

Catching Up The Men

by Joan Lombard

Joan Lombard is one of the few women sports writers in Ireland. In this article she analyses K. F. Dyer's book 'Catching Up the Men': published by Junction Books, London (GBR).



Prejudice, intolerance, sheer ignorance and male chauvinism have, for generations, prevented women taking their rightful place on the athletic tracks and at other major sporting arenas but at last -when their participation is more important than ever - the story of their emancipation has been told.

In his book "Catching Up The Men", Dr. KF Dyer has finally shattered the illusions of those

still clinging to the belief that women are inferior to men at sport. In a carefully researched, if at times rather tedious, survey, he arrives at the conclusion that by 1995 women's average performance in all major track events will match that of men.



Jennifer Redpath confronts Moira McLeod in the international hockey match between Ireland and Scotland in Lisburn (IRL).



The Sports Council of Northern Ireland. In the centre Mary Peters, Vice-President of the Council, who was Olympic champion in the pentathlon in Munich (FRG), 1972.

His assumption is based on a probing study into the reasons why women have taken so long to catch up the men, and in a particular reference to Ireland he states that for 50 years women's progress was effectively "stamped out" by the combined effects of religious conservatism, male chauvinism, and political division.

The late Archbishop McQuaid does not escape the pen of Dr. Dyer. He will go down in the annals of Irish sporting history as the man who said that women undressing on the sides of the track would be an occasion of sin for men athletes ; and who, despite the achievements in the immediate post-war years of famous women athletes, and the tremendous upsurge of interest inspired by their achievements in Dublin, successfully stopped girls' athletic events in the Republic according to the author.

Dr. McQuaid let it be known that he did not approve of women's athletics, and sports administrators gave in rather than confront the Church.

The result was that for years girl athletes had no opportunity to compete, and Dr. Dyer

wonders how many potential women champions and record holders were completely lost to athletics in the Republic and to what extent did women in Northern Ireland fail to reach their full potential through lack of competition from their Southern compatriots.

"The organisation of women's sport in Ireland, both North and South, continues to be plagued by religious and political divisions," says Dr. Dyer and he feels that many Islamic and Hindu countries are similar to the Irish Republic in their attitudes to women's sports.

He notes that India has produced a number of notable male track and field athletes but wonders who can name a single sportswoman from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh or Sri Lanka ?

There are so many incidents of lack of vision, meanness and stupidity in the history of sport ; of women being positively warned against or positively forbidden to compete or participate for health and safety reasons ; of battling against lack of facilities, lack of money, lack of recognition and lack of opportunity that in the author's view it is clear enough that behind

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each of the reasons have been hidden assumptions that women's performances are, and will always be, much lower than men's and that women's sport does not matter much anyway.

Dr. Dyer says that there is a strain of social conservatism, often associated with religious attitudes, which has emphasised the place of women in the family as child bearers, mothers, and home-makers to the exclusion of all else. Thankfully, the biological reasons for differential treatment and performance of the sexes are now being questioned on the sports field just as they are being questioned in the work place.

"Women in the past have been subject to strong social pressures almost from birth, designed to deter them from striving for maximal success and high achievement in most sports. The roles of woman and successful athlete are almost incompatible in most western countries.

"Women who wish to participate in sport and remain feminine have faced great stress. High achievement in a sporting context has tended to detract from, rather than enhance, their feminine image in the eyes of men. and by choosing sport in the first place, they have tended to place themselves outside the social mainstream".

An ardent adult sportswoman, says Dr. Dyer, is often thought of as not completely feminine. Most people believe that women are not meant to compete with men and that those who try are not only doomed to failure but are demonstrating, somehow, something imperfect in their makeup as women.

Fortunately that theory is now being seen as one of a million myths. Dr. Dyer can and does prove by innumerable statistics-which though necessary to his point are rather tiresome to read - that already in many sports women's performances are improving much faster than men's,

This maybe a nasty, bitter pill for some male athletes to swallow but if they read "Catching Up The Men" they must accept its validity, as they must also accept that it was lack of opportunity, not lack of ability which to date has retarded women's progress.

Women are now participating in many events which were hitherto closed to them. They are

running, swimming and cycling in long distance events with marked success, and they are becoming jockeys, racing-car drivers, footballers and weight-lifters. They are also undertaking training and competition schedules as gruelling and time consuming as those of most men.

They are organising themselves on professional circuits and combining sports careers with marriage and the bearing of children, and of the utmost importance is the fact that the financial support for, and financial incentives in, different women's sports are slowly but quite noticeably increasing.

However, one major area where women have been and still are seriously discriminated against is that of organisation, including coaching, team managing, and administration. This, according to Dr. Dyer, is almost exclusively a male preserve in all countries of the world. He points out that attempts to obtain women's representatives on the International Olympic Committee were made in 1960 by prominent women from Australia, the USA and USSR, but were unsuccessful as have been all subsequent attempts.

As a testimony to women's unequal struggle for recognition in sport "Catching Up The Men" must surely be highly acclaimed for its unbiased attention to indisputable facts, and as a text and reference book it is of immense value. The author is an academic specialist in social biology and a senior lecturer at the University of Adelaide and he approached his subject with tremendous zest and proved his points with an abundance of statistics, diagrams, graphs and tables.

Unfortunately to the average sportsperson this may be off-putting. In terms of readability it is at times hard going. But it must be remembered that ardent sports lovers thrive on their ability to recall names, times, dates, and occasions when records were made and broken ; "Catching Up The Men" provides the instant and correct answer to the innumerable arguments which are so much part and parcel of the sporting world.

J. L.



* Since the 84th Session of the IOC in Baden-Baden in 1981, there have been three women members of the IOC.