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Stretching the Limits:
journalism and gender politics in women's sport

by Adrianne Blue

submitted for the PhD by prior publication

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March, 2010

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Acknowledgements

I wish to thank my thesis supervisor Professor Howard Tumber, who provided intellectual support and shepherded the project to completion. My thanks too to Adrian Monck, whose idea it was that I undertake to do a doctorate by prior publication, and to Dr. Sarah Niblock whose counsel early on helped me span the gap between theory and practice.

Declaration

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ABSTRACT

My work on the sports pages of the Sunday Times led to invitations to write two books on the emergence of elite female champions and two unauthorized biographies of female champions, all of which included original data and analysis of gender issues in sport. One of the first academic, self-reflective analyses by a sports journalist, this dissertation written for the PhD by prior publication, places my work in the context of the profession and considers my contribution to understanding how elite champions have used their agency in sport.

Contributions in the works submitted include re-theorizing the “feminine apologetic” with regard to elite champions, documentation and interpretation of agency and constraint in the career of Martina Navratilova, identifying and modelling the backlash role of gymnastics, and interrogating the gender frontier; all are critically analysed here. In this dissertation, issues of journalistic practice including the advantage of bias are considered, and the “doping apologetic” is identified, named and preliminarily modelled.

My work both benefits from and contributes to the cross-disciplinary, inter-linked analysis of women's sport in the social sciences and in sport and women's studies, and has been cited in the literature. Contravening conventionalist journalistic stereotyping of female champions, it documents and evaluates how champions have attempted to gain opportunity for themselves, and how their strategies may have affected the paradigm of femininity.

THE STRUCTURE OF THIS THESIS

My work on the sports pages of the Sunday Times led to invitations to write two books on the emergence of elite female champions and two unauthorized biographies of female champions all of which included original data and analysis of gender issues in sport. Excerpts from two of these books (Blue, 1987, 1995) and selected newspaper (e.g. Blue, 1994a and 1998) and periodical journalism (e.g. Blue, 1988a, 2006, 2007b) are presented for the PhD by prior publication. Articles which became parts of books were unchanged except for transitional paragraphs, and so are not considered comparatively here.

In one of the first academic, self-reflective analyses by a sports journalist writing for national newspapers and magazines, this dissertation places my work in the context of the profession and considers my contribution to understanding how female champions have used their agency in sport. I define agency as the "individual ability to shape our own lives" (Holmes, 2007: 41).

At first reluctant to cover women's sport, I soon agreed with my editor that it was one of the biggest sports stories of our era. I have been in the forefront of British sports journalists who contravened the conventionalist sexist framing still found in some journalistic representations of women's sport, my work both benefiting from and contributing to the burgeoning cross-disciplinary developments of the 1980s and 1990s in sport and woman's studies and in the social sciences. My work began to be cited in the literature as gender became a major topic in the sociology of sport Coakeley (1998, Theberge, 2000).

My work makes no essentialist argument that women's sport should be different from men's, and I do not accept that the paradigm of professional sport as competitive, commercial, and aggressively physical is a "male model". Based on interviews with contemporary female champions, on participant observation, and on technical and academic studies and archival material, my work is founded in the tradition of campaigning journalism and its allies in academe, particularly in interpretive sociology and ethnography, and on gender analysis. Interviewing techniques in journalism are contrasted with those in the social sciences, the advantage of bias in journalism is considered, as is the cognitive and narrative tool of framing.

Original contributions in the works considered include re-theorizing of the "feminine apologetic" in the case of elite champions; documentation and interpretation of motivation, agency and celebrity in the career of Martina Navratilova; and identifying and modelling the backlash role of gymnastics; performance-enhancing drugs are discussed and the concept of the "doping apologetic" is identified and named in this dissertation.

As evidenced in the chapters submitted for the PhD, *Grace Under Pressure: the emergence of women in sport* (1987) is an informal social history of elite female sport emphasizing agency and celebrity in the twentieth century. Depicting and interpreting key moments, issues and personages, the book evaluates the achievement of elite women's sport—and considers how the agency of female champions may have lessened the constraints on ordinary women, changing the ideal of womanhood. The book argues that because female champions must withstand the pressure of prejudice as well as the pressure of sport they are more heroic than the men.

Extensive interviewing of those close to Navratilova for my unauthorized biography and examination of the ups and downs of her career demonstrated the thesis of *Martina: The Lives and Times of Martina Navratilova* (1995), that tennis was Navratilova's true love, a key reason for the tennis star's serial monogamy being to gain the support and confidence needed for her continuing achievement in tennis.

Journalistic stereotyping of women's sport is seen in tabloidizations of my work and in the Independent's 2008 excruciatingly sexist Olympic coverage. The symbolic institutionalisation of elite sports women as social anomaly is evidenced in the mandatory sex testing conducted for three decades.

My research inside the world of elite sport found that the cognitive dissonance between being a woman and an athlete termed the "feminine apologetic" (Felshin, 1974), which researchers continue to find in ordinary players, is in elite sport a cynical, image-protecting strategy for addressing the ambivalence of others.

I attempt to revivify narrative frames of Cinderella in analysing the advent of the first black Wimbledon female champion.

Doping, a major issue of twenty-first century sport, is addressed in Blue (1987 and 1995) and in New Statesmen sports columns (Blue, 2006, 2007a) and this dissertation identifies and names "the doping apologetic"; a dynamic in which users of muscle-building drugs and sporting institutions strenuously decry doping as a cynical strategy of image-protection.

Gymnastics, a sport in which girls could be girls but dared not become women, has had a backlash role.

My satirical essay on the weaker sex, men, recalls historical attempts to “protect” women out of sport.

The dissertation demonstrates my thesis that elite sportswomen have attempted to use their agency to increase their opportunity and achievement in sport and concludes that their activity has impacted on the paradigm of womanhood, evidenced by, for example, the multi-billion-pound fitness industry aimed at women. The question as to whether or not elite sportswomen might have had greater impact on the female gender paradigm had they been more forthright is interrogated, but the answer must be left to future research.

INTRODUCTION

The French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir put the cat among the pigeons with her famous insight in *The Second Sex* (1949: 295): “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman’. Sport, she said, could be an antidote to the paradigm of docile, self-effacing womanhood (357): “Let her swim, climb mountain peaks, pilot an airplane, battle against the elements, take risks, go out for adventure, and she will not feel before the world the timidity to which I have referred.”

More than half a century later, millions of women, many of whom have never even heard of Simone de Beauvoir, have entered the realm of sport and found themselves inadvertently on the frontline of gender politics. As a female sports writer my position has been in some ways analogous. I entered a particularly macho world and wasn't always welcome. When I arrived at a grand prix, it was often assumed that the man standing next to me—even if he was a fifteen-year-old boy—must be the Sunday Times correspondent: surely I couldn't be, I was a woman. Because of the prejudices prevalent in both journalism and sport, I tried to avoid writing about women. In *Battling for News: the rise of the woman reporter* historian Anne Sebba (1994: 252) documents my ambivalence: “Adrianne Blue went to work for the *Sunday Times* as its motor-cycle racing correspondent and began to cover other ‘macho male sports’ such as weight-lifting, judo and athletics ‘because I didn’t want to get stuck in the women’s ghetto’.”

The sports pages of the Sunday Times, unlike most sports pages (Boyle, 2006), prided itself on investigating the business and politics of sport. For example, I and

my colleagues revealed the unlovely business practices of the sports tycoon Mark McCormack's IMG (Blue and Wheatley, 1989) and illegal debenture ticket sales at Wimbledon (Blue and Mott, 1989). Similarly, to avert planned cuts of morning swimming hours at British public baths, I was dispatched to interview the Minister of Sport to corral him into revealing his double standard: his admission that his own morning swims at a private pool would continue ran as an Inside Track item; early swimming hours were not cut. In "an era-changing stint as Sunday Times sports editor" (Scott, Independent, 2008) John Lovesey, whose career had included some years in New York at Time-Life, encouraged tough journalism and "wider cultural points of reference" (Boyle, 2006: 36). It was not atypical for sports correspondents to also write on other subjects (e.g. Blue, 1990a).

Prior to moving to the paper, I had been the first female sportswriter to conduct a post-match interview in the changing room at Lords, where amid showering cricketers, I interviewed the then England captain Mike Brearley for Time Out in a story that was laid out but never published because of a strike (Sebba, 1994).

One of the few female sports correspondents writing for a British national newspaper in the 1980s and 1990s, I continue to be one of the still remarkably few female sports journalists writing today. In 1992, according to Sports Council figures, just 24 of the 513 members of the Sports Writers Association of Great Britain were female. In 2009, renamed the Sports Journalists' Association and open only to full-time sports journalists, its female membership has tripled, but remains under 10 per cent, with just 74 of the 750 full-time sportswriters being female. Like sport itself, sports journalism remains a frontier of gender politics.

Newspaper sports departments, Chambers et al (2004:111) conclude, are the locus of "the most intense and the most historically enduring gender divisions in

journalism, in terms of who is permitted to cover which sports as journalists, how athletes are covered as well as in terms of which genders are served as audiences". Even after a revolution in sport which has changed the shape of women's bodies and influenced their attitudes and professional prospects (Boutillier and SanGiovanni, 1983; Blue 1987), as many have noted, stereotypically sexist and limited media coverage keeps women in their place (e.g., Boyle and Haynes, 2000; Whannel, 2008, Hardin and Whiteside (2009).

In 2008, just one per cent of the images and two per cent of the articles on the sports pages of British national newspapers were devoted to female athletes and women's sport—that is 28 of 1,482 pieces—according to a content analysis conducted on a Friday, a Saturday and a Sunday in March (Women in Sport Audit, 2008). This is particularly disappointing, as one aim of the Women's Sport Foundation, which sponsored this study and of which I was a founder member (1), is boosting media attention. Not only is women's sport still often framed in disempowering stereotypes of traditional femininity on the sports pages, it is contained, limited, *hemmed in*. Is it any wonder that as recently as Wimbledon 2006, "in contrast to the women, the men appeared to have achieved a greater comfort in their status" (Mahoney, 2006: 1).

Implications of the paucity of female sportswriters

Little has changed with regard to numbers of women working as sports journalists since Boyle's (2006) definitive survey of the sports pages of British national newspapers in 2005. Of up to 160 by-lined stories in the dailies, only 14 (about 9 per cent) were by women. In the Sunday papers, things were worse: just 3 per cent—7 of the 244 by-lines on the sports pages—were women's. As Boyle (2006: 149) concludes, "Clearly, even with the under-representation of women in other

areas of print journalism, these figures are very marked and suggest that despite advances in the broader sports industry, women sports journalists remain something of a rarity in the UK press.” Hardin and Whiteside (2009) go so far as to argue that female sports writers being so few are tokens who dare not contest the stereotypical coverage of women, but this is at best an over-simplification.

