." ("Die Sportlerin im Bilde" 1927: 5)<sup>10</sup>

Female athletes themselves also expressed their views in the column and reworked the stereotyping that formed under the title "sportsgirl." In an open letter to a certain "Uncle Robert" – strongly reminiscent of Mimi's Aunt Mathilde – a "well-known Viennese sportswoman, the type of young girl of 1927" ("Brief an einen Unbelehrbaren" 1927: 3) defended sports in a gallant, chatty, bourgeois tone against old gentlemen, from whom she had obviously often reaped ridicule and misunderstanding for it:

<sup>9</sup>In the German original: "daß unsere weiblichen Sportstars nur gut 'sporteln' können."

<sup>10</sup>In the German original: "Die immer noch allzu Aengstlichen werfen dem Sport vor, er züchte den Typus des Mannweibes, lasse die Mädchen zuviel von jener Weichheit verlieren, die den Reiz der Frau ausmache. Das ist aber wohl nur in ganz besonderen Ausnahmefällen zutreffend, und wir wollen dies durch das Bild beweisen. Wir werden in der Rubrik 'Der Sport der Frau' Bilder von sporttreibenden Frauen und Mädchen bringen, Bilder von Sportlerinnen, die durch ihre Leistungen Aufsehen erregen, aber auch Bilder von solchen, die den Beweis liefern, daß der vernünftig betriebene Sport die Schönheit der Frau nur erhöht, daß die Gesundheit, das Selbstbewusstsein, die Ausgeglichenheit, die er verleiht, auch in der Erscheinung des 'Sportsmädels' ihren äußeren Ausdruck finden."

It's sheer nonsense when you say that we only play tennis to put on brightly colored sweaters, to find opportunities for flirting, etc., to make use of the decorative glamour that surrounds the tennis girl. We want to play tennis, because it is a beautiful, healthy pastime for us women, we want to swim, because there should be no girl today who is afraid of the water and starts to scream when she gets a few waves in her face, we want to do gymnastics, fencing, running, jumping, rhythmic gymnastics, because all this is very healthy, sensible, conducive to well-being. I hear you whistle the word "record," laughing superiorly in an unnaturally high pitch, the trump that always comes when you don't know what to do. . . . Sport is not record hunting, exaggeration, one-sidedness. It can be, but that is not the ideal of our movement. The sports-only girl certainly cannot be considered the model of the modern woman, but her success inspires, brings new young people under the spell of sport, attracts attention, engages the general interest. . . . No hard feelings, dear Uncle Robert, and a firm handshake from your niece Grit. (ibid.)<sup>11</sup>

With a "firm handshake" and clear words, the pseudonymized author of the letter ("a well-known Viennese Sportswoman") worked through the accusations against the female athletes, taking advantage of the bold, brash, yet polished style of the sportsgirl, one which was nevertheless caught in the crossfire of criticism. Like many others, the author put forward previously established arguments (sport is healthy) and downplayed the competitive side of women's sport, presenting it primarily as a cheerful pastime that neither threatened ideals of femininity nor endangered male supremacy. In doing so, they repeated and reinforced the stereotypical portrayals of sportsgirls, but also appropriated the figure and used it for their own purposes.

The figure of the sportsgirl was neither the exclusive expression of an oppressive ideal of femininity shaped for and by the male gaze, nor was it solely an empowering female form of subjectification through which women were able to open up spaces for themselves – it rather swerved between those two poles (Greenblatt 2011). This swerving refers to the ongoing process of changing the feeling rules for women's sports: the emotional style associated with sportsgirls, which had achieved a high level of popularity and acceptance by the mid-1920s, allowed female athletes such as the author of the letter to "Uncle Robert" to add their voices to the debate, to contradict long-established authorities, and to explore their own tastes for ambition.

