

# Playing with the Boys

## *Manon Rheume, Women's Hockey and the Struggle for Legitimacy*

by Nancy Theberge

*Dans cet article, l'auteure réfléchit sur l'importance de l'expérience de Manon Rhéaume pour les femmes dans le sport. Le succès relatif de Manon Rhéaume témoigne des*

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One of the most dramatic developments in Canadian sport in recent years is the growth and success of women's hockey. Participation in organized programs has expanded greatly in the last decade. At the elite level, Canadian success in international competition, where the women's national team won gold medals at the 1990, 1992, and 1994 World Championships, attests to the level of development of the sport.

The growth of women's hockey has occurred in the context of the broader cultural ambivalence that plagues women's sport. This ambivalence is particularly powerful in sports that Bryson describes as "flag carriers of masculinity." These are sports that emphasize toughness and physical dominance. Bryson argues that the entry of women into "flag carrier" sports has prompted efforts to reassert masculine superiority. One way this occurs is through the inferiorization of women's athletic achievements. Central to this is a process of universalism, in which men's sports are positioned as the only legitimate forms. Bryson describes this process:

Scores, distances, times, heights, and weights are recorded and compared, and this lends an apparently factual validity to claims of superiority. Even when women participate separately, there is an implicit male standard against which they are judged at least in relation to strength, speed, and power. (176)

Recent events in women's hockey provide an important instance of the effort to gain legitimacy in the face of dominant notions of "real" sport. Despite the successes of the Canadian national team and the rise in numbers of programs and participants, women's hockey still suffers

from an absence of public recognition and media attention. The struggle to gain greater publicity is marked by a particular irony in that by far the sport's most visible personality is a woman who has gained fame by playing with men. The experience of Manon Rheume, the first woman in North America to sign a contract in men's professional team sport and to play a game in a professional league, provides insight into the problems of establishing the legitimacy of women's sport.

This article examines the "case" of Manon Rheume as an instance of ideological struggle around women's sport. Drawing from media accounts and interviews with players, the discussion considers the significance of Rheume's experience in light of cultural ambivalence about the meaning of women's sport. The paper is not about Rheume *per se*. Most media discussions of this case focus on Rheume the person or athlete. In contrast, this account considers Rheume's involvement in professional hockey as a case study that illustrates important issues in the social construction of sport.

### Manon Rheume and men's hockey

Although Rheume has played most of her career in boys and men's hockey, this alone does not distinguish her from many female players in Canada. Across the country, and especially in areas where girls' programs are not yet well established, untold numbers of girls are playing with boys, particularly at younger ages.

What distinguishes Rheume is her participation in the highest levels of organized men's hockey. Several events mark her career. In August 1991 she tried out for and earned a place as the number three goalie with the Trois Rivières Draveurs of the Quebec Major Junior League. With counterpart organizations in Ontario and Western Canada, the Major Junior Leagues are generally viewed to be the highest calibre of play in Canada below the National Hockey League. In November of the same year she played 17 minutes in a game with the Draveurs, becoming the first woman to play in a Major Junior game.

After playing for the national women's team in the 1992 World Championships in Finland, in September of that year Rheume was invited to the tryout camp of the Tampa Bay Lightning of the National Hockey League (NHL). A few weeks later she played one period in an exhibition game against the St. Louis Blues of the NHL. Shortly thereafter she was sent to the Atlanta Knights, a minor league team affiliated with the Lightning, and in November, 1992 she signed a contract with the Knights. In December of that year she played part of a game,

making her the first woman to play in a regular season game in a men's professional league, and in April, 1993 she played a full game. She spent the 1993-94 season with the Knoxville and Nashville teams in the East Coast Hockey League and in April, 1994 again played with the Canadian national team at the World Championships in Lake Placid, New York. After beginning the 1994-95 season with the Las Vegas Thunder of the International Hockey League, Rheume was assigned to a semi-professional team, the Las Vegas Aces. In January, 1995 she joined an Austrian team for a game.<sup>1</sup>

These events, particularly Rheume's invitation to the

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Lightning training camp and appearance in professional games, received extensive media publicity. Much of this coverage emphasized her "ice breaking" role as a woman in men's sport. While the flurry of publicity that accompanied her experiences in Tampa Bay and Atlanta has subsided, Rheume remains the most well known woman hockey player in Canada.

