



Barrie Jones

THE NEW FEMALE JOCKS

Thelma McCormack

Certains films récents semblent permettre aux femmes une liberté en activité physique qui n'aurait jamais été montrée dans le passé. La femme athlète, pour Hollywood, était la danseuse, mais dans des films récents comme "Personal Best" et All the Marbles", les femmes peuvent participer directement au monde du sport. Et pourtant, ces films glissent sur les sujets comme le lesbianisme et traitent les femmes d'une manière très stéréotypée. Elles deviennent des versions féminines du "jock" masculin.

Anyone accustomed to Hollywood movies must have been surprised by the opening sequences of *An Unmarried Woman* in which the viewer sees Jill Clayburg jogging, and not looking terribly chic while doing it. Sweat, sweat pants, and a dripping nose are not among the stereotypes of women in our popular culture, especially in the movies, which do more to promote cleavage than exercise.

But the *Unmarried Woman* jogging was not an athlete. She was a

high-fashion, New York, upper-East-side artsy type, more Jacqueline Kennedy than Billie Jean King.

She represented a new class stereotype where fitness, like *nouvelle cuisine*, has become part of the "U" lifestyle, a form of consumption rather than any kind of radical statement about women and their bodies.

Back home and in her apartment after her stockbroker husband has gone off to his office (and, as it turns out, to another woman), the *Unmarried Woman* reveals her true fantasy, to be a dancer. The mirror has replaced the fresh air and the city landscape. Thus the audience is reassured that the jogging was only something she did with her husband and, possibly, for him, but given her own choice she might

sleep in and then, later in the day, take a taxi to her ballet class. In short, there is no doubt about her sexual identity or about her commitment to conventional sex roles. Indeed, all that is really changed is that the girls who used to be called the horsy set have left the country bridle paths and have co-opted an urban lower-class sport for fun just as they co-opted working-class jeans. (Bowling may come next.)

In the comments that follow I want to look at two recent films in which the women are athletes — *Personal Best* and *All the Marbles* — films in which women are prominent in non-traditional careers for women, and in which we might expect a different understanding of how women experience their bodies. I'm going to suggest that these films fail. By that I mean that although these films show us women with pride and confidence

in their bodies, attitudes that replace shame and guilt, they do not offer us any real liberation. In the end, we have female "jocks" and, along the way, a great deal of confusion about female athletics and female sexuality.

Hollywood's early version of the female athlete was the dancer who was cute, and, compared to the Mae West image or the stripper image, sexless: a little girl who could sing and dance. But if she left her small town for the city and a role in the Broadway show, she frequently wound up in the chorus line of the big musical, both in reality and on the screen. Tall and "statuesque" (as the ads always said, implying that they were decorations), they kicked, paraded up and down elaborate sets, and displayed gorgeous costumes. The cameras loved to close in on their blank but beautiful faces. They were entertainers, many of whom wanted to get out of the chorus line to "star," but they were not, as we indicated earlier, sex objects in the way that the burlesque stripper was. Backstage they were seen as basically good girls, a little more cynical about the world and about rich men than the girls who stayed at home, but waiting idealistically for Mr. Right and a life in the suburbs with children and church on Sunday.

The male dancers in these films were just as conventional. There was never a whisper or hint that the male dancers — lithe as Fred Astaire, muscular as Gene Kelly — could be homosexual or bisexual. They were all men, show-biz entertainers for whom dance was paid employment, not art. And just to emphasize their male privilege in the world, they

were often dancers who combined performance with choreography and, in some instances, business management. Thus an occupational role that is composed primarily of women is seen as acceptable for men who, in turn, masculinize it by assuming dominant roles in it, like teachers and principals.

