

# Sporting Women in the Shattering the Master

BY PATRICIA VERTINSKY



Joelle Marshall, about 70 years old. Photo: Marlene Hielema

*Cet article commente les métaphores usuelles autour de la vieillesse ainsi que les modèles d'activité physique élaborés dans une société patriarcale et médicalisée, qui enseignent aux femmes âgées des pratiques bien ancrées dans une sexualisation et une connaissance de ce qui est meilleur pour leur santé et leur bien-être. De plus en plus de femmes âgées ont développé des stratégies de résistance et elle veulent réécrire ces diktats masculins et vieillir avec des nouveaux idéaux sportifs qui n'excluent pas des sports et des exercices plus énergiques..*

If history, aging and popular culture tell us anything, it is that all three, like the images they retail, are socially constructed. And there is certainly no shortage of images of old age on which the non-aged draw—though the dominant ones still tend to be held up as mirrors of mortality, forcing more attention to the biological processes of decline than the possibilities of sustaining vigour and sporting prowess. Since sport is one of the major contemporary sites where youthful physical displays are paramount and physiological requirements important, it is hardly surprising that aging sportsmen and sportswomen are not abundantly evident in the public gaze.

On the other hand, women on average, are living substantially longer than men to the extent that they dominate aging populations. Given the rapidly increasing percentage of elderly people in the population of the developed world, the pace of technology which constantly threatens to ameliorate or even reverse the aging process, and the benefits to many of leisure, equipment and access to sporting arenas brought by early retirement in a flourishing economy, we might expect to see far more images of sporting female elders in the media, and view them out-

doors and in public spaces for sport and recreation. No longer does it seem realistic to follow Jung's argument that the concerns and satisfactions of life's afternoons will necessarily differ from those of its mornings. As Carolyn Heilbrun points out in the *Last Gift of Time: Life Beyond Sixty*, what makes life worth living in your 60s? The same things that make it worth living at any time.

Indeed, an international project called the "Superyoung" has demonstrated that those who appear to sidestep time tend to be extremely athletic, avoid stress, have fewer illnesses, richer relationships and look younger than their counterparts of the same age (James and Weeks). Early inspiration for the project came from Emily, a 76-year-old Californian great-grandmother who took up skateboarding in her 70s—a sport where at 25 you are already deemed a "senior."

I am always struck by these "showy" exceptions, and snappy portraits of exuberant lived experience which somehow (by being held up for their exceptionality) seem to contribute to ageism rather than the reverse. They imply that old age is a kind of site of physical being, an entrance to a state where decline is normal: aging as embodied in both time and space. As sporting heroines, or heroes of aging, such examples can become exceptions to the rule rather than representatives of a wider population.

Too often among those who write about aging, images of older people inhabit mythical spaces that bear little resemblance to lived experience (Hillyer). As Blaikie points out in

# Public Gaze

## Narrative of Aging Female Bodies

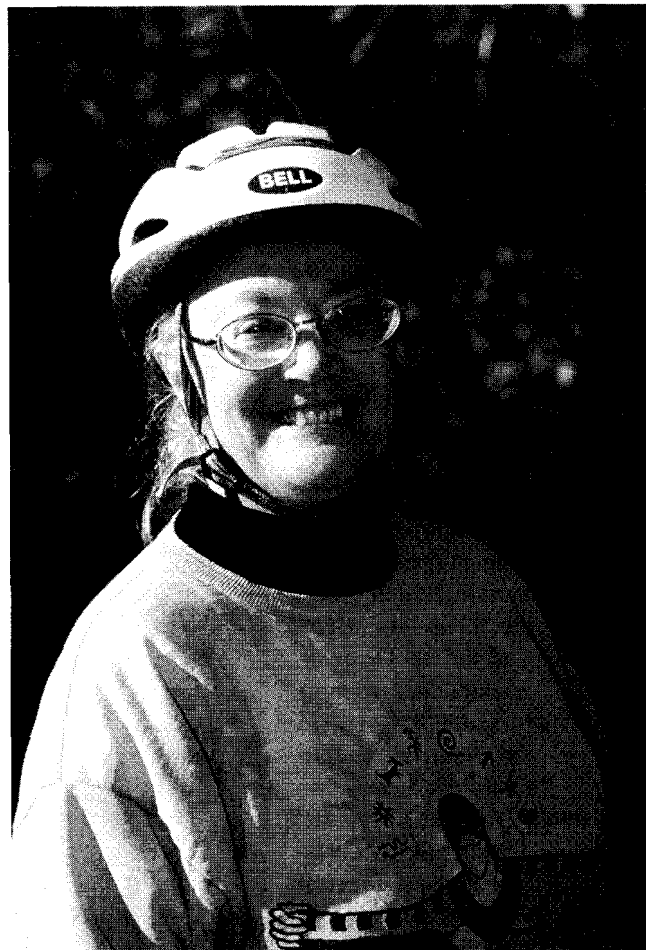
*Aging and Popular Culture* “much of the sociology of later life remains uncharted territory, a Dark continent like Victorian Africa, understood and diversely interpreted by its indigenous peoples yet still awaiting “discovery” by the civilized world” (169). As well, the history of aging, especially the history of women and aging still remains largely unwritten—more characteristic of a land of scattered islands with few bridges between them than a rich historical tapestry of accommodation, resistance and meaningful activity woven across time and space. Perhaps as Norbert Elias has argued, this has to do with the fact that we resist the thought of bodily decline, deep old age and eventual death. Yet Margaret Gullette insists that “the amount of desperation about aging that has circulated in fiction and other literature over the last century goes far beyond what any writer could have experienced of loss through the processes of age alone” (29).

