

Reflecting on a Life Through Sport

by Jennifer Fenton

En questionnant les représentations dualistes entre la vie et la mort, l'auteure réfléchit sur les expériences sportives d'une amie qui s'est servie d'activités

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physiques pour faire face à un changement dans son état de santé.

Life is not orderly.
—Natalie Goldberg

I, too, am realizing that life is not a linear pattern of optimistic and anticipated events. I have had family, friends, and colleagues threatened by illness and I have had to rely on them to help me understand how illness is a part of life. For so long, I have separated life and death as if they were opposites, and now I am beginning to believe that this dichotomy is not so salient. What life has to offer is far more complex and intertwined than I ever imagined. My thoughts were in part stimulated by recent feminist literature. The typical dichotomous or dualistic representations of aspects of life, which pit masculine versus feminine, work versus family, and work versus leisure, have been criticized (Tom; Fox). Tom discusses how research has separated women's lives into segregated, unrelated entities that are not reflective of how women interpret and give meaning to the diverse situations they encounter. She suggests that dualistic frameworks undermine the ability of women to integrate the many different aspects of their lives

which infers a powerlessness or lack of control over their lives. Fox, in support, cites comments made by bell hooks that "dichotomous thinking stresses differences from one another and meaning is derived only in relation to the differences from their

oppositional counterparts" (336). A pluralistic or holistic approach is suggested as a way to acknowledge the more realistic multidimensional nature of lives. These

discussions encouraged me to think about life and death in a new way. When my friend Sue died, I was further challenged to acknowledge the co-existence of life and death and to wrestle with their meanings. At the same time, I am reminded that sport was an integral part of our lives and friendship, and is intimately woven into the issues and questions surrounding life and death.

Woman to woman

It has been a year now since I lost Sue to ovarian cancer, just before her fortieth birthday. For me it has been a year of remembering, reflecting, and grieving the loss of a colleague and very good friend. I was drawn to Sue by her unlimited energy and love for life that was played out through physical activity and sport. We played together for years and I came to know the role that sport had in her life. I have caught myself trying to intellectualize her death and the process of grieving that I continue to participate in. I ask myself, what is the meaning of death? What is the meaning of life? What do these mean to me? What did they mean to Sue? I never asked Sue these questions directly and wish now that we had spent some time

sharing the meanings and the mysteries of life as she was experiencing them. Sue was a role model and mentor for me in a way that I was truly unaware. She adopted sport and physical activity into her life, allowed them to shape the meaning of her life, and drew upon them to help her cope with her illness. For Sue, the benefits gained and skills developed from participating in sport and physical activity extended far beyond the boundaries of the sport or activity itself. It was clear that her fierce commitment to and involvement in sport shaped the choices she made when cancer took her life in unexpected directions.

Life, illness, and sport

Sue's motto was that "sport is a right, not a privilege." She engaged her right and played in team sports throughout her school life. Sue defied the traditional beliefs about sport being a male preserve and she challenged the myths which create barriers and limit many girls and women in sport today. As an adult, she continued on with a vengeance, playing in all activities that were humanly possible. She was especially drawn to team sports like baseball, softball, basketball, volleyball, and soccer. Her keen interest and belief in sport led her towards a career in the field. Sue devoted 20 years to the Recreation and Sport Branch of the provincial government. Sue also loved individual sports and joined running clubs, swam, played tennis and golf, rowed, and was keen on water aerobics. Sue also loved tap dancing and ballet and was especially excited about participating in recitals. She dedicated time to coaching Special Olympic athletes in swimming and would volunteer at other sports celebrations for athletes with disabilities. She wanted everyone to have access to sports so that they, too, could have the opportunity

to enhance the quality of their lives.

