

Dorothy Kidd

Un film comme "Personal Best" a déclenché un débat animé sur le rôle de la nouvelle femme physiquement active et les relations entre femmes. Les femmes ont gagné peu à peu une place autonome dans le sport, mais la lutte contre l'identité féminine traditionnelle continue.

L'hétérosexualité obligatoire, qui fait partie de cette identité, a jeté un tabou sur le sujet du lesbianisme; un tel tabou renforce la division entre femmes et les empêche de s'organiser pour que les choses changent. Au lieu de ce silence auto-imposé sur ce sujet, il devrait y avoir discussion, compréhension et acceptation.

As a very conservative institution, sport has often been a bellwether of women's emancipation, and the release of the film *Personal Best* was no exception. I was struck by the film not because of its cinematic value but because of the very heated response to it. I realized that *Personal Best* had struck a chord — or perhaps a dischord — in many people, especially among runners, feminists, lesbians, and the sports community.

The response was to much more than the lives of two elite track athletes and their relations with their coach. The film also sparked discussions about controversial subjects seldom captured on screen: the role of the new physically active woman; bonding between women; and perhaps the greatest taboo — lesbianism in and outside sport.

While these themes are new for Hollywood, they make up the daily existence of many women. Women in sport challenge the traditional myths about female physical capacity. Women in all walks of life are redefining their social, political, and sexual identities.

GETTING PHYSICAL: COMPULSORY HETEROSEXUALITY AND SPORT

In this article I would like to ask some questions about these issues and pose a way of linking them. What does it mean for women to be physically active? How does it affect the way they relate to other women and to men? How does women's involvement in sport relate to their sexuality, and especially to heterosexuality and lesbianism?

I would like to explore how these questions relate to the institution of "compulsory heterosexuality," a term used by Adrienne Rich. I will look at how women are challenging the assumption that their sport involvement and everything else they do is for the purpose of servicing men physically, sexually, and emotionally.

Some of this discussion may be new to many people. Very little writing about sport addresses sexuality, while much of mainstream feminist writing has little to say about sport. I've been informed by both schools of thought and by discussions with women from all levels of physical activity and inactivity across the country.

Just to make a film about women in sport was to alter women's traditional invisibility in that male domain. Very little has been recorded about the female athletes and volunteers who have contributed to our sport heritage. *Personal Best* reflected a greater public acceptance of women in sport. The film showed two heroines who were proud of their bodies and serious about their achievements. They were role models for hundreds of thousands of women taking up physical activity, perhaps for the first time. Many girls and women have commented that it was inspiring to see strong and powerful women athletes on the screen.

Strong and *powerful* are two adjectives that are seldom used to describe women in sport. Together with *aggressive*, *competent*, and *self-sufficient*, these words are most often used to describe the male athlete. So synonymous is sport with the traditional male role that physically active girls are still called tomboys, and the greatest respect accorded any female is to say that she performs like a male.

The character traits necessary for sport are so incongruent with the stereotypical female role that sportswomen have had to counter numerous attacks on their sexual identity. Women at many international Olympic events still have to submit to the notorious sex tests, tests given only to women to affirm their biological sex.

This model of femininity underwent some subtle changes in *Personal Best*. The two stars, noticeably more muscular than the typical Hollywood heroine, are both very competent and aggressive in competition. But the director takes care to inform the audience of the limits of this new feminine physicality by continually using a larger black woman as a foil. An image more muscular and active, the definition continues to include desirability by men. Linda Williams, a reviewer of the film, wrote, "where once women (were consigned) to a passive voluptuousness, it now represents them as so many trained seals flexing their muscles to male awe and approval" (*Jump Cut*, July, 1982, p. 1).

Other feminist critics and some mainstream writers have taken Robert Towne, the director of *Personal Best*, to task for his "sexploitation" of women's bodies. But the conflict over what constitutes the new role for women in sport is much more widespread. In the January, 1983, issue of *Women's Sports*, women and men reacted strongly to a commentary on women's bodybuilding. One reader wrote, "Contrary to what Bill Mandel seems to think, many women do not lift weights, run, figure skate, dance or whatever for the sole purpose of making ourselves sexy and appealing to a bunch of slavering males.

We exercise to get in shape, to make our bodies strong and healthy, to seek and realize the potential that lies within our bodies." Another concluded her letter with "the message is not muscles, it is development of every aspect of ourselves to reach our potential as human beings."

The writers underscore the sentiment of the thousands of women who have newly taken up sport and physical activity of all kinds. This popular movement has gone a long way to claiming an autonomous place for women in sport and defining a new concept of physical fitness appropriate to one's physical needs and aptitudes. But there is still a long way to go to guarantee the ground that has been won. Let me illustrate this with a few examples.