The film *Turning Point*, however, was a departure, for if audiences were accustomed to male dancers in top hat and tails in the musicals, there was much more ambivalence about classical ballet. The president of the United States, for example, was acutely embarrassed by his son who joined a dance company, and he assured the press that he and Nancy had had his son "checked out" and that the boy was "O.K." But as it turned out, the financial backers of *Turning Point* had nothing to fear. Baryshnikov, the male dancer, turned out to be a great lover and, furthermore, his style of dance, according to dance critics, was in the best Russian "athletic" tradition. All that and a Soviet defector as well.

But the story line of the film is not about male dancers; it is about two women dancers, now middle-aged. One has remained a professional dancer; the other gave up her career for husband and children. The movie, then, is about the conflict between career and family — more abstractly, between art and materialism. But it is also a statement about women and their bodies, a conflict (in feminist terms) between a body that has become useless for reproduction and one that has become useless for just about anything else.

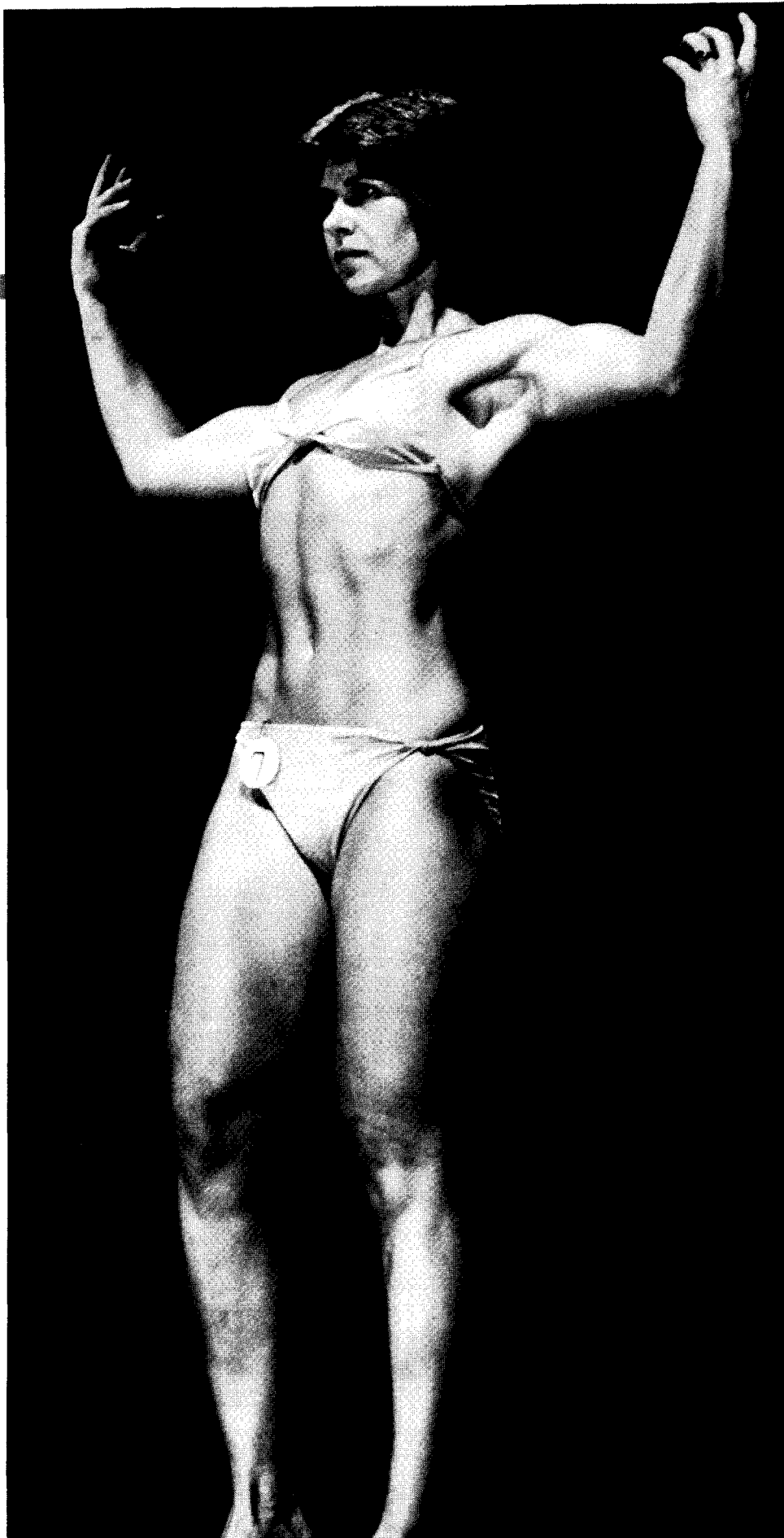
The false dichotomy is left intact.