Hardin and Whiteside's interviewees, all fairly inexperienced American sports journalists, said they felt subject to little professional discrimination from their publications, but the authors disbelieved them. Yet Boyle's interviews of British journalists and my personal experience tally with that of Hardin and Whiteside's young American female sportswriters; all of us cite "the importance of knowledge of ... sport [and] an ability to write and a foundation of core journalistic skills" and are aware of "little significant discrimination" from sports department colleagues and editors (Boyle, 2006: 158). The work of a new generation of well sussed female sports writers—e.g. Scott (2007) and Potter (2009) in the Times and John (2009) in the Observer—reveals a confident feminism in British sports journalism.

New departures in theorizing women's sport

I have been in the forefront of British sports journalists, not all of them women (2), who as early as the 1980s began to contravene the conventionalist sexist framing still apparent in the representation of women (e.g., Harris, 2008; Newton, 2008, Lawton, 2008). In what is one of the first academic self-reflective analyses by a writer of sports journalism, this dissertation for the PhD by prior publication critically examines my own practice, sampling my books and articles on elite women's sport written over two decades, 1987-2007. That work documents, depicts, and contextualises, the emergence of female champions in individual sport, offering new data and interpreting data from other sources and disciplines. When

articles became parts of books, they were unchanged except for transitional paragraphs, and so are not considered comparatively here.

My work both benefits from and contributes to a new, cross-disciplinary scholarship, a new way of theorizing women's sport, that began to attract notice in the 1980s and 1990s particularly in the inter-linked, academic fields of sport, cultural and women's studies, and sports psychology and sociology, all of these disciplines partaking of the insights of critical feminist analysis when examining the topic of gender. My own formative influences in this regard came less from the classic texts of second-wave feminism (Beauvoir 1952, Greer, 1970, Millet 1972,) than from studies in the disciplines of social science and sport (e.g., Powdermaker 1974 [1966], Dyer 1982, Boutillier and SanGiovanni 1983, Wells 1986). An early job as an editor at a publishing house specialising in the social sciences where I worked on the manuscripts of Dr John Money, then a leader in developing the concept of gender identity, broadened my knowledge and perspective.

I define agency as the individual ability to shape our own lives" (Holmes, 2007: 41), and gender as a social and psychological process that constructs differences between women and men. My work makes no essentialist argument that women's sport should be different than men's, and as the section on theory clarifies, I do not accept that the paradigm of professional sport as competitive, commercial, and aggressively physical is a "male model".

A big story on the horizon

It was because of the intervention of a male sports editor that I was asked to cover my first major women's sports story and dispatched to the Nike stronghold of Eugene, Oregon, to do so. The paper's male athletics correspondent had a sheaf of documents about my chief interviewee, the great champion Mary Decker (later

Mary Decker Slaney), couriered to me to read on the plane. The occasion for my assignment to write what would be the first piece on Decker in a British newspaper was not to report on a sporting event; rather it was to examine a case of sport being used as an instrument of power politics. Decker was an outspoken leader of the disgruntled American athletes campaigning to participate in the 1980 Moscow Olympics: the President of the United States had withdrawn Americans from the upcoming Games to express symbolic disapproval of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. My story for the Sunday Times sports pages, which was trailed on page one, later appeared in my book *Grace Under Pressure* (1987), chapters of which are submitted for the PhD.

I do not believe the Sunday Times sports editor assigned me to cover the Decker story just because I was female—nor just because I was American—although these were advantages with regard to this particular story. The sports editor John Lovesey—who later became the paper's news editor and for whom I then wrote news—employed me as he would any journalist on the basis of my relevant knowledge and professional (reportorial and writing) skills.

He chose me for this particular story, above all, because I was aware of the political nature of all sport and because of my understanding of the feminism in the air, because long before any other sports editor, he had recognized the big story coming: “Today, Adrienne specialises in writing about women and sport because, she believes, 'the greatest sports story of the nineties is the emergence of women as champions'” (Sebba, 1994: 252).

Demanding female sports champions and their institutions were embracing the so-called male competitive, commercial, and aggressively physical professional model of sport, opening up new territory for themselves, and inspiring other

women. It was news—in journalism and in academe—and by the end of the nineties, in a new edition of *Sport in Society*, Jay Coakley (1998) reported that gender was the major topic of study in the American sociology of sport (Theberge, 2000).

My work on women's sport

My journalism in the area of women's sport for the Sunday Times had led me to be invited to write a book on the emergence of elite female champions. I was asked to do this because no such book for the intelligent general reader existed in Britain. *Grace Under Pressure: the emergence of women in sport* (1987), is an informal, diachronic social history of elite women's sport emphasizing the twentieth century. Its thesis is that elite female champions striving only to win opportunity for themselves were loosening the constraints of the traditional paradigm of femininity; it argued that because female champions must withstand the pressure of prejudice as well as the pressure of sport they are more heroic than the men. Reviewers and scholars welcomed the book and it was cited in the literature by ground-breaking feminist sociologists (e.g., Hargreaves, 1994 and 2000, Creedon, 1994 and 1998). *Grace* and other work considered in this dissertation continue to be cited (e.g. Brace-Govan 2004, Welky, 2008, ProCon.org, 2008).

A second book, *Faster, Higher, Further: women's triumphs and disasters at the Olympics* (Blue, 1988), the first feminist account of women at the Olympics, was short-listed for the Observer Sports Book of the Year award. After co-writing the javelin champion Fatima Whitbread's autobiography (Whitbread and Blue, 1988), I was invited to write two unauthorized biographies, one on the runner Liz McColgan (Blue, 1992), the other on Martina Navratilova (Blue, 1994, 1995) published in seven languages. Chapters of the latter are submitted for the PhD.

The Navratilova biography, which examines the interface of the personal, the professional and the political in her life, illustrates the thesis that Navratilova's overriding commitment was to tennis, a key reason for her serial monogamy being to improve her support system, her self-esteem and ultimately her tennis. Self-belief is known to be a factor in sporting performance (Mahoney, 2006).

The satirical essay “The weaker sex: an immodest proposal” (Blue, 1990) arguing that men should be banned from sport for their own good, is a new genre, a new departure, in sports journalism, although it owes much to Jonathan Swift. It is submitted to give insight into the ideological basis of “protecting” women from sport.

In 2006 and again in 2007, I was invited to write a sports column for the New Statesman. We want “your take,” the deputy editor said. I had written for the Statesman when Hugh Stevenson was editor, and then for John Lloyd, contributing the Diary and sport and literary pieces. Now I was writing for John Kampfner and his deputy Sue Matthias (who was made acting editor when Kampfner left but was not appointed editor). The mode of investigation would differ, but the essence of the product I delivered for the column—a combination of anecdote and analysis—was little different from what I filed as a sports journalist (and later as a news journalist) for The Sunday Times (1979-1994), where after our first meeting, the sports editor gave me a report on trends in society to read, and told me that television had taken over the representation of mere fact, and that the job of print journalism in a Sunday paper now was vivid writing and interpretation. The word count was higher at the Sunday Times than at the New Statesman, as were the journalistic standards—I attended the events, I spoke to people on both sides of the issue, but I did not pretend in print to objectivity as many journalists still do. (This

issue is discussed in Methodology.) The brief was to write the truth as I saw it, and we (I and the sports editor and the subs) were quite aware that my truth might not be the same as some other correspondent's. Two New Statesman columns regarding performance-enhancing drugs (Blue 2006, 2007b)—now a major issue in elite sport—are submitted.

Self-reflection, *metacognition*, in the terminology of cognitive psychology, is the act of thinking about your own thinking—in this case articulating theoretical and methodological strategies employed in one's own work. Subjective, it is a relativistic process but it is my hope that it may provide some insight into journalistic practice and process and some understanding of top level women's sport.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cross-disciplinary approaches

Sports biologists led the attack on the constraints on women's sport from an unexpected perspective, repudiating beliefs about female frailty and incapacity for sports. Kenneth Dyer's influential *Catching Up the Men* (1982), citing biological research including some of his own, showed that women's records were increasing at a faster pace than men's, suggesting that when the pool of players widened and equal numbers of women began training at the same intensity as men, some women would surpass men. *Female Endurance Athletes* (1986) edited by Barbara Drinkwater brought together the findings of researchers in biomechanics, physiology, psychology and nutrition, analysing factors influencing performance, and showing us that in long-distance running, from which women had been especially barred, they had the best advantage. *Women, Sport and Performance: a*

physiological perspective (1986) by Christina Wells reported that in most aspects of performance there was more difference within the sexes than between them.

In *The Sporting Woman* (1983) sociologists Boutillier and SanGiovanni identified sport as a locus of masculine hegemony and set the agenda of explaining how social and cultural structures excluded or constrained women in sport. This was the first work in the new feminist sociology of women in sport. It argued that women could and should achieve more in a less prejudiced world; the focus was the sportive Everywoman. In a widely cited study which found that social approval of a woman's achievement in sport depended on how the sport conformed to traditional images of appropriate feminine behaviour, Matteo (1986) identified sport considered male appropriate (football, for example), female appropriate (gymnastics) and neutral (golf and tennis).

Women who played sport hard enough to perspire used to be asked—they even *asked themselves*—are you a woman or an athlete? Jan Felshin (1974) hypothesized that to reduce the cognitive dissonance resulting from participating in what was seen as a masculine and masculizing activity, sports women compensated by dressing in girly-girly ways, using a lot of makeup, not taking sport too seriously, and reaffirming other traditional feminine values. Felshin termed this the “feminine apologetic” which she theorized as a strategy to deal with sportswomen's cognitive dissonance. In the twenty-first century, researchers continue to find the cognitive dissonance between being a woman or an athlete persisting in university and county players, this internalised view of themselves as social anomalies undermining their achievement (e.g. Guillet et al, 2000, Grogan et al 2004 cited in Jarvis 2006).

Blue (1987) found that in the case of elite champions, the apologetic was not a matter of cognitive dissonance within the champion's mind, but rather a strategy for dealing with the ambivalence of others including sponsors and the public. Countless researchers (e.g., Chase 1992, Creedon 1994, Hargreaves, 1994, Chambers, et al, 2004), have concluded as does Whitson 1994 [cited in Wesley & Gaardner 2004: 646]) that, "Sport has generally been an institution through which dominant social constructions of femininity and masculinity are funnelled" and that boys learn to use their bodies in "skilled, forceful ways" whereas "girls learn to circumscribe their movements and limit their strengths". Connell's classic study, *The Men and the Boys* (2000) shows the complex social process involved in training, coaching, medically supporting, managing, and marketing "the exemplary masculinity of the male sports star", this social process being predicated on the superior capabilities of the male champion, capitalizing his gender, his 'hegemonic masculinity'. In my work as a sports journalist, I saw first at Nike in 1980 and later elsewhere in Sportsworld, that the same complex of training, coaching, medical support, management and marketing, goes into the creation of the female sports star.

The wealth of analyses focussing on particular sports, social classes, nations and historical periods are beyond the scope of this dissertation. Blue (1987, 1988), Vertinsky (1990), and Guttman (1991) synthesized and interpreted data from many sources and disciplines in their broadly focused studies of women's sport. As Whannel (2008: 190) asserts: "Feminist writing on sport rightly identified that there was nothing arbitrary or natural about sport's discriminatory culture, argued that women could and should be able to engage in all sporting activities, and fought to bring those opportunities about." Happily, Messner (2002) reports that while the

little league and high school playing field is still far from level in the United States, what he sees as the contested gender terrain of sport is increasingly fluid, weakening fixed constructions of gender.

