

A competitor's viewpoint

by José Poelmans (HOL)



As you probably know, hockey is my favourite sport and I have represented my country in it for eleven years. I draw my experiences as a competitor—directly or indirectly—from this very important period of my life.

Women's hockey in Holland is the most extensive ladies field sport. Almost 40,000 girls and women take part in this sport, which is governed by one federation, for both men and women, and consists of more than 80,000 members. Thus the whole family can take part in hockey as members of one club. Internationally, Holland has great importance as a hockey nation. Both men and women continuously gain honours in the world's top competitions.

I would like to talk about the problems I have met as a woman playing hockey at national as well as international levels. The picture I am going to give may be rather subjective but is, in my opinion, most representative.

I shall concentrate on four points.

1. The gap between the position of men and women, still too wide.
2. The existence of two international hockey federations.
3. My personal experience as a top-level athlete.
4. Top competition team sports.

The too wide a gap between the position of women and men

Looking back on my hockey career, I can distinguish three stages : as a junior member, as a senior member, and as an international representative of my country.

At each of these stages I have met with great differences, the main one being that in nearly all aspects the woman was lagging behind the man. I am not concerned here with the natural physical advantage a man has over a woman.

As a *junior* I used to train along with the boys, and most of the time I was the only girl there. I did so because the boys had more training facilities and more training hours available then we did.

I think it is only fair to say that there are great differences between the way hockey is played at English schools and the way hockey is played in Dutch mixed clubs. (I do not think I could ever have trained along with the boys here in England !)

As a *senior member* I noticed, especially in the beginning, great differences in men's and women's training. The men had everything they needed at their disposal : fields, equipment, coaches, facilities, organised practice hours, whereas we women were left to find our own way.

I must admit that in some ways the situation has been changing for the better over the last years.

Internationally, the differences between men's and women's hockey were even greater. The men always had more and better training facilities, more and better hockey equipment, more international matches and tournaments—anywhere in the world, more and better medical care, and also greater financial resources than we had. Many of us have tried very hard to improve this situation.

At junior level, fortunately, hardly any differences between boys and girls remain, as far as hockey is concerned. *At senior level* the position of women has clearly improved in comparison with a decade or so ago. Nevertheless, the men playing hockey in the Dutch first league are taken so good care of by their clubs that we as women see that there is still much left for us to be sought after. *At the international level*, we can still find the differences I mentioned before. In 1978 the Dutch ladies are still many steps behind their brothers.

Admittedly the medical care is now well organised for us. However, as far as tourna-

ments in distant countries are concerned, we see again and again that the financial means for women are much more limited than those for men. The problems mentioned here will not sound strange to you.

I have mentioned a few problems in connection with hockey, but you know as well as I do, that these problems are also reflected in the society of this moment. It is a fact that there is inequality in distribution of finances between men and women in many sports. The worst, however, is that this is regarded as normal.

The existence of two international hockey federations

At the present time there are two international hockey federations.

One is the IFWHA—the International Federation of Women’s Hockey Association, and the other is the FIH the Federation Internationale de Hockey.

The older one, the FIH, has both male and female members, whereas the IFWHA is exclusively for women. This situation is drawing a lot of attention at the moment and causes a rather complicated problem. For as you probably know the Olympic Games in Moscow will mark the first time that women’s hockey is to be staged as an Olympic sport. However the International Olympic Committee has set one condition, namely that there is to be one international hockey federation instead of two. This leads to a conflict, as the aims of the two federations are quite different. For the moment they meet in the very impersonal supreme council, in which both federations are represented. And in this way women’s hockey is assured of its place in the 1980 Olympic Games. It does not, however, mean that all problems have been solved.

Because I played in the Dutch national team for eleven years, and because Holland is a member of both federations, I played in both the IFWHA and FIH tournaments and matches. Over the years I have experienced the differences which exist and which often created problems. I will try to illustrate these differences by giving a few examples from the two federations.

Example one

The opening ceremony of a world tournament is a very important event for the

IFWHA, and attendance is compulsory for all competitors, regardless of whether a player has to compete soon after the ceremony.

The FIH, on the other hand, leaves the decision as to whether to take part in the opening ceremony or not to the teams of the individual players.

Example two

The IFWHA chooses lodging and playing grounds which can accommodate all competitors. This is done to stimulate contacts among players from the various countries, and to create a more pleasant atmosphere. The quality of the playing grounds and whether or not the lodgings are in quiet surroundings are considered of minor importance.

These issues, on the other hand, are given utmost priority within the FIH because they are considered of great importance for the competitors.

Example three

The FIH creates possibilities for competitors to take part in excursions, whereas the IFWHA takes it for granted that all competitors are to take part.

These are only a few examples ; I could mention many more.