There is no real exploration of the body. Like the show-biz girls of the chorus line, the body is defined by men, just as it is in medicine, psychiatry, or pornography. Although these women are essentially caricatures rather than women, the film brings them to life with another stereotype. In the climactic scene of the film, the two grown women engage in a catfight, hitting, kicking, and clawing each other — a scene that might have been taken out of one of those old films about the Folies Bergère where there is usually a hair-pulling fight between jealous (barbaric?) women, to the amusement of the male patrons.

To summarize, then, films about dance reinforce the conventional images of women and avoid the question of male sexuality in a world where men are outnumbered by women and where women are seen to excel.

But the tables are turned where women enter male-dominated fields: athletics, business, government, or professions. Every woman who breaks that barrier is sooner or later under suspicion. Is she or isn't she a lesbian?

In *Personal Best*, she is. Critics who were enthusiastic about the picture saw this feature of it as being "handled" tactfully, as if it were a given that we had only now discovered. They evaded the issue just as Lillian Hellman evaded it in *The Children's Hour* (a play about two women who start a boarding school for girls). Were the two women lovers? Or was only one a lesbian? Or were they victims of a vicious female child (who would grow up and turn into Senator McCarthy)?



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Other critics who were also enthusiastic about *Personal Best* saw the lesbian relationship as situational, something that happens when women spend so much time with each other and are cut off from the larger environment (like prison lesbian relationships?) and are under such stress. It was only natural that what began as comfort, nurturance, affection would drift into love and an erotic relationship.

But this like-sex subculture hypothesis is not very convincing if one considers both the world of dance and the world of male athletes. There is no suggestion of lesbian relationships among female dancers in either the fictional or documentary accounts of their lives. Nor was there one in *Chariots of Fire*, about male track stars. The men lived together, studied together, trained together, worked together and ran together, but this did not in any way interfere with or damage their heterosexual relationships.

In short, if there is any truth to the notion of like-sex subcultures combined with stress being conducive to homosexual relationships, it should apply to men as well as to women, and it should apply to women in conventional roles (dancers) as well as to women in non-conventional careers (professional sports). The alternative hypothesis is that when men enter women's occupations, the media masculinize the occupation; when women enter men's occupations, the media masculinize the women. Athletics is only one example of this general phenomenon.

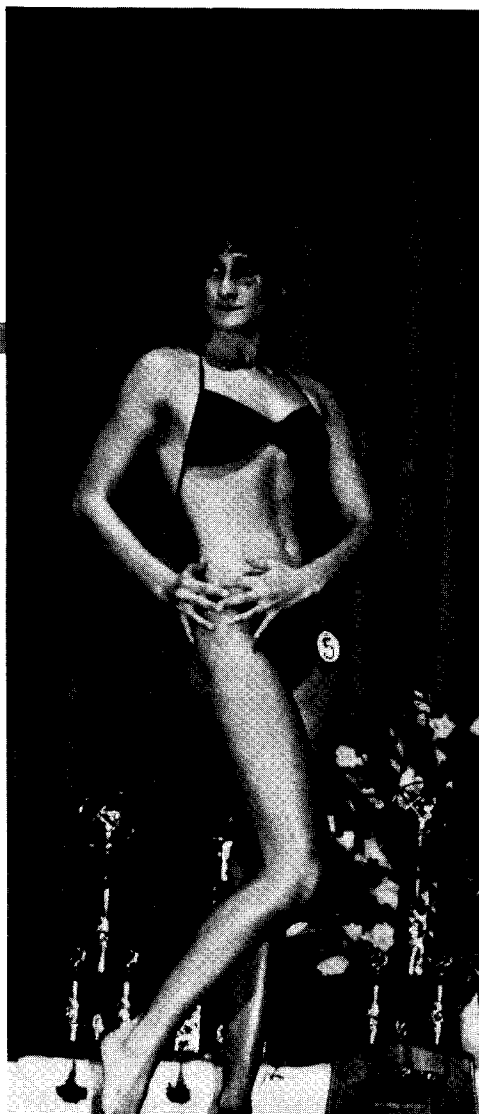
Still, many women, feminists or sympathizers, were pleased about *Personal Best*. The world of athletics