Few sport history scholars have been willing to confront the problems of embodiment and its relation to social life and culture, and for this reason we have tended to resort to literary and artistic forms to get any sense of old age. These have provided indicators to the ways in which the aging body is not just a body subjected to the imperatives of physical decline, but one that moves through life and is continuously inscribed and re-inscribed with cultural meaning (Hockey and James).

If we are to undercut the master narrative of decline we must demonstrate that the connections we have made between the biological, psy-

chological and the social are ideologically loaded, deeply gendered and culturally prescribed, and are therefore open to revision and change. Indeed, “The idea that we might escape being aged by culture is breathtaking” (Gullette 18). It feeds a desire to discard the “standard” social meaning of the aging body and hold tight to a more complex idiosyncratic narrative of age identity. It suggests that the kinds of images of historical aging and sporting women that have been presented to the public gaze might be read, not as part of the familiar master narrative of decline, but from the perspective of an active concept of aging as self-narrated experience.

This may require what Stephen Katz calls learning to “undiscipline” old age, to disregard the boundaries of stereotypes and well worn paths, including the overt ethnocentricity and record of unsuitability (in other than developed countries) of the Western disciplinary knowledge of gerontology. He suggests that by paying more heed to the challenges of the postmodern life course which allows an increased recognition of the diversity of late life, and the agency of the elderly themselves, we may be able to unthread earlier orthodoxies about the aging



*Photo: Marlene Hielega*

body.<sup>1</sup> The reality is that elderly women are not and have never been a homogeneous group. Many old women have suffered from poverty, poor health and disabilities while others have been affluent, healthy and energetic and have participated eagerly in sport and recreational activities. It is possible to find sterling examples of individuals who have challenged conventional assumptions about the physical sporting capabilities of elderly women and who have not withered from the public gaze.

Many more have not.

### **Sport and Aging Women in the Public Gaze: The Case of the Marathon**

Let us then take the case of one particular sporting event where aging women have had particular and multiple obstacles to overcome in order to participate in the public gaze.<sup>2</sup> Making up one-third of 18,000 official runners, many women from around the world ran the 104th Boston marathon in the last year of the millennium, including an increasing number of aging women. Although much of the celebration on the official Boston marathon webpage focused on the swiftest young male runners, there was a section on Boston "Masters" runners. Gitte Karlshoj of Denmark was heralded as winning the women's master's race "with complete disregard for her age"—which was all of 40!<sup>3</sup> Top female "Masters" marathoners in their early 40s are so far uncontaminated by the perceived problem of menopause and decline.

Popular Boston memories focus rather on Uta Pippig's menstrual emergencies during the 100th Marathon—"her victorious battle of mind over body at that time of the month." Boston newspapers pointed out, "there is no delicate way to put this. Pippig had "female issues" at the worst possible time," and continued, "Distance running, like childbirth, isn't exactly a dainty process."

The evocation of reproduction metaphors in relation to women and sport remains pervasive for women

of all ages, with a particular and persistent stigma of decline for menopausal and post-menopausal women. Throughout history women have been considered old after menopause, useless to society and in imminent danger of pathological deterioration—their condition viewed as a deficiency disease, and now one re-



*Photo: Marlene Hielema*

quiring hormone replacement therapy (Vertinsky 1995). Clinical and epidemiological research has saturated the discourse on menopause, ignoring until recently firsthand accounts by women themselves about how they have experienced their own physicality. The dissemination of new evidence about the positive relationship of exercise to a variety of health conditions has seen a number of elderly women breaking out of the "feminine mystique" and

empowering themselves through more vigorous exercise and competitive sport (Vertinsky 1998). Yet even as new sporting opportunities have been pursued, new problems have emerged. *WomenSport International* is concerned that since sex steroid hormones are banned in international competitions, they leave at risk competitive female Masters athletes who are persuaded of the health and therapeutic benefits of Hormone Replacement Therapy. Drug-testing regulations simply ignore the perceived health needs of aging female athletes as irrelevant to the world of competitive sport.

