

Where Are the Role Models?

Exploring the Invisibility of Female Athletes in the Media

by Katherine Snow

Déférence, réticence, silence et retenue sont toutes des modifications que l'auteure a observé lorsqu'elle a étudié les changements de performances et de comportements de ses meilleurs athlètes féminins. L'auteure identifie l'invisibilité

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de l'athlète féminin dans les médias comme cause principale des modifications du comportement des filles.

I am a physical educator in an elementary school. I teach all the children from grades two to six. By the time these children graduate, I have made very detailed observations of how they have developed in their athletic ability. I have also had the opportunity to study their social behaviour and their public "self." It is because of this long period of observation that I have noticed, what are to me, some astonishing and somewhat disturbing phenomena.

For example, 12-year-old Tara is a very talented athlete. She is a superb runner who wins girls' races everywhere. She also plays soccer for her community girls' team. She helps other girls to succeed at a skill if she sees they are having difficulty. She referees games for younger children. Through the years, she has developed a tremendous team sport strategy. Coupled with her excellent skill level, this puts Tara in the top one per cent of her class.

Recently, Tara was playing in a full court basketball game in her class. There were three girls and two boys on her team. Whenever she had the ball, she passed to a boy. If she dribbled in to the basket, she passed to a boy at the last moment so she never took a shot at the basket. There were 18 attempts at the basket and two were successful. None of those attempts were made by a girl. When I asked Tara and the other girls why they did not shoot, they shrugged and said they didn't know.

Girls in their younger years are eager achievers. They show exuberance toward athletics on par with their boy classmates. They like to have the ball first, to demonstrate, to answer questions, and to show off their knowledge and skill in front of both the class and the teacher. When Tara was in grade three she was always in the forefront of whatever we were doing in class. This desire to be con-

spicuous continues through grade three where both the boys and girls are beginning to hone their athletic ability.

My observations of Tara and other talented, athletic children during my 18 years with the Protestant School Board of Greater Montreal have led me to notice and label some behavioral phenomena in the girls: deference; reticence; silence; holding back.

Deference

In grade four, the very talented girls start to curb their enthusiasm. They still like to participate fully in the activity, but they sometimes refuse to be the shooter or the leader. Frequently they defer to a boy, allowing him to be the first to take the opportunity to score. Sometimes the boys go first simply because they assume they will go first. On other occasions the girls, even if given the choice, will choose to be second. If the girls are part of a small group of girls, they do not defer to anyone.

Reticence

By the time the top-performing girls reach grade five, they are very competent and knowledgeable. However, when a girl is questioned by a boy as to why she did something in a game situation, she often chooses to say that she does not know rather than to answer the question. If the boy indicates she has done something incorrectly, most girls will back down and agree with the boy. She is reticent to take a stand for herself.

If a girl queries another girl about clarification or help in a game situation, the girl is quite clear and definitive in her explanation. If a boy asks the same questions, then the girl might be equally definitive but end her answer with a self-diminishing statement such as: "for what it's worth."

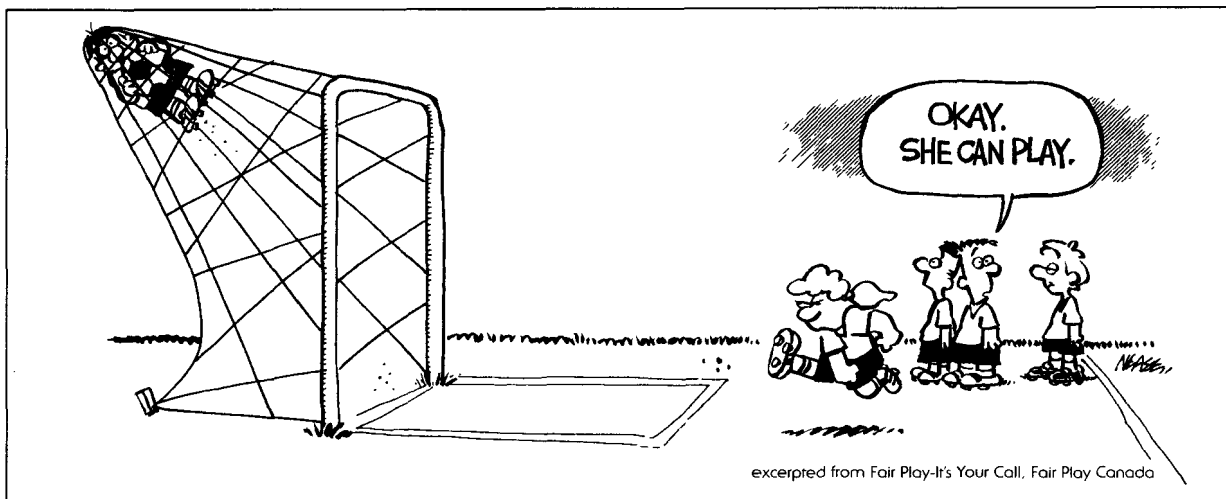
I watched Tara and André discuss a game situation one day. Tara had an opportunity to shoot a basket in a game. She chose not to shoot but to pass to Nicholas who was next to her. By that time Nicholas was covered and he could not take the shot. André was furious. He argued that if she could not take the shot she ought to have passed to him as he was in the clear by the basket.