<sup>11</sup>In the German original: "Es ist blanker Unsinn, wenn du sagst, wir würden nur deshalb Tennis spielen, um uns knallfarbige Sweaters umzuhängen, um Gelegenheits zu Flirts usw. zu finden, um uns den dekorativen Schmiß, der nun einmal das Tennisgirl umgibt, nutzbar zu machen. Wir wollen Tennis spielen, weil das ein uns Frauen zuträglicher, schöner, gesunder Zeitvertreib ist, wollen schwimmen, weil es heute kein Mädchen mehr geben soll, das Angst vor dem Wasser hat, und zu schreien beginnt, wenn es ein paar Wellen ins Gesicht bekommt, wollen turnen, fechten, laufen, springen, rhythmische Gymnastik betreiben, weil dies alles sehr gesund, vernünftig, dem Wohlbefinden zuträglich ist. Ich höre, wie Du das Wort 'Rekord,' überlegen lächelnd, hoch über Deiner sonstigen Stimmlage breit flötest, den Trumpf, der immer kommt, wenn Du nicht weiter weißt. . . . Sport ist nicht Rekordjagd, Uebertreibung, Einseitigkeit. Er kann es werden, aber das ist nicht das Ideal unserer Bewegung. Das Nur-Sport-Girl kann gewiß nicht als das Vorbild der modernen Frau gelten, aber sein Erfolg befeuert, bringt neue junge Menschen in den Bann des Sports, erregt die Aufmerksamkeit, beschäftigt das allgemeine Interesse. . . . Nichts für ungut, lieber Onkel Robert, und einen festen Handschlag von Deiner Nichte Grit."

## Ambition – Changing bodies, changing feelings, changing the rules

So far, in this article the emotional style of sportsgirls has mainly been viewed from the outside – how it was evoked, described, evaluated, used, and how it interacted with common feeling rules. Reddy (2008) notes that emotional styles, however, are characterized primarily by their operation at the experiential level. To really work, an emotional style must be tested in corresponding writing, speaking, gesturing, and so forth. At this practical level, emotional styles initiate self-exploration as a form of self-alteration (Reddy 2008: 85) – and thus, spurred by emotions, change. They need to be experienced, evaluated, *tasted* – to apply Hennion’s term – to really make an impact. How, then, did the emotional style of sportsgirls and the physical experiences of female athletes interact to unleash transformative potential?

The controversy around women’s competitive sports (Cahn 2015) referred to the physical damage that could purportedly be caused by “overexertion,” but also to the psychological and emotional consequences that would supposedly have a negative impact on the “nature” of female athletes. Walter Kühn, a teacher, pleaded in the *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* for the abolition of all competitions in women’s sports on these grounds, invoking the readers’ aesthetic repulsion:

As recommendable as running is for the woman, as unattractive the woman appears in the final fight: if such a woman could see her distorted, highly red and sweat-soaked face in the mirror, she would certainly consider whether she should continue this exercise! It cannot be denied that in the fight the woman loses her femininity and with it her grace. Therefore, away with all championships and records for our girls and women! (Kühn 1925: 5)<sup>12</sup>

The visual as well as the physical play a central role in Kühn’s argument: if women could only see how ugly they looked during a competition, they would realize themselves that it wasn’t for them. He was not alone in his plea; many of his contemporaries argued similarly. But the sportsgirls and agents of women’s sports also used the publicity that the press provided to advocate for the expansion and advancement of competitive women’s sports. They inscribed themselves in the popular narratives of their time, used them to promote their causes and to change feeling rules in ways that would give them more freedom for doing and tasting sport. Tasting here refers to the experiential level of sport. But it refers to more than mere experience – as Hennion puts it, it is closely linked to reflexivity, to being aware of experiencing, to skillful practices of guiding, shaping, and enjoying the very experience, and to processes of meaning-making. In this, the body plays a central role. Just as it served as a visible sign of distaste for opponents of women’s sports, female athletes used embodied experiences as a way of advertising their cause. In their texts the body occupies a central place and competition often played a key role in creating the experiences that seemed to make sport particularly appealing.