To be sure, more elderly women are running marathons than ever before, just as more elderly women are living longer. Sixty-one-year-old, Katherine Heard, finished second in Pikes Peak—the first U.S. marathon to allow an official but separate race in 1962. Madge Sharples ran her first London Marathon at the age of 64. Born in 1916 she started running in her sixties and continued well into her 70s, competing in 50 marathons worldwide (Hargreaves). Americans Ruth Rothfarb and Ida Minz

are both over 80 years old and have run the marathon in just over five hours. Canadian Betty Jean McHugh, "the fastest grandmother in the west" celebrated her 70th birthday recently by running the Honolulu marathon.

The fact that elderly women have not only demonstrated their capacity and endurance for distance running, but nearly everywhere shown their strength and hardiness by con-



*Photo: Marlene Hielema*

sistently living longer than men, makes it all the more significant that official marathons remained closed to women of all ages until only three decades ago. While women are practiced winners in the “marathon of life,” the concept of vigorously active and sportive older women has been less generally welcomed, especially in American society where large scale surveys report that one in two women over 74 are inactive. Though it seems increasingly in our power to intervene directly in the processes of aging and the environments in which older women live, negative imagery and distortions concerning their aging bodies are difficult to dislodge. Feminist theories and methods of analysis centred upon the relational aspects of gender have been particularly helpful in showing that while the overt forms of instruction about techniques of being “female,” “feminine” and “old” have altered as conceptions of gender and aging have shifted, the body stories and scripts available to old women have remained relatively limited (Calasanti

and Slevin; Sparkes 98).

Historical medical debates around the issue of exercise and exertion or overstrain are particularly instructive to the debate on elderly women’s capacity for exercise. Though regular exercise has been a cardinal element of the medical profession’s code of hygiene since antiquity, a visceral fear of overexertion by both men and women has long been a medical preoccupation. A century ago, asylums and hospitals were said to be crowded as a result of athletic excesses and medical journals reported widely on the mischief (even permanent injury or death) that might be wrought upon heart and body from the exertion of long distance running, particularly marathons (Whorton 115). The spectacle of the marathon race at the first modern Olympics in 1896 and the first Boston marathon in 1897 lead to an announcement in JAMA that heart damage was unquestionably caused by long distance running. Yet, though the stereotype of damage from over-exertion persisted, sensational professional long

distance walking and running feats became extremely popular. By 1909, only men over 40 were being advised to abstain from vigorous exercise, and soon after R. Tait McKenzie argued for a complete reconsideration of the whole question. Men continued to run marathons and the value of strenuous exercise to the nation was increasingly stressed. Nor did an extensive discussion of senescence succeed in preventing older men with the necessary resources from participating in a wide variety of sports, physical pursuits, or professional ultra-distance runners and walkers such as Edward Payson Watson and Daniel O’Leary from completing huge distances at 70 and 80 years old (Lucas 129).

In the early boom of marathon running, women young and old were not allowed official entry, and the medical debate about the “athlete’s heart” (which was damaged from exertion) found no reason to fixate upon the female heart. Views of womankind remained deeply rooted in reproductive biology and a sepa-

rate spheres philosophy that constrained women's space and physicality. Supported by medical arguments that "too active" women would squander the birthright of future generations, maternalist physical educators vehemently opposed female involvement in sporting competitions. Older women were even more thoroughly constrained from participation in physically strenuous activity by a medical discourse which viewed menopausal bodies as diseased and decrepit (Vertinsky 1994).

So while men ran in spite of medical cautions, women sat out because of them—at least until science turned the issue on its head in the 1960s and '70s, touting endurance exercise as a therapeutic tool for aging, cardiac patients. As increasing numbers of affluent, middle aged male executives took to running to recover their youth and stave off disease, the *New England Journal of Medicine* claimed that marathon running would actually protect men from the declines of aging.

Whether the popular jogging movement was cause or consequence of the doctors' new enthusiasm for distance running as preventive medicine, the focus was squarely upon middle-aged males in danger of heart attacks rather than females. After all, women of any age were still being turfed out of marathons in the early '70s and were not even allowed to enter the Olympic marathon until 1984. Only later was it realized that women were equally at risk from heart disease as they aged (though less often diagnosed or treated promptly).