Meanwhile, female champions attempting to extend their own agency were becoming role models (Lines, 2001) inspiring Everywoman. As Theberge (2000: 327) concludes, although the impact of their efforts has been “constrained by dominant ideologies of gender, sport and physicality” they “constitute significant challenges to ... the male preserve of sport.” Even though scarcely any world class champions were or are willing to call themselves feminists (Blue, 2007a), their efforts have been aptly termed “stealth feminism” (Heywood and Dworkin, 2003: 25).

Media coverage

Outmoded stereotypes of femininity (and, arguably, of masculinity) continued to be purveyed by some sportswriters, as a recent study by Curry et al (2002 [one of several cited in Jarvis 2006]) showed; sports coverage in American men's magazines not specifically devoted to sport emphasized sportsmen's competition and aggression whereas the equivalent women's magazine's coverage of sportswomen emphasized cooperation and participating for pleasure. My own examination of the *Independent's* coverage of the 2008 Beijing Olympics for this dissertation, considered in the Discussion section, found the inappropriate highlighting of a female competitor's conventional femininity rather than her sporting achievement, confirming Boyle and Haynes'(2000: 132) conclusion that "examples are not difficult to find" of "a highly gendered treatment given to female athletes". In the United States, where universities are required to offer comparable facilities to men and women if they want Federal money, there is no law

demanding equal media coverage, and figures remain poor. Billings et al (2002), for example, analysing 2,367 lines of broadcast commentary on the finals of the 2000 American collegiate athletics championships found that not only were significantly more words used to discuss men than women, but men were talked about in terms of their athletic ability and performance whereas for women it was primarily their personality, decorum, looks, and family background.

Although a large and growing body of work concludes that beliefs about gender appropriate behaviour are reflected in what is seen as the media's predominantly sexist depiction of female champions (e.g. Theberge, 2000, Chambers et al, 2004) and that sport is theorized as masculine and even masculizing by the media, it is my impression that recent coverage on the British sports pages has become more equitable. As detailed in the introduction, the British media, coverage of women's sport remains minimal (e.g., Boyle, 2006; Women's Sports Audit, 2008) but sports journalists on the "heavies" including Scott (2007) and Potter (2009) in the Times, Trollope (2007) in the Independent and John (2009) in the Observer are writing about women in nonsexist terms, and some redtops have shown restraint in reporting the issue of world champion runner Caster Semenya's gender (Mirror, 2009).

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Approaching the so-called "male model": divergent roads

My work makes no essentialist argument that women's sport should be different than men's, and I take issue with the received notion that the paradigm of professional sport as competitive, commercial, and aggressively physical is a "male model" unless we go so far as to define any profession requiring those factors as

male. Admittedly, strength and stamina are traditionally associated with maleness, but physical fitness can also be a success factor for both men and women in such professions as nursing, war reporting, and university teaching. The issue of muscle as a frontier of gender is discussed in the final chapter of *Grace Under Pressure* (Blue, 1987) as well as in the biography of Navratilova (Blue, 1995) and in the sports column "Pushing Boundaries" (Blue, 2007a).

Neo-Marxist analyses such as *Sport: a prison of measured time* (Brohm, 1978) attack the culture of elite sport, among them Hargreaves (1994), which in contradistinction to what she sees as the liberal feminist analysis of women's sport, argues for a more equalitarian, less competitive and less money-based women's Sportsworld. Re-defining sporting heroines as those from minorities, i.e, the unsung, Hargreaves (2000: 3) asserts: "Gendered heroism is being constantly challenged by women who are appropriating *the narratives of maleness* [my italics] and transforming themselves from victims into superstars. According to many feminists, to claim an identity that used to be exclusively male in a macho, sexist culture is symbolically heroic. However, what is often forgotten is that the fierce concern for equality *props up* [my italics] the violence, the corruption, commercialization and exploitation that plague men's sports."

It is particularly in that last sentence and in the notion that to be a female superstar is to inhabit a narrative of maleness that our roads diverge: in my view, it is not women's "concern for equality" that props up the dominant paradigm of professional sport; nor would women abandoning the paradigm be likely to diminish it. Mainstream journalists need not condone or embrace that model to report it. One may choose to criticize certain practices or to argue for evolution, as Blue (1987a) argued in the Sunday Times sports pages for equal prize money at

Wimbledon, but in my view it is futile to call into question what now appears to be the very *raison d'être* of modern professional sport. One need not be a materialist to know that those who dominate the institutions of sport are wed to materialism and are highly unlikely to change the paradigm. Equal prize money at grand slams has been obtained, but as to the likelihood of transforming sport into something less capitalistic, individualistic or competitive, well, the beast is such that in our lifetimes at least—as perhaps they do realise—Marxist interventionists such as Hargreaves (2000) will yearn in vain.

In *Built to Win: the female athlete as cultural icon*, Heywood and Dworkin, (2003), both active sportswomen as well as scholars, argue that many academics who call for a gentler sports realm usually do not participate in vigorous sport themselves, and therefore fail to understand the joys of competition, which is, of course, always also against oneself. While I am sure there are marathoners in academe who are also neo-Marxist feminists, this argument has some resonance.

Conceptualising gender

The multi-disciplinary gender testing in 2009 of the runner Caster Semenya has raised the question of how to define a woman for the purposes of sport, leading the governing body of athletics to embark on a year-long study of the issue (Harris, 2009, Longman, 2009). The decision to determine her sexual identity not just on the basis of biology, but also on gender factors, highlights the complex interaction of such biological factors as hormones with social and psychological ones, but is disputed by some experts (Dreger, 2009). In theorizing gender, scholars make a distinction between sex differences—biological differences between males and females—and gender differences, which most see as the socially, psychologically and culturally produced aspects of being male or female.

Simone de Beauvoir set the terms of the great debate: how much of being a woman is ordained by nature, how much by nurture? But as Holmes (2006: 93) explains, the term "gender" in its contemporary usage appeared later, in medical studies of sex reassignment. Kate Millet (1972 [1970]: 27) mentions the term in *Sexual Politics*, but because Millet's book, like Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* (1970), was aimed at the intelligent general reader, initially it was rarely cited in the academic literature, where Oakley (1972) was credited with the first mention. Over time, what we used to call sex roles began to be known as gender roles. However, theorists continue to argue as to how much control an individual has over becoming gendered. Is Creedon (1994: 3) correct in defining gender "as an ongoing cultural process that constructs differences between women and men"; does the individual have any choice, or is gender thrust upon her (or him); or is gender a culturally-induced performance (Butler, 1990)? As the twentieth century neared its end, gender became the most written about topic in American sport sociology (Coakley, 1998, Theberge, 2000).

Revelation of Dr John Money's fraud (Diamond and Sigmundson, 1997; Colapinto 2000) in reporting the John/Joan sex reassignment case (Money and Ehrhardt, 1972), has muddied the understanding of gender. Indeed, three decades of social theory led Connell (2002: 35) to opine cautiously and sagely that, "A common-sense compromise would suggest that gender differences arise from both biology and social norms."

What is little realised is that as early as 1916, a scientist in the field of what would later be called sex hormones concluded that the biological differences between men and women were not clear cut, noting the "many individuals with ovaries who are not women in the strict sense of the word and many with testes

who are really feminine in many other respects" (Bell, cited in Oudshoorn, 1994). Popular books continue to proclaim that men are from Mars, women from Venus, but research has shown there is more overlap between the sexes' physiological strength and endurance than there is difference (Dyer, 1982, Wells, 1986, Drinkwater, 1986). The aforementioned studies show that some women are stronger, taller, faster, or have more stamina than some men.

Campaigning journalism and its links to social science scholarship

The model of campaigning journalism was formative in my journalism, which is fact-based but intentionally polemical. Historically, the aim of such reporting has been to document abuses and marshal public opinion to right what is perceived as a wrong. This social activism was what I have understood to be the "power of the press". This is a tradition in which I was working regarding women and sport. It is historically situated in my own experience as well as in the traditions of journalism. Like many journalists, I was inspired by the perseverance and daring to confront authority of Woodward and Bernstein (1974). Waisbord (2009) reports that the American press tends to limit outright opinion to the comment pages, whereas advocacy journalism permeating news coverage is more acceptable in Europe. Yet, even in the so-called objective, journalism of Woodward and Bernstein (1974), which led to the downfall of Nixon and the unraveling of the Watergate conspiracy, it was a campaign to get to the truth, based in the strongly held belief that a government should be held to account, which drove them on.

Such journalism has much to do with instinct, passion, caring about the issue, but it insists on accuracy as a *sine qua non*. I saw myself as both a critic and a defender of elite women's sport. Embedded in my writing on women in sport is a dual spirit of social activism and uneasiness about discriminatory discourses, about

sexism and racism, dating back to childhood lessons in tolerance and equality learned in school history lessons and stressed by parents from immigrant families. In interviews, Oriana Fallaci, the author of *Interviews with History* (1977) and Robert Fisk, author of *The Great War for Civilisation* (2005), have told me that their advocacy journalism stems from similar uneasiness sown early in their lives.

Campaigning journalism has activist allies in academe. Interventionist approaches to sport are widespread in cultural studies, postmodern ethnography, sports sociology and other disciplines. In *Feminist Methodologies for Critical Researchers: Bridging Differences*, for example, Sprague (2005), argues that in addition to critically analyzing issues, social scientists ought to find ways to use the knowledge they create to empower the disadvantaged. She questions the efficacy of academic writing's impersonality and its limiting itself to highly specialised audiences. Sports sociologists Creedon (1994) and Messner (2002) do inject the authorial voice and use journalistic scene-setting in their narratives, telling the stories behind the issues to communicate their knowledge to a wider audience. Their approach, however, is a far cry from the commissioning by British editors and the production by journalists of intentionally opinionated, polemical, reportage in all media including television where correspondents routinely speculate as to what Downing Street may decide to do.

Peter Donnelly (2000: 79) praises sports journalism for providing "rich 'insider' information for sociologists of sport interested in the experience and meaning of being an athlete". Similarly, journalistic accounts such as *Among the Thugs* (Bufford, 1991) document and give insight into the experience of being a fan. Despite important differences between journalism and the social sciences in methodological and theoretical assumptions and techniques, and in the academic

review process, Donnelly (2000: 82) finds that the data and insights of those journalists who have access to areas out of bounds to many sociologists can be of use to sociologists: "In the final analysis, ... it would be more surprising if good insider journalistic accounts were not similar to good ethnographic research."