<sup>12</sup>In the German original: “So empfehlenswert der Lauf für die Frau ist, so unschön wirkt die Frau im Endkampf: könnte solch eine Frau ihr verzerrtes, hochrotes und schweißstriefendes Gesicht im Spiegel sehen, sie würde es sich sicher überlegen, ob sie diese Uebung weiterbetreiben soll! Es läßt sich nun eben nicht weglegen, daß die Frau im Kampf ihre Weiblichkeit einbüßt und damit ihre Anmut verliert. Darum fort mit allen Meisterschaften und Rekorden für unsere Mädchen und Frauen!”

The *Berliner Sport-Club* (BSC) – a sports club that targeted mainly members of the bourgeoisie – tried to convince female readers of the illustrated magazine *Sport im Bild* to take up sports. Appearing in Vienna and Berlin, the magazine was mainly aimed at a high-society audience publishing on topics such as theater, fashion, society, and, of course, sports. By the mid-1920s, it had become very popular. In a letter, written in a breezy and informal tone and illustrated, the club addressed a fictitious “madam,” urging her to become active herself. To whet the readers’ appetites, the letter spared no superlative:

Do you know the glory that one feels after climbing a mountain peak, that mixed feeling of pride in one’s achievement, joy in one’s own strength, emotion at the grandeur of nature, and worldlessness. Do you remember how your body would lengthen and stretch to the tips of your fingers on the beach in summer, how every pore of your skin would open to receive a ray of sunshine, so that it would dance with your heart in a reckless dance of cheerfulness and joie de vivre?

Madam, I am sad, because I cannot promise you so much of the sport we call athletics, but a good part of it, as much and as little as a big city child needs now and then to shake off their worries for hours, to be a happy and harmless person for some hours. (Berliner Sport-Club 1924: 460–61)<sup>13</sup>

The text presented sport as a means to happiness, as rich in pleasure and recreation, as a haven of pride and self-confidence. It is striking that it was obviously not enough for the authors to simply name the emotions that sport was able to trigger in their eyes. They also painstakingly described the bodily sensations that accompanied them, took on the feelings of the individual limbs, and tried to refer to already existing embodied experiences, such as the bodily sensation of being at the beach in summer. In addition, the letter was accompanied by images that showed women doing sports. These were mainly dynamic photographs that captured the momentum of various sports, rather than stagings of fashionably dressed sportsgirls as could be found in the fashion magazines and advertisements of the time. The images accompanying the text showed female athletes in motion, at the start or finish line, fighting for the field hockey ball or handing over the relay baton, some with faces marked by emotion and effort, which by no means ensured only pure happiness. The sweating faces of the athletes, distorted with exertion, seemed to the authors (quite in contrast to Kühn) to be an effective advertising medium and a

<sup>13</sup>In the German original: “Kennen Sie die Herrlichkeit, die man nach dem Erklimmen eines Gebirgsgipfels empfindet, jenes Mischgefühl aus Stolz über die Leistung, Freude an seiner eigenen Kraft, Ergriffenheit über die Größe der Natur und Weltlosgelöstheit. Wissen sie noch, wie ihr Körper sich im Sommer am Strande dehnte und streckte bis in die Fingerspitzen, wie jede Pore Ihrer Haut sich einem Sonnenstrahl öffnete, ihn zu empfangen, auf daß er tanze mit Ihrem Herzen einen leichtsinnigen Tanz des Frohsinns und der Lebensfreude?”

Gnädigste Frau, ich bin traurig, denn so viel kann ich Ihnen nicht versprechen vom Sport, den wir Leichtathletik nennen, aber doch einen guten Teil davon, so viel und so wenig, wie ein Großstadtkind ab und zu braucht, um seine Sorgen für Stunden abzuschütteln, um für Stunden ein froher und harmloser Mensch zu sein.”

fitting representation for women's sports. The athletes and their advocates were visibly concerned not just with having athletic feelings, but really with tasting them – evoking and living them out with a cultivated body and the senses. It was, in fact, one of the major selling points of sports.