I have cited them as an introduction to the following questions :

- a) Is organising a world cup tournament a means for staging top-level sport with achievement as the exclusive objective ?
- or
- b) Is the world cup tournament to be, rather, an event involving top-level sport in which achievement plays a part, but not necessarily the most important part ?

In my opinion these two different approaches constitute the essential problem, not only between the two federations, but also among the players themselves. If you allow me to give my personal opinion, I can tell you that I have always enjoyed the IFWHA tournaments, and that I have always felt their approach to be a pleasant one, but at the same time, as a top-level athlete I prefer the aims and attitude of the FIH.



My personal experience as a top-level athlete

Another problem I have encountered in my hockey career—and this one has very little to do with me being a woman—is a certain isolation.

As a top-level athlete one spends much time on training, matches, preparation, and related concerns. Apart from that, you have your work and study which implies that you are more than fully occupied and that little or no time is left for other activities. When you study or work (or both) and, in addition, are involved in top-level sport intensively, you are active every minute of the day. Therefore I am convinced that someone trying to achieve a maximum result, at that moment and in the time of preparation, lives in a sort of isolation, an isolation which is understood and accepted if it concerns men, but hardly so if it concerns women, because of their position in society. In my opinion this isolation is absolutely necessary to achieve a top result. But this isolation, accompanied by the desire to take part in social activities and have human contacts, has its drawbacks.

To begin with, you move about in a small narrow world, in my case the world of hockey.

This meant that I had to miss many other opportunities. I neither drank nor smoked and I went to bed early.

Consequently, many friends thought me unsociable. One is totally self-occupied, occupied with one's own achievement in hockey; the aforementioned constraints—no smoking, no drinking, being unsociable—and therefore no longer being accepted by one's friends and acquaintances—make one even more self-centred and this induces isolation.

Now that I am no longer a top-level athlete and now that I have come out of my isolation—in a very pleasant way—it is hard to assess the positive and negative effects of it.

I think that on the one hand I did miss opportunities in those years, but on the other hand the contacts and experiences as an international representative still mean so much to me to the extent that my present life—away from top-level sport—is being enriched by it. By the way, this will differ from person to person, especially in team sports.

Top competition team sport

I believe there exist differences between top-level sport at the team and individual levels. Superficially, I might be tempted to say that a one hundred meter runner can enjoy only 12 seconds and I can enjoy 70 minutes of competition. In the long run, the enjoyment of training and achievement may well be the same. Yet there are other aspects of playing in team sports which have been very important to me—and still are—owing to which I think that individual top-level sport would be less suitable for me.

The preparation for important matches is done together. This means that you stimulate one another, you train together, you co-ordinate everything, you respect one another and you help your teammates in trouble.

You come to realise that your own achievement is only valuable when it is done in support of the whole team.

The joy from victory is great, as great as a new record achieved by the one hundred meter runner, I believe; sorrow from defeat, on the other hand, does not have to be overcome all by yourself. You cheer one another up.

The ultimate effort during the matches and training is at a lower level than it is in a great number of individual top-level sports. The joy in doing sports is therefore greater, and the demand for dope fortunately does not exist in our team sport.

The players adapt more easily to circumstances which prevail in great tournaments—being abroad, meeting foreign people, hearing and speaking foreign languages—mainly because you can share your experiences with your teammates, with whom you feel completely at ease.

Regular and intensive co-operation with ten other people, each standing for his own world, closely resembles everyday life in society, and the ability to co-operate with others increases.

The question of retirement and its effects also merits attention. Retiring from the international scene will, I think, create fewer problems for team sportsmen than it does for an individual sportsman. After all, winning did not *only* depend on your *personal* achievement and your *personal approach* to the game but also on those of your team-

mates. Besides, you had to discipline yourself all the time to make your own personal qualities a contribution in the interest of the team. You retire, but you continue to practise your sport with teams at lower levels without losing your enjoyment of the game.

We are at present involved in an active discussion about how to take part in society, especially after retiring, from top-level sport. This is an issue which seems to be a great problem for most individual sportsmen.

Amateur team sport, even at the highest level, is not a daily occupation which prevents you from taking an *active* part in a variety of activities in society. At the same time, being part of a team, you have had to face a great many situations in which you had to bear responsibility, not only for yourself, but also for others and often under great pressure. Yet, the job had to be done.

I think that circumstances like these form a mental training which make the team athlete more suitable not only for his or her sport, but also for functioning more effectively in society.

Conclusion

At the end of my speech I wish once again to summarise its main points.

- Unfortunately, as far as finances are concerned, there is still no equality between men's and women's hockey in Holland.
- I hope that the IFWHA and the FIH will become *one* federation before long.
- I have had great joy in my sport, in spite of certain limitations it imposed on me.
- I personally see advantages to team sport over individual sport.

In addition, may I add that I would not have missed it for anything in the world and that hockey has not ceased to be an important part of my life, as a player, as a board-member, and as a manager-coach.

J.P.