A Sporting Chance

The sporting arena is a complex battle between the sexes.

Jan Wright explores the ideology of 'difference' in sport.

Tears flowed like spring rain as the elfin Australian realised that she had become the country's first track and field medallist for 16 years ... There were women athletes at the Olympics who were distinguished by moustaches and physiques that would alarm Dean Lukin, and it is enough to say that Glynis Nunn was not one of them. She was an athlete of undiminished femininity who smiled warmly and spoke softly, who ran lightly and through with grace, who triumphed with modesty and who accepted her hour of happiness in the time-honoured woman's way, she cried. That is why the world applauded. (Melbourne Herald, Oct 2, 1984.)

This description of Glynis Nunn is representative of the way in which media coverage of women's and men's sport continues to reproduce traditional expectations of masculine and feminine behaviour. Men are described in terms of their achievements, their toughness, both mental and physical, under trying conditions, including playing while seriously injured and in pain (the back pages of any popular newspaper provide evidence of this). Women, on the other hand, are described in terms of their physical attributes, their non-performance behaviour and their relationships.

Sport, of all social institutions, is particularly influential as a demonstration of gender differences. As a form of public display, it is ideally placed to reinforce the dominant ideology of male superiority. It is accessible to all for observation and comment. The results need no interpretation from experts. They are the currency of popular conversation - it is obvious who runs further, who jumps higher, who throws further and therein lies its power for legitimating commonly held beliefs.

Even the arguments from social biologists such as Ken Dyer that women are catching up to men, buys into this ideology of difference. The standard is still male performance and still expressed in terms of winning and losing or beating an external standard such as a record.

For many female participants the pleasure that they derive from sport has very little to do with besting an opponent and very rarely is it about being better (or worse) than men. It has much more to do with feeling powerful and in control of their bodies, as they achieve in ways that they have never experienced before. What is culturally valued about sport, however, is who is better than whom - how do performances differ rather than what do they mean to individual participants. These differences in performance in turn help to confirm or legitimate the dominant version of gender relations. Women are not as strong/powerful/exciting/fast/aggressive as men therefore they are weaker/inferior not only in biological terms but in social terms as well. Sport is thus ideally placed, in Luce Irigaray's terms, to "construct the male body as virile, full, unified and the female body as passive, castrated or lacking as the necessary precondition of patriarchal social relations, 'naturalising' and rationalising the historical domination of women by men."

While the conditions for valuing sport rest on the comparison with a standard which means a male standard, women will always lose out. The popular belief continues to be that women will never be as good as men (read as exciting/powerful/aggressive/tough) in the areas that really matter. Few people seriously entertain the idea of women playing with men on the football fields of Australia's capital cities and that's a very safe and comforting position for women because, in the long term, that's the forum in which it really counts. The media confirms these beliefs by both explicitly and implicitly representing women as either less than men or as different in ways that constitute women as emotional, dependent, nurturant, etc.

The comparison of women to a male standard (to their disadvantage) comes through clearly in commentary such as that demonstrated in The Bulletin (August 18, 1987) article "Impossible Dreams in Athletes' Sights". For most of the full-page article the author describes the achievements of a number of men in breaking what, at one time, appeared to be impossible records. In
the last paragraph the author draws attention to the achievements of a woman, Evelyn Ashford, but he does this by comparing her achievement with that of men, and particularly with men of a decade ago.

"Nor is record breaking a purely male domain. The women’s 100 metre sprint provides possibly the most stark portrayal that no barrier is beyond the imagination. American Evelyn Ashford’s 10.76 seconds world record is equivalent to a hand-timed run of 10.5. A decade ago, Ashford would have made the Olympic men’s final on that effort. And barely 10 men in Australia could go that fast now." (Emphasis added.)

Read another way, Ashford would only have made the final, and that was ten years ago; men’s times have improved since then, and today at least ten men in Australia alone, could beat her. Nor is there any mention of a comparison with other women; the comparison is only with the male standard. There is nothing for men to be concerned about here. Is this too cynical a conclusion? I think not. I am not arguing that this is the author’s consciously intended meaning, but when an article like this is read in the context of the prevailing ideology of gender relations, this interpretation is not unreasonable.

A patriarchal society has a vested interest in the continued privileging of traditional male sports. As women threaten male dominance in other public spheres of life, sport has become the last frontier (along with war) where men can publicly demonstrate their differences. When we have female bankers, politicians, union organisers and managers, it is becoming increasingly difficult to make a rational argument that women have inferior abilities in any other sphere of activity.

Sport remains the one arena where men can display the culturally valued attributes of physical toughness and strength. If women take on men in sport, if sport becomes ‘feminised’, what avenue is there left to demonstrate male superiority? An example from Bryson wonderfully illustrates this point:

In 1978, A Texan woman was one of only three people from the United States to qualify for the finals of the famous Cliff Diving Championships in Acapulco. However, her attempt at the championship was aborted when the Mexican competitors threatened to withdraw if she did not. She was then disqualified. As one competitor explained: "This is a death-defying activity - the men are taking a great gamble to prove their courage. What would be the point if everyone saw that a woman could do the same?"