#### **Issues in the construction of Rheume's experience**

Perhaps the most obvious impact of Rheume's experience is the publicity she has brought to women's hockey. As *Toronto Star* columnist Mary Ormsby wrote in April, 1992, "Manon Rheume has given women's hockey a face." Ormsby indicates the significance of this:

In a market where sport has become a star-driven enterprise, women's hockey has landed a celebrity who has provided the game with an unbelievable opportunity for promotion.

Ormsby's comment points to the commercial payback from the publicity Rheume has generated. Another effect is her influence as a "role model." Her efforts, often portrayed as a struggle against odds, to which she has brought particular determination and commitment, send a message to girls about the heights to which they may aspire. In the contemporary context of women's sport, this is not insignificant. Several widely publicized recent events highlight problems and difficulties in women's sport. The Harding-Kerrigan affair in figure skating, the stabbing of Monica Seles in tennis and in the same sport, Jennifer Capriati's arrest for drug possession and the appearance of her police mug shot in *Sports Illustrated* (Price) offer a construction of women's sport as "tragedy"

(Birrell and Theberge) rather than triumph and accomplishment.

Rheume's influence as a role model, and the statement some see in her career about the heights to which women athletes may aspire, point to one of the major dilemmas facing women's sport. Abby Hoffman, former Director General of Sport Canada and Olympic runner, summarized the dilemma:

On the one hand, she's said something positive about the capabilities of female athletes, and she will serve as a role model for other women who aspire to achieve at that level....But her appearance also tends to support the argument that female athletics is only credible when women can compete at the same level, and that athletic ability is to a large extent measured by standards set by males. (Habib A3)

Former *Montreal Gazette* columnist Michael Farber made a similar point in a September, 1992 column titled "Rheume's Message is Unsettling—Success Measured on Male Terms." The column was written following Rheume's appearance in an NHL pre-season game. As Farber writes, with this appearance, "she was legitimized. She had played against men" (D20).

The legitimation of women athletes who compete with men is one of the cruellest ironies of the world of sport. Despite changes and some improvement, sport remains largely a male preserve in which opportunities, resources, and support go disproportionately to boys and men. This is very much the case in hockey. Ice time is still dominated by boys and men's leagues, media coverage focuses almost exclusively on men's hockey, and the sport's exalted position in Canadian culture rests to a considerable extent on its celebration of a "very traditional masculine ideal" (Gruneau and Whitson 190).

The celebration of Rheume's "success" in men's hockey is ironic in light of the relative absence of opportunities in women's hockey, particularly at the elite levels. To be sure, opportunities at the highest levels have expanded significantly, first with the introduction of World Championships in 1990 and then with the addition of the sport to the Olympic program in 1998. But while women may now aspire to compete in the World Championships—a one week tournament—every two years and in the Olympics every four years, men—and women—who play professional hockey train and practice daily. And they are paid for their efforts. Alone among Canadian women hockey players, Manon Rheume can focus her efforts on her hockey career.

It is significant to note here that Rheume's full time efforts are mainly devoted to training and practicing. Since moving to professional hockey, her playing experience has been limited to the single game with Trois Rivières, an exhibition game with Tampa Bay, two games with Atlanta and four games each with Knoxville and Nashville, in addition to her appearances with the Cana-

dian women's national team. Thus, her situation in men's hockey has been one of full time involvement, and daily training, but little playing time.

### **Women hockey players' accounts of Rheume's experience**

Further insight into the meaning of Rheume's experience is offered in the comments of female hockey players. As part of a larger study of women's hockey in Canada, over the last two years I have conducted interviews with two samples of female hockey players.<sup>2</sup> The material

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reported below is taken from players' responses to questions about their reactions to Rheume's experience and the significance of this experience for women's hockey.

The first sample is comprised of 23 adolescent girls between the ages of 14 and 17. These respondents were identified from participants at female hockey camps held in western and central Canada in the summer of 1994. Some had recently taken up the sport while others had played for years and were among the best players in their province, for their age group.

The second sample is comprised of 22 women playing at senior, elite levels in western and central Canada. These women ranged in age from 16 to 34, with the majority in their twenties. This group includes some of the best players in Canada, including several with experience in the national team program. Many of these women are familiar with Rheume as a player, having competed with her in tournaments and in the national team program. Interviews with these women were conducted between May, 1993 and July, 1994.