In a similar fashion, BSC member Liselotte Wehner answered the question, “Why do I like sports so much?” in the club's own newspaper, that appeared monthly to inform and entertain the club members:

Who has ever felt his body, when all muscles and sinews tense, when the joy of life overcomes one. . . . A physical ecstasy, in which one is master of all one's senses, in which one forgets the gray everyday life, makes the dulllest time a holiday for us. . . . On the purely physical level, sport has created a new human for us, but that is certainly not its most valuable service to humanity. It has given us a type of human being to whom feeling the physical being has become a spiritual experience. (Wehner 1930: 4)<sup>14</sup>

Wehner is keen to describe the physical ecstasy of exercise as akin to a spiritual encounter by evoking the ideal of a human being who is educated to enjoy the feeling body and make this tasting into an intellectual, pleasurable realm. What sounds harmless and enthusiastic in this piece would eventually be channeled into racist ideologies and fed into the body politics of National Socialism (Alkemeyer 1995; Pfister and Reese 1995). The emotionally affected sporting body that takes a core position in Wehner's explanation was (and still is) a vessel and target for political ideologies.

This is where competition and ambition come into play: they appear as amplifiers and triggers for the experience of sport and the sensations and feelings it evokes. Thus, the advertorial letter in *Sport im Bild* also referred to the important role that competition had for women's sports:

Originally it is not the amount of your performance that determines its value, but solely the degree of pleasure you feel in the exercise of this jump, throw or run. But since pleasure and interest commonly increase with performance, the 3 centimeters or the fifth of a second by which you improve . . . is a good measure of how strong your will and how strong your body. (Berliner Sport-Club 1924: 461)<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup>In the German original: “Wer hat schon je seinen Körper gespürt, wenn sich alle Muskeln und Sehnen spannen, wenn die Lebensfreude einen überkommt. . . . Ein körperlicher Rausch, in dem man doch Herr über alle seine Sinne ist, in dem man den grauen Alltag vergißt, macht uns die trübste Gegenwart zum Feiertag. . . . Rein äußerlich hat uns der Sport einen neuen Menschen geschaffen, aber das ist bestimmt nicht sein wertvollster Dienst an der Menschheit. Er hat uns einen Typ Mensch bescheert, dem das Fühlen des körperlichen Seins zum geistigen Erlebnis geworden ist.”

<sup>15</sup>In the German original: “Die Kraft, im Winter in Spielen und gymnastischen Übungen gesammelt und gespeichert, wird sommertags erprobt im Kampf, im Lauf und Sprung und Wurf. Ursprünglich ist es nicht die Höhe Ihrer Leistung, die ihren Wert bestimmt, sondern allein der Grad der Freude, die Sie bei Ausübung dieses Sprunges, Wurfes oder Laufs empfinden. Da aber gemeinhin Lust und Interesse mit der Leistung wachsen, so sind die 3 Zentimeter oder die fünftel Sekunde, um die Sie sich . . . verbessern, ein guter Maßstab, wie stark Ihr Wille und wie stark Ihr Leib.”

Ambition was revealed in this text as a means to joy, as a pleasurable and performance-enhancing emotion. In the way the fictional letter foregrounded “harmless” delight, sketching it as childlike and playful, the intention to tone down and defuse the combative nature of athletic ambition was noticeable – presumably because strong, aggressive ambition was subject to the very prejudices formulated, for example, by Kühn. Nevertheless, it could not be completely eliminated, since ambition was shown to be an amplifier of feelings and a source of great pleasure, and thus essential for the experience of sport. It also was at the core of the emotional style that evolved around the figure of the sportsgirl.

Ambition was closely related to the idea of life as a struggle. This logic of competition shaped, among other things, the world of (paid) labor in the Weimar Republic and was also reflected in popular pseudoscientific narratives of human evolution and racial doctrine (Hau 2017; Verheyen 2018). Against this background, sport was seen by many as the ideal exercise for modern public life, in which women would now have to participate, for better or worse. Sporting ambition, however, had more functions than to arm athletes for the “struggle for existence.” To read it merely as an expression of a martial interpretation of the world and a means of improving performance falls short of the mark. What is clear and should be emphasized again here is that athletic ambition also brought enjoyment and empowerment to female athletes. In the politically right-wing liberal *Karlsruher Tagblatt*, the athlete and women’s sport functionary Georg Amberger made the case for women’s sports and explained where its success came from:

The woman wants to have a field of activity where she can excel, where she can show off her dexterity and skill. On the one hand, it’s ambition that spurs her on, but on the other hand, it’s also the joy of variety, of doing something different from everyday life. Out of the gray monotony, out onto the green lawn, into the free cheerful air. (Amberger 1923: 11)<sup>16</sup>

The mix of ambition and joy sport provided opened up a counter-world to everyday life for the author and the women he coached. He also recognized in the increased interest in women’s sports the expression of the will of many women to show off their own abilities and to gain public recognition for them.

Sporting ambition continued to have an effect in everyday life and was an expression of a changed self-image. Sport was not only a training of the body, but also of the emotions that would benefit the female athletes. The (female) physician Dr. Hildegard Junkers-Kutnewsky described this in the *Sportblatt zum Berliner Tageblatt* – the sport supplement to a left-wing liberal newspaper that was read all over Weimar Germany:

After athletic training, one feels refreshed, as after a bath, able to resume mental work, not only with a healthier body, but also with renewed vigor, self-confidence,

<sup>16</sup>In the German original: “Die Frau will ein Betätigungsfeld haben, wo sie sich hervortun, wo sie ihre Gewandtheit und Geschicklichkeit zur Geltung bringen kann. Es ist einmal der Ehrgeiz, der anspornend wirkt, dann aber auch die Freude an der Abwechslung, etwas anderes zu tun, als es der Alltag bringt. Heraus aus dem grauen Einerlei, hinaus auf den grünen Rasen, in die freie fröhliche Luft.”

and courage. For this is the secret of sport, that it not only makes the body healthy, but at the same time gives willpower and endurance to the spirit. The woman who does athletics experiences a complete inner transformation of her being. (Junkers-Kutnewsky 1925: 13)<sup>17</sup>

Dr. Junkers-Kutnewsky attributed an immense effect to tasting sport emotions, which also had an impact beyond the sports fields. Precisely because the experiences of sport affected both body and mind through emotions, they seemed particularly effective to Junkers-Kutnewsky. She inscribed herself in the discourse (very present in the 1920s) of sport as a means of enhancing the workforce and thus increasing work performance, as Hau (2017) portrays it. Nevertheless, the “inner transformation” she described not only affected the work capacity of female athletes. It also indicated a change in self-awareness, modes of subjectivation, and self-understanding. Empowered by the experiences they encountered in sports, the ambitions they cultivated there, and an emotional style that provided them with a competitive repertoire of expression and emotion, female athletes demanded more social participation. The changes they sought were initially aimed at the level of sports organization, and many female athletes campaigned for more women in leadership roles in sports clubs. An athlete called Lisa Gross expressed herself provocatively in the *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*, one of the most renowned German newspapers in the Weimar Republic, which, in the course of the 1920s, became increasingly conservative:

We need women with leadership talent. Women in positions of responsibility. This yearning for female leaders is particularly noticeable in today's world, which wants to do away with old prejudices. Even the popular belief that in the realm of women's sports, men with a strong hand must hold the reins of government is one such prejudice that the new age will override. (Gross 1926: 6)<sup>18</sup>

Gross interpreted what was happening in sports as the dawn of a new era, as a change that would affect the whole world. Likewise, many women who were involved in the women's movement recognized sporting feelings and particularly ambition as a means of change. Accordingly, the Austrian women's rights activist Marie Deutsch-Kramer went on record in the social democratic newspaper *Die Frau*:

<sup>17</sup>In the German original: “Nach einem leichtathletischen Training fühlt man sich erfrischt, wie nach einem Bade, fähig, die geistige Arbeit wieder aufzunehmen, und zwar nicht nur mit einem gesünderen Körper, sondern auch mit erneuter Spannkraft, Selbstbewusstsein und Mut. Denn das ist ja das Geheimnis des Sports, daß er nicht nur den Leib gesund macht, sondern gleichzeitig dem Geiste Willenskraft und Ausdauer verleiht. Die Frau, die Leichtathletik treibt, erlebt eine vollkommene innere Umwandlung ihres Wesens.”