Television helps to highlight the differences between male and female performance and bring the observable to a mass audience. Women’s sport rarely makes it to the TV screen but when it does it is often trivialised. Women’s sport is often reported for its humour or the unusual rather than for action of the game or the achievements of the women involved. The concern seems to be to keep the male sports world clearly differentiated and the media takes on a major role in doing this in a number of ways, some obvious and intended, some more subtle and possibly unconscious.

The most obvious difference is the general invisibility of women athletes. You might well be forgiven for believing that only men played sport if you were going on the amount of women’s sport in newspapers, television, and magazines such as The Bulletin and Time. In a survey in 1980, 2% of all available sports space in capital city newspapers was given to women’s sport. There were four times as many men’s as women’s sports featured in the results section and twelve times as many graphics. A further survey in 1984 indicated that rather than improving, the situation had deteriorated with 1.3% of newspaper space devoted to women’s sport and five times as many men’s as women’s sports covered in the results section.

When women do feature, their coverage is different from that of male participants in a number of significant ways. The emphasis is less on the action of the game or achievement of the athlete than on her femaleness, her physical appearance, her dress and her relationships - that is, her femininity or lack of it. This can be demonstrated by looking at most newspaper and television coverage though some writers are more subtle than others and their ideological bias is not immediately obvious.

The television coverage of women’s and men’s Olympic gymnastics stands out as one example of the production of difference through the media. Although both women’s and men’s activities require strength, agility and flexibility,
the commentators are selective in the attributes they associate with each sex. Attention is drawn to the strength and power, to the muscle development of the young male competitors while the female competitors or 'girls', as they are more likely to be called, are described as 'petite'. Reference is usually made to the young male competitors while the female competitors are described in terms of their physical appearance - Julie McDonald for instance we learn has "Nordic good looks, pale green eyes, cropped blond hair and perfect, very white teeth." The Wickham article reassuringly describes Tracey, now retired, with her "retrousse nose and button brown eyes... now topped by an almost an Afro of brown curls", as married, into cooking and teaching herself to sew. So it seems that, after all the hard years of training and being accepted, as it were, as androgynous, it is not too late to flower as an attractive and marriageable woman.

A further example from The Good Weekend (SMH, April 11, 1987) demonstrates the ways in which an article that is intended to be supportive of women's sport reveals, on closer analysis, unintended meanings that reflect cultural attitudes to women and women's behaviour. The article, 'How to Sell a Sportswoman' is ostensibly about the difficulties women's sport has in attracting substantial sponsorship and, in particular, is about the ways in which the entrepreneur, Robert McMurtie, intends to attract sponsorship for women's netball. The main protagonist of the article and of the photo that accompanies it, is not women netballers but McMurtie. He is associated with potent imagery that positions him as a very active participant in the text. He means "business", he will boycott those who ignore his sales pitch, he will no longer tolerate the rationale of "the breweries, the advertising agencies, the television networks, media sports departments" in ignoring women's netball. He is described as "the Mean Machine of Marketing" (an allusion to successful male athletes); he is "like quicksilver in his office, moving from busy phone to photocopying machine". His marketing strategies are "conducted with all the precision of a military campaign". His marketing strategies are presented as "the precision of a military campaign" Robert McMurtie is active, successful and capable of bringing about change through aggressive marketing. Unable to act on their own behalf, the netballers have to seek legitimation through male representation in the real world of business to which they have no access as equals; at the same time, they are the commodities to be exchanged. Either way, women are disempowered in the male worlds of business.

Individual women such as Anne Sargent, then captain of the Australian netball team, and Ann Mitchell, manager of the world champion 'cricket in culottes team', are described not in terms of their achievements but in terms of the emotions they have experienced in relation to their involvement in their respective sports. Anne Sergeant "sighs": "Sometimes the workload is so heavy. You don't know whether to scream or cry. But if I didn't have it, I'd crave it." Ann Mitchell is described as "be-sieged"; "her crusade has almost engulfed its champion"; she "suffers terrible migraines" and sometimes feels like giving up. The women are represented as barely coping, operating on an emotional level and confessing to weaknesses and the need to be supported.

So that even in an article that is apparently supportive of women's sport the traditional gender relations are reproduced in subtler ways in the language and in the structure of the argument. It is not only in the traditional male sports that reproduce gender relations but in the representation of women in their own sports, that the mass media helps to define what is normal, appropriate and desirable behaviour for female sports participants.

For all of the above reasons, women's participation in sport presents a dilemma to the feminist writer, at least to this feminist writer. On one hand it is apparent that many women derive a great deal of pleasure from their participation and this should not be ignored or dismissed. On the other hand, organised sport is so blatantly instrumental in maintaining and reproducing social relations that support a patriarchal order, that its practice must be transformed in radical ways both to match more closely with women's experience and desires and also to subvert attempts to colonise it for patriarchal ends. For many women the choice has been to opt out of sport altogether, not because they did not want to be physically active but because they were resistant to and often alienated by the restrictive structure of sport and the competitive ethos. Other women, like the netballers described above, and most women's sports organisations, take men's sports as their model for the future. As such they will remain on the fringes of the male sports world colluding in their own oppression.