With few exceptions, the younger players were favourable in their assessment of Rheume's experience. The most frequent comment was that Rheume has brought beneficial publicity to the sport and offered evidence that women can play hockey. Comments in this regard included the following:

*It tells us that anyone can (play hockey). It doesn't matter, regardless of who you are or what sex you are you can play if you want. I think what she's done is good. It's sort of opened up people's minds.*

*I think it's great. I think she has a lot of courage... being able to show that she can compete just as well. And maybe it gets the guys to sort of, instead of turning their*

*head around they can sort of look and understand that we can play just as well.*

*I think what she's done, it was a big eye opener for a lot of people. I think that's when people really saw girls play hockey and they're not bad at it. They're not the way people thought they were at the game. I think she did a lot for women's hockey.*

Another player tied the significance of Rheume's experience specifically to her making the NHL. In that case, she said, "It'd probably tell all girls that they can do it and they can get stronger, they can... whatever they put their mind to, they'll be able to do it."

One player evaluated what has happened to Rheume in the context of opportunities in women's hockey:

*I'm sure a lot of girls' goal would be to play in the NHL and stuff but I'd like to just see them open up something like that for women. A semi-professional league for women... I mean it would be great to play in the NHL, don't get me wrong. I think it would be awesome to play with the pros and stuff but if we could open up something for ourselves and give ourselves something to be proud of and something we can enjoy just like the men have for so many years.*

Nearly all the senior players expressed skepticism about Rheume's NHL tryout and signing with an NHL affiliate, viewing the events as publicity stunts. Most were equally suspicious of the possibility that Rheume (or any other woman) would ever compete successfully in the NHL. While one senior player expressed the view that women will someday play in the NHL, and another indicated she didn't know if this were possible, others were firm in their rejection of this possibility. The predominant feeling is that physical differences between men and women preclude women's playing in the NHL. Player comments include the statements that the best women players could "never make it;" "there's no way a female could play in the NHL;" "it's unrealistic (to expect to play in the NHL);" "from a logical point of view...she really shouldn't be there. It is publicity." One player offered the following assessment:

*(I've played with) some of the best women hockey players and I still don't think that any of them are good enough to play at that level. Not looking from a talent standpoint, but it's the old reality check where you have to look at the physiological differences and that kind of stuff.*

In comparison to the adolescent players, there was much greater variation among the senior players in their assessment of the publicity generated by Rheume's experience. Like the younger players, a few of the senior women, including some of those who see Rheume's playing professional hockey as a publicity stunt, nonethe-

less view it as beneficial, in that it has brought recognition to the sport and demonstrated the calibre of female players. Others see the publicity Rheume has generated to be a mixed blessing, in that the emphasis on a woman's "success" in men's hockey detracts from the appreciation and awareness of women's hockey. A few explicitly identified a process of inferiorization (without of course using this term).

*The only thing that I don't like is that they focused on her playing against men and you have to be compared against men before you're good. Seems like that's the norm. I don't like that. We're as good, I'm as good as (X, a player in the NHL), relatively speaking.*

Others spoke of a negative effect on the development of the game, as some girls (and importantly, their parents) now aspire to the NHL and believe that the best route to the NHL is to play boys' hockey. Following are the comments of one player on this concern:

*Now all these girls who are coming up, especially goaltenders are saying yeah, one day I can play in the NHL instead of saying one day I can play on the women's Olympic team... All that is now is a girl playing in a guy sport again. It's not a girl excelling in and helping out women's hockey, it's a girl playing in a guy's sport. And I don't think that is good publicity at all for the female program because especially in (my community) this year we had about seven girls that would not play with the female program, they wanted to play with the boys because they said they'd play better hockey. Whereas they didn't even give the program a chance. They just assumed it.*

Notwithstanding the doubts many players expressed about the legitimacy of Rheume's playing professional hockey, there was nearly universal agreement among senior players that Rheume had been presented with a wonderful opportunity. Many indicated that given the same opportunity, they would take it. Commenting on the skepticism of many in women's hockey, one player offered the following comment:

*I think we all have to look past our own jealousies and ask ourselves is Manon going to get better because she's given this opportunity to practice every day and get the coaching and the ice time? Is she going to get better? And that would be my question... Because if she can get better imagine what the rest of us can do with that type of opportunity every day, sort of a professional lifestyle. I mean everybody makes a lot of negative comments but if they'd look deep down inside they'd do the same thing given the opportunity, right?*

Only one of the senior players made reference to Rheume's limited playing time. She said that "I kind of

feel sorry for the girl. She's not playing much hockey. She's making all kinds of money but she's not playing."