Tara knew, as I did from observing, that she could not get the ball to André without it being intercepted. He was too far away from her. Instead of explaining this to him, Tara shrugged and said that she was sorry and that she did not really understand basketball very well.

When Tara was no longer on the court, I overheard her explaining to her girlfriend exactly what had happened. She then complained that André always acts like he knows everything and he makes her feel stupid.

Silence

The third phenomenon I have noticed is the general conversation and activity of the children when they are in a team game situation. The boys tend to talk all the time, trying to control the game by telling the players what they should do and where they should go. The girls, even those in the top performing category, tend to be mute. They play well when it is their turn but never try to control the play as the boys do by calling out things such as: "Go there!", "Pass to me!", "Run up the court!", "Pass when I say pass!", "Everyone over here!"



For example, I watched a soccer-baseball game played by a class of grade five students. As soon as they knew who would be in the field and who would be kicking first, the boys started to control the game. Two boys, waiting their turns to kick, took up positions near first and third bases. They said they were base coaches and when a child kicked the ball that child should listen to what the base coach says and act accordingly. They yelled out verbal commands and tried to make hand signals to everyone.

The boys, wherever they were, commented on each pitch or roll. If the pitcher was a boy and he rolled a poor pitch they groaned and said try harder. If the pitcher was a girl they said to change the pitcher right away.

The top performing girls, when it was their turn to kick, simply kicked as hard as they could and ran the bases. They ignored all of the talking from the boys. If a girl made a home run she went to the end of the kicking line afterward and sat down without talking. The girls said congratulations immediately. The boys acknowledged what she did and said that she was lucky.

Holding back

By grade six, the top performing girls are very accomplished in their skill level in all of the activities. Yet these girls hold back when playing on teams with boys. When they are in a full game situation they almost always defer

to a boy. This action is usually in the form of a pass just before a scoring opportunity. The girls do not attempt to score the goal.

By contrast when the girls play competitively with girls they are uninhibited. Tara scored six points in the girls' tournament game, yet she did not even attempt a shot during the co-ed basketball game in class.

What are the factors influencing these girls?

As a physical educator and a woman who loves active living and sport, I have tried to understand the phenom-

ena I have observed in my classes. It looks to me as though the girls are denying themselves the right to excel. Kathleen Weiler suggests that a girl's backing down when confronted by a boy is an awareness of or deferment to power. The boy automatically gets respect because he is a boy (Skelton). I wonder if my female students realize they are on the low end of the hierarchy in a mixed sex group, if they have a different system for establishing their place in the group, or if they are "just fitting in" (Mitchell).

I thought about what types of behaviour my female students were observing and modelling. Who, in fact, are their role models and where would they most likely be exposed to role models?

Women are under-represented in all types of television programming and they are portrayed as less powerful, less authoritative, and less knowledgeable (Robinson). The effect of fewer females on television (91 per cent of all experts we see on the screen are men) may be especially detrimental for girls who are still seeking role models. Also, having fewer women on the screen implies that women count less in Canadian society (Robinson).

Historically, the coverage of female sports and female athletes in the newspaper has been overwhelmingly less than male coverage in both picture and copy form. This is still true despite the increased pressure or awareness to cover female sports in recent years (Weiler, 88).

In the Fall of 1992 a study by CAAWS of 15 major daily

Canadian newspapers was conducted to examine the extent to which newspapers covered women's sports in their sports section. The results showed that on average 92 per cent of the space was devoted to photographs and articles of men, five per cent to photographs and articles of women and men, and three per cent to photos and articles of women only (McDonald).

The invisibility of female athletes in the media

The girls in my classes are exposed to *The Gazette*, Montreal's only English language daily newspaper, in their English classes as well as in most of their homes. Over a two month period the Sports Section included: eight photographs of girls and women who participate in several sports; six feature articles on women in a small variety of sports; and, limited coverage of women's tournament results in the Sports Shorts column.

This prompted a two week study of the front page of the Sports Section of *The Gazette*. There is approximately 266 square inches of reporting space on the front page. There is always a centre colour picture toward the top or above the fold of the section. During the two week period women were mentioned on the front page five times. They received 117 square inches of space. In that same time period, articles and pictures which depicted men received 3,232 square inches of space.

The colour picture was almost always an action shot of a professional team sport such as hockey or baseball. Usually there were two or more players in the picture. These players were men. The pictures were all taken during a game. None of the photographs were taken during a championship or medal winning event. Underneath the picture, there was usually a story about the game or about some specific players or both.