METHODOLOGY

Verbal cantilevering

To journalists the world is a series of interdisciplinary problems out there for us to document and interrogate and then communicate to others. A journalist is a bridge builder, an engineer whose specialty is figuring out and supplying verbal cantilevers which link disciplines. To put it another way, the media mediates, explaining and contextualising the accomplishments of one set of people to a wide audience of others. Typically, in the work under discussion, the cantilevers are constructed largely from data obtained in interviews with contemporary female champions and their entourages and enemies, and with other experts in the field, from observation, and from technical and professional journals and other published sources. Sports journalists continue "to buck the trend" of journalists staying routed to their desk (Boyle, 2006: 12). Face to face interviews, though time-consuming, are preferred to telephone and email interviews because they give more data (what you see as well as what you hear). It is believed in the profession that most people will say more face to face, and that you can read and use gestures as well as words to draw them out, but few journalists I know are aware that people are less truthful in telephone interviews (Jarvis, 2006).

"Skeptical enquiry" (Rowe, 1999 cited in Boyle, 2006) and objectivity—defined as attempting to separate verifiable facts from subjective values (Schudson,

1978)—helps in researching a story, but the "objectivity norm" averring that one should report the news "without commenting on it, slanting it, or shaping its formulation in any way" (Schudson (2001: 150, cited in Harcup, 2004) is, in my experience, unattainable and not desirable either. It is standard practice for interviewees on both sides of a contentious issue to be asked the same question, and for their answers to be reported to the best of one's ability fairly. However, "fairly" like "impartially" is a moot term. Researching a story impartially, defined as aiming to find out "the truth" can be a good start but then one reaches a conclusion as to who or what is right or nearly right. Presenting both sides neutrally and pretending to a neutral voice (as news agency copy does) is not only false, it makes for misleading and boring journalism. Overt bias makes for a more intelligent story (Blue, 2006c).

Even more so than in other journalistic writing, the sine qua non of effective sports writing is factual and interpretive clarity and the ability to grasp the method and significance of what people in differing *métiers* do. One's analysis of an issue or an event must be written simply enough for the casual reader while not boring the readers who know the area well. In synthesizing and communicating recent discoveries and new practices in sports medicine, as in reporting famous victories, one is a communicator of ideas and experiences ranging far beyond one's own expertise and beyond the experience of one's audience.

The brief is to make achievements, issues and their meanings enjoyable and clear. One famous definition of the aim of poetry is "to delight and to instruct"; in other words, poetry functions as high quality infotainment. So too does successful print journalism—in my view, it doesn't matter whether the correspondent is covering sport or politics. Newspaper sports pages consist of "stories"—but

whether one speaks of them as news and features, which is what we did, or uses Rowe's typology of "hard news, soft news, orthodox rhetoric and reflexive analysis" (1992 cited in Boyle, 2006: 17) of which most journalists are unaware—the sportswriter tries to tell the story in a way which captures the reader. The narrative is structured using facts and opinion to create a discourse aimed—as it would be for any other part of a national newspaper—at a broad audience, i.e, those well informed about a given sport or subject, and those who are new to it. Gender was never a prime factor in considering my target audience. I was never instructed to target a male audience in writing for the sports pages where women remain a minority, although an increasing one (Chambers et al, 2004).

Sports journalists write about a champion's psychology and personal life as well as her (or his) play in the belief that many, perhaps most people read about sport to identify with the hero, to experience vicariously the pleasure of putting everything on the line and winning (or losing without being lost) and to imagine oneself so focused, so motivated, so strong.

Framing as a building block of cognition and narrative

Entman's classic essay (1993 in Tumber 2008: 233) makes this crucial point:

“Frames call attention to some aspects of reality while obscuring other elements, which might lead audiences to have different reactions [and thus a frame] plays a major role in the exertion of *political power* [my italics], and the frame in a news text is really the imprint of power—it registers the identity of actors or interests that competed to dominate the text.”

Just as it is in other journalistic disciplines, framing is a key methodological instrument for encoding the content of sports journalism. Modelled by Goffman (1974), frames are filters—e.g., stereotypes—which people use to perceive,

identify, and label experiences; in the course of a lifetime, an individual builds a series of these filters, or frames, through which they interpret the world. The practice of framing in journalism, as is well known, is a narrative tool for the representation of "reality"; it often entails using stereotypes or metaphors of comparison to guide the reader's perception.

In sports journalism, framing is usually a routinizing element often resulting in stereotypic reportage. While judicious journalists seek out pertinent frames, not just the *mot juste* but the frame *juste*, most of the time journalists like almost everyone else do not question the lenses, i.e. frames, through which they perceive reality, falling back on their standard bag of tricks to save time. However, this can result in clichéd and, in the case of reporting women's sport, in inappropriate narratives. In the Discussion section, I examine stereotypic framing in the tabloidization of my work and in the Independent's coverage of the 2008 Olympics, I examine my own attempt to revivify the Cinderella frame (Blue, 1987), and I analyse pejorative framing (Blue, 1995) such as Beauty and the Beast in tennis.

Interviewing: the advantages of bias

Unlike sociological research, which tries to make the interviewing process and the questionnaires "objective" (Bell 1999:136), journalism prides itself on leading questions. Borg (1981:87) warns wannabe social scientists of the "response effect" which biases an interview: "Eagerness of the respondent to please the interviewer, a vague antagonism that sometimes arises between the interviewer and respondent, or the tendency of the interviewer to seek out the answers that support his preconceived notions" are response effects, Borg explains. While social scientists shun such effects, response effects are if anything an advantage in journalism. While one does not necessarily want to put words into one's interviewee's mouth,

it is well known that what one reporter gets out of a subject may be quite different from what another elicits. Bell (1999) approvingly cites Cohen (1976) who compares the open-ended interview to a fishing expedition, noting that like fishing, interviewing requires careful preparation, a good deal of patience, and considerable practice if the reward is to be a worthwhile catch.

The total immersion of anthropological participant observation (Powdermaker, 1974 [1966]) is far more intense than that of a correspondent following the grand prix or the tennis tour, but the observer-observed dynamic (Back, 2006) does affect communication: the interviewee sizing up the interviewer's credibility (just as the interviewer does the interviewee) and deciding how much to say. An experienced journalist investigates the motives behind the interviewee's answers, and in follow-up questions probes, often getting the subject to reveal more than he meant to. One advantage of print journalism is fewer time constraints; so long as the key question is answered, interviewees can be allowed to diverge from the issue, as in allowing the divergence, the journalist may leave with a better story than the one she came to get.

Malcolm (2004 [1990]) argues that the moral ambiguity of journalism lies not in its texts but in the relationships out of which they arise, a journalist being a kind of confidence man preying on people's ignorance and vanity during interviews, and betraying them in the published story. There is some truth in this, as the journalist's job is to create a seemingly safe space that encourages the interviewee to reveal all. However, in most cases, journalists make it clear prior to the interview that they are journalists, and it is matter of personal integrity as to whether one treats the revelations of widows and orphans differently from those of the Minister of Sport.

The advantage of journalistic access

As Donnelly (2000) concludes, journalists have the investigatory advantage of more access to sports celebrities than academic researchers have, and primary source material from interviews and "insider" information can be of use to scholars. As a Sunday Times journalist, I had excellent access to champions and administrators at the highest levels of sport. Even when I was seeking data for *unauthorized* biographies of Liz McColgan (Blue, 1992) and Martina Navratilova (Blue, 1994, 1995), parents and friends and others close to the champions or formerly close to the champions were more than willing to be interviewed even when the champion had urged them not to talk to the biographer. Liz McColgan's parents, who were very close to the champion, wanted her story and their contribution to her success to be documented, and so gave me hours of their time even though they knew that McColgan herself was not pleased. Interviewees typically include enemies, teachers, coaches and their wives, partners and former partners, other competitors—indeed, anyone to whom one can get access who has been part of the extensive support systems (Mahoney, 2007, Gladwell, 2008) which enable champions to attain sports excellence. The subject is always interviewed too. In my role as sports correspondent I had previously observed and talked with both champions and my continuing role as a correspondent insured that even though the biography was beyond their control, they continued to answer my questions in post match interviews at sports venues.

My analysis of data obtained from medical and other journals and in interviews with sport professionals continue to be useful to scholars, indicating a paucity of data concerning world class sportswomen. E.g., a dozen years after my documentation of anorexia and continued training despite injury (Blue, 1987), the

gymnastics scholar Wendy Varney bases much of her argument against the Opie Report, an Australian inquiry into gymnastics, on my work (Varney, 1999: 81). A decade later, in the *International Journal of the History of Sport*, historian Barker-Ruchti (2009) relies on quotes from an Olympic champion I obtained over two decades earlier as gymnastics correspondent of both the *Sunday Times* and the *Times* (then run as separate newspapers).

DISCUSSION

Agency and celebrity

Internationally-known female sports champions face prejudice in Sportsworld (3), but their income and celebrity grant them considerable agency. As Struna (2000: 195) notes: "We have much to learn... about how particular groups or individuals exerted their agency, what boundaries and constraints they faced and did or did not overcome, and why a particular set of relations and not others resulted... Such studies clarify who participants were and the social directions of a sport's 'development' and spread; in so doing they speak to larger social processes."

The work considered for the PhD by prior publication focuses on the achievement (rather than the victimisation) of elite female sportswomen—the Wimbledon, world and Olympic champions; the icons. It asks what they have done within the institution of professional sport, how and why, analysing how they have used their agency in attempting to gain equal opportunity in sport. There is, however, "no monolithic sports culture" (Boyle, 2006: 149) not even within the boundary of elite women's sport, each sport having its own character, although similar issues reverberate. *Grace Under Pressure: the emergence of women in sport* (Blue, 1987) is an informal social history of elite female sport emphasizing

their agency and celebrity in the twentieth century. *Martina: the Lives and Times of Martina Navratilova* (Blue, 1995) evaluates those issues in the life of a major champion. The newspaper and magazine journalism submitted from 1987-2007 speaks to these issues too. Some of my newspaper articles became chapters of *Grace Under Pressure* and of the unauthorized biography of Navratilova, but they were unchanged except for the occasional transitional paragraph within a chapter, and so they are not considered comparatively here. Even "A Swansong for Martina, the Finest There Ever Was" (Blue (1994a), which encapsulates her career, is not changed in the biography, although because it tells the whole story up to the last Wimbledon final, whole chapters were interspersed between its paragraphs.

Narrating and interpreting key moments, issues and personages in a continuum of women's sport, *Grace Under Pressure* demonstrates the thesis that elite champions seeking opportunity for themselves have even without trying freed other women by loosening constraints on womanhood. It focuses on the use of this agency rather than on its impact, which, however, can be seen even in the case of the first female superstar of tennis, Suzanne Lenglen, who won Wimbledon every year but one from 1919 through 1925. Nineteenth-century female tennis champions in their tight collars and long dresses had been in the forefront of challenging Victorian notions of female frailty. Lenglen played with no corset and wore loose, shockingly short, calf-length skirts, which enabled her to play with a very visible athleticism, and were soon translated into dresses for ordinary women, giving them a new freedom to move. The headband Lenglen wore on court, a defence against formerly unmentionable female perspiration, also became wildly fashionable (Laver, 2002 [1968]). Lenglen's innovations and those by later champions, would eventually lead to the once unimaginable sport and fitness activities engaged in by

women today and to the multi-national, multi-billion-pound sports clothes and fitness industries. The chapter called “La Prototype” in *Grace Under Pressure* (Blue, 1987) gives a journalistic account of the origin and development of celebrity in women's sport. The story ended badly for Lenglen at Wimbledon, as the British press, having pulled her up, knocked her down, reporting her late arrival for a match as a snub of Queen Mary, who was an even bigger celebrity. The fans became hostile and Lenglen never played another Wimbledon.