### **Conclusion: women's hockey and the struggle for legitimacy**

The issues raised by Rheume's experience illustrate well the contemporary struggle to establish the legitimacy of women's sport. While the bulk of press coverage of Rheume has presented her as a role model and "ice breaker," some commentators have pointed out the dilemma posed by the celebration of women athletes who "succeed" in men's sport. The inferiorization of women's athletic achievements is at the centre of this struggle.

The remarks of players reported here indicate that this struggle is well understood by participants. To be sure, the appreciation is much greater among players competing at senior levels, who are for the most part also older. The fact that younger players are much more likely to emphasize the benefits of the publicity Rheume has generated may suggest they take for granted the advances that have occurred and fail to appreciate the ongoing struggle for the acceptance and legitimacy of women's hockey. If this is the case, it seems likely that without change in the status and visibility of women's hockey (and women's sport), if these players remain active and especially if they realize the ambitions that many expressed to play at the highest levels, many will come to appreciate these struggles.

There is an aspect of the discourse around Rheume that figures prominently in comments of players and others in the sport that is largely absent from the media constructions. That is the fact that Rheume is a goaltender. The position of goaltender is unique, demanding particular skills. While there is debate about this point among hockey experts, many argue that physical size and strength are less important for a goalie than players at other positions (or "skaters"). Earlier it was noted that most of the senior players interviewed do not believe that women can compete effectively at the highest levels of men's hockey, owing to physical differences in size and strength. At the same time, they recognize that for goaltenders, the significance of gender differences in this respect is reduced considerably, if not eliminated.

The issue of comparative performance of men and women athletes is beyond the scope of this article. Moreover, I would argue that this discussion is not a fruitful one as in the current conditions of the organization of sport, which favour men overwhelmingly, such discussions can only further consolidate the perception of men's "natural" superiority (Willis). Nonetheless, it is significant that in the media constructions of Rheume's experience, little attention is given to an aspect of her biography that people in the sport understand to be central to her story. The result of this inattention is that Rheume is constructed as the female athletic version of "everyman," when in reality by virtue of the position she plays she is in fact rather unique. This selective inattention is only one aspect of the

broader ideological construction of Rheume's experience. In this account, men's hockey is positioned as superior and women who play with men come to represent the heights of female athletic achievement. Among the competing readings of Rheume's experience, it may be argued that the dominant interpretation is a powerful—but troubling—re-confirmation of masculine hegemony in sport.

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<sup>1</sup>The account of Rheume's career provided here is taken from her autobiography (Rheume, with Gilbert, 1993) and information provided by Andria Hunter. My thanks to Andria for her World Wide Web search, to obtain up-to-date records on Rheume's career.

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- 1954 Marilyn Bell becomes the first person to swim across Lake Ontario
- 1956 Skier Guiliانا Chenal-Minuzzo of Italy is the first woman to take the Olympic oath at the Opening Ceremony; Marilyn Bell is the first woman to swim the Straits of Juan de Fuca
- 1961 Doris Plewes puts the finishing touches to Bill C-151, which becomes the Fitness and Amateur Sport Act
- 1962 The Fitness and Amateur Sport Act becomes law
- 1966 Sex tests (gender verification) for women are adopted in international sport
- 1968 Enriqueta Basilio becomes the first woman to light the Olympic flame, sex testing of women is introduced at the Mexico Games; Sandra Post is the first Canadian woman golf professional to win an American tournament
- 1970 The Royal Commission on the Status of Women releases its report
- 1971 Debbie Brill becomes the first woman to high jump six feet; she will dominate her sport throughout the decade
- 1973 Snooky Seely sets a world record in shotput at the Stoke Mandeville Games
- 1974 The first National Conference on Women in Sport is held in Toronto and leads to the creation of Sport Canada's Women's Program
- 1975 The United Nations declares International Women's Year; women tennis players win pay parity at the US Open
- 1976 Rowing and basketball become Olympic events for women
- 1980 The first Female Athlete Conference is held at Simon Fraser University and becomes the catalyst for the founding of the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport and Physical Activity (CAAWS); Fitness and Amateur Sport establishes the Women's Program
- 1981 Abby Hoffman is the first woman to be elected to the executive of the Canadian Olympic Association (COA); later that year she becomes the first woman to be appointed Director of Sport Canada
- 1981 Formation of CAAWS
- 1982 The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms prohibits discrimination on the basis of gender
- 1984 The first women's Olympic marathon is won by Joan Benoit of the United States; women's cycling, synchronized swimming, and rhythmic gymnastics are added to the Olympic calendar
- 1986 Sharon Wood is the first Canadian woman to scale Mount Everest