During that same two week period, there was only one colour photograph with women as subjects. The photograph was composed; it was not an action shot of the women participating in the sport. It was a photograph of the team which won a gold medal. The story about the women's team was found on page seven of the sports section. This is a departure from the norm. Colour pictures on the front page usually have the story right under the picture.

For a clearer understanding of the visual representation of women in the Sports Section, for another two week period I studied only photographs. During those two weeks, 86 photographs of men were featured and only eight of women.

It is clear that women in sports, and in particular team sports, are very much under-represented in the media. In the two month period I studied *The Gazette's* Sports Section, only two women's team sports were mentioned.

In this same two month period, there were several references to a Montreal synchronized swimming champion Sylvie Fréchette. These articles dwelt on her grace at accepting the silver medal instead of the gold at the

Olympics. They also focused on her interest in fashion swimwear. There was no mention of her tremendous ability as an athlete (9 Feb. 1993). Similarly two other synchronized swimmers, twins Penny and Vicky Vilagos, were featured in a huge spread in the Fashion Section modelling swimwear. They were mentioned briefly in the Sports Section. Again, no mention was made of their tremendous athletic ability (9 Feb. 1993).

A very successful biathlete, Myriam Bédard, was also featured on several occasions during the two months I studied the Sports Section. A Canadian company had chosen to sponsor her in the next Winter Olympics and to have her be their spokesperson. She was chosen because: "She's obviously a great athlete but she also speaks well in both languages and she is attractive" (St. Pierre).

The lack of attention paid to women in sports in the media, and the consequent, implicit trivialization of their athletic achievement, is driven home in the Media Report to Women when a cameraman, documenting an ascent by 19 teenagers in the Peruvian Andes, decided not to film any females at the end because "girls reaching the top would make the ascent look too easy" (Allen).

Conclusion

Girls are receiving the message that female athletes have little value. If boys appear to have a higher visibility in community sports and, as the research shows, boys receive more opportunity to learn than do girls (Robertson) then how are girls going to value themselves as athletes? How will they know that being a good athlete is healthy and that every girl has the right to play and to be good?

The girls in my classes need to know that a score or an attempt to score is playing the game and not a power struggle. They are simply exercising their right and responsibility as a player and a member of the team.

The Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women (Holmes and Silverman) has made a recommendation that the Federal Government of Canada develop or support cultural and sports programs so as to provide equal opportunities for social and physical development to adolescents of both sexes. If this recommendation is implemented then perhaps the girls' self-confidence will increase and they will begin to value themselves as athletes.

If I could wave a magic wand and make all the sports in which women compete covered at both the local and national level as well as at the international level, on television and in the newspaper, with photographs as well as copy, and if this coverage would increase to at least by 50 per cent, I think girls would start to perform better in co-ed games. They would have roles models of women in sport and physical activity to aspire to. They would value themselves and all women as full contributors to and participants in whatever field of physical activity they choose.

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excerpted from Fair Play-It's Your Call, Fair Play Canada

- 1919 Suzanne Lenglen leaves her corset in Nice and makes her Wimbledon debut 1922 The Federation sportive feminine internationale organizes the first Women's Olympic Games in Paris; in one day alone, 20,000 spectators watch 18 world records broken in track and field
- 1923 The Edmonton Grads win their first of 17 Canadian championships
- 1926 Alexandrine Gibb spearheads the formation of the Women's Amateur Athletic Federation of Canada (WAAF) to initiate international competition for Canadian women; the second Women's Games are held in Gothenburg, Sweden, with entries from 10 nations
- 1928 Florence Bell, Myrtle Cook, Fanny (Bobbie) Rosenfeld and Ethel Smith win the 400 yd relay at the Amsterdam Olympic Games; Ethel Catherwood takes gold in the high jump; several women collapse at the end of the 800 and the event is declared dangerous to women and banned until 1960; Dorothy Prior is the first Canadian woman to compete in Olympic swimming events; staging the only feminist boycott in Olympic history, the British women stay away from the Games to protest the lack of women's Olympic events
- 1930 The third Women's Games are held in Prague
- 1932 Amelia Earhart flies solo across the Atlantic
- 1934 The fourth and last Women's Games are held in London, England
- 1936 The Women's Games are cancelled in exchange for a nine-event Olympic program for women
- 1938 WAAF (Ontario) starts the first coaching development scheme for women
- 1939 Dorothy Walton wins the All-England title, badminton's equivalent of a world championship
- 1948 Fanny Blankers-Koen of the Netherlands is the first mother to be an Olympic gold medallist
- 1948 Barbara Ann Scott wins the Olympic figure skating title
- 1950 Track, basketball, ice hockey and softball star, coach and sport columnist, Bobbie Rosenfeld, is named Outstanding Canadian Woman Athlete of the Half Century