Interview with Susan K. Cahn
by Jennifer Loft

Dr. Susan Cahn, Professor of History at the University of Buffalo since 1992, is best known for her book on the history of women and sports, *Coming on Strong: Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth Century Sports*, which was awarded the Best Book Award in Sport History by the North American Society of Sports History. She completed her B.A. (1981) in Women’s Studies and History from the University of California at Santa Cruz, and her M.A. (1985) and Ph.D (1990) from the University of Minnesota. Her research interests include U.S. women’s history, the history of sexuality, African-American history, southern history, feminist theory, and LGBTQ studies. Her most recently published book, *Sexual Reckonings: Southern Girls in a Troubling Age* (2007), examines African American and white southern teenage girls from 1920 to 1960. It explores how adolescent girls’ sexuality became a central issue in southern culture and politics, leading to political conflicts over race, class, and gender relations in the south.

Dr. Cahn’s research interests have developed and changed over time. She currently focuses on examining women’s sexuality and women’s mental illnesses and health. Throughout her various research projects, it is obvious that history and women’s studies are her passions. When I asked about her decision to devote her life to this work she responded, “I knew from the beginning of college that I was a women’s studies major. I was captivated by second-wave feminism.” During the second half of her undergraduate career she decided to double major in women’s studies and history, thinking initially that she would become a history teacher.

Since Dr. Cahn is best known for her work on women and sports, I questioned her decision to focus on this subject. She replied, “It wasn’t my original plan. It wasn’t strategic. I
wanted to focus on sexuality and lesbian history, but I saw the importance of sports in lesbian culture. No one took sports and women in sports seriously so that motivated me.” In addition to her scholarly publications, Dr. Cahn has achieved other great goals throughout her career, which she defines as her main highlights in academia. She states her biggest achievement as “being promoted to full professor and gaining tenure, and I got it based on evaluation from peers who respect you and your work.” She says that fancy awards are not her goal, but respect. She has also had a couple of graduate students she has watched move from school to jobs to books coming out, and it is satisfying for her to see their journey.

Since Dr. Cahn has been at the University of Buffalo since 1992, I asked for her thoughts on what she likes best about the university. She replied, “I like getting to work with students on all levels and feeling I get to know people over time and watch them grow.” She also enjoys meeting other faculty and the possibility for intellectual conversation at the university. Dr. Cahn is involved with the Institute for Research and Education on Women and Gender, as well as the Feminist Research Alliance Group, where she will be introducing the speaker on April 20, 2011. I asked her why she thought these groups were important, and she responded, “It’s one of the only ways to bring feminists at this university together in conversation. Just knowing there are other feminists out there, and the opportunity to share work, is important.” In terms of the question of funding for feminist research at the university, Dr. Cahn states, “There is a lot of feminist activity here so we can turn that into intellectual conversation, but we need institutional support.”

While on the topic of feminism, I asked Dr. Cahn when she first knew she was a feminist. She said, “I was probably 16 or 17. It made me a little nervous because of the images and stereotypes [of feminists].” However, she was able to put these fears behind her and devote her
life to this type of work. Unfortunately, there are a multitude of young girls and women who still fear labeling themselves as feminists. Her advice to them is to “be true to your beliefs and values” and to call yourself what you want. She would try to ask these girls and women what they are afraid people might think and try to talk about those feelings.

There are many people who think feminism is dead or that there is no need for it because women have already achieved equality. Dr. Cahn disagrees, stating, “There is a strong need for feminism. There is a lot of evidence that shows there is a need for it. There are a lot of inequalities; they are now just more subtle.” Noting the controversy surrounding the Republicans’ hope for decreasing reproductive health and abortion access for women, Dr. Cahn asserts, “It is really frightening how the Right has been decreasing women’s rights. This speaks to the need for feminism still.”

At the close of the interview, Dr. Cahn offered some advice for emerging scholars: work really hard; be true to your heart and mind, as you might be setting the trend; and, you need to feel like whatever you’re doing is worth it, especially due to the uncertainty of employment at the current condition of the United States. Most importantly, she tells us to make sure we love what we do!