<sup>18</sup>In the German original: “Dazu brauchen wir Frauen mit Führertalent. Frauen auf verantwortliche Posten. Dieses Sehnen nach Führerinnen macht sich gerade in der heutigen Zeit bemerkbar, die mit alten Vorurteilen aufräumen möchte. Auch die landläufige Meinung, daß im Reiche des Frauensports Männer mit starker Hand die Zügel der Regierung führen müssen, ist ein solches Vorurteil, über das sich die neue Zeit hinwegsetzen wird.”

But also a psychologically important moment cannot be overlooked in women's sports. Women in general still suffer from a lack of self-confidence from the times of oppression. They often feel inferior, which expresses itself in the shyness of appearing in public life. But it is precisely this that is a great disadvantage for women and their political tasks. Here, too, sports can help. Those who want to achieve something in the field of sports must constantly exercise their physical strength, but they must also have presence of mind and be able to concentrate their thoughts. Sport demands physical and mental discipline. However, successful sporting achievements generate a feeling of satisfaction in everyone and increase their self-confidence. Thus, sporting successes can lead to overcoming the feeling of inferiority. Many women will experience in themselves that when they do sports, they also become more courageous and self-confident in the spiritual field. (Deutsch-Kramer 1929: 11–13)<sup>19</sup>

The tasting of ambition and acting out of a competitive emotional style were seen and experienced by sportswomen as well as advocates of feminism as an impetus for change and as ways to influence feeling rules. Tasting ambition with the senses, with the body, and reflecting on it, meant experiencing oneself and one's own body as a powerful agent with a capacity for change, as well as a source of joy and pleasure. Because it was so central, experience took up much space in the press reports, especially in those written by the female athletes themselves or directly aimed at them. The emotional style of the sportsgirls was thus presented as embodied, as immediately tangible, and was linked to concrete practices of moving, training, competing, sweating, and speaking up. These practices brought forth bodies that presented themselves as empowered, capable of action, able to fight, and impactful. Those were also bodies which were shown to enjoy themselves, their sensations fueled by exercise and their agency catalyzed by doing sports. The emotional style of the sportsgirls was not simply discursively (re-) produced by the press. More importantly, it was acquired in practice when women developed physical awareness, self-confidence, and specifically sport-related feelings. By changing the experiencing body and allowing emotions that were formerly deemed ugly and unwomanly, especially sporting ambition, to thrive, female athletes were laying the groundwork for changing the rules of what was doable, thinkable, and "feelable" for women in general.

<sup>19</sup>In the German original: "Aber auch ein psychologisch wichtiges Moment ist beim Frauensport nicht zu übersehen. Die Frauen leiden im allgemeinen noch aus den Zeiten der Unterdrückung her an einem mangelnden Selbstbewußtsein. Sie fühlen sich häufig als minderwertig, was sich in der Scheu vor einem Auftreten im öffentlichen Leben ausdrückt. Gerade das aber ist für die Frau und ihre politischen Aufgaben von großem Nachteil. Auch hier kann der Sport helfen. Wer auf sportlichem Gebiet etwas leisten will, muß seine körperlichen Kräfte ständig üben, er muß aber auch geistesgegenwärtig sein und seine Gedanken konzentrieren können. Der Sport verlangt körperliche und geistige Disziplin. Gelungene sportliche Leistungen erzeugen aber in jedem Menschen ein Gefühl der Befriedigung und steigern sein Selbstbewußtsein. So können sportliche Erfolge zur Überwindung des Minderwertigkeitsgefühls führen. Viele Frauen werden es an sich selbst erfahren, daß sie, wenn sie Sport betreiben, dann auch auf geistigem Gebiet mutiger und selbstsicherer werden."