I realize that Sue and I were privileged to have had these opportunities to participate in sport throughout our lives. Many girls and women are denied these experiences within our existing sport system which covertly discriminates by race, social class, sexuality, religion, and gender (Birrell; Vertinsky; Cahn). I do not think Sue ever questioned the role of sport in her life. I know it took me many years to understand that my physical activity experiences were privileged. I stopped assuming that inactivity was a choice that girls and women made. I began to question and to listen. I am conscious that we need to make more "voices audible and individuals visible" (Schulmit) within the sport system as I know it.

I recognize now that so much of the way Sue dealt with life was built on her sporting experiences: her innumerable friends and sense of camaraderie, her passion for competition, her physical skills, her self-esteem and confidence, her eagerness to help and to give, and her acknowledgement and sincere acceptance of difference. All these traits can be fostered through positive sporting experiences. Sue activated these rich resources at a time of crisis when many of us would be at a loss of what to do.

Physical knowledge

Through sport, Sue knew her body. She knew how far she could physically push it, how much it could take, and when she had to alter her behaviour. Athletes and participants in sport and physical activity learn about their bodies in an intimate way through the implicit physical and mental stresses placed upon them while participating. Athletes learn how to maximize their performance by focusing on and listening to their bodies and learning its unique idiosyncrasies. Sue often would tell me that she was not "fighting" cancer. Instead she played along with it and listened to her body. Her body would let her know what to do. Sue remained true to her conviction. She

did not wait for doctors to diagnose her situation, and instead signed herself into the hospital for various procedures along the way. She educated herself and integrated this knowledge into her lifestyle. She took control of a disease that was uncontrollable. From the first day, when Sue learned her condition was terminal, she carried on with her life and slowly changed her behaviours and commitments as she felt was appropriate. Making decisions was uncomplicated for Sue. She was confident and deliberate with the choices she made. Sue also felt that she was sick less often and less severely than others during treatment because of her active lifestyle. This made her feel proud and, at the same time, powerful.

It is disheartening to know the benefits of physical activity and sport that gave Sue such incredible control over her life are not afforded equitably to girls and women in our society. Sue had a close relationship with and great knowledge about her body from her vast involvement in physical activity. She was not slight and athletic looking in stereotypical terms. Sue was a large framed and bosomed woman, with small powerful legs. She mastered the apparent barriers that her body presented her and was an incredible role model. She entrusted her body to provide the meaning in her life.

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Coaching

At the Lillehammer 1994 Winter Olympics, 29.7 per cent of athletes, officials, coaches, and registered staff were female (CAAWS). These numbers increased slightly by special equity initiatives at the Commonwealth Games in the summer of 1994, but female representation at all levels is

not close to parity with males. The current sport system suffers from a lack of diversity and inclusiveness. Sue unknowingly created opportunities for herself to which many women have not had access to. When Sue suffered from physical injuries and illness and could not participate herself, she volunteered to coach. Coaches create a team which is a collective of individual strengths, operating far more proficiently as a whole than as isolated segments. Sue developed skills which allowed her to be a great coach. She placed value on knowing her teammates well, their individual strengths and weaknesses. Sue valued the team concept by creating a team for her life which she could nourish, by giving and receiving. Through sport, Sue developed friendships that extended across boundaries; each one cherished without judgement.

During her illness, she called on each one of us specifically for our unique strengths and allowed us an opportunity to help her. She focused on the present and took one day at a time as if she had an unlimited amount. She never brought worry to others; she worried about them instead. She sent cards and remembered special events in other people's lives. She spent time with those

she was concerned about the most. She became our coach; a role that we all wished we could have filled, but the job was hers. I was thankful for her guidance. During this time I felt awkward and inadequate. My desire to help was clouded by emotion. So, it was Sue who helped me.