that we get in newspapers or on TV is about hockey, baseball, football, basketball, and other mostly male games. It was a great relief to sit through two hours watching women in ugly track shoes, comfortable clothing, pushing themselves toward greater strength and mastery. I have nothing against figure skating, but quite a bit against little velvet costumes that make girls look like spinning dolls, and I wonder a good deal about the socialization of girls that at about the age of nine turns them into horse fetishists.

Men who are groping their way toward ending patriarchy must have found it a welcome change too after all the films, like *Raging Bull* (the story of a real-life boxer), that are devoid of anything except brawn. Finally, there was something very classy about *Personal Best*. As a film it had style and was, at the same time, good hype for the next Olympic games. It was big budget and good entertainment.

At the other end of the continuum is *All the Marbles*, about two women who are tag wrestlers, the California Dolls. They are good at what they do, but they are not entered into competition and there are no big prizes or prestige. It is a job, a craft, and one that thrives in a seedy milieu involving marginal people and marginal lifestyles.

If we are to judge from the film, tag wrestling is extraordinarily violent. But the violence in the ring is compounded by the violence outside of it by a picture of women who are "naturally" hostile toward each other and who are unable to contain that impulse. Male managers have to control the tag fighters, who seem to lack the profes-



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sional detachment of other fighters, male boxers or male wrestlers. The women are depicted as being motivated by the least civilized drives. The male trainer of one team in *All the Marbles* tells his team, the Toledo Tigers, what to expect from the California Dolls: "California Dolls are greedy for your title, hungry for your money. You whipped their ass in Chicago, so now they're gonna be fightin' for pride as well. Remember that. Pride. Hunger. Greed. They got it all." As it turns out, the Dolls win and the Toledo Tigers (who, incidentally, are black) are such poor losers that their manager has to prod them into congratulating the winners.

Failure for the Dolls or any other women wrestlers is mud wrestling. Indeed, in *All the Marbles* there is a scene of the women engaged in mud

wrestling. Is it sport or is it pornography? The women involved resent it but do not necessarily resent the men who promote it or the men who view it. They feel that their professional pride as wrestlers has been compromised.

Neither woman in *All the Marbles* seems very interested in men or sex. They get their laughs and revenge on their manager by listening in from the other side of the motel wall as he enjoys the women he picks up. The two wrestlers are close friends — closer than most, but there is no suggestion of any kind of sexual relationship between them.

When these films are viewed together, the picture that emerges is not one of women being liberated, of women coming to know their bodies in any broad holistic sense. They know it as a machine, as muscles that have been trained to respond to signals, as a body that feels pain and fatigue but not a body that experiences a complex range of feelings. They are the female version of "jock."

The right to become a female "jock" may be a form of equality, but it is a form of equality that serves neither sex. And it is — and I throw this out for discussion — nothing new: it simply reverses the older misrepresentation of women's bodies as existing for reproduction. In the female "jock" the body exists for athletic glory as a substitute for reproduction. The larger questions about women are left obscured.

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