By this time, however, a shift from running for hearts to running for well-being and personal gratification was taking place, with women, impelled by the second wave of feminism and the requirements of Title IX, increasingly demanding to run long distances for health and for pleasure. With the increasing commodification of physical activity and the effects of the fitness boom of the 1980s, marathons gradually be-

came open and accessible to women of all ages. In the '80s and '90s, they became big business in a unity of athletic endeavour and economic production that was, in many respects, gender and age neutral where profit was concerned. Women, even aged women could now not only enter and run marathons, but make a living from running road races.

Thus we can see how standard metaphors for "normal aging" and "appropriate physical activity" were elaborated in a patriarchal medicalized culture to "teach" aging men and women deeply gendered, role-based practices and sets of knowledge about appropriate exercise for health and well-being. Medical warnings about over-exertion resulted in a clear differentiation of practices when it came to long distance running. While men ran in spite of medical cautions, women were banned from distance running because of them. Female runners fought their early battles alone, avoiding the public gaze in their training endeavours and efforts to overcome so many obstacles.

### **Towards successful aging and new sporting ideals for women**

For women beyond menopause, it is now evident that even those in their eighth and ninth decades can achieve significant health and strength benefits from exercise (Fiataron *et al.*). Very elderly women are running marathons, winning championships and climbing mountains, and demonstrating remarkable strength, ability and determination in physical pursuits. Trained women over 80, for example, are achieving performance times in the mile run that approximate those of the average teenage girl. In Masters Championships and Senior Games competitions at all levels, senior women athletes (although still far fewer than men) are now demonstrating that they do not need to accept a major decline of aerobic power and muscle strength as an inevitable feature of aging, and

that they are capable of conditioning their bodies through rigorous training regimens. They are a testament to the remarkable resilience of the human body when it is properly maintained and to the role of sport in successful aging (Spirduso).

Impelled by the realization that by the year 2025, 20 per cent of the population in North America and parts of Europe will be over 55 years of age, exercise advocates increasingly focus upon the complex dynamics of successful aging and the need to disassociate aging and inactivity. 1999 was declared by the United Nations as the International Year of Older Persons, providing a special opportunity for issues of gender to figure more prominently in social policies designed to encourage sport and exercise and provide greater access and opportunities for participation. Contrary to historical stereotypes and popular opinion, most older women are fit enough to enjoy full lives and many manage well despite handicaps. Recent national and international initiatives in health promotion and population health are reflecting more fully the realization that the factors which influence the lifestyle practices of the elderly are multiple and interactive, and deeply embedded within particular social, economic and physical environments. Researchers have begun to listen more closely to the narratives of the elderly themselves who are the "natives" of that time of life and can best describe what activities they enjoy, what barriers are placed in their way, and how they are affected by negative stereotypes of the aging female. As elderly women attempt to publicly challenge the limiting stereotypes of the aging female body and seek new paths to active living they are disrupting the cultural storyline of loss and decline that has constrained them in the past. They would point out that aging is very much an individual affair, and that while the first truth about aging is that everybody does it, the second truth needing to be broadcast

is that everybody does it differently.

Of course, the public does not want them to do it too differently. When the flying grandmother from Phoenix mopped up all the medals and shattered world records in the 100 metres at the World Veteran Athletics games at Gateshead in England in 1999, her Australian competitors called foul and pointed to her pronounced muscularity—her slim hips, her broad shoulders. Husband, children and four grandchildren from the farm stepped up to declaim the mean-spiritedness of the Aussie's complaint that "Kathy Jaeger was a man" (Wilkinson). End of the story, that is until the International Amateur Athletic Association announced, some months, later that Jaeger had tested positive for the male anabolic steroid methyl testosterone and was therefore banned from Masters competitions for two years. Kathy Jaeger put it down to a "silly hormonal imbalance, simply a female thing" but she did not bother to appeal (cited in Hurst).

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<sup>1</sup>This agency carries perils of course, for where elders are empowered to live in challenging new ways they also place pressures to keep active and remain youthful.

<sup>2</sup>A more detailed study of "A Woman's P(l)ace in the Marathon of Life: Feminist Perspectives on Physical Activity and Aging" can be found in the *Journal of Aging and Physical Activity* 2 (2001):21-34.

<sup>3</sup>Masters events are, for the public,

an important and growing sign of successful aging, though in many sports they are organized for mid-life athletes or younger. A wide variety of sports continue to be seen as age-appropriate as well as gender-appropriate.

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