"R," aged twenty-four, went to a private gym for fitness and strength, only to be immediately sized up as a "hip" problem and told that they would have her "looking good" in no time at a special rate. Women constantly have to fight the assumption that they are exercising to lose weight and be attractive to men. While that may be a part of it, they usually continue because of other benefits they have found for themselves. Women constantly have to resist the pressure to mould themselves to cultural notions of beauty and to avoid the self-hatred and alienation from one's body that comes with this pressure.

"E," aged thirty-three, was reacting to a change in the composition of her exercise class. "The older, larger women aren't there any more. And even I sometimes feel out of place next to all those fashionably dressed younger ones. Now it's a mixed class too, with

guys standing all around watching, and I feel a little vulnerable and exposed doing some of the more sexual exercises on the floors." She was not opposed to mixed classes *per se*, but she was concerned that the centre's attempts to balance their books with a larger mixed class meant she was forced into an uncomfortable situation. "I went to that class partly to relax . . . and I wonder where all the older women have gone."

"S," aged twenty-nine, teaches fitness classes. She described a concern about a teaching approach that is all too prevalent. "The women in a class I've just started with call it the 'Barbie Doll.' Their last instructor used to stand in front of the class and go through her routine, expecting everyone else just to model her. There was no opportunity for feedback and no attempt to modify the routine to people's problems or special needs. They hadn't talked about it as a group before, and once I took over they all realized how each of them had felt terrible about not matching the instructor's standard of fitness and of looks."

The "Barbie Doll" is a fitting description of women's traditional role in sport. "Expressive," individual activities were encouraged to train women for future roles as wife and mother. Women were not encouraged to work together but to compare and compete with one another. The myth that women cannot work together is reinforced by the few opportunities to do so. While I am not uncritical of the male sport tradition, it has provided many men with training in teamwork, leadership, and the value and seriousness of their contributions. Many women have joined teams and developed co-operative recreational

WHAT EXISTS IS ISOLATED RESISTANCE TO COMPULSORY HETERO- SEXUALITY AND A SUPPORT NETWORK OF LESBIANS AND FRIENDS.

programs, but credit for this recent growth must go to the largely volunteer efforts of some women and men.

The fight by women for a new approach to their own physical development and to sport was one of the strongest themes of *Personal Best*. Linda Williams, in the review quoted earlier, also wrote, "that women athletes can be both tough and compassionate, that the 'killer instinct' that motivates male competition, and which is advocated by their coach, can be tempered with a female ethic of support and co-operation that is not only good for the soul but wins in the end. In other words, the film asserts on the level of its sports theme what it is afraid to assert on the level of its sexual theme."

In *Personal Best* we saw two women working together and challenging the traditional male authority on the track. But that was as far as the director was prepared to go. Off the track, their relationship posed little threat, whether or not they slept together. It was the bonding and common purpose on the track that posed a threat, not their sexual relationship.

We have seen how the traditional female identity in sport has been tied closely to compulsory heterosexuality. Women's involvement in sport is often not for their own human development but for the moulding of a fashionable body and a set of skills for their future roles as wife and mother. Lesbianism is a strong taboo because of the threat of women bonding together socially and politically, not sexually. It is a taboo against all women who step out of the boundaries of women's traditional role in the patriarchy.

We have seen how women in sport have had to endure questions about

their sexual identity. Because they challenge so much of the traditional definition of womanhood, they also have to endure badgering about their sexual orientation. Whether or not they have had sexual relations with other women, the whisper campaign has usually been enough to terrify them into silence. The label might mean isolation from teammates, coaches, friends, and family, and potentially loss of jobs, scholarships, or children.

Women who have stepped across the boundary have had to endure some or all of the above. In Canada, protection against discrimination on the basis of sexual preference exists only in Quebec, although conversations with sportswomen reveal many instances of this kind of discrimination. Athletes have spoken of dismissals, of parents and friends turning against them, of male coaches trying to turn athletes against female coaches by inferring the women were "after little girls." The taboo hurts all women who participate because of the way it reinforces division and acts against bonding and the organization of women for change.

In a recent discussion, several women spoke of the way that this division has operated in their sport experience. One heterosexual woman spoke of the way a lesbian was ostracized on her team, with no dis-

cussion and no opportunity for recourse. Another spoke of watching a lesbian friend sit quietly listening to homophobic remarks, both of them feeling powerless to interject. Another told of how she had stopped seeing her old friends when she came out as a lesbian, only to find out years later that they had known about her sexuality all along and were hurt by the separation. Each of their experiences showed the isolation that leaves women fighting alone against compulsory heterosexuality.