## Conclusion

The press coverage of sportswomen in the 1920s illustrates the heated debates surrounding female passion for sports and the feelings women cultivated and displayed while exercising. There was uncertainty about how to deal with these women who competed in public in ever growing numbers, displaying emotions, such as ambition, anger, aggression, and exaltation. Female ambition, in particular, was deemed ugly by advocates of conservative bourgeoisie gender norms and feeling rules. For the women competing and their proponents, however, this emotion, especially, along with the wide array of other feelings the embodied practices of sport brought forth, were resources for new, more agentive ways of subjectification and, thereby, became drivers of change. These “sport feelings” formed the core of a special emotional style cultivated by the so-called sportsgirls, through which they were able to challenge the wide-spread gendered feelings rules of their time. This style was consciously defined in contrast to the feeling rules that traditional, bourgeois-Wilhelmine ideas of a private, prudent, and gentle femininity entailed – it was loud, passionate, outspoken, and rebellious. It also opened up new possibilities for expression: By adopting the openness, sassiness, and brashness of the popular figure of the sportsgirl, female athletes formed a collective, found a hearing, and managed to balance between living up to gender expectations and breaking with gender norms. The emotional style that evolved around competitiveness, ambition, and a passion for sports, provided the women athletes with a way to speak up and protest against those who wanted to forbid them from doing competitive sports – this novel emotional style became a means of creating a new self-understanding and a resource for challenging the status quo (Fürst 2014). Sportsgirls tried to create acceptance for themselves and their way of life by nevertheless embracing some aspects of traditional femininity. The emotional style of the sportsgirls was therefore ambivalent. It was subversive and opened up spaces for action, and at the same time, it was characterized by the desire to make a new form of femininity socially acceptable that was challenging the predominant feeling rules.

Feeling rules are collectively discussed, formed, and cultivated. They represent explicit or unspoken social agreements about which feelings are considered appropriate in which situations; they influence which emotions are shown and how, and which are suppressed, reinforced, regulated, rewarded, or punished (Hochschild 1979; introduction in this issue). Feeling rules are negotiated, made effective and contestable in everyday practices, in case of sportsgirls and their supporters and opponents, in such practices as reading the newspaper or exercising in sport clubs. As the press, in the 1920s, was a potent platform for the formation of feeling rules, engaging with printed material can be considered a form of emotional education, spurring self-exploration and meaning-making. Thus, press sources allow insights into the dominant feeling rules, not only in relation to how they were debated and contested, but also how they were adapted and experienced. Female athletes and their opponents alike spoke out in the press, jointly creating the figure of the sportsgirl who was characterized by a specific emotional style.

In order to work as a catalyst of change, the emotional style of the sportsgirl needed to be embodied, felt and experienced by the women athletes – it needed to be tasted (Hennion 2007). Tasting is a reflexive practice of engaging with oneself and the world, and, as such, is closely related to feeling. Emotions are not only the

objects of taste, but also its agents. It is only through tasting and feeling, through the practical engagement with the lived and embodied experiences of the ordinary, that a certain emotional style really effects its impact (Gammerl 2012) – and that it unfurls the capacity to change the rules. The emotional style of the sportsgirls emerged from a practical confrontation with feeling rules and (embodied) experiences: while doing sports, the sportsgirls acquired experiences and feelings that they interpreted meaningfully under the banner of this emotional style, made them usable for themselves, and tapped into them as resources for subjectification beyond sports venues. In processes of tasting, consciously evaluating, and interpreting their own experiences and feelings, new possibilities of existence crystallized, which not only undermined the prevailing feeling rules, but through their affective potential encouraged change on a larger scale.

The example of the sportsgirls illustrated how engagement with contested feeling rules might lead to the development of a new emotional style. This, in turn, might provide people with the resources they need to challenge and change societal rules on a larger scale. Importantly, this does not only occur on a discursive level: experiencing, feeling, tasting bodies, their practices and sensibilities, are crucial to emotional styles being put into (political) action. And such was the case with the sportsgirls: changed bodies brought forth changed feelings; these enabled women to challenge existing gendered feeling rules and, ultimately, undermine the gender hierarchy itself.

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