Throughout the twentieth century, elite champions continued to use their agency, providing to other women the example of winning, technical *mastery* and female decisiveness and earning power. In their book on the cultural politics of sporting celebrity, Andrews and Jackson (2001: 8) acknowledge that, “The seemingly [unpredictable contests and] visceral, dramatic immediacy of the sport practice provides the sport celebrity with an important veneer of authenticity, that sets him or her apart from celebrities drawn from other, more explicitly manufactured, cultural realms”. Indeed, in sports journalism for the national press the nature of celebrity is not at issue, it is a given. While the fame and income of a sports champion can be augmented by the marketing activities of sports management companies such as IMG (Blue and Wheatley, 1989), sporting achievement is the crucial factor in a champion's celebrity. Even in the case of the tennis champion Sharapova, who famously earned more endorsement than prize money (Tennisinfoblog.com, 2007), the glamour offensive would have failed to work had she not been among the world's top-rated tennis champions.

Tennis, golf and athletics: identifying a phoney feminine apologetic at the top

Tennis—privileged as a sport practiced by women of high social status at exclusive clubs—became a gender battleground only after women took control of their sport

in the 1970s (Blue, 1987) and, like the male professional players, insisted on prize money delivered openly instead of under the table (King, 1982). Like the Women's Tennis Tour, the women's golf tour, known as the Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA), became major players in professional women's sport.

Felshin (1974) had hypothesized that sportswomen experienced cognitive dissonance between their social and competitive self, but that those who play socially acceptable sports such as tennis and golf have less need to employ what she termed the feminine apologetic, than those who play contact team sports like soccer. Insisting on getting prize money like the men and controlling their own sport—insisting on independence—“masculinized” tennis in the eyes of commentators.

In the chapter in *Grace* called “No More Apologies, Please” (Blue, 1987) I explained that in elite sport, the apologetic was not the result of internal ambivalence, not cognitive dissonance, but rather it was a pragmatic strategy designed to allay the ambivalence of the fans and the sponsors. My book brought the sociological concept of the feminine apologetic to a nonacademic audience, re-theorizing the model with regard to world class champions: “Sociologists call these disclaimers an apologetic. ...What is new is the fact that at the top sport stars are only apologizing for image purposes. No longer feeling ambivalent about their role as sports women, they nonetheless feel the need to pretend to be ambivalent. Many ordinary recreational players still have trouble taking the last piece of cake, winning, particularly against a man, but sport stars have passed beyond that conflict or they wouldn't be winners. No one who has trouble gobbling up her opponents gets to be Olympic or World or Wimbledon champion” (Blue, 1987: 115).

Hargreaves (1994: p 207) cites my argument “that women are forced to market their bodies because this is what the sponsors demand” in her discussion of the marketing of sport, as does Creedon, in *Mediasport* (1998) noting that “Sports correspondent of the Sunday Times of London Adrienne Blue explored how marketing the LPGA and women's professional tennis involves pressure to be slim, look sexy and be ‘feminine’.

The LPGA had hired a marketing expert to remake its image and thereby its bank balance. Attempting to sell the women's golf tour the way Madison Avenue sold perfume, he had the golfers lose weight even though extra poundage put extra power into their golf swing. Clothes came off for a sexy calendar, and income went up, as the LPGA pushed the pulchritude rather than the sporting achievement of their players (Blue, 1987). Later, in a book length study Crosset (1995: 180) found that the LPGA “relentlessly promote femininity, motherhood and sexuality.”

I had first encountered the phoney apologetic while covering my first major women's story about the American middle distance runner Mary Decker's leadership of the fight against America's withdrawal from the 1980 Moscow Olympics. "Her public fury was a sign that women's sport was coming of age. She felt free enough to be an athlete not a lady, albeit with homely disclaimers thrown in" (Blue, 1987: 25). Mary, Mary, the only female runner on the elite Nike team, was, like her twenty-eight teammates, quite contrary on the subject of world politics, but she felt a need to balance the scales by asserting a traditional feminine interest, e.g., she attempted to convince the visiting British journalist that the clearly industrial carrot cake we were munching was her own recipe, cooked by her own hands.

When I argued for equal prize money on the sports pages of the Sunday Times (Blue 1987a) many Wimbledon players were as yet unwilling to make a fuss. Even five years later, when the champion Steffi Graf was asked by Tennis Magazine to comment on the sex-based pay differential, she ducked the issue, asking what is so "important about this question?" (quoted in Bain, Boyle and O'Donnell, 1993: 135).

The two chief planks of my argument were that three sets of the intricate play in women's matches were as gripping as five of the bam, bam, bam of men's matches, and anyway the gentlemen in charge of Wimbledon had the option of lengthening the women's matches. (Equal prize money did not arrive at Wimbledon until 2007).

Women running their own sport

Of all professional women's sport, tennis, which has an independently-run women's tour, attracts the most fan interest, attendance and sponsorship (Trollope, 2007).

Indeed, tennis players are the most marketable female athletes in the world (Tennisinfoblog.com, 2007). Yet as recently as Wimbledon 2006, it was apparent that female players, still arguing for equal pay, were less sure of their status than were the men (Mahoney, 2006).

In his examination of the origin of alienation in Australian women's sport, historian Dennis Phillips (1990: 187) relied on the analysis of women's Olympic history in *Grace Under Pressure*: "Adrienne Blue believes that the decision to abandon the separate Women's World Games [in the 1920s] may have been 'the mistake of the century'. Relinquishing control of women's athletics to the men significantly 'set back the development of women's sport'. What appeared to be a giant leap forward ... became instead 'a historical sprained ankle. Women lost control of their sport. Not until 1972 would the number of women's track and field events at the Olympic Games be equal to the number at the Second Women's

World Games in 1926'." Moreover, as we know now, the late twentieth-century merging of sports administration has depleted the numbers of female administrators and coaches (Wann, 1997; Women's Sports Audit, 2008), leaving men in authority over many women's sports. Of the governing bodies in Britain that represent both men's and women's sport, five do not have a single female board member, and just one in four coaches employed by these NGOs to support development programmes or work with elite athletes are female (Women's Sports Audit, 2008). Arguably, with more female administrators at the highest echelons, their might have been a better fight for female acknowledgment in sport.

Stretching genres: unauthorized sports biography

When the British javelin champion Fatima Whitbread and I co-wrote her autobiography *Fatima* (Whitbread and Blue, 1988), we took the genre beyond the shallow self-serving half truths one expected in such books. Fatima's story included facing up to her abandonment as a child, her rape, and her embarrassment of muscle. However, there were limits to what could be said in writing anything authorized by a living subject. This was a reason that two unauthorized biographies of champions followed, both of them involving considerable original research including interviews with the subject and with enemies, colleagues, family, and friends. First came *Queen of the Track: the Liz McColgan Story* (1992). *Martina Unauthorized* (1994) appeared in America the following year re-titled *Martina: The Lives and Times of Martina Navratilova* (1995) with additional material on the US Open in the final chapter and is published in seven languages.

Martina, which is no hatchet job, nonetheless takes the genre of sports biography beyond hagiography. Its thesis is that the tennis star's serial monogamy was based in her commitment to tennis: it was a search for someone or something

to enable her to achieve more in tennis. Extensive interviewing of those close to Navratilova for my unauthorized biography and close examination of the ups and downs of her extraordinary career demonstrated that hypothesis, and as the book recounts, her perhaps unconscious life plan worked. The issue, a complicated one, evidenced throughout the book, is summarized on pages 91-93. The biography analyses the stages of Navratilova's reputation from defector to deviant to beloved champion, and the effect of all that on her marketability as a celebrity. It overturns the myth that Navratilova willingly admitted her sexual orientation and traces her path to influential gay rights and ecology movement spokesperson.

During the Cold War she moved to the United States despite knowing it would cause problems for her Czech coaches and teammates; welcomed by US officialdom, for a long time she was suspect by the public. It is no longer unusual for an elite athlete to dwell elsewhere than her native land, this display of agency being made more often now for reasons of tax or training or convenience to competition sites rather than ostensibly for political reasons. Defecting, which was less political than personal, had freed Navratilova to pursue her future and locked her into a long-term relationship with the media. An early misjudgment, her convening of a press conference to deny her sexual preference, pp. 102-106, made the issue of her private life fair game for the media ever after.

I shadowed Navratilova during her last singles year at the 1994 French Open and at Wimbledon, writing pieces for the Sunday Times, for which I was no longer writing full-time, and for the Independent and the Guardian; these pieces became chapters of my unauthorized biography of Navratilova (Blue, 1994, 1995) and as they were unchanged except for the occasional transitional paragraph within a chapter there is no reason to consider them separately. Even "A Swansong for

Martina, the Finest There Ever Was" (Blue (1994a), which encapsulates her career, appears largely unchanged in the book although as it tells the whole story, whole chapters were interspersed between its paragraphs. Throughout that season and as she played her last Wimbledon singles final, what had been apparent for years, became utterly unmistakable: the crowd had not just accepted Navratilova, it loved her. As *Martina* (1994, 1995) notes, the tennis correspondents of the "heavies" had long since been reporting her play as they would any great player's, The Times even reporting her pre-Wimbledon dreams, and the tabloids had become increasingly sanguine.

By the time she retired from singles tennis at the age of thirty-eight, in 1994, Navratilova had won over the media and the crowd, and won twenty million dollars in prize money, more than any other female player (WTA, 1994). She had dwelled in admired stardom for well over a decade. Yet, despite the expensive services of IMG (Blue, 1994, 1995), as each relationship of three to seven years ended, Navratilova got—and on the whole probably deserved—a bad press for behaving callously. Her endorsements lagged behind her prize money, and she believed and often said that the lack of lucrative contracts was due to her sexual preference, but perhaps the problem was IMG itself. Perhaps she should have changed agents. Mid-west based, conceivably, the company believed her beyond the sponsors' pale and therefore didn't seek those endorsements ardently.

Pejorative media labels

Before the arrival of Martina Navratilova, the tennis player Chris Evert, had been derided by journalists on both sides of the Atlantic as the Ice Maiden, a tag used generations earlier to punish Helen Wills for *not* losing her temper on court (Blue, 1995).

However, Bjorn Borg, framed as the cool Swede, was hailed for his placid temperament, and managed to avoid the tabloid xenophobia even leveled at Beauty, Sabatini, whose sin was being Argentinean after the Falklands war (Blain, Boyle and O'Donnell, 1993). Happily for Evert, she was transformed into an American Beauty (and, for a while, into a British wife) without having to adapt either her persona or her cool, methodical, merciless, baseline play by the arrival of a new Beast, Navratilova. The beholders in the media didn't change their storyline—they simply changed frames, focusing on a different aspect of Evert's character. Why? Partly because Evert had learned a few tricks of media management, partly because novelty is nearly everything in journalism and the Ice Maiden frame was becoming worn out, mostly because now that they had a new Beast, they needed a Beauty (Blue, 1995).