Sue called me one day and told

me that she really wanted to go to New York. She gave me two week's notice and I sensed the immediacy of her request. She knew that no matter how busy my life was, that I would be able to make this happen for her. She indicated that she had only a small window of time between treatments and that she did not have time to be flexible. There were only a few things on her list for New York: *Cats* and other plays with dancing, Fifth Avenue, 42nd Street, Central Park, the Rainbow Room, and sightings of celebrities (especially Bette Midler and David Letterman). We had to see and touch the Statue of Liberty and the Empire State Building, eat pretzels from the street vendors, and bagels from the deli's. All this in three days and two nights. And, yes, Sue walked everywhere. She relied on her body again to help satisfy her dream. Sue gave me a chance to contribute to her life in a special way. I think what struck me profoundly was the way Sue could make others feel special about their role in her life. Good coaches will do this.

Team sports

Team sport offers opportunities to build a camaraderie that is strong and long lasting. Sue's team spirit influenced people's lives for years. Sue took the socializing aspect of sports seriously and was often referred to as a "party animal." When she became physically unable to participate in some of her favourite sports, she continued to meet the team at the bar. It was Sue's goal to bring people together even those from rival teams. At one point, I think Sue played on four softball teams at once. She challenged the norms in sport and the meaning of competition. Sport suffers in our society from the negative aspects of competition such as violence, sexual harassment, and the use of performance enhancing drugs. Sue was competitive but she accentuated the notion of sporting spirit with her relentless commitment to acknowledging players as people first. She found it impossible to exclude.

Sue confirmed her commitment to team sport, when after a severe setback of pneumonia she began planning a party for all her friends. Once again she relied on her body to call the shots. She had been given pain killers which finally allowed her to sleep through a night and awake with renewed energy. For three consecutive days she called and invited over 1000 colleagues, friends, family, and teammates from all over Canada to a party to "Celebrate Life." More than 800 friends showed up. The sheer number of people at that event are a testament to how Sue had touched their lives. Players from teams who had not seen Sue in 20 years made the trip and confirmed the life long connection that sport can provide. It was obvious that Sue was a special teammate, and her enthusiasm for sport was contagious.

I was overcome by this notion of having a party to celebrate life. I felt excited because I knew this was what Sue wanted and yet I felt anxious and confused. A party? It truly was an unusual approach to accepting the fact that her life was coming to an end. I wondered how I would bring closure to my life. Did I even know this many people? Would they be the people I would want to share the last moments of my life with? I admired Sue's mental fortitude at this critical moment in her life. Years of challenging herself through sport and building self-esteem and confidence, allowed her to muster the courage to recognize meaning in her life.

Everlasting images of sport

Sue knew that she needed to continue sports and activities as long as possible. This is what she knew and loved about life: the activity, the competition, the challenge, and most of all the people who were involved in sharing the experience. Each sport she chose, she threw herself enthusiastically into it, creating friendships along the way. She felt the support of her networks throughout her final months. Physically drained from treatments, living on her own, and on

leave from her career, she never felt lonely. Sue also loved watching sport on television. On her last day, Sue wandered downstairs in her mom's house and watched a few more highlights of the Winter Olympic Games in Lillehammer, Norway.

Conclusion

I have accepted that illness and death are a part of life and that the decisions I make today will impact upon the choices I will have later. I have discovered the limitations of dichotomous thinking and will continue to explore and encourage more holistic approaches. I am saddened, however, to know that girls and women are under-represented in all levels of sport and therefore may not be able to draw on their experiences in other spheres of their lives. The barriers are multiple and complex. Sport has a solid history of being created for western, middle class, white, heterosexual males and this gender order continues to be reproduced and reinforced in the current system. I hope that more people will question assumptions and communicate experiences because it is these actions that will bring about change; maintaining the status quo and silence will not. My experiences with Sue have heightened the importance of increasing the accessibility to sport and physical activity for girls and women so that we all will benefit from the multifaceted, positive contributions that sport and physical activity can offer to life.

Unfortunately the world has lost someone significant. I was honoured to have participated in Sue's life, and I remain indebted to her for educating me along the way.

In addition to Sue and my brother who I miss dearly, I sincerely thank my partner Mark, who also benefited from Sue's rich friendship, my advisor, Wendy and colleagues, Bryna, Claudia, and Wilf for their inspiration and overwhelming support.

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