The silence has also led to some very damaging myths about the nature of differences between sportswomen. One of the greatest differences in the volunteer world of amateur sport is over who has time and money to devote to participation. This sometimes appears as a split between women with the responsibilities of children and a husband and women who are supporting themselves on their own. The stereotype suggests that the more traditional option is synonymous with heterosexuality and the other with lesbianism. This has sometimes led to misunderstanding and hostility, both in women's sports and other women's groups. Until all of the discussion comes out into the open, the greater problem of finding more time, money, and support will continue.

I have tried to point out some of the reasons why there is no organized resistance to compulsory heterosexuality in sport. What exists instead is a lot of isolated resistance and a supportive network of lesbians and friends. Extending across generations, across sports, across social classes, and across the country, it includes women from many levels of sport — athletes, former athletes, coaches, and sport administrators. As

a group, this collection of individuals represents, as Adrienne Rich describes, "a breaking of a taboo, a rejection of a compulsory way of life, and a direct and an indirect attack on the male right of access to women." Because of the severity of the discipline of the taboo, this group also includes a "high degree of self-censorship, role-playing, self-hatred . . ." For it is not a public group with any political mandate, but only a loose collection of individuals.

Just as Tory and Chris seldom discuss their relationship in *Personal Best* and never mention the words *lesbian* or *gay*, many lesbian sportswomen never discuss their relationships in public or describe themselves as lesbian or gay. This self-censorship is not because their lives are unimportant, but because of the threat of disclosure to their lives. With little public validation, the self-hatred sometimes means that lesbians as well as heterosexual women police strong women-identified women by ridiculing them. They also do so to protect their vulnerable security in the very conservative sport establishment.

The group that has made a strong critique and attack against compulsory heterosexuality has of course been the lesbian-feminist community, with some support from the feminist movement. While many similarities exist between these two communities, there has not always been a lot of support and mutual respect. Women from the organized-sport tradition have learned to respect often contradictory values: authority, teamwork, competence, competition, and hard work oriented to winning at all costs. These values are very different from the sometimes rigid set of ethics established by the feminist community. In their reaction against submission to the patriarchy, femi-

nists have sometimes rejected responsible leadership. In response to the harshness of competition, they have questioned the pursuit of excellence. In response to the exploitation of women's bodies, they have sometimes denied the sensual and aesthetic pleasure of physical movement.

The image of women in *Personal Best* differed only in degree from the traditional representation. But the movie afforded us a mirror of women's progress in sport and opened up a public debate about issues that had only smoldered before. The discussions allow us to see that the movement for women to reclaim control of our physical selves is only just beginning. They allow us a way to tease out the links among women's physicality, bonding, and sexuality. They let us see the commonality between women organizing around sport issues and women developing a strong social and political identity in other areas.

Some of these mutual interests have led to women coming together around common sport interests. Women from organized sport, recreation, and fitness and women from the women's health network are forging more connections, some of them through the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport. What kind of new sport ethic can women establish to guarantee an autonomous physicality for every woman?

Women and men can continue to promote sport as a legitimate female activity in which women can safely develop strength, aggressiveness, excellence, flexibility, endurance, balance, and grace. Promoting this new definition would widen the parameters for participation of women of all backgrounds, as well as aiding the many males who do not fit the gender role for their sex. It would

also force those with patriarchal interests to come out strongly against strong and powerful women rather than hiding behind public acceptance of homophobia.

Encouraging women to work together to plan, participate, and lead sport of all kinds will assist women and girls to develop skills for use in other parts of society. Other articles in this collection have spoken of the potential contribution women can make to help remove some of the worst excesses of patriarchal sport and develop a more co-operative model that makes it possible for all to participate and enjoy themselves at their own levels of fitness and commitment.

Making visible the lesbian network in sport may prevent further division among women. Heightened visibility does not mean an exclusion of heterosexuals and a glorification of lesbianism, but a greater acceptance of the risks that lesbians have taken to define their lives without men and an acknowledgment of the fight lesbian and heterosexual women make against compulsory heterosexuality. If the fears of closeness and possible difference were not there, it might lead to much stronger bonds on both the individual and organizational level. Or as one heterosexual woman said at a recent discussion group, "Once you understand something, you're not afraid of it any more, and it's harder to use it against you."

Further Reading:

Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," in *Women, Sex, and Sexuality*, ed. C. Simpson and E. Person, University of Chicago Press, 1980.

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