Navratilova had become the Beast, the Defector, the Lesbian, and on a long losing streak she began to be called the Choker, a label she peeled off with victory at Wimbledon in 1978. In 1994, long after she had been outed, in answer to my question at a press conference, she said: "I didn't know I was gay until I was eighteen years old. I never had any problems with it. You guys have problems with it maybe, but I didn't" (Blue, 1994, 1995).

She may not have had private problems but she certainly had professional ones in that when finally forced to come out she lost millions of dollars in potential endorsements. As media scholar Pam Creedon (1998) put it, the sports kit companies and their PR representatives were sure that "little girls and sweethearts sell... Homosexuality doesn't sell". Billie Jean King puts a slightly different gloss on it: "When you reinforce somebody's lifestyle, they like you" (Blue, 1987: 116). And when you don't, they don't. In an interview I conducted with her for the

Martina biography eight years later, King, the closest thing women's tennis has had to a feminist or a freedom fighter (Blue, 1987) —she won the tennis battle of the sexes and led the fight for women's control of tennis—declared that among her reasons for attempting to hide her sexual preference over the years was the need to protect the jobs of her employees in Chicago (Blue, 1995).

Meanwhile, after Navratilova's outing and despite her image being damaged repeatedly because of the messy divorces, Navratilova's popularity bloomed. Perhaps Billie Jean was wrong, perhaps after all it is mere myth that you have to reinforce the public's lifestyle. Or is it that Everybody's lifestyle is different than the pollsters think? Or perhaps I am right about IMG's self-fulfilling prophesy of failure. Are the public more open-minded than the sponsors? Bill Clinton was re-elected President although his serial adultery was known to the voters. Eventually, Martina Navratilova was admired by the tennis *haut bourgeoisie*. The whole world is not the Bible belt.

Symbolizing otherness: Vogue and the sex and gender tests

In the flurry of interest in women's sport that followed publication of *Grace Under Pressure*, I was invited to write an article for Vogue on the then cutting-edge issue of visible muscles in top-level women's sport (Blue, 1988a). As coverage in Vogue would signal that female muscle had attained an aura of chic, I accepted the invitation and used part of the piece to attack the sex test then required of elite female sports women (but not men). The test and its discriminatory implications were not well known to Vogue readers, and so this seemed to be an excellent opportunity to make a fashion-conscious audience aware not just of female achievement in sport and the beauty of the trained female body, but of an inequity which public opinion might help to remedy.

The first woman to fail the sex test, the Polish sprinter Eva Klobukowska, who looked like a woman (to an international team of doctors) and had always lived as a woman, had been found in 1967 to be one of six people in every thousand who have XXY chromosomes, and a bureau of sporting officialdom called Femininity Control announced that she had “one chromosome too many to be declared a woman for the purposes of athletic competition.” This public proclamation of a biological anomaly which gave her no advantage at sport blighted her life.

Two decades of controversy later, a geneticist writing in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (de la Chappelle, 1986) “questioned the fairness and even the validity” of the tests. In “Gender verification - what purpose? What price?” Fox (1993) continued the battle. By 1996, the eight athletes who failed the tests at the 1996 Atlanta Olympics were allowed to compete. No man had ever been caught masquerading as a woman. Routine mandatory testing was abandoned except by the Asian Olympic committee. At the 2006 Asian Games, the Indian middle-distance runner Santhi Soundarajan, distraught after failing the test and having to return her silver medal, attempted suicide (Rajan, 2009).

In 2009, at the world championships in Berlin, the South African 800 metres runner Caster Semenya, whose quick improvement gave rise to suspicions of either doping or sexual anomaly or both (Blue, 2009), was subjected to a complicated gender test, judged by experts from several disciplines. At this writing the world believes she is intersex because of widely reprinted reports from an Australian newspaper of what allegedly was a leak from the governing body, but the gender test results remain officially secret, and it appears that whatever the verdict,

Semenya will be allowed to keep her world title and medal (Longman, 2009, Mirror, 2009) most probably to avoid a lawsuit.

As I argued in *Vogue*, the mandatory sex test had put femaleness literally under the microscope, in effect suggesting that there was reason to suspect any woman who achieved in top level sport of being male. Sex testing and its successor, gender testing, may predispose women athletes to fall into that group identified as “having lingering concerns” about the purpose and outcomes of exercise testing even in ordinary circumstances, the psychological constraints possibly hindering their performance (Mahoney, 2007).

Arguably, elite sportswomen could perform to a higher standard if they were less worried about achievement masculinizing their image. Dyer (1982) found that women's world records were increasing at a faster pace than men, and predicted that as more women became athletes and trained as hard as their male counterparts, women could outpace men, particularly in endurance races like the marathon. Building on this work, I wrote a piece interrogating the issue in the *New Statesman* called "Are Women Afraid to Run Faster than Men?" Blue (1987b). However, women still trail men in the marathon.

Narrative strategies: reframing Cinderella

One of the most astute analysts of journalism Janet Malcolm, a journalist herself but adept at showing the profession's self-serving elements, is wary of framing (Malcolm, 1995) which, she says, portrays subjects as if they were characters in bad novels, narratives of journalism like those of folklore, deriving their power from black and white portrayals with no grays. Cinderella must be very, very good and the step-sisters must be nothing less than horrid. ‘Second step-sister not so bad after all’ is not a good journalism story, she points out.

As Barnett (2006) argues in "Medea in the media: narrative and myth in newspaper coverage of women who kill their children", mythical archetypes are inherent in this sort of framing. I define the term myth as these writers do in the Barthian (1993) sense as meaning any of the iconic stories we tell ourselves and our children over and over. By this definition, the Cinderella fairy tale is a myth. As a framing device, myth can easily stray into the realm of cliché and care must be taken by the journalist to revivify the cliché.

One way to subvert the original message is to reframe the mythic heroine's persona, as I attempt to do in the *Grace Under Pressure* chapter about how the first black female Wimbledon champion got to centre court despite her sport's institutional racism. For dramatic effect, this 1950s tale is narrated in the present tense and the writing plays with the idea of whiteness and makes no apology for Cinderella's physical strength (Blue, 1987: 22):

"Harlem is black. Tennis still tends to be whiter than white. Little white lies in tandem with big, brutal white lies have kept black players out. Polite bigotry is still enshrined in the sociology of the game. But in 1950 tennis apartheid was ended, when the player they called the 'Black Bombshell,' Althea Gibson, cracked the colour bar in tennis.

"Tall, tough, rough, from the Harlem slums, Althea Gibson played her first tennis outside her family's tenement apartment on New York's 143rd street. She is the sport's first Cinderella. As in the original fairy tale, Althea Gibson's Cinderella story, in which a handful of black princes [who funded her training] and a golden-haired, white fairy Godmother [Alice Marble, a female tennis champion with a social conscience] appear, did not change the structure of the kingdom. The wicked

step-sisters needed no favours from princes, no waving magic wands. They had tickets to the [Wimbledon] ball."

The then tiny black American middle class sustained Althea Gibson throughout the 1940s—partly for her own sake, partly in hopes that she would make a place for black players in world tennis.

Narrative and research strategies: tipping the balance

Like historians and social scientists, sports journalists work from within paradigms, models and theories. Unlike them, however, journalists usually try to keep their underlying principles implicit in their writing because mentioning them explicitly would hurt narrative flow. Good journalists make a point of combining fact and anecdote with analysis. Short of space one usually offers the telling detail and the acerbic quip rather than piles of data and long, reasoned argument, but the aims are the same: to interrogate, document and interpret, and to contextualize—to find the meaning in issues and events.

In constructing profiles of male champions, the issue of gender per se rarely arises, nor is there usually any need to identify gender as a theme. In profiling female champions I have had one cardinal rule: I made a point of writing about women in the same way I wrote about the men, adding the issue of gender only when it was specifically relevant as, for example, in issues of equal opportunity. Typical of my approach was that used to research and write my first major women's story on the great middle distance runner Mary Decker, then a leader in the fight against her country's withdrawal from the 1980 Moscow Olympics. Decker held impressive world records partly because of a medical procedure in which "a surgeon slit the sheaths" of her calf muscles to allow room for the bulging

muscle her intense training was creating, an operation more usually performed on American football players and horses (Blue, 1987: 76).

Tape-recorded interviews were conducted in Washington, D.C. with the U.S. President's speechwriter and in Eugene, Oregon, at Nike headquarters where Decker was the only female member of the "club" of twenty-nine elite runners (Blue, 1987). Interviews with the speechwriter Rick Hertzberg and with Decker herself were in-depth. Interviews with Decker's entourage of physiotherapists, coaches, and other staff were sometimes on the run. In writing up my observations—continuously—I jotted down technical facts, scenery, details of what people looked like, as well as other heard and observed data. As in contemporary ethnography, journalistic notes such as these are never just the facts, but also one's initial response and interpretations.

The piece profiling Decker appeared in the sports pages and was trailed on page one. It appeared in *Grace* as part of the chapter called "Our Medals vs. Their Medals" (Blue, 1987) where the story is set up in two contrasting scenes which document and attempt to decode the opposing views of the East coast intellectual politico and the West coast activist sports star. The first viewpoint is rendered largely in indirect discourse, a technique allowing the author simultaneously to present and to question the national policy on Olympic sport. The implied denials (in the second paragraph of page 74) provide context for the reader and they put words into the interviewee's mouth—but not words that differ from what the interviewee, in this case the President's speech writer, would wish to say. This slants the story but is, in my view, a fair way of framing the political reality (Johnson-Carter, 2005) and contrasts with the *Mirror's* practice described in the section on tabloidization.

Decker had been right to fear the peril of befouling her image, as became apparent four years later, when shortly after her disastrous collision with Zola Budd at the Los Angeles Olympic track, an outraged Decker voiced naked anger at a press conference and lost her role as America's sweetheart, something that it is likely would have been forgiven a male hero (vide McEnroe). Blue (1987 and 1988) analyzed the events leading up to the Olympic collision and the race in Britain the following summer where Decker won the race, but Budd, who clearly had a better agent, asked and was paid nearly twice as much to run.

Tabloidization

The *overt* gender stereotyping of women is no longer always present in the upmarket newspapers. Nor was it always entirely in force in the tabloids even by 1998, when I specifically wrote against it in the Express (Blue, 1998), but the issue of whether women have any business being in sport is often there, and was there in the unpleasant headline foisted onto my three-page spread about muscular sportswomen in the right-wing Express: "Fighting Fit or Freakish? Why do we think it unnatural when a woman achieves at sport?"

In the piece I spoke out against unproven allegations of doping with muscle-building drugs then being levelled at Florence Joyner Kersee and, by implication, at all other women with muscles. Flo Jo had just died. Had she been alive, the intemperate charges being hurled at the 100 metres Olympic champion in newspapers internationally would have been libels. This vortextuality—"the phenomenon whereby whole areas of the media become temporarily drawn into one central story" (Whannel 2008: 188) — was venomously anti-woman-in-sport.

At a time when the newspaper was temporarily under female editorship (Rosie Boycott was the editor) I had been rung up and commissioned by the

features editor precisely because she knew my piece would take the stance that sport was natural, not unnatural, for women. But the subs not only stuck that word, “unnatural” into the headline, they put it into my copy.

At least the facts and meaning of the piece had not been reversed, as had happened a dozen years earlier when the first serial rights to my book *Grace Under Pressure: the emergence of women as champions* (1987) were sold to the left-wing Sunday Mirror where one of Fleet Street's first female editors Eve Pollard was at the helm. In a splashy spread with my by-line they used my words out of context to say the very opposite of what I had actually written. It appeared that I was haranguing iconic sportswomen to play in frillier skirts and more mascara. Pollard herself may not have read the piece, but there is no reason to think she would have changed it if she had. I was naïve not to expect a down-market tabloid cynically to enforce traditional stereotypes.

1948 ideology rears its head 2008

Yet the Mirror's (2009) coverage of the recent Caster Semenya gender controversy was measured, as on the whole was coverage generally (Blue, 2009). On the issue of gender, on the whole the British sports pages are improving, although all is not yet well. In 2005, the famous Ashes summer, the whole country hailed the fact that the men's team had brought home the Ashes, and the players were feted in an extravagant parade to Trafalgar Square. Meanwhile, the women's team, which had won their own Ashes series, followed “on a smaller bus behind the main parade” (Potter, 2009: 1). Even in 2009, the year the female captain of the England cricket team Claire Taylor became the first woman to be listed as a Wisden cricketer of the year, the four other players named were male. Worse, there are disheartening throwbacks even in unexpected places.

In its excruciating 2008 Beijing Olympic coverage, the usually politically-correct Independent profiled a double gold swimming champion in terms of her dismay at her big shoulders and her taste in junk television and designer shoes. The piece on a champion who had just broken the longest-standing world record in her sport is so full of gently mocked girlish gush and modesty that we don't even hear about Rebecca Aldington's world record until column three (Harris, 2008). The headline is "A Statue of Me with These Shoulders?" The standfirst is: "Mansfield's most famous daughter talks to Nick Harris about fame, Jimmy Choos and starring in Strictly Come Dancing." We don't hear much about swimming, but we know how often she talked on the phone to her boyfriend during the Games.

What makes things crystal clear is that on the same day in the same sports section, a piece on a male Olympic canoeing champion, 'First kayak gold is reward for a doctor with patience,' (Newman, 2008) stresses his dedication and determination, and the one on Olympic boxers, "DeGale rages against blows delivered behind British backs", is full of focused male fury (Lawton, 2008).

This marginalization of the female champion's achievement and glorification of the men's achievement reinforces male dominance and control of sport. It creates a barrier to any significant change with respect to conceptions of the female athlete, her body, her right to compete, and it obfuscates understanding of her excellence. The framing and the ideology are not dissimilar from the London Daily Graphic's report in 1948 of Fanny Blankers-Koen's second Olympic gold medal: "Fastest Woman in the World is an Expert Cook." (Blue, 1988).

Letting the side down

Could the sporting icons and their institutions have made life better for ordinary women—and for themselves—if they had not played up to the sponsors but sought

equality instead of money? Consider: as Navratilova's career waned, and Steffi Graf seemed likely to become dominant world number one, pressure began to be put on Graf to upgrade her image: "It is said that some people at the Women's International Tennis Association, the up-market player's union, which keeps a canny eye on the obscenely well-paid image stakes, have told Graf that she needs a new hair-do.... If Steffi gets a new hair style, will they then advise a new nose?" (Blue, 1987: 49).

As we know now, Graf never got a new nose, though there were some who advised it. They were far less forthright on issues that mattered. If the sports champions for whom stiletto heels were dangerous and who wore them only to public events had refused to wear them, the health of the female population, who emulated the plimsoles too, would be better. Might not showing a bit more courage in negotiating the image trap have put an early end to the feminine apologetic?

Might it not rescue sportswomen like the boxer Laila Ali for whom life is particularly uncomfortable on the front line of twenty-first-century gender politics, "a frontier that all female champions must somehow negotiate on entering Sportsworld? Gymnasts and beautiful tennis players get their passports stamped with the least hassle, but boxers? Well, theirs is still regarded as a 'manly pursuit'" (Blue, 2007a). Arguably, if the elite champions had been more forthright (and the media more equitable), the impact of elite sport on the paradigm of womanhood might have been even greater.

Super-middle-weight-world champion Laila Ali, who is Mohammed Ali's daughter, has had to struggle for serious media coverage of even her Madison Square Garden bout. She feels it necessary to talk obsessively on her website about

glamour and makeup and pregnancy (Ali, 2009). Similarly, Buysse and Embser-Herbert (2004) have found that American university public relations material often pushes pulchritude rather than the sporting achievement of its female athletes, concluding: "The institution may be trying to sell the team as heterosexy and feminine to improve the institution's coverage and support. Unfortunately, what this does is further distance the image of women athletes from athletic competence."

Alas, my conclusion in *Grace* remains applicable: "What is unfortunate is that when elite champions play the PR game they do nothing to change the prejudices. Thus, many women who play at recreational level and many beginners—unbolstered by living on the pro circuit or an Olympic squad—continue to feel self-doubt. In this way the elite sport stars are, with only a few exceptions, letting other women down" (Blue, 1987: 116).

Recently, when asked by a female correspondent of the Times (Scott, 2007: 1) to comment on the issue of image-manufacturing, the head of global marketing at Sony Ericsson, sponsors of the women's professional tennis tour, admitted: "We live in a world of celebrities and personalities and the story is often the person because tennis is an individual sport, but there is an over-emphasis on glamour and not enough on performance." So change may be on the way.

The doping apologetic: a new term and concept

In the twenty-first century, doping is a major issue in sport, perhaps the major issue. Is it really so surprising then that the iconization (Heywood and Dworkin, 2003) of Marion Jones who won five medals at the 2000 Olympics was followed by her gaoling a few years later for denying under oath that she took performance-enhancing drugs? Or that in 2009, the gender-testing fiasco of the

800 metres runner Caster Semenya at the world championships, occasioned in part by suspicions of testosterone abuse, is one of the biggest women's sports stories of the decade?

Despite the denial by top sportsmen and sportswomen, by trainers and administrators—and by the sports media—anyone who covers top level sports or participates in them knows that the use of performance-enhancing drugs is widespread among both male and female champions. There is a conspiracy of denial (Donohue and Johnson, 1986, Blue, 1988, 2006a, 2007, Francis, 1991). The drugs issue is analysed in my first New Statesman sports column, which was trailed on the cover (Blue, 2006a); the piece, which notes drug scandals at the apogees of male speed and endurance sport, including top sportsmen in athletics, cricket, distance cycling and football, is offered as one of the prior publications for the PhD.

Many sports journalists express surprise and decry drugs in sport, but surely they cannot be more ignorant than I am of the prevalence of drug use. To deal with the thorny issue of performance-enhancing drugs, there is a phoney, image-protecting discourse in play in the world of sport. Doping is widely denied and said to be abhorred even by dopers, and wherever possible when top practitioners are caught, their doping is portrayed by athletes, administrators and most of the media as an individual and honest mistake. No term has yet been invented for this dynamic, which I shall call “the doping apologetic”. Like the feminine apologetic at elite level, it is a cynical pragmatic strategy for image-protection. Whereas the dirty little secret in sport in the first half of the twentieth century was money—payment even to Olympic athletes eventually becoming acceptable—the dirty little secret today remains doping with performance-enhancing drugs.

Female champions have more often been suspected of doping than men, but it is likely that men, who need have no fear of appearing muscular, use drugs more frequently than do women. As I have argued elsewhere (Blue, 1988, 2006, 2007b), because of the social fear of female muscle, far fewer women than men train with heavy weights, and "no one really knows how a highly trained female athlete should look" (Donohue and Johnson, 1986: 68). "In the past, fewer female than male athletes engaged in weight-training programmes. Consequently, the gender differences between athletes in the same sport could reflect training differences" (Drinkwater, 1986 p. 48). Because of the guilt of the East German women's teams—and perhaps because they make an easy scapegoat—there is a popular view that women use such drugs more than men. The evidence is that this is not so (Blue, 1988, 2006, Francis, 1991).

Elite male and female champions pretend to abhor performance-enhancing drugs although they are widespread in sport, and an image-protecting discourse and strategy have grown up around the issue of performance-enhancing drugs. Unlike the feminine apologetic in which one pretends to uphold certain ultra-traditional feminine ideals as truths, on the issue of doping both male and female champions feel compelled to deny the truth they know, which is that to achieve at top level, and thereby win the prize and endorsement money on offer, one probably does need drugs. Blue (2007b), for example, argues that "we should get out of denial and into legalising and controlling."

These drugs are not a simple fix; they enable you to work harder: "What many of us don't realise is that sports doping rarely gives you a free ride. If you or I were to take anabolic steroids and sit down in front of the telly, we would not build muscle or speed or endurance. Drugs allow you to train harder. They help

you recover more quickly from a hard session so you can work hard again the next day. Some drugs boost the body's propensity for building muscle or its ability to use oxygen, but you still have to do the work. A male judo medallist [who had been caught] once told me: 'I took drugs so I could train twice a day. I don't feel any guilt because I know I earned my medal'" (Blue, 2006).

The use of drugs to help sporting performance dates back to ancient Greece where athletes drank special brews before competition (Blue, 1987). On the Riviera and at Wimbledon the first female sports superstar, Susanne Lenglen, sipped cognac between sets, and the male runner who won the 1904 Olympic Marathon was famously dosed twice with strychnine during the race (Blue, 1987). The 1967 death from an amphetamine overdose of a British cyclist, Tommy Simpson, famously brought drug-testing into sport, and at the 1968 Olympics, seven male weight lifters tested positive as did one female athlete, but because of the time of the race timetable, she became the first Olympic athlete banned for drug-taking (Blue, 1988). It was women who were to bear the brunt of suspicion ever after, although fewer women than men partake of muscle-building chemical cocktails.

Like weight-lifting and power-lifting, body-building *embodies* precisely what worries people about women in sport. "All that rippling muscle on a woman, that 'unnatural' bulge in the wrong places, puts long-held ideas of feminine grace under pressure" (Blue, 1987: 167). These three sports and field events get the bum rap: they give rise to suspicion of doping for there is a lingering misconception that women cannot build muscle naturally. Yet because muscles are thought less attractive on women than on men, sportswomen are less likely to use muscle-building drugs than are their male counterparts.

Most of the male and female athletes I have talked to off the record—from the very best to those in the ranks below who having have had less media training were flattered to speak to the press so spoke more openly—admit that *someone they know* dopes. When at the 1988 Seoul Olympics, the fastest man in the world, Ben Johnson, was shown to have taken anabolic steroids, insiders in sport I spoke to were not surprised that he had taken them; they were surprised he had been dosed so badly he was found out. That attitude was unchanged when Linford Christie, Dwayne Chambers and Marion Jones, among others, tested positive for banned drugs. Similarly, as I assert in my New Statesman "takes" on the Tour de France (Blue, 2006, 2007b), the drug scandals have surprised no one who knows professional cycling.

The pressure of prejudice as well as the pressures of sport

Writing at the start of what seemed to me to be a revolution in women's sport, in my first book *Grace Under Pressure: the emergence of women in sport*, I documented the use of agency—the achievements and failures—of champions of individual sport, focusing most on tennis, but considering also the continuum from gymnasts to body builders.

I argued that because of their problematic status—the view of them as social anomalies—female champions were more heroic than the men: “Like male champions, women have achieved excellence at great personal sacrifice. They have endured pain, exhaustion, defeat. They have altered their bodies with chemicals. They have, for sport, submitted to the surgeon's knife. In the ‘amateur sports’, they have endured the indignity and participated in the lie of under-the-table money. The women who have become champions are no better than they should be; no better than the men. They have followed the [so-called] male competitive model;

they have won at all costs" (Blue, 1987: xv). They were, however, more heroic than the men, I argued, because they had to show grace under the pressure of prejudice as well as under the pressure of sport. The Marxist feminist counter-argument (Hargreaves, 2000) is detailed in the section on theoretical foundations, but I believe that *Grace* and my later work demonstrate my argument to be right.

The ideal female body has changed over time (Laver, 2002 [1968]). The final chapter of *Grace* (1987) analyses muscular sports like weight-lifting, the use of performance-enhancing drugs, and attitudes to them. *Faster, Higher, Further* (1988) expands on why women are less likely users of muscle-building drugs than men. Both books, and the pieces offered from Vogue (1988a) and the New Statesman (2006, 2007a and b) deal with drugs or attitudes to female muscle. The unauthorized biography of Navratilova, because of libel issues, is discreet on the question of use of performance-enhancing drugs, as were the books on Liz McColgan and Fatima Whitbread. One has no sure knowledge, and one can only speculate carefully, e.g., that blood doping has been used by some runners (McColgan, 1992), that Fatima Whitbread and Tessa Sanderson each charge the other uses drugs, but both deny it (Whitbread and Blue, 1988), that the Czech government in pushing tennis may like other Soviet states have engaged in drug use (Blue, 1994, 1995).

Admittedly, when the professor in "My Fair Lady" asks, "Why can't a woman be more like a man?" he didn't have the musculature of female weightlifters, discus throwers or body-builders in mind. These "thoroughly muscled women—including ...all the women in the world's top twenty in the javelin, the shot put, and the discus—are engaged in something very interesting, whether or not one believes they have bodies beautiful, whether or not one believes they are going too far—

making women too muscular—which is to say, too strong. They are stirring the gender cauldron," I wrote in *Grace* (Blue, 1987: 179) and continue to assert now. "Despite all the ribaldry, the pointed remarks, and their own fears and self-doubts, there is no stopping them" or the millions of ordinary women who now build strength and visible muscle at the gym.

The gymnastics backlash: Lithe Lolitas vs Wonder Women

Eagerly embraced by the media and the public because of its apparently non-muscular femininity, gymnastics can be understood in a double political context—as at once a conservative backlash force in gender politics and a progressive force in world politics.

In documenting and analysing the nature of the new, pre-pubescent killer gymnastics, my hypothesis was: "This is one sport in which girls can be girls. The problem is they dare not become women" because the changes to their bodies brought on by puberty would limit their capacity to excel at their sport (Blue, 1987: 155). As the gymnastics correspondent of both *The Times* and *The Sunday Times*, I was particularly well placed to investigate what was going on in the sport. I attended championships and went to training sessions to observe and interview athletes and coaches, and I read up on physiology and discussed the issues with physiotherapists and doctors. Two decades on, my data based largely on original interviews and my analysis is still cited by scholars (e. g., Varney, 1999, 2004, Barker-Ruchti, 2009).

Until Olga Korbut and Nadia Comaneci changed everything, women's artistic gymnastics had consisted of mature young women performing graceful, balletic exercises. After Korbut, pre-pubescent gymnasts, many like Korbut herself a lot older than they looked, began to execute dangerous, acrobatic routines undo-able by

a fully developed woman's body. This killer gymnastics ushered in by Olga Korbut required a childlike physique. There was rumour but no real evidence that the Soviets gave their gymnasts drugs to stave off puberty. There was evidence, though, that the Soviet training academies worked the girls hard enough that the percentages of fat in body weight was kept low enough to stave off puberty.

In writing the history of these women gymnasts years after their advent, I used archival television footage and newspaper reports, and I discussed technique with gymnastics coaches. One focus of my lens was on the impact of Olga Korbut's iconic tears at the 1972 Olympics, which created a new star, and, more importantly, a women's sport which even traditionalists could embrace. Only the most stalwart cold warriors saw the Eastern bloc's sweet human face as a Trojan horse.

At the time of my initial work on the issue, gymnasts had the highest rate of anorexia nervosa in sport (Rosen, 1986). This starvation disease had been linked by doctors not only to fear of being fat but also to a fear of growing up. Gymnasts had a professional reason for fearing puberty: it would mature them out of their sport—which since the advent of Olga Korbut was the preserve of lithe Lolitas.

Interviewed on the BBC television programme "Reputations: Olga Korbut" (2000) broadcast worldwide, I explained how Korbut had led the sport in the wrong direction, but had since proposed the way back. Her suggestion, some years after she retired, was that gymnastics be divided into age categories. Then the girls who were in their early teens could compete against each other and those who had become women could stay in competition. Anorexia levels could be expected to diminish in the sport as delaying puberty would be unnecessary. The young group might still be the elite—because certain contortions can only be performed by

short, undeveloped bodies. The older group, though, might just catch on—their interpretation could go back to the intense levels of old. Acrobatics might again give way to something akin to ballet. The proposal has yet to be taken up. Nor has the one which follows.

The weaker sex: men

Finally, in demonstration of the ideology lurking behind attempts to “protect” women from sport, I submit a satirical essay “The Weaker Sex: An Immodest Proposal” (Blue, 1990) published by the Design Museum on the occasion of an exhibition on sport. The essay is a new genre in sports journalism, although it owes much to Jonathan Swift.

In his essay entitled “A Modest Proposal for Preventing the Children of Poor People from Being a Burthen to their Parents, or the Country, and for Making them Beneficial to the Publick” Swift made the case for salt, peppering, cooking, and dining on the children of the poor.

My immodest proposal argues that because of innate masculine physical disadvantages—particularly the vulnerability of their genitalia—for their own protection men should be banned from the perils of cycling and football, indeed, from all sport.

CONCLUSION

The contesting of the formerly male terrain of sport by female elite champions has been aptly termed “stealth feminism” (Heywood and Dworkin, 2003) although scarcely any of the champions were or are willing to call themselves feminists. The work of sports journalists such as myself writing for a mainstream readership on the national sports pages and in *Vogue*—i.e., writing for the unconverted—

functions as a kind of stealth feminism too, although conducted in full daylight.

Admittedly, at the Sunday Times, it is considered that the typical reader is educated and fairly intelligent but a little groggy as she or he spreads marmalade on the Sunday morning toast.

This dissertation has examined my work on the agency of elite female champions in a continuum of individual sports. The hypothesis that champions have used their agency to seek opportunity for themselves has been demonstrated, and that their activity has loosened the constraints of the paradigm of femininity is evidenced by the once-unthinkable, multi-billion-pound, global sports wear and fitness industries aimed at and used by women. In 2009, the year of its twenty-fifth anniversary, Britain's Women's Sports Foundation has re-branded itself as the Women's Sport and Fitness Foundation.

Like male champions, women have achieved excellence at great personal sacrifice. They have endured pain, exhaustion, defeat. They have altered their bodies with chemicals and even submitted to the surgeon's knife. And they have stood up to double trouble, withstanding the pressure of prejudice as well as the pressure of top level sport. But the playing field is still tilted against them. Yes, Wimbledon prize-money is at last equal even though women play fewer sets. Yes, more sports are included for women in the Olympics than there used to be, but there is neither Olympic nor media-coverage parity. Yes, superstar Navratilova, who was once a pariah has been accepted, but as the recent Caster Semenya case attests, slurs of "mannish" continue to give sportswomen a reason to fear the very muscles they need to win. And where once I argued that women's tennis was more interesting than men's (Blue, 1987a)—and it was—now I would have to argue that it is more boring. Why? Because the women have given up the vast

array of strokes to concentrate on baseline power tennis at which, because most women have less upper body strength than men, few are likely to be better than the men. It seems they are mirroring the power game of the dominant grouping, men. To quote that philosophical sports advocate Simone de Beauvoir once more, "It is precisely the female athletes, who being positively interested in their own game, feel themselves least handicapped in comparison with the male" (1952, 333).

After a quarter of a century of covering top level sport, after writing four books depicting and analyzing the achievement of female champions and co-writing another, after interviewing hundreds of the icons, and researching the histories of those before my time, I have found few champions who dare to call themselves feminists even guardedly, even though all are open advocates of equal opportunity and equal pay. I wonder sometimes if the long-held view of sportswomen as a social anomaly hasn't worn down the female sporting establishment. If they had dared to be more forthright even about little things like wearing high heels, perhaps they would have lost in the image stakes and therefore the income stakes; but they might have prevailed, and loosened more of the constraints on womanhood. Arguably, elite sportswomen might have been braver if their achievements had been reported more equitably. What is certain is that the female Olympic, world and Wimbledon champions continue to win and they make more money than ever before. To win today they have to be ever stronger so, like the men, some take performance-enhancing drugs and like the men some of those protect their image by voicing the cynical "doping apologetic". Meanwhile, boys still want to grow up to be footballers, but an informal survey I conducted in May, 2009, at a child's birthday party turned up no girls who want to grow up to be sports stars. What does that tell us about elite women's sport and the function of its

champions as role models? Those answers must be left to future research. As for female sports journalists, although they remain few, I and others in the profession are aware of little significant discrimination from within the institution of journalism (Boyle, 2006, Hardin and Whiteside, 2009). Encouragingly, the work of a new generation of sports journalists reveals feminism in British sports journalism is again on the ascent.

END NOTES

1. The British organisation initially called the Women's Sports Foundation and recently renamed the Women's Sports and Fitness Foundation celebrated its 25th anniversary in December, 2009. Prior to its founding, an organisation called the Women's Sports Foundation already existed in America but the decision was taken not to call ours the British Women's Sports Foundation because a number of Birmingham-born-and-bred black athletes said they would not join an organisation with the word "British" in the title as they did not feel British.

2. Regrettably, there is not space here to consider the work of those others such as the athletics correspondent Duncan Mackay of the Guardian who has written equitably about women's athletics for a quarter of a century or Mathew Trollope (2007) in the Independent; nor the work of a new generation of female sportswriters which reveals feminism in sports journalism again on the ascent, among them Katie Scott (2007) and Sarah Potter (2009) in the Times, and the continuing work of New Statesman columnist and former Observer Sports Monthly deputy editor Emma John.

3. A term for the world of professional sport first used by the American sportswriter Robert Lipsyte in his autobiography *SportsWorld: an American Dreamland* (1975), and then by James Michener in his analysis of *Sports in